

**Power, Consumers' Perception of Ethical Products, and  
Purchase Intention: The Case of the Clothing Industry**

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**Abstract:**

The present research examines how power influences consumers' perception of and intention for regular and ethical products. One experimental study was conducted to test the proposed relationships using hypothetical purchase scenarios. A total of 201 participants were recruited from an online data collection website and randomly assigned to a regular (vs. ethical) attributes condition and asked to read an advertisement about a sweatshirt. The results provided evidence for the differential effects of power on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. However, the results partially supported the interaction between power and regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. Specifically, the results found that consumers

experiencing a state of high-power were less inclined to buy regular products emphasizing regular (vs. ethical) attributes. In contrast, consumers experiencing a state of low-power were more inclined to buy ethical products emphasizing ethical (vs. regular) attributes. This research makes important contributions as to how consumers' purchase intention varies as a function of power states and increases our understanding of the role of power in consumer behavior.

**Keywords: ethical products, power, purchase intention, experimental design**

## **1. Introduction:**

The clothing industry has emerged as an example of an industry in which consumers routinely uncover examples of worker abuses in fashion supply chains and environmental issues such as greenhouse gas emissions and polluted waterways (Bain 2021). The estimated carbon impact of the fashion production ranges from 8% to 10% of overall global carbon emissions and expected to increase to 60% by 2030 (Maiti 2022). In addition, the fashion production poses ethical problems especially in developing economics where 80% of apparel is made by young women between the ages of 12 and 24 years old (Maiti 2022). As this awareness of clothing industry drawbacks emerged, it becomes urgent for consumers to change their shopping habits in a way to force fashion companies to change their production practices. Therefore, the present research focuses on the clothing

industry as it is imperative to better understand and identify ways to influence consumers' perception of and intention towards ethical products.

Ethical products refers to products with at least one positive environmental or social attribute (Edinger-Schons et al. 2018; Paharia 2020; Reczek et al. 2018; Yan, Keh, and Chen 2021). Previous research has studied a range of factors that influence consumers' responses to ethical products including the type of benefit sought from the product (Luchs et al. 2010), public self-image concerns (White and Peloza 2009), belief in a just world (White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012), self-accountability (Peloza, White, and Shang 2013), consumer participation in production (Paharia 2020), combination of intrinsic and extrinsic appeals (Edinger-Schons et al. 2018), and product transformation salience (Kamleitner, Thurridl, and Martin 2019; Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales 2019). In the present research, we examine the role of power as an additional factor that may influence consumers' perception of and intention for regular and ethical products.

Power is defined as asymmetric control over valued resources in social relationships (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2016; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). Although a great deal of research has demonstrated that power have important consequences on how consumers behave, little research examined how power influences consumers' preferences or

tendencies to buy ethical products. The majority of prior research on consumer behavior that has touched on power has examined issues such as the role of power in influencing risk perception regarding websites' information privacy practices (Bornschein, Schmidt, and Maier 2020), increasing consumers' healthy food consumption (Wang, Melton, and Zhang 2020), and influencing consumers' prosocial behavior (Han, Lalwani, and Duhachek 2017). In addition, there is consistent evidence that low-power consumers fostered greater willingness to pay for products associated with status (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2010; Rucker and Galinsky 2008).

Our predictions are grounded in recent conceptual and empirical research on power demonstrating that the effects of power can be understood by the agentic-communal model of power (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015, Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2016). This model argues that power affects people's orientation toward the world in an agentic or communal fashion, having power increases the focus on agentic goals and value of the self and lacking power increases the focus on communal goals and value of others (Rucker and Galinsky 2016). In the present research, we propose that power influences consumers' perception of and intention for ethical and regular products. Second, we propose that ethical purchase intention varies as a function of whether consumers are in a high-power or low-power state, and whether the products'

regular (vs. ethical) attributes is highlighted. Specifically, high-power states increase consumers' purchase intention for regular products promoted on the basis of products' ability to offer regular benefits, whereas low-power states increase consumers' purchase intention for ethical products' promoted on the basis of product's ability to offer ethical benefits.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development:**

