Consumer empowerment in consumer–firm relationships: conceptual framework and implications for research

Akhavannasab, S., Dantas, D. & Senecal, S.

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Consumer Empowerment in Consumer–Firm Relationships:

Conceptual Framework and Implications for Research

Sanam Akhavannasab & Danilo C. Dantas & Sylvain Senecal

Abstract

This article contributes to the literature on consumer power in consumer-firm relationships in three ways. First, it proposes a consumer empowerment framework adopting a consumer perspective that includes the antecedents and consequences of consumer power perception. Second, it distinguishes two manifestations of consumer power perception: personal power—the perceived ability to resist or ignore a firm's persuasive efforts and make final decisions independently—and social power—the perception of influencing a firm's decisions and responses. Third, it identifies the entities involved (i.e., firms, third parties, and other consumers) that empower consumers through the exchange of resources. Moreover, this article discusses how the constructs of consumer power and empowerment differ from related concepts such as perceived control and self-efficacy. Finally, it proposes a research agenda.

Keywords: consumer power, consumer empowerment, social power, personal power

Introduction

Currently, consumers are more active, participative, resistant, influential, social, and united in their consumption behaviors than ever before (Cova and Pace 2006). These emergent characteristics have led to a rebalancing of power in consumer–firm relationships. Stories such as "United Breaks Guitars" (Deighton and Kornfeld 2010), in which a dissatisfied consumer created a series of music videos to express his frustration with United Airlines and shared them through YouTube, are regularly reported in the press as examples of how empowered consumers are now able to harm firms' reputations. However, consumer empowerment is not always harmful to the firm. Some firms (e.g., Priceline.com, Threadless.com) deliberately use it as a strategy for developing enhanced consumer satisfaction (Pranić 2008), consumer involvement (Hunter and Garnefeld 2008), and repurchase intentions (Fuchs, Prandelli, and Schreier 2010). The rationale underlying these strategies resonates with Russell's (2004) idea of power, which he defined as the ability to produce intended effects. Thus, a consumer looking to fulfill a need gains the ability to produce what he or she wants and in turn obtains greater satisfaction.

Despite the phenomenon's pervasiveness in today's market, we found only 60 articles within the academic marketing literature using the term "consumer empowerment" or "consumer power" in their titles. The number of articles added per year is relatively low (averaging 2.3/year), although this rate has been increasing: 3.2/year since 2006 compared to 1.3/year before 2006. The study of "consumer empowerment" and "consumer power" has received growing attention since 2006 both from researchers and practitioners (Deloitte 2011; Labrecque et al. 2013; Urban 2004; Wathieu et al. 2002).

Despite the increasing popularity of the topic, the literature manifests several serious weaknesses or omissions. The first, ambiguity in the concept itself, derives from a poor definition of consumer power. Prior research has not clearly defined the underlying dimensions of consumer power, nor has it distinguished the construct from other similar relational concepts such as consumer control, consumer engagement, or consumer competence. The second weakness concerns the relationship between consumer power and its antecedents and consequences; these relationships have yet to be put into a comprehensive framework. While previous studies have mainly focused on recognizing consumer resistance tactics (Holt 2002; Penaloza and Price 1993) and consumer empowerment strategies that firms are using (Fuchs et al. 2010), these studies did not focus on theory building. One exception is Pranić and Roehl (2012b), who clarified the dimensions of consumer empowerment and demonstrated that emotional responses and satisfaction are consequences of empowerment. However, Pranić and Roehl (2012b) specifically focused on developing the framework in the context of service recovery. The narrowness of this focus comprises the third weakness. Until now, consumer empowerment research has focused on specific situations such as digital media (Labrecque et al. 2013) and service recovery (Pranić and Roehl 2012b). Unfortunately, this proliferation of a context-specific treatment limits clarity regarding the meaning of the construct as well as the potential impact of consumer power in marketing.

Hence, this study's main contribution is an in-depth analysis of consumer power and the consumer empowerment process, which enables us to define their conceptual domains, provide a general definition for each, and, by taking an integrative approach, propose a general conceptual framework for understanding consumer empowerment. We propose two components of perceived consumer power: social and personal power. Perceived social power refers to the perception that a consumer can influence a given firm's decisions and responses. In contrast, perceived personal power refers to the perception that an individual can ignore or even resist a firm's persuasive efforts and thus make an independent final decision. Moreover, we identify the different types of resources that empower consumers (see Figure 1) and then categorize the antecedents and consequences of consumer power perceptions (see Figure 2).

This article is divided into four sections. The first section explores the theoretical roots of consumer power and consumer empowerment by reviewing the theoretical foundations of power and empowerment in marketing, sociology, psychology, organizational behavior, and healthcare. This theoretical analysis enables us to arrive at a general definition, which we use in the second section to identify the entities that empower consumers by exchanging resources with them (See Figure 1). In the third section, we then take a micro perspective, focusing on consumer-firm relationships, and propose the consumer empowerment framework (see Figure 2). Lastly, we discuss the paper's contribution to theory, its managerial implications, and opportunities for future research.

Conceptual Foundations

Theoretical Considerations for Analyzing Power and Empowerment

Power is at the heart of the construct of empowerment (Kucuk 2009); it is a multilayered and complex concept (Lukes 1986) influenced by many social resources and agents (Barbalet 1985). To better study power and the empowerment process, we first limit our analysis to the micro level, analyzing these concepts from a consumer's perspective.

Second, because power is a relational concept (Anderson and Galinsky 2006), we define it within specific social relationships. Consumers may perceive a sense of power in various types of relationships (Figure 1). We recognize three major relationships that influence consumer power: consumer–other consumers, consumer–third party, or consumer–firm. For this paper's purposes, we analyze consumer empowerment and power in consumer–firm relationships (Figure 1). However, we suggest that the resources exchanged in other relationships (e.g., consumer–other consumers) influence the consumer empowerment process in the consumer–firm relationship. Therefore, we discuss the empowering impact of the resources exchanged in those relationships. In this paper, we adopt the definition of *resource* from Foa and Foa (1980): anything that can be transferred from one party to another in a relationship. In Figure 1, we illustrate the major relationships that a consumer can have in a marketplace.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

We draw from marketing relationship theory (Mick, Fournier, and Dobscha, 1998) and interactive experience theory (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009) to examine the conceptual foundations of consumer power in consumer–firm relationships. We consider consumer–firm relationships to be those situations in which both the consumer and the firm come to the relationship purposefully, interact mutually, and remain active in defining and affecting their relationship (Mick et al. 1998). From a motivational perspective, a consumer may intentionally seek power to influence the firm's decisions or simply wish for the firm to refrain from abusing its power. In any of these cases, we aim to shed some light on the meaning of consumer power and consumer empowerment from a consumer perspective.

