
Consumers Who Lack Control Seek Functional Products



By Andy J. Yap , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Charlene Y. Chen, Assistant Professor of Marketing & International Business, Nanyang Business School.

Framing a product as functional can appeal to those who feel a loss of control.

In many parts of the world, consumers are well acquainted with the concept of retail therapy. When a person feels down, shopping often provides some relief. It's not just women and shoes. Research has shown that even a little retail therapy can prolong lives – especially those of older men.

While it's understood that ice cream is a near-cure for broken hearts, a body of research has emerged in the last ten years, showing finer links between various psychological needs and the products preferred by consumers. Along with Leonard Lee, we have been looking into the types of products that appeal to consumers when they feel control-deprived.

In a recent paper, we hypothesised that consumers would compensate for a loss of perceived control by buying functional products – products designed to fill a basic need or accomplish a practical task, such as household cleaning

agents. We further theorised that this preference would be due to the functional products' association with problem solving, a quality that promotes a sense of control.

In our article, [“Control Deprivation Motivates Acquisition of Utilitarian Products”](#), recently published in the Journal of Consumer Research, we showed that individuals whose sense of control is threatened tend to buy more functional products than people who see no such threat. They are also more responsive to ads highlighting a product's functional benefits, as opposed to hedonic ones. By hedonic, we mean that which evokes feelings of pleasure.

Moreover, we found that this preference for functional products was directly inspired by the consumers' interest in solving problems. Loss of control triggers a penchant for solving problems as a way to compensate.

Study results buttressed by four studies

In the **first study**, 126 shoppers in a US supermarket wrote a short essay recalling as vividly as possible an event where they had experienced a low or a high sense of control over their environment. The participants then went grocery shopping with their own money and handed out their purchase receipts at the exit.

Compared to the shoppers who had been manipulated to feel a heightened sense of control, those with a low sense of control bought more functional products. There was no statistical difference in the amount they spent on hedonic products.

Lack of control activates a willingness to solve problems

In the **second study**, 236 participants recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk were split into a high-control, low-control or baseline group via essay writing. They were then shown an ad for a pair of sneakers that emphasised either functionality (e.g. durability) or pleasure (e.g. style). The control-deprived people who had seen the functional ad declared a greater intention to purchase the sneakers. They were also willing to pay significantly more for them.

Involving 175 participants recruited in an Asian mall, the **third study** replicated the findings of the second study, but with sugarcane juice this time. The low-control participants were keener to buy the product when

shown an ad highlighting its health (“functional”) benefits. In addition, they were influenced to a larger extent by the problem-solving properties of sugarcane juice, meaning its ability to fight dehydration, prevent heatstroke and generally keep the body healthy.

The purpose of our **fourth study** was to test whether it was indeed the motivation to engage in problem solving that made functional products (or at least products framed in such a way) more desirable to consumers in low-control situations.

Among 203 participants recruited via Mechanical Turk, the low-control group was, as predicted, keener to book a massage for functional reasons (e.g. to reduce body fatigue) than for hedonic reasons (e.g. to enjoy themselves).

What is meant by loss of control?

It’s important to state that loss of control doesn’t mean being out of control or lacking self-discipline. It refers to the everyday, fundamental experience of being unable to produce a desired outcome in a given environment. Such situations could include traffic jams or long queues at the till, especially in overcrowded stores. It also describes what a parent typically feels when dealing with a child who throws a tantrum in a supermarket.

Such loss of control differs from a lack of autonomy, which is when people feel they can’t act according to their own will. It must also be distinguished from a lack of power, a situation in which a person with fewer resources is subject to the influence of another who has more.

Framing your product

Marketers already knew that consumers like the virtuous nature of functional products. For one, buying them just doesn’t induce as much guilt as when buying a hedonic indulgence. While most people get a thrill out of spending money, they also like to perceive themselves as rational beings.

Our research shows that functional products – or again, products able to be framed as such – have an additional edge. In the thousand-and-one everyday situations where people have low control, functional products help to restore psychological equilibrium.

In practical terms, if managing a store where overcrowding is a regular problem, it would be advisable to line the more crowded sections with

functional items.

When selling a product based on its functional benefits, using imagery that evokes a loss of control – it could be something as simple as unpredictable weather – may increase sales, all the while providing a “therapeutic” shopping experience to consumers.

***Andy J. Yap** is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and Charlene Y. Chen is an Assistant Professor of Marketing & International Business at Nanyang Business School.*

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/marketing/consumers-who-lack-control-seek-functional-products>

About the author(s)

Andy J. Yap is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour and the Academic Director of the Centre for Organisational Research at INSEAD.