### ***2.1 What are Ethical Products?***

Ethical products refer to products with at least one positive environmental or social attribute (Edinger-Schons et al. 2018; Paharia 2020; Reczek et al. 2018; Yan, Keh, and Chen 2021). Common examples of such products include energy-saving light bulbs, recycled laptops, biodegradable bags, and fair trade coffee. Although products may inherently vary in environmental or social responsibility (e.g., cotton towels vs. paper towels), the important distinction is that ethical products make their environmental or social benefits salient to consumers (Garvey and Bolton 2017). In the next section, we review extant research on the factors affecting consumers' responses to ethical products. The review is grouped into five major streams of research and directly summarizes each article's main findings and contributions with respect to previous literature.

## ***2.2 Factors Affecting Consumers' Responses to Ethical Products:***

The first stream of research has examined what can marketers do to overcome the liability of ethical products. For example, Luchs et al. (2010) showed that the type of benefit sought from the product as a new factor that influences consumers' preferences for ethical products. Specifically, product categories in which gentleness-related attributes were valued, ethicality was an asset and enhanced preferences for ethical products. In contrast, product categories in which strength-related attributes were valued, ethicality was a liability and attenuated preferences for ethical products. Similarly, Chernev and Blair (2021) showed that the degree to which consumers view the company as a moral agent and the degree to which moral concerns are prominent in consumers' minds as two factors that influenced the sustainability liability.

The second stream of research has identified the effective promotion strategies companies use to promote ethical products and behaviors. For example, White and Peloza (2009) demonstrated that when public self-image concerns were heightened, consumers exhibited more positive donation intentions and behaviors in response to other-benefit than self-benefit appeals. In contrast, when public self-image concerns were minimized, consumers showed more positive donation intentions and behaviors in response to self-benefit than other-

benefit appeals. Similarly, Peloza, White, and Shang (2013) demonstrated that when self-accountability was heightened, consumers would be more likely to choose products positioned on the basis of ethical attributes than products positioned on the basis of self-benefit attributes. In a recent study, Edinger-Schons et al. (2018) found support for the basic assertion that adding an extrinsic appeal to an intrinsic appeal-based communication for an ethical product decreased consumers' interest in the product. There is also a continued interest in better understanding the use of specific emotions in promotional appeals (Schwartz and Loewenstein 2017; Wang, Mukhopadhyay, and Patrick 2017).

The third stream of research has examined consumers' perception of and interest in products associated with ethical benefits. For example, Goldsmith, Roux, and Wilson (2020) demonstrated that reminders of resource scarcity on low-cost sustainable product adoption was moderated by whether or not the prosocial (vs. personal) benefits associated with such products were highlighted. In another study, Paharia (2020) indicated that when consumers were given responsibility for whether a product was produced (e.g., made-to-order), they had low purchase intention for products made with unethical processes. In contrast, when consumers had no responsibility over production (e.g., made-to-stock), they had high purchase intention for products made with unethical processes. In addition, numerous studies has showed the importance of incorporating religious beliefs into research on ethical

behavior (Kathryn et al. 2017; Leary, Minton, and Mittelstaedt 2016; Minton, Kahle, and Kim 2015).

The fourth stream of research has explored how to create positive waste behaviors. For example, Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales (2019) provided evidence that making consumers aware of the transformation of recyclables into new products (e.g., showing that recycled aluminum can be transformed into a bicycle) increased consumers' socially beneficial disposal behaviors. In a similar study, Kamleitner, Thurridl, and Martin (2019) suggested that making the product past identity salient increased demand for upcycled and recycled products. These results occurred because past identity salience induced product's biographies (i.e., stories), which in turn allowed customers to feel more special with a product that holds a biography.

The fifth stream of research has explored downstream consequences of choosing ethical products. As an example, Garvey and Bolton (2017) found that choice of an eco-product undermined subsequent environmental behavior among consumers low in environmental consciousness (i.e., licensing), while enhanced responsible behavior among consumers high in environmental consciousness (i.e., reinforcement). Similarly, Farmer et al. (2017) indicated that consumers eat less when consuming sustainable food. In a recent study, Tezer and Bodur (2020) showed that using green products (e.g., headphones made from recycled materials) enhanced the enjoyment of the



accompanying consumption experiences (e.g., listening to music) compared to using regular products.