Power

Social psychology has extensively investigated the concept of power. In sociology, power is considered as a constant negotiation process between the parties involved in a relationship (Barbalet 1985). Barbalet (1985) noted that this interplay includes the power exercised by one party against the resistance of the other. According to this stream of research, one party uses power strategies to overcome the other party's resistance strategies and to exercise his or her power (Foucault 1982). Social resources are involved in these power and resistance strategies; if certain social resources are available only to the party exercising power, the one who is subject to this power will look to other social resources to counteract the exercised power (Barbalet 1985). Therefore, the imposition of power in a relationship is not absolute (Courpasson, Golsorkhi, and Sallaz 2012); it can flow in either direction (Foucault 1982). We propose that a similar constant power interplay exists in consumer–firm relationships that will continue as long as the relationship exists between the consumer and the firm. This dynamic makes the measurement of actual consumer power challenging because power constantly shifts between the consumer and the firm.

To solve this measurement concern, many social psychologists have described power as a psychological construct, referring to the individual's subjective sense of power in a relationship (Anderson, John, and Keltner 2012; Rucker, Hu, and Galinsky 2014). Anderson et al. (2012), for instance, defined and measured power as a snapshot, indicating that measuring the subjective sense of power enables researchers to explore and to distinguish between the antecedents and the behavioral consequences. Because the present study proposes a consumer empowerment framework that includes the antecedents and consequences of consumer power on an individual level, we consider consumer power to be a psychological construct.

Now, we turn to the question of what power is. Generally, literature in social and cognitive psychology distinguishes between two types of power: personal and social power (Overbeck and Park 2001). Personal power is defined as the ability to ignore the influence of others and to make independent decisions, implying the ability to act with agency and independence (Lammers, Stoker, and Stapel 2009). In contrast, social power refers to an individual's ability to influence others despite their resistance (Lammers, Stoker, and Stapel 2009; Overbeck and Park 2001; van Dijke and Poppe 2006). We adopt this same categorization of power in developing the concept of consumer power.

Consumer Power

Few studies have tried to conceptualize consumer power. As summarized in Table 1, the proposed definitions are either context-specific (e.g., service marketing, Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010) or contemplate only one type of power; this does not represent a more generalized use of these definitions (Broderick et al. 2011). Also worth noting is that only three definitions of power refer to the subjective sense of power (Table 1). For example, Brill (1992) defined customer power as the customer's general perception of resistance to and influence over salespersons. In this view, customer power is a personality trait that can potentially challenge the dynamic and relational nature of power. Grégoire et al. (2010) defined customer power as a unidimensional construct, stating that power is a client's perceived ability to influence a firm when communicating directly with it. This definition refers solely to the customer's social power. For their part, Huang et al. (2014) focused only on the personal aspect of power, stating that power is the consumer's perception of confidence and control over a decision.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Consumer Personal Power

Prior research has suggested that the personal aspect of power is an outcome of the consumer empowerment process. For example, the term *empowered consumers* refers to those who feel free of the influence of marketers (Powers et al. 2012), make purchases that are more informed and independent (Niininen, Buhalis, and March 2007), and can avoid pushy marketers (Urban 2004). We adopt the definition of personal power proposed by Overbeck and Park (2001) and define perceived consumer personal power as the extent to which a consumer feels that he or she is able to ignore a firm's persuasive efforts and make a final decision independently to fulfill his or her own needs.

Consumer Social Power

Prior research has suggested that the social dimension of power is another outcome of consumer empowerment situations. Socially empowered consumers can modify existing services (Harrison, Waite, and Hunter 2006) and co-create value (Karpen et al. 2015); they can alter brand meanings through online communities and interactions with other consumers (Cova and Pace 2006); they can punish corporate behavior (Kucuk and Krishnamurthy 2007; Mainwaring 2011); and they can make or break a brand (Mainwaring 2011). Further, they can campaign publicly against harmful and unethical corporate practices (Mainwaring 2011), and they can negotiate prices (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006). Inspired by the definition of social power proposed by Overbeck and Park (2001), we define perceived consumer social power as the extent to which a consumer believes that he or she can influence a firm's decisions, responses, and actions.

Depending on the situation, the extent of personal power and social power may vary. For example, a consumer who is searching for a product might feel a high level of personal power and a low level of social power. However, when a consumer can negotiate the selling price of a product or customize it, both personal power and social power may be at a high level.

To better delineate the concept of consumer power, we distinguish it from other related constructs in Table 2, which presents the definition of these related constructs and highlights how they differ from social and personal power. For example, consumer self-confidence, which refers to an individual's feeling of assurance and capability of making a good decision and earning a positive experience in the marketplace (Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001), is an antecedent to the feeling of personal power. The self-evaluation of the ability to make a good decision increases a consumer's feeling that he or she can make the final decision independently. In another example, we can differentiate the two dimensions of power from control. Perceived control refers to the feeling of dominance in a situation that requires the ability to either resist the firm's efforts (i.e., personal power) or influence the firm (i.e., social power). Having clarified the two distinct dimensions of consumer power, in the next section, we examine how a consumer can acquire them.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Empowerment

The empowerment process refers to mechanisms through which people gain more power in their lives. Examples of such mechanisms could be the democratic participation of an individual in social communities (Christens, Peterson, and Speer 2011), the increase of an individual's environmental awareness (Zimmerman 1995), the enhancement of a patient's options in finding and obtaining health services and patient–physician collaboration in a healthcare setting (Ouschan, Sweeney, and Johnson 2006), or the involvement of employees in organizational decision-making (Spreitzer, Kizilos, and Nason 1997). Many conceptual efforts exist on the topic of empowerment across different disciplines[i]. First, the consumer empowerment process can be defined as mechanisms that increase the subjective sense of consumer power in a consumer–firm relationship. Second, these mechanisms can refer to either enablement or power delegation. Enablement refers to a resource exchange that arises from consumer interaction with market-related entities (e.g., other consumers, other firms). These consumer empowerment mechanisms instill consumers with a sense of power (Kucuk 2012), whether it be personal power, social power, or both. For example, consumers use third parties' accurate and unbiased information as an independent source of information (Kucuk 2009), which enables them to select from various options offered by other firms (Wathieu et al. 2002). In another example, we can see that online social settings make proactive consumers change a brand personality (Boyd, Clarke, and Spekman 2014). These resources help consumers either counteract the effects of powerful marketing strategies or influence a firm's decisions (Herrmann 1993), inferring both personal and social power. Clearly, the enablement category of the consumer empowerment process is outside a firm's control.

