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The role of consumers' network positions on information-seeking behavior of experts and novices: A power perspective [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Results from two studies demonstrate that depending on consumers' network positions (peripheral or central), experts and novices behave differently when seeking information about their networks or products related to those networks. Experts in central network positions (vs. peripheral) seek more network-related information, while novices in the same positions seek more product-related information. In contrast, experts in peripheral network positions (vs. central) seek more product-related information, while peripheral novices seek more network-related information. Findings also suggest that desire for power (social or personal) mediates these relationships. Given the importance of social networks in consumer decision making, this research demonstrates the influence and importance of consumer's network position on information-seeking behavior of experts and novices.

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1. Introduction

What role does power have on consumers' information-seeking behavior? This question is important in marketing given that information about products is constantly being shared among consumer networks and information provided by others constitutes a significant proportion of the information search process (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Kiel & Layton, 1981). Power refers to a person's ability to influence others and make them do things they would not do otherwise (Weber, 1978). As a relational variable, a person's power influences another person or group, representing an asymmetric relationship (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). This power type is referred to as *social power* (Lammers, Stoker, & Stapel, 2009; van Dijke & Poppe, 2006). However, power is also a person's ability to do and to get what they want, without outside influence (Emerson, 1962). That is, power can reflect individuals' ability to take control over their own outcomes and to be independent of others' influences. This power type is referred to as *personal power* (Lammers et al., 2009; van Dijke & Poppe, 2006).

Smith and Fink (2010) show a person's network location conveys information about that person's power. They conclude structural positions with higher centrality (one who has many ties) generate greater perceived social power than people residing in the network's periphery. Social capital theory suggests individuals' network

structure (*who* one is tied to and *how* one is tied to them) may provide individuals with unique benefits (e.g., power) because "social advantage is created by a person's location in a structure of relationships" (Burt, 1992, p.4). Since social power associates with interdependence rather than independence (Lammers et al., 2009), social power comes from occupying network positions with a more optimal social structure (Smith & Fink, 2010). Complicating the issue is how product-specific information accumulation serves as a proxy for power. For instance, French and Raven (1959) describe expertise as another form of power. Arguably, expertise in the consumer domain provides individuals with more personal power since they have higher cognitive capacity (i.e., beliefs about product attributes) and cognitive processing capacity (i.e., decision rules for acting on those beliefs) to perform product related tasks successfully and independently (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). These individuals tend to be less dependent on others and are less influenced by the behavior of others.

To extrapolate power's role on information-seeking behavior, this research seeks to understand how consumers' level of *expertise* and their *network position* interact to affect information-seeking behavior, and how desire for power (social or personal) acts as the motivating force behind this process. This inquiry fills a void in the extant literature. Prior researchers focus on how individual differences or social contexts change consumers' information-seeking behavior (e.g., Goldsmith & Clark, 2008; Mitchell & Dacin, 1996); often overlooking how a network position affects consumer decisions. Consumer networks research exploring the network position's role primarily focuses on post-consumption processes (e.g., opinion leadership, social contagion, and information diffusion) (see Kratzer & Lettl, 2009; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, & Scott, 2007); often overlooking

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pre-consumption processes such as information-seeking behavior. Recent network research on pre-consumption processes (e.g., adoption probability) largely ignores how people utilize their social network positions to acquire product information (e.g., Katona, Zubcsek, & Sarvary, 2010; Watts & Dodds, 2007). Clearly, this research stream has much to gain by exploring how network positions and expertise jointly affect the information-seeking behavior of consumers, and how power (social and personal) plays an important role in this process.

Going forward, there are reasons to speculate that experts and novices, as well as centrally- and peripherally-located individuals differ in the way they seek information from other people. Most likely, the type of information that consumers seek depends on this interaction such as association-product information (e.g., events, activities, and people of the club vs. specific-product information such as physical attributes, brands, and quality) (cf. Mitchell & Dacin, 1996). Furthermore, the desire for social or personal power likely mediates these relationships. This research explores this inquiry to set a framework for understanding novel insights into how the desire for power, expertise, and network position affects the flow of information in consumer networks.

2. Expertise and network centrality

Expertise is “the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully” (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987, p.411). Consumer expertise influences how individuals gather and organize information, affecting product purchases. Prior research suggests that experts and novices both engage in active information-seeking behavior. For instance, novices seek information because they lack product experience (Bettman & Park, 1980). Experts seek information about specific product features because they are more exposed to the attribute's existence (Brucks, 1985).