Although a great deal of research has dedicated increasing attention to understanding the underlying factors that drive consumers' responses to ethical products (e.g., Edinger-Schons et al. 2018; Chernev and Blair 2021; Kamleitner, Thurridl, and Martin 2019; Schwartz and Loewenstein 2017; Yang, Deng, and Bhadauria 2020), little is known about when or if common variations in consumers' everyday lives such as states of high-power or low-power might influence whether consumers are more persuaded by products emphasizing regular or ethical attributes.

### **2.3 What is Power?**

Power is defined as the individual's capacity to provide or withhold valued resources or administer punishments (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Brinol et al. 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003; Rucker and Galinsky 2009). This capacity is the product of the actual resources and punishments the individual can deliver to others. Resources and punishments can be material (e.g., food, money, economic opportunity, physical harm, or job termination) and social (e.g., knowledge, affection, friendship, decision making opportunity, or verbal abuse). The value of resources or punishments reflects other individuals' dependence on those resources (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003).

Power can be understood as structural in nature where those with power have more of some valued resources compared to

those without power (Rucker and Galinsky 2016). Therefore, power is often manipulated by giving individuals differential access to resources or control over tasks and people (Anderson and Berdahl 2002). Power is also recognized as a psychological state or mindset that can be activated in the absence of structural differences in power. Sometimes individuals' power can coincide with their control over resources or position of authority and sometimes individuals form internal beliefs of their power relative to others across relationships (Anderson and Galinsky 2006; Anderson, John, and Keltner 2012). Therefore, consumers feelings of power can be subjectively activated by having participants recall past episodes of possessing power (Brinol et al. 2007; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Galinsky et al. 2008; Guinote 2007; Lammers et al. 2013) or physically activated by the postures people assume (Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh 2001; Huang et al. 2011; Yap et al. 2013).

#### ***2.4 Power and Ethical Behavior:***

Previous research on unethical behavior has largely emphasized that high-power individuals have a greater tendency to behave unethically than low-power individuals. For example, Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky (2015) demonstrated that upper-class participants were more likely to engage in unethical behaviors, when the beneficiary was the self. In contrast, low-class participants were more likely to engage in unethical behavior, when the beneficiary was another individual.

Importantly, the results revealed that power mediated the relationship between participants social class and unethical behavior. Similarly, Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky (2010) found strong evidence that the powerful were more likely to engage in moral hypocrisy than were people who lack power. In another study, Yap et al. (2013) showed that expansive postures incidentally shaped by the environment lead people to feel powerful, and these feelings of power caused cheating, stealing, and traffic violations.

Although prior research emphasized the corruptive side of power, some evidence demonstrated that power can reduce self-interested behavior. For example, Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh (2001) proposed that power can have negative effects such as eliciting self-interested behavior or positive effects such as encouraging socially responsible conduct depending on the nature of the goals people associate with it. Similarly, Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee (2003) demonstrated that those who were primed with high-power displayed greater action than those who were primed with low-power, when acting served both self-interested goals and social responsibility goals. These results suggested that power does not always lead to antisocial outcomes, but it can be the catalyst for achieving prosocial outcomes.

The effects of power in consumer settings have focused exclusively on the moderating role of power in influencing prosocial behavior. For example, Han, Lalwani, and Duhachek

(2017) demonstrated that in low power distance belief (PDB) contexts power negatively predicted charitable giving, whereas in high PDB contexts power positively predicted charitable giving. Across a series of studies involving hypothetical as well as real purchase decisions, high-power increased consumers' purchase of healthy food and decreased their purchase of indulgent food (Wang, Minton, and Zhang 2020).

Taken together, the argument that powerful individuals show elevated activity of unethical behaviors and ultimately produce antisocial consequences is countered by various literatures suggesting that under specific conditions power induces feelings of social responsibility and can have prosocial outcomes (e.g., Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh 2001; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Yap et al. 2013). In addition, prior research considered the role of power as a moderating variable and there is limited research in consumer behavior exploring the consequences of power in ethical contexts (e.g., Han, Lalwani, and Duhachek 2017; Wang, Minton, and Zhang 2020).