In comparison, in the case of power delegation, the firm grants power to the consumer. Examples of firms' power delegation strategies include consumer collaboration in the development of a new product (Fuchs et al. 2010), consumer value co-creation in brand communities (Boyd, Clarke, and Spekman 2014), customization (Niininen, Buhalis, and March 2007), "pay what you wish" (Kim, Natter, and Spann 2014), and "name your own price" (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006). In these situations, not only do firms delegate power (e.g., Threadless.com gives consumers the opportunity to design apparel), but they may also limit the power (e.g., Priceline can reject the offered bid of the consumer as too low). The next section elaborates on the empowering role of a firm and other entities with which a consumer interacts in a market.

Consumer Interaction with Market-Related Entities

Consumer–Firm(s) Interaction

When a consumer is in a marketplace, he or she interacts simultaneously both with a focal firm, from which he or she makes the purchase, and with other firms that provide similar offerings. The focal firm may deliberately empower consumers through implementing certain marketing strategies (Fuchs et al. 2010; Reis, Pena, and Novicevic 2002). A consumer-centric strategy such as customization along with consumer participation in pricing, product development, recovery services, and value co-creation (Fuchs et al. 2010; Moynagh 2002; Pranić and Roehl 2012b; Reis, Pena, and Novicevic 2002) all suggest consumer empowerment. These strategies involve exchanges of resources between consumers and firms. The firm's resources (e.g., empowering strategies and technology) interact with consumers' resources, such as experience and familiarity with the product category (Harrison, Waite, and Hunter 2006), financial capacity to pay premium prices for customized products (Harrison, Waite, and Hunter 2006), consumer desire to be involved and exercise power (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010; Zimmerman 1995), ability to process information and evaluate options (Wathieu et al. 2002) and self-efficacy (Kucuk 2012). Exchanges of resources between a consumer and a firm bring both personal and social power to the consumer.

In contrast, other firms play an empowering role for consumers. Depending on the number of firms and the distinguishability of the firms' offerings, consumers respond differently (Holt 2002; Penaloza and Price 1993). For example, in a monopolistic market, consumers are dependent on a specific firm's offering and are unable to ignore or resist the firm's power, indicating a lack of personal power. In contrast, competitors are sources of consumer power in the relationship between a consumer and the focal firm (Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006; Tiu Wright, Newman, and Dennis 2006) in non-monopolistic contexts. The availability of options and information interacts with the consumer's ability and motivation to process those options and information (Moynagh 2002; Newholm, Laing, and Hogg 2006; Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006), decreases the costs of switching, and enables the consumer to feel independent, emphasizing the perception of personal power. In this process, the focal firm does not proactively empower consumers. In fact, resource exchange with other firms enables the consumer to feel independent from the focal firm. We emphasize that when the consumer interacts with other firms, the latter's resources are always in interaction with the consumer's resources, such as the desire to control and be involved in information gathering and option evaluation (Wathieu et al. 2002), financial capacity (Harrison, Waite, and Hunter 2006), brand attachment, and individual factors such as self-efficacy. The right side of Figure 1 summarizes the resources that the consumer and firms exchange in their relationship during the consumer empowering process.

Consumer–Other Consumers Interaction

A consumer in the marketplace may interact with other consumers. This type of interaction provides another important resource exchange contributing to the feeling of empowerment (Christodoulides, Michaelidou, and Argyriou 2012; Harrison, Waite, and Hunter 2006; Wathieu et al. 2002). Interaction with other consumers promotes consumer power by allowing people to express their consumption experiences and learn from other consumers' experiences (Labrecque et al. 2013). Much information sharing between consumers occurs online today, especially on social media (e.g., TripAdvisor, Yelp). Research suggests that the information gathered by consumers on social media influences their purchase intentions (Wang, Yu, and Wei 2012; Barcelos, Dantas, and Sénécal 2018). Consumers who share their consumption experiences provide a source of information for a prospective buyer interested in purchasing a particular product (Kucuk and Krishnamurthy 2007; Wathieu et al. 2002). This information is not derived from the firm because it comes from other consumers who have bought and used the product. Therefore, it makes the consumer less dependent on the information provided by the firm. Other consumers' opinions affect the consumer decision-making process—for example, by influencing product evaluation and product selection (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Senecal and Nantel 2004). This independent information helps the consumer distinguish the true value of a product from the marketers' persuasive efforts (Holt 2002; Ozanne and Murray 1995). Taking others' opinions into account increases the consumer's perception of personal power, enabling decisions that are less dependent on the firm's persuasive messages (Tiu Wright et al. 2006).

Alternatively, a consumer can feel empowered when perceiving the ability to change other consumers' decisions or behaviors through voicing his or her opinions online. A consumer can share a product evaluation, which may change other consumers' responses to the marketers' efforts (Boyd, Clarke, and Spekman 2014; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Gu and Ye 2014; Kozinets 1999). This influence over other consumers may affect firms' sales and decisions (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Gu and Ye 2014), amounting to feeling social power over that firm. The empowering impact of other consumers depends on consumer resources, such as consumer desire to engage in voicing his or her own experiences (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010), and on certain individual factors (e.g., extraversion, Anderson, John, and Keltner 2012). The upper section of Figure 1 summarizes the resources exchanged in the relationship between a consumer and other consumers.

Consumer–Third Party Interaction

The consumer might also interact with third-party organizations. These may be governmental (e.g., the Federal Trade Commission) or private (e.g., Consumer Affairs) organizations that distribute accurate, unbiased, and independent information about firms and consumer rights and follow up on business malfeasances (Day and Aaker 1970; Delgadillo 2013; Grønmo and Ölander 1991; Nardo et al. 2011; Wahlen and Huttunen 2012). These organizations serve as independent sources of information for the consumer. Information provided by these organizations increases the consumer's knowledge and facilitates his or her decision-making process; as this is independent of the information the firm provides, it implies increased personal power. Information related to other consumers' real experiences on Consumerreports.com is a good example of such empowering sources.