Despite an abundant history of literature on consumer knowledge and expertise (cf. Alba & Hutchinson, 1987), how individuals' social network positions differentially impact the information-seeking behavior of experts and novices remains unexplored. Social network positions are important to consumers because pre-existing interaction and connection patterns within a group may provide better opportunities or advantages for individuals, above and beyond their personal characteristics (i.e., social capital, see Burt, 2000). Within a social network, certain network positions provide individuals with a more optimal social structure that offers privileged access to knowledge, information, and resources (Burt, 2000; Kratzer & Lettl, 2009). One such position is to be *central* in a social network (Freeman, 1979).

Network centrality is the interconnectedness between the individual and other members in the network (Freeman, 1979). Individuals who are central (vs. peripheral) in their networks tend to be more active (i.e., continuously working to maintain and manage contacts), have shorter paths of contact to others within their broad social network, and have more ties with other central members in the network (Faust, 1997). Network centrality also measures one's popularity or prominence in a network (Freeman, 1979). Centrally located individuals tend to have higher access to others and have a larger number of people who are willing to share information and resources with them; they tend to possess unique social advantages for acquiring information and resources (Cross, Borgatti, & Parker, 2001; Mehra, Dixon, Brass, & Robertson, 2006). Centrality also implies greater control over resource and information acquisition because these individuals can choose from a greater number of alternative network members to satisfy their wants and needs (Lee, Cotte, & Noseworthy, 2010).

3. Conceptual background

In general, people lacking product knowledge seek out specific types of information from others to build that specific knowledge.

For example, novices may seek specific-product information (herein referred to as *product-related information*) to bolster their knowledge about products (Herr, 1989). Likewise, people in peripheral positions may seek association-product information (herein referred to as *network-related information*) to gain social benefits and opportunities from their network. Since peripheral individuals already are limited with social opportunities (due to their disadvantaged structural position), they seek information to assist them in achieving greater network status (i.e., to become more central). Given this stream of logic, the motivation to seek out specific information helps individuals accumulate more power within their network.

Intuitively, central novices seek product-related information to increase their knowledge so they can become a resourceful person in the network. Peripheral experts seek network-related information because they lack the social status. Peripheral novices need both types of information. Conversely, central experts have significant social advantages through their network position and product knowledge and they do not seek any information type.

However, several reasons exist to believe that this scenario may not always be the case. Prior studies show that experts seek product-related information to continuously update their repertoire of knowledge (Bettman & Park, 1980). Experts desire more information to enhance their knowledge base, reducing their dependence on others. While novices seek product-related information to increase their repertoire of knowledge, experts want information to maintain their independence and reduce their dependence on others.

Central individuals likely seek network-related information to protect their structural position. Prior studies show that a relationship exists between centrality and network influence (Brass & Burkhardt, 1992; Lee et al., 2010). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests an individual's structural position affects their attractiveness as a network member, access and contact frequency they have with other network members, and the power they exert over others – all influencing the degree of interaction and information-sharing that occurs within a network (Marsden, 1987). Central individuals are motivated to stay engaged with the network through accumulating network-related information. While peripheral individuals may seek network-related information to increase their social standing, central individuals also seek the same type of information to help maintain their influence over their network.

The previous discussion suggests people seek particular types of information not only due to deficiencies, but to accrue additional benefits from acquiring more information. However, the question of how expertise and centrality interact to influence information-seeking behavior becomes clearer as the motive of power becomes an important variable in explaining this process.

4. Theory development

Going forward, this research posits centrality and expertise interact to influence information-seeking behavior of consumers (product- or network-related information). First, central experts, who are knowledgeable in both domains, likely place higher priority in seeking network-related information (vs. product-related information) because they desire to build and maintain credibility and influence within their social group. Research shows people in central positions occupy a position of influence, and serve as opinion leaders among their peers (Lee et al., 2010). Hence, occupying a central network position generates social power. These individuals need to protect and maintain their social status to preserve social benefits such as popularity, prominence, and influence (Bonacich, 1987; Burt, 2000). Network-related information facilitates and maintains ongoing contacts with other members in the network. Even though they may already have accumulated high social and personal power, these individuals continue to seek more social power to help them utilize

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