By integrating the literatures on ethical products (Chernev and Blair 2021; Edinger-Schons et al. 2018; Garvey and Bolton 2017; Goldsmith, Roux, and Wilson 2020; Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales 2019) and agentic-communal model of power (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015, Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2016), the present research

develops specific hypotheses regarding the differential role of power in shaping consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. In doing so, we examine how power states affect consumers' perception of and intention for regular and ethical products. Second, we examine how power states interacts with products' regular (vs. ethical) attributes to moderate consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. Specifically, we predict that consumers who are experiencing high-power states might be more likely to purchase regular products if the regular attributes of the product is emphasized. In contrast, we predict that consumers who are experiencing low-power states might be more likely to purchase ethical products if the ethical attributes of the product is emphasized. Putting these influences together, we formulate the following hypotheses:

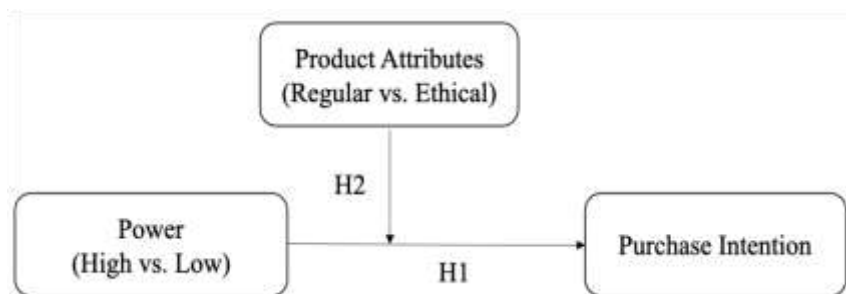
**H1:** Power influences consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products.

**H2a:** High-power increases consumers' purchase intention for regular products with regular (vs. ethical) attributes, compared to low-power.

**H2b:** Low-power increases consumers' purchase intention for ethical products with ethical (vs. regular) attributes, compared to high-power.

The present research put forth the following predictions relating power to consumers' perception of and intention for regular and ethical products (for a conceptual framework, see figure 1). First, we predict that power influences consumers' perception of and intention for regular and ethical products. The second part of the model pertains to the interplay of power states and products' regular (vs. ethical) attributes to moderate consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products.

**Figure (1) Proposed Conceptual Framework**



### 3. Experimental Study:

The purpose of this study was to test our proposition that power influences consumers' perception of and intention for regular and ethical products. This study used advertisements to promote sweatshirts as the focal product along with environmental impact as the ethical issue of interest (i.e., whether textiles were sourced from regular or recycled materials). We predicted that power differently influences consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products (H1). In addition, we predicted a two-way interaction of

power and product attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products (H2).

### **3.1 Research Method:**

#### ***3.1.1 Design and Participants:***

A total of 201 participants (133 women and 68 men,  $M_{age} = 40.84$ ,  $SD = 14.19$ ) were recruited from an online database to participate in the study in exchange for a small amount of payment. The target sample size in this study was conservatively selected based on the recommended minimum of 50 participant per condition and previous findings of research on ethical consumption (e.g., Newman, Gorlin, and Dhar 2014; Tezer and Bodur 2020; Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzalez 2019). This study employed a 2 (power: high vs. low) x 2 (product attributes: regular vs. ethical) between-subjects experimental design.

#### ***3.1.2 Experimental Procedures:***

Participants were informed that they would complete two independent studies. In the first study, participants were asked to complete an episodic recall task presented as a cognitive warm-up study that help participants become familiar with writing about themselves, which in reality constituted the manipulation of power. Power was manipulated by having participants recall a situation in their lives where they had or lacked power and write as much detail as possible about the situation in four minutes.

Participants were then directed to the second study and were told that they would participate in an advertising study in which they would view an advertisement about a sweatshirt and respond to some questions regarding the advertisement. The stimuli were created using a popular online store with pictures and attributes of the sweatshirt taken from their website to increase realism. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions and received details about the sweatshirt, which were identical across conditions including picture, price, and description. After viewing the advertisements, participants evaluated the advertisement to support the cover story including measures of novelty, ease of understanding, and creditability. In addition, participants reported their purchase intention toward the advertised product.

