

It's all about autonomy: Consumers react negatively when prompted to think about money

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Whether they are aware of it or not, consumers dislike being reminded of money—so much that they will rebel against authority figures, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"When consumers are reminded of [money](#), do they conform, shrug it off, or react against others' attempts to influence them?" ask authors Jia (Elke) Liu (University of Groningen), Dirk Smeesters (Erasmus University), and Kathleen D. Vohs (University of Minnesota). The researchers found that money reminders lead consumers to react against people who would normally influence their decisions.

In three studies, participants were subtly reminded of money by either working on a computer with a hard currency screensaver or by formulating sentences using money-related words. "Because money reminders boost the importance of consumers' autonomy, those subtly reminded of money perceived the authority commands and off-handed peer opinions as threats to their autonomy, which did not occur among those not reminded of money," the authors write.

Specifically, the participants who were reminded of money reacted in opposite ways from authority figures or peers when it came to evaluating products. Conversely, participants who were not reminded of money followed commands or suggestions of authorities and peers.

"This reactance to social influences only occurs when money-reminded consumers made decisions for themselves," the authors write. "When these consumers were asked to make decisions for a relatively intimate other, they were indifferent to social influences (i.e., the unsolicited opinion of another consumer)."

"This research highlights money's ability to stimulate a longing for freedom, and has potential implications for interpersonal communication, advertisers, and markets," the authors write. "Money cues are frequently present in the social environment (e.g., television spots mentioning savings or discounts, in-store signage with dollar signs, billboards advertising the state lottery). These money cues may function in the same way as money primes in our studies and lead [consumers](#) to retaliate against perceived influences on their behavior."

More information: Jia (Elke) Liu, Dirk Smeesters, and Kathleen D. Vohs. "Reminders of Money Elicit Feelings of Threat and Reactance in Response to Social Influence." *Journal of Consumer Research* (published online July 14, 2011). ejcr.org

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