These organizations also serve to amplify the consumer's voice, which a focal firm and other consumers are then more likely to hear, facilitating interactions between several consumers and between consumers and firms. These organizations have the power to make firms comply with consumer protection laws, again implying consumer social power. In some cases, third parties have the authority to stop firms from engaging in illegal and irresponsible business activities (Delgadillo 2013). These third parties help address consumer dissatisfaction by following up on consumer complaints or managing collective resistances, such as lobbying and boycotting (Herrmann 1993; Penaloza and Price 1993). For example, third parties such as Consumer Affairs and the Better Business Bureau allow consumers to file complaints in response to irresponsible or illegal business practices. The lower left of Figure 2 summarizes the resources exchanged in the relationship between the consumer and other third-party organizations.

Consumer Empowerment Framework

We propose a general framework for the consumer empowerment process. Consisting of an integrative model that identifies the elements involved and their consequences. In this framework, we identify three antecedents (i.e., consumer-based, firm-based, and environmental factors) that contribute to power perception, which in turn leads to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences. Figure 2 illustrates the consumer empowerment framework, which the following sections explain in detail.

Antecedents

Consumer-Based Factors

Based on Belk's (1975) and Jacoby's (2002) stimulus–organism–response model, we used three types of consumer-based factors, including situational (stimulus), individual (organism), and behavioral (response) ones. Individual factors differ from situational factors by being general and long-lasting individual characteristics (Thorndike 1947). Individual factors include consumer experience and knowledge, brand attachment, self-efficacy, self-determination, motivation to exercise power, locus of control, extraversion, and self-esteem. Table 2 illustrates some of these important individual factors. For example, self-esteem, which refers to a person's overall subjective emotional evaluation of his or her worth (Rosenberg 1965), is one of the important elements in an individual's empowerment process (Zimmerman et al. 1992). Bearden et al. (2001) found that consumers with high self-esteem are harder to persuade and less concerned about social rejection. Resistance to persuasive messages increases feelings of personal power. Another important empowering individual factor is self-determination, which refers to an individual's sense of having a choice in initiating and regulating actions (Deci, Connell, Ryan 1989). When a consumer feels that he or she has a choice in negotiating the price or selecting a desired option, he or she feels more personal power. Moreover, consumer knowledge enables consumers to make more informed choices and to be more independent of the information provided by the firm in making the final decision (Newholm, Laing, and Hogg 2006; Wathieu et al. 2002), resulting in more personal power. Many individual factors moderate the impact of other factors on a consumer's power perception. Both marketing and other related literature has well documented the impact of individual factors.

The second group of consumer-based factors is situational. We consider social surroundings as an important situational factor that affects consumer power. We adopt our definition of social surrounding from Belk (1975), who referred to interpersonal interactions with other consumers and third-party organizations. When other consumers are present in a decision-making process, they are a source of information independent of the firm's communication efforts (Nicholls 2010). Moreover, the presence and responsiveness of other consumers may affect one's experience of social power over the firm.

Finally, behavioral factors are likely to affect consumer power. The first important behavioral factor is consumer engagement. According to Doorn et al. (2010), consumer engagement refers to consumer behavioral responses that go beyond a transaction. It may manifest itself as a dissatisfied customer's complaint, a positive comment made to other consumers, or an act of participation in value creation for oneself or other consumers. For example, in his YouTube video "United Breaks Guitars," Dave Carroll retaliated against the airline's negligence by communicating his experience to millions of consumers (Bernof and Schadler 2010). In addition, when a firm provides consumers with the opportunity to communicate their preferences and engage them in the product development process, they may feel some influence over the firm's decisions on that final product (Fuchs et al. 2010). Previous studies suggest that consumer participation in service specification and production increases both the perception of control over the service outcome (Dantas and Carrillat 2013; Fred Van Raaij and Pruyn 1998) and the perception of influence over the service provider (Menon and Bansal 2007). Certainly, the impact of consumer engagement on consumer perception of power depends on the firm's responsiveness (i.e., firm-based factors), other consumers’ responsiveness (i.e., situational factors), and consumer motivation to engage (i.e., individual factors). Table 2 summarizes some of the behavioral factors.

Firm-Based Factors

Firm-based factors refer either to the firm’s willingness to help consumers (e.g., benevolence, firm responsiveness) or to the implemented consumer-empowering strategies (e.g., customization). For example, customization is an empowering strategy in which consumers become involved in the design of a product by declaring their own preferences (Niininen, Buhalis, and March 2007). This strategy shifts the power over product/service specifications from a firm to a consumer (Reis, Pena, and Novicevic 2002). For example, in Pandora jewelry stores, consumers can customize their own bracelets using a range of specially selected materials.

In addition, firms can also use pricing strategies to empower consumers. Some firms such as Humble Bundle offer some of their products under “pay what you wish” conditions and delegate the whole price determination process to a consumer (Kim, Natter, and Spann 2014). In this situation, the firm depends on the consumer to set the price. Giving the consumer the ability to ignore the firm’s posted price and to set the final price independently emphasizes the consumer’s personal power. Moreover, the consumer’s exerting influence over an important element of the marketing mix (i.e., price) implies the perception of social power.

Environmental Factors

The first environmental factor is competition, which refers to the quality and quantity of other firms' offerings and their differentiation from a given firm's offerings. In a competitive market where a variety of different offerings is available, consumers feel less dependent on the offering of a given firm, increasing perceived personal power. The second environmental factor is the technology available for possible use by consumers, firms, and third-party organizations. It has a positive effect on consumer-based factors (i.e., ability to process information, ability to filter and organize options, and social interaction with and connectivity to other consumers). The Internet, search engines, cloud services, comparison tools and shopbots, virtual agents, online communities, social networks, online forums, and chat rooms all increase consumer perceived personal and social power (e.g., Hunter and Garnefeld 2008; Pires, Stanton, and Rita 2006; Wathieu et al. 2002). For example, Comparethemarket.com enables consumers to find and compare many retailers based on various product categories, such as finance, telecom, travel, grocery, and home and furniture, in just a few seconds (i.e., individual factor). A consumer who is about to purchase insurance for a new car thus has access to many insurance providers and can compare them easily, which makes him or her independent of the information that the firm itself provides, implying perceived personal power. Information technology can also increase a consumer's social power. For instance, a consumer dissatisfied with a recent stay at a hotel can publicize his or her opinion through Tripadvisor.com or other social networks. Comments and views received from other consumers and a possible recovery response from the firm amount to social power since they may affect consumers' perception of influence over the firm.

