

## Key study: Zhang, Winterich & Mittal (2010)

Zhang, Winterich & Mittal (2010) found that power-distance influences impulsive buying. PD is linked to self-control, such that those with high PD display less impulsive buying. The effect manifests for vice products but not for virtue products.

There were two parts to this study.



### Study 1

Participants were 97 undergraduate students from a large U.S. university. The study was an independent sample design.

The participants carried out a sentence-completion task with the goal of making power-distance more salient. Participants formed meaningful sentences from sets of scrambled words. The words given in each condition either provoked a high or low sense of power-distance. To make sure that the feelings were salient, there were three questions at the end of the task about power hierarchies. Participants who demonstrated that in fact they were high PD or low PD were then asked to go on to the second part of the experiment. It was found that in 90 percent of the cases, the priming was successful.

Participants were told the following: “Imagine that you are at a store and have \$10 cash. You can buy as many or as few of the products listed below, or none at all. After the study is completed, one participant in each session will be randomly selected and the participants will receive whatever they have chosen in this study. If you are selected and you decide to buy nothing, you will get \$10. If you are selected and decide to purchase something, you will get those items and the remaining money, totaling \$10.” The products were a serving of Oreo cookies for \$.75, a bag of potato chips for \$1.00, a bag of gummy candies for \$1.50, a serving of Cheetos for \$.75, a Snickers bar for \$.75, and a bottle of cola for \$1.50.

The researchers found that power-distance predicted the amount of money spent. Those in the high PD condition spent less money and bought fewer items.

### Study 2

Because PD restrains impulsive buying through its associations with self-control, the effect of PD should be limited to behaviors associated with socially proscribed products, especially those that elicit greater temptations for immediate gratification. Specifically, vice products (e.g., ice cream) lead to greater temptation for immediate gratification than virtue products (e.g., frozen yogurt). In general, the ability to delay gratification and demonstrate restraint is considered virtuous, such that the consumption of vice products may be socially proscribed. When consumers consider the consumption of unhealthful or vice products, the self-control associations activated by high PD should reduce their impulsive buying. Thus,



the association of high PD with greater restraint against socially proscribed temptations should manifest as less impulsive buying of vice products among people with high PD than among those with low PD.

Therefore the research hypothesis was:

*For vice products, high-Power Distance people buy less, whereas Power Distance has no effect on the buying of virtue products.*

Participants were 170 undergraduate students from a large U.S. university. 38% of the sample was female. The tasks were the same as in the previous study, but the items to be purchased included three vice and three virtue products.

*Product type.* The vice products were a Snickers bar, potato chips, and regular cola. The virtue products included a granola bar, apple, and orange juice. The dollar amount spent and the quantity bought served as the dependent variables.

For vice products, those with high (versus low) PD spent less. The mean spent on vice products in the high power distance group was .66 compared to \$1.09 in the low PD group. For virtue products, those with high PD spent more, though this difference was not significant. For vice products, participants with high PD bought fewer items. For virtue products, PD did not influence the number of items bought.

## Discussion

The researchers showed that Power-distance influences impulsive buying of vice products, both in terms of the amount spent and the number of items purchased. If Power-distance influences unplanned buying in general, it should affect purchases of both vice and virtue products. However, this is not the case. This study supports the hypothesis that differences in power-distance result in different levels of self-control associations, which influence impulsive buying.

One variable that clearly may affect this experiment is that the researcher used only American participants and then primed them in order to get them to think about power-distance as high or low. They wanted to see if making people more aware of power-distance (high) would lead to negative affect and those affect the study. However, since Americans come from a culture that is relatively low in power-distance, priming people to have high power-distance may have led to a negative feeling that may have led to impulse buying - that is, instead of power distance, it could have been the negative feeling that led to those Snickers bars! However, the researchers did a survey to determine the feelings of the participants. They did not find any correlation between high power distance priming and negative feelings during the experiment.

The greatest criticism of this study would be its artificiality. The nature of the task under controlled conditions is not how most of us shop. The idea of getting a little extra cash and then being given a basket of goods to choose from controls variables really well, but it does not reflect what really happens when people get extra money. First, it is not clear how salient power-distance would be in the process of spending money. Did the presence of researchers as well as the priming test lead to lower purchases of "vice goods?" Would that happen if somewhere were only in a grocery market? A lot of impulse buying



today takes place on the Internet. This study does not take into consideration the deindividuation - that is, the sense of anonymity - that the Internet can promote. More research is clearly needed to support the findings.

