Executive Summary

What do You Think, Darling? Revisiting Knowledge on Purchase Decisions of Couples within Households

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Purchase decisions and consumption often take place within family households and/or relationships. Thus, many purchase decisions (e.g. the purchase of cars, houses, furniture, or insurances) should be studied in the field of family decision making. Researchers in this field deal with the question of who makes the ultimate decision, to identify which product categories are male- resp. female-dominant. A second stream investigates the underlying decision processes, to tackle the question of why one specific partner dominates the decision; this research has generated several antecedents of ‘decision dominance’ (or, equivalently, the influence distribution). Numerous studies have been guided by Resource Theory which postulates that one partner’s relative influence in joint decision is a function of several power-related resources to the relationship (e.g., income, education, status, and their respective [in]equality among partners). However, in modern days, we observe societal changes that pertain to gender roles. Women exert more influence in domains that were traditionally male-dominated and vice versa. Consequently, answers to the combined “who decides” and “why him or her” questions are potentially outdated. Moreover, the context in which decisions are made (i.e. what is purchased?) has been merely subordinate to the investigation of antecedents.

Hence, we review whether established antecedents still apply to contemporary couples. Moreover, we systematically select product categories associated to either one or no specific gender. Therefore, in an online study, we investigate (1) product category-unrelated (education and income), (2) product category-related (knowledge and preference intensity), and (3) contextual (product category, gender) antecedents of relative influence in joint decisions regarding vacations, television sets, groceries, and dining out.

Regarding (1), we find evidence for the decreasing importance of education as an antecedent of relative influence in joint decisions. In contrast, income seems to still play a role. Although it is assumed that women contribute to the household more than they did in the past, in our study men earned more than their female partners. Thus, we observe that the partner who contributes more to the household income also has more decision power in the purchase of products. Consequently, the unequal distribution of income still serves as a source of power and supports the position of the partner with higher income. However, as levels of education have become quite similar, its role declines. This finding further suggests that, as the gender pay gap decreases, income also should less and less impact the dominance of one partner in joint decisions in the near future.

Regarding (2), we also observe both knowledge and preference intensity to be powerful antecedents of influence. Partners who are more involved with the product category also have more power in the decision process.

Additionally, and related to (3), we demonstrate that beyond its role as relevant antecedents, knowledge and preference intensity are associated with gender and vary across product cate-
categories. We find women to be more knowledgeable and having more intense preferences for grocery shopping, whereas the same applies to men and the purchase of TV sets. This finding indicates that at least some purchase responsibilities are still divided by gender and further implies that antecedents of influence must be investigated by product category, because they have different associations and meanings.