Consumer protection and supporting laws comprise the last environmental factor that improves consumer engagement and a firm's responsiveness. A consumer with access to unbiased, accurate information about consumer rights is more independent of the information provided by the firm and has a heightened perception of personal power. When a customer has the right to voice his or her own frustration (i.e., behavioral factor) in the hopes of influencing the firm's response (i.e., firm-related factor), this also affects the consumer's perception of social power.

Consequences

Consumer power has cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences. In terms of cognitive consequences, when consumers feel powerful in their decision-making process, the outcome will be more congruent with their expectations. Russell's (2004) definition of power (i.e., the ability to produce intended effects) echoes this proposition. In turn, this congruency increases consumer satisfaction (Oliver 1980). Marketing research indicates that a consumer's perception of personal power over a task increases the feeling of satisfaction with both the decision-making task (e.g., Araujo Pacheco, Lunardo, and dos Santos 2013) and the firm (e.g., Chang 2008; Hunter and Garnefeld 2008). Another cognitive factor is trust. According to Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (2011), trust is willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Ouschan et al. (2006) found that increasing a consumer's perception of power will provide them with a higher level of trust. Moreover, Füller et al. (2009) showed a positive relationship between the perceived empowerment of consumers who participated in value co-creation and their trust in a firm.

Consumer power also results in emotional consequences; such power increases the experience of positive affective responses such as amusement, desire, enthusiasm, happiness, and love (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003). However, decreased power intensifies the subjective experience of negative emotions, such as embarrassment, fear, guilt, sadness, and shame (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003). In marketing research, Menon and Bansal (2007) found that in a service encounter, a consumer's feeling of social power enhances the experience of positive emotions, while a lack of social power increases the experience of negative emotions. Similarly, Fuchs et al. (2010) suggested that a consumer's social power engenders da heightened sense of enjoyment and fun in relation to the product's use. In addition, Pranić an Roehl (2012b) found that a consumer's feeling of empowerment in a service encounter enhances the consumer's experience of positive emotions (e.g., feeling happy, pleasantly surprised). Therefore, we propose that consumer feelings of personal and social power result in positive emotions such as happiness and enjoyment.

Lastly, consumer power results in behavioral consequences; consumer power increases willingness to pay, positive word of mouth, and verbal defense in public (Fuchs et al. 2010). Fuchs et al. (2010) found that when consumers are given the opportunity to create a product, they are willing to pay a premium for that product and will share positive information and defend the firm against negative opinions. Strong bonding and commitment to a firm is another behavioral factor that could be considered a result of a consumer's power perception (Ouschan et al. 2006; Fuchs et al. 2010).

Discussion

Contributions to Research and Implications for Firms and Consumers

This article provides a conceptual framework for consumer empowerment, which we have developed based on a thorough review of the literature and an analysis of the combined concepts of empowerment, power, consumer power, and consumer empowerment. The framework clarifies the consumer empowerment process, through which a consumer experiences independence from a firm's persuasive efforts and/or influence over a firm's decisions and responses.

The framework makes several contributions to the marketing literature. First, it provides a sound basis on which to ground future theoretical and empirical research on consumer empowerment. Second, the framework identifies and clarifies the relevant elements of the empowerment process that lead to the perception of consumer power. Although power has been recognized as the central part of the empowerment process (McGregor 2005; Menon and Bansal 2007), no prior research, to our knowledge, has explicitly outlined the role of perceived consumer power as an outcome of the consumer empowerment process. Third, the framework identifies the relationships among various constructs (i.e., antecedents and consequences) that affect and are also influenced by two different dimensions of consumer power (i.e., personal power and social power). By doing so, we provide a strong basis for applying the proposed consumer empowerment framework to various consumption contexts.

The proposed empowerment framework also has implications for firms in that it presents the different levers available for firms to empower consumers. As we discussed here, although empowerment leads to positive outcomes for consumers, it can also lead to adverse outcomes for firms. For marketers, our conceptual framework offers a guide to using consumer power to build commitment and trust. This framework can also help managers to better understand the mechanisms behind the consumer empowerment process, which in turn can help them develop more effective strategies for dealing with empowered consumers. For instance, in recent years, a firm's media presence has been categorized as either paid (e.g., through advertising), owned (e.g., through the firm's website), or earned (e.g., via word of mouth and expert opinions; Stokes et al. 2011). Although earned media presence such as word of mouth has always existed, social media has helped propel earned media to the center stage of marketing concerns. Because earned media can encompass all entities that we have identified as empowering sources, we cannot overlook its importance in the consumer empowerment process in a consumer–firm interaction.

The proposed framework has implications for consumers, as well. Our consumer empowerment framework indicates that individual factors such as consumers' abilities and desires play an important role in enabling consumer power. Although some of the individual factors, such as extraversion, refer to general and long-lasting personal characteristics, others, such as consumer knowledge and the ability to process information, could be improved by situational and environmental factors. For example, the use of comparative search engines, shopbots, online community recommendations, and collaborative filtering (e.g., discussion boards) is critical in increasing consumer power. Moreover, through the Internet (especially social media), consumers can organize boycotts and demonstrations among other ways to put pressure on companies. In other words, the Internet enables consumers to put their power into practice. A good example of these platforms is change.org, where consumers can organize petitions against businesses employing negative practices.

Furthermore, the model shows that how situational factors (i.e., the existence of other consumers and third-party organizations) increase consumer power. Outcomes are not limited only to proactive consumers who voice their complaints; they may also be experienced by consumers who decide to abandon a shopping situation based on negative comments they receive from other consumers (Kucuk 2008). This model highlights the important role of word of mouth in the consumer empowerment process.

Research Avenues and Limitations

From a research standpoint, the exploration of phenomena related to consumer power and the empowerment process is promising. To instill greater confidence in the framework's implications, we encourage further conceptualization, empirical testing replication, and extensions to our work.

First, research is necessary to test antecedents of consumer power and to articulate their interactions. Although the main effect of some antecedents is clear—a competent consumer perceives that he or she has more personal power—the way that different antecedents interact with each other to affect this relationship is less clear. For instance, among competent consumers, how would their power vary according to their desire to exercise it (a consumer-based individual factor) or when other consumers hold opposing opinions about a firm (a consumer-based situational factor)? Investigating the various impacts of antecedents on the two dimensions of power is also important. For example, while competence is a key driver of personal power, social power might not be. Beyond consumer-based factors, firm-based factors also require further investigation. Research could distinguish the impact of different empowering strategies on the dimensions of consumer power perception. For instance, does negotiation increase both personal and social power equally? Does the “pay what you wish” strategy increase social power more than personal power?

Second, in this paper, we analyze the application of the consumer empowerment framework only in a few contexts. For example, in oligopolistic settings (an environmental factor), where consumers have fewer options, one could explore how the other factors composing the framework, such as firm-based factors (e.g., benevolence), interact to affect the perception of power. In addition, research that applies the framework to different cultures could also be beneficial, as prior research has shown that the acceptance of power distance does vary across cultures (Triandis 1993). Thus, testing the proposed framework in different cultures would help us to understand how power distance may moderate proposed relationships. Likewise, some factors (e.g., product and service category) could affect consumer motivation to exercise power. In fact, Deloitte (2011) developed a consumer power index that supports this proposition, finding that the consumer power index is higher for categories such as restaurants, hotels, and computers.

Third, the association between the framework and other theoretical perspectives, such as attribution theory, may also provide new insights. For instance, prior research has found personal power and social power to inversely affect accuracy of judgment; i.e., a consumer with a high level of personal power will judge another person less accurately than will a person with a high level of social power (Lammers, Stoker, and Stapel 2009). Future experimental research could manipulate these two dimensions of power and compare either opposing or similar consequences.

Fourth, the consumer empowerment framework investigates consumer power from a relational perspective. Undoubtedly, the dynamic nature of power relations implies the existence of resistance tactics on the part of firms, as well. We encourage researchers to analyze how the perception of consumer power evolves when firms apply such tactics. For example, how empowered would a consumer feel when a company is immune to pressure from the public and third parties?

Fifth, empirical studies in consumer empowerment are notably lacking. Our classification of consumer power perceptions and the identification of the antecedents for empowerment is a preliminary step for future empirical studies. For instance, an instrument to measure consumer perceptions of power needs to be developed. Existing measurement scales for consumer power and consumer empowerment have restricted applications because they are context-specific (Hunter and Garnefeld 2008; Pranić and Roehl 2012a). Thus, a measurement scale to assess consumer power perception would assist in empirically testing the effects of antecedents and the consequences on consumer power perception. Likewise, qualitative works can significantly contribute to the field by exploring contexts in which the relationships among the actors identified in our conceptual framework are complex and not easily accessible through quantitative methods. Health care, for instance, could represent an extremely rich context for this kind of research.

Sixth, we encourage other researchers to contribute by empirically testing the effects of power perceptions on behavioral consequences such as purchase intention (Fuchs et al. 2010; Rucker, Dubois, and Galinsky 2011) and psychological ownership (Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2001) as significant consequences of consumers' feeling of power.

Seventh, previous research suggests that the stronger the consumer's sense of empowerment, the greater the likelihood of positive psychological outcomes, such as satisfaction. Based on these findings, one could assume that a firm, as one of the empowering entities, should always seek to empower its consumers. However, because no research has yet explored this issue, the hypothesis is still untested. Moreover, another imperative concern is clear: is consumer empowerment always good for consumers? Newholm, Laing, and Hogg (2006) suggested that this power requires taking and accepting risks and responsibilities, requiring more time and effort on the consumer's part. For this reason, we believe that the exchange of resources affects the consumer empowerment process.

Finally, we encourage further research to differentiate between the effects of resource quality and quantity on consumer power. In today's omnichannel environment, consumers' experiences in one channel affect their experiences in another. Does the distribution channel also affect consumer power? If so, which channel is more empowering? Answers to these questions would help further develop consumer empowerment theory and help managers and researchers to better address the phenomenon.

Table 1: Consumer Power Definitions

References	Marketing Context	Personal Dimension of Power	Social Dimension of Power
Brill (1992)	Sales	The perceived ability or potential to resist the salesperson’s efforts.	The perceived ability or potential of a consumer to influence or control the behavior of the salesperson.
Broderick et al. (2011)	Pricing	---	The ability of a consumer to negotiate/have access to the best possible deal in the marketplace; is directly associated with the consumer’s social power and ability to draw upon resources.
Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp (2010)	Service Recovery	---	Perceived ability to influence a firm, in the recovery process, in a way that he or she will find advantageous.
Harrison, Waite, and Hunter (2006)	Online Marketing	It is relational and includes autonomy perception within a social setting.	It is relational and includes the authority relationship within a social setting.
Huang, Lotz, and Bon (2014)	General Consumption	A state of mind in which consumers feel confident and in control of a decision related to an intended purchase.	---
Labrecque et al.(2013)	Online Marketing	An asymmetric ability to control valued resources in online social relations.	An asymmetric ability to control people (influence) in online social relations.
McGregor (2005)	Consumer Policy		An inner perception of power and authority to act.
Ozanne and Murray (1995)	General Consumption	---	The ability to exert influence in the market.
Rezabakhsh et al. (2006)	Consumer Policy (There are three bases for consumer power)	Expert power refers to the possession of information on quality and pricing in markets.	Sanction power is a means to discipline firms’ behavior and thus counter the disregard for consumer interests. Legitimate power designates consumers’ abilities to directly influence marketing, especially product and pricing policy.

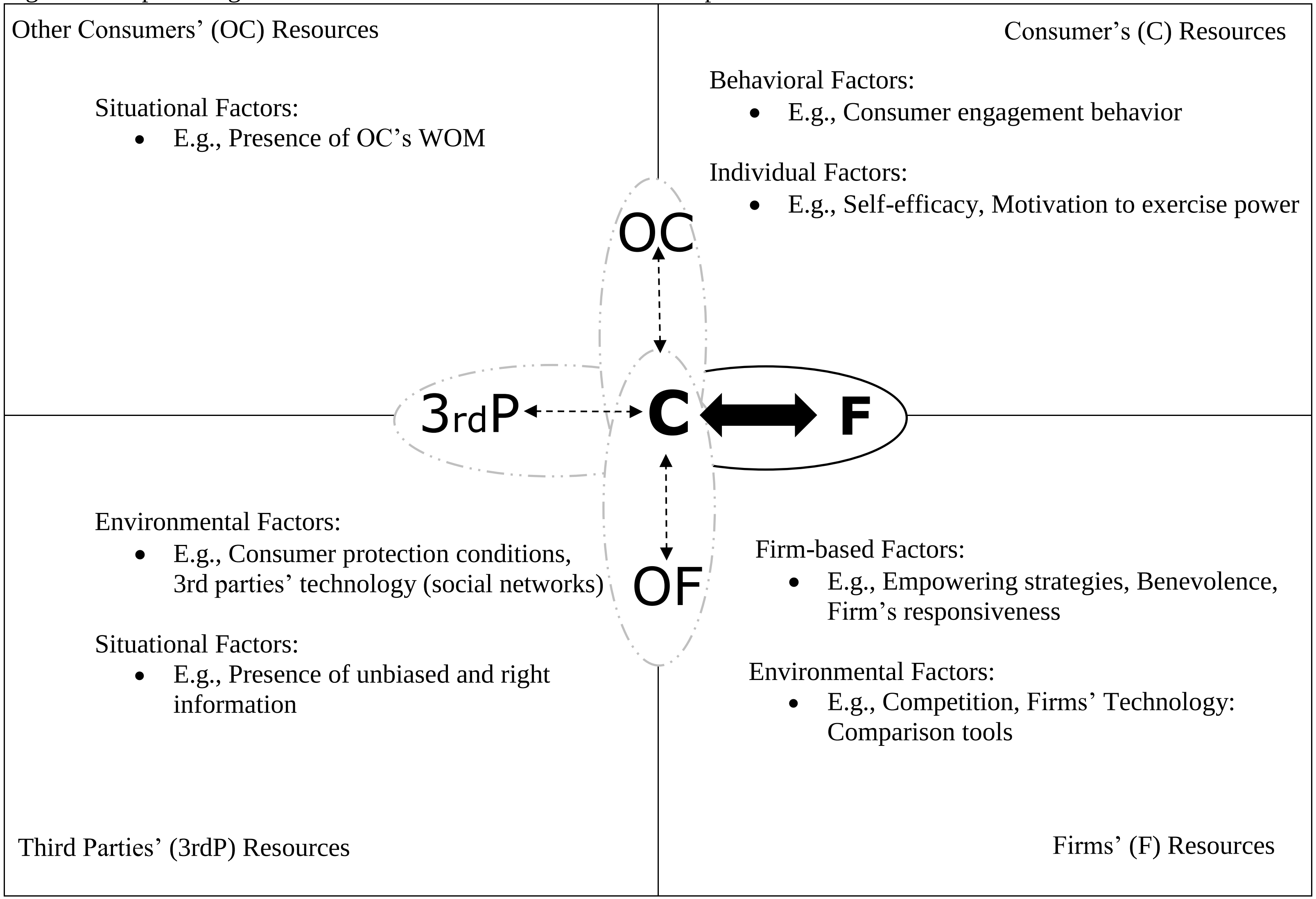
Table 2: Associated Concepts and their Relationship to Consumer Power and Consumer Empowerment Process

Construct (Alphabetical Order)	Definition	Relationship with consumer power
Benevolence **(Xie and Peng 2009)**	A sincere concern for consumers' interests and the motivation to do good for them.	The firm's motivation and concern to do good for consumers may impact the firm's will to delegate power to consumers.
Co-creation **(Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009)**	Refers to when consumers proactively customize the offerings.	It increases consumer social power. For example, when a consumer is able to make a bracelet in Pandora, he/she is a changing an element of the marketing mix and influencing the firm's offering,
Consumer Engagement **(Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012)**	Participation and connection with the organization's offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organization	A consumer-based behavioral factor that refers to consumer proactive behavior in a relationship with the firm. Proactive consumers are more likely to experience resistance to and influence on firms' offerings.
Controllability **(Folkes 1984)**	The degree to which a cause was perceived to be under the firm's or the service provider's volitional control.	These three types of control are outcomes of having consumer-based behavioral (e.g., engagement) and situational factors (e.g., access to other consumers' reviews as a source of information for decision-making). In the proposed framework, they are antecedents of consumer power.
Customer retaliation **(Grégoire and Fisher 2008)**	Customer actions designed to punish and cause inconvenience to a firm for the damages the customer feels that the firm caused.	These are behavioral consumer-related factors. All of them will cause resistance to marketing efforts and increase personal power. In cases where consumers would like to change any offerings, social power will be involved, as well.
Consumer boycott **(Klein and Ford 2003)**	An attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace.	

Consumer resistance **(Penaloza and Price 1993)**	The way individuals and groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination.	
Consumer-firm interaction **(Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009)**	Relationship between consumers and firms to exchange social and economic resources.	Refers to interaction of two factors: a behavioral consumer-related factor and a firm-based factor. This interaction will produce a feeling of power for the consumer.
Consumer-consumer interaction **(Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009)**	Refers to the relationships among fellow consumers.	A situational consumer-related factor. This mechanism makes the consumers less dependent on information provided by the firm and increases their personal power. In contrast, it increases consumer social power because it enables them to impact other consumers' decisions and consequently a firm's decisions Weenig and Midden (1991). Emergence of the Internet has propelled the growth of consumer-consumer-based networks since it is easier and less costly for consumers to be connected. Therefore, interaction between a consumer-based situational factor and an environmental factor increases consumer power.
Customer attachment anxiety **(Mende, Bolton, and Bitner 2013)**	The extent to which a customer worries that the firm might not be available in times of need, has an excessive need for approval, and fears rejection and abandonment by this firm.	Mende et al. (2013) found that attachment anxiety is positively related to preference for closeness with the company. We believe it decreases the consumer feeling of resistance to the firm, which is personal power.
Customer attachment avoidance **(Mende, Bolton, and Bitner 2013)**	The extent to which a customer distrusts the firm's goodwill. It is characterized by an excessive need for self-reliance, fear of depending on the firm, and struggle for emotional and cognitive distance from the firm.	In contrast, Mende et al. (2013) found that the more consumers tend to avoid attachment, the less they will prefer closeness with the company. Therefore, it positively impacts their feeling of personal power.
Customer Participation in Co-production **Bendapudi and Leone (2003)**	Co-production refers to customer involvement in production and delivery of the service.	A consumer-empowering mechanism (Araujo Pacheco, Lunardo, and dos Santos 2013), in which the firm delegates power to consumer. For example, a consumer at a self-service checkout feels more independent of the service provider, implying personal power.
Emotional Brand Attachment **(Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park 2005)**	Emotion-laden target that causes a specific bond between a person and a specific brand.	Brand attachment is associated with lower consumer independence from firm. Therefore, it decreases personal power.

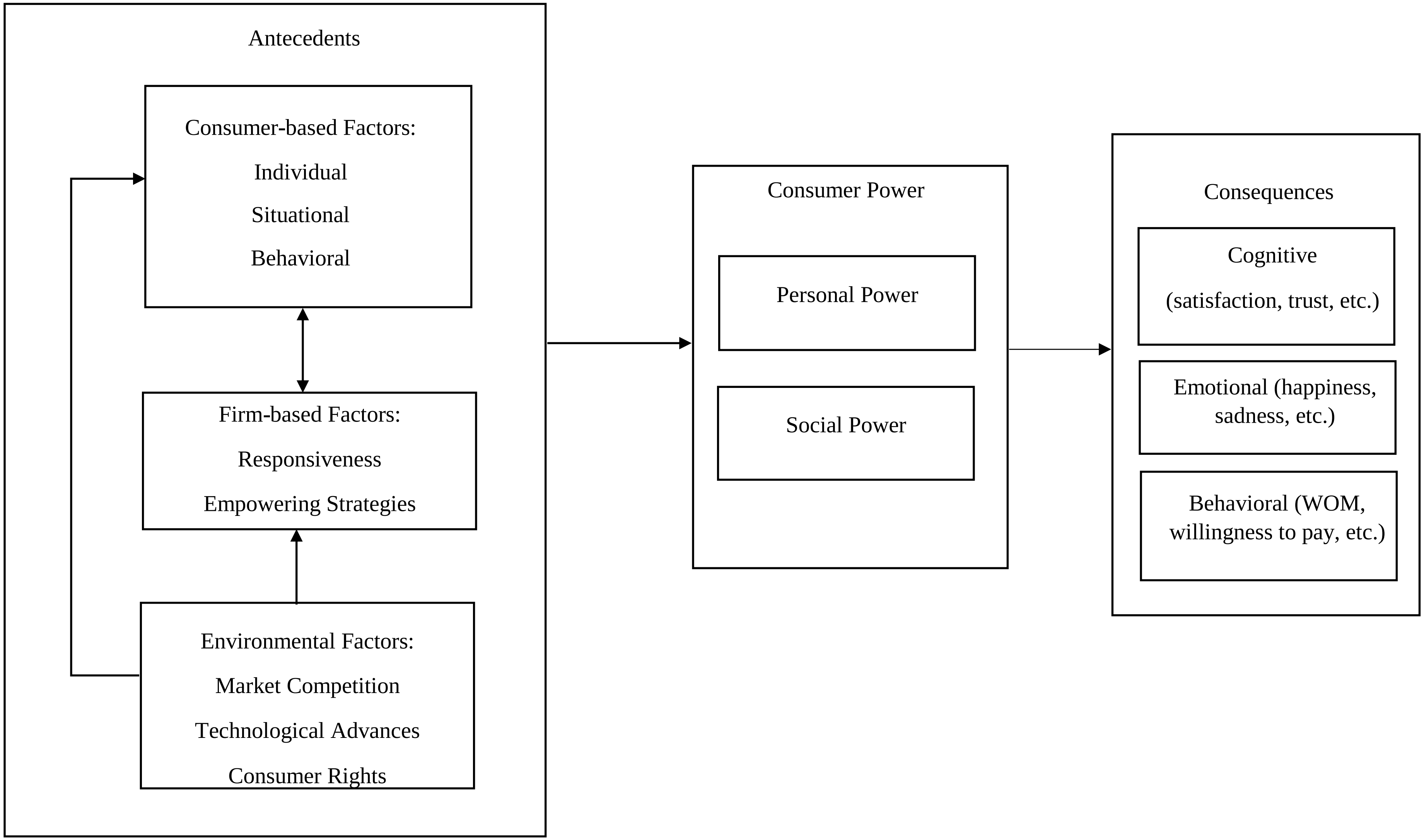
Self-confidence **Bearden et al. (2001)**	Consumer self-confidence is the extent to which an individual feels capable and assured with respect to his or her decisions and behaviors. It reflects subjective evaluations of one's ability to generate positive experiences as a consumer in the marketplace.	Self-confidence is a consumer-based individual factor. A confident consumer will be able to make a decision independently of the information provided by the firm, implying personal power. Additionally, consumers' feeling of being able to create positive experience, which can impact their intention to change the offerings to their own advantage, brings feeling of social power. One dimension of consumer confidence is persuasion knowledge. It reflects the individual's confidence in his or her knowledge regarding the tactics used by marketers in efforts to persuade consumers. The more consumers are aware of the marketers' persuasion efforts, the more they may resist them, implying personal power.
Self-efficacy **Gist (1987)**	An individual's belief in his/her capability to perform activities with skills.	This is an individual consumer-based factor. Zimmerman et al. (1992) found that it is an antecedent to personal empowerment. Additionally, in a marketing context, Fuchs et al. (2010) found that lack of competence diminishes social power.
Self-esteem **Rosenberg (1965)**	Self-esteem reflects a person's overall subjective emotional evaluation of his or her own worth.	This is an individual consumer-related factor. Zimmerman et al. (1992) identified self-esteem as an antecedent to the empowerment process. Moreover, literature indicates that individuals with high self-esteem are more difficult to persuade and are less concerned about social rejection (Bearden et al. 2001), which increases consumer independence from the firm's persuasion efforts and consequently increases consumer personal power.

Figure 1: Empowering Resources in a Consumer–Firm Relationship



* OF: Other Firms

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Consumer Empowerment Process



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[i] A comprehensive list of definitions, correspondent dimensions, antecedents, consequences, and applications related to the empowerment process is available upon request from the first author.