Following the advertisement study, participants were told they would answer some final questions, which included manipulation check items and some filler questions. At the end of the session, participants reported their demographics (e.g., age, gender, education, occupation, and ethnicity), were debriefed, and were probed for suspicion.

### ***3.1.3 Measures and Manipulations:***

*Product Attributes.* As part of the advertisements, participants were given information about the attributes of the sweatshirt they were supposed to purchase. In the regular attributes condition, participants received information about the sweatshirt in general. In



the ethical attributes condition, participants received information about the eco-friendly attributes of the sweatshirt and was positioned as “Conscious Choice”.

*Power.* Participants were asked to recall and write about a particular incident in which they either possessed power over someone else or in which someone else possessed power over them. Previous research has demonstrated the effectiveness of this procedure to manipulate feelings of power (e.g., Brinol et al. 2007; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Galinsky et al. 2008; Guinote 2007; Lammers et al. 2013; Rucker and Galinsky 2009).

*Purchase Intention.* Participants indicated their purchase intention using three items on seven-point scales anchored (1 = not at all and 7 = very much): (1) How likely are you to buy the product?, (2) How willing are you to buy the product?, and (3) How inclined are you to buy the product?. These items were generated for the purposes of this study based on prior research (e.g., Paharia 2020; Pelozo, White, and Shang 2013; White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012; Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales 2019).

*Manipulation Check.* In order to ensure that the manipulation of power induced different feelings of power, participants answered three questions assessing the extent to which they felt powerful while writing the narrative essay on seven-point bipolar scales anchored (powerless/powerful, without control/in control, and weak/strong). This measure was adapted from previous research on power (e.g., Brinol et al.

2007; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2016). In addition, participants rated perceived product ethicality using three items on seven-point scales anchored (1 = not at all and 7 = very much): (1) The sweatshirt is an environmentally friendly product, (2) The sweatshirt is an ethical product, and (3) The sweatshirt is beneficial to the environment. These items were used to assess the effectiveness of product attributes manipulation based on prior research (Lin and Chang 2012; Yan, Keh, and Chen 2021).

### **3.2 Analysis and Results:**

#### **3.2.1 Manipulation Check:**

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with product attributes manipulation as the independent variable and perceived product ethicality as the dependent variable was conducted. The results showed a significant effect of product attributes manipulation on perceived product ethicality ( $F(1,199) = 36.694, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.156$ ). Participants assigned to the ethical attributes condition perceived the ethical sweatshirt to be more ethical ( $M = 4.61, SD = 1.08$ ) than did participants in the regular attributes condition ( $M = 3.69, SD = 1.07$ ). Therefore, the manipulation of product attributes was successful. A similar one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with reported feelings of power as independent variable and power index as the dependent variable was conducted. The analysis showed a significant effect of feelings of power on power index ( $F(1,199) = 63.730, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.243$ ). Participants assigned to the high-

power condition reported greater feelings of power ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) than did participants in the low-power condition ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), suggesting that the power manipulation was successful.

### 3.2.2 Hypothesis Testing:

The first hypothesis predicted that power influences consumers' purchase intention for ethical products relative to regular products (H1). Consistent with H2, we predicted that a two-way interaction between power and products' regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with power and product attributes as independent variables and purchase intention as the dependent variable was conducted. The results showed a significant main effect of power on consumers' purchase intention ( $F(3,197) = 6.431$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.032$ ), a non-significant main effect of product attributes on consumers' purchase intention ( $F(3,197) = 0.198$ ,  $p = 0.657$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ ), and a non-significant interaction between power and product attributes ( $F(3,197) = 0.056$ ,  $p = 0.813$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.000$ ). Therefore, the results supported the first hypothesis. The parameter estimates of the ANOVA model are summarized in table (1).

**Table (1) ANOVA Results**

Variables	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Power	6.431	0.012	0.032
Product Attributes	0.198	0.657	0.001
Interaction	0.056	0.813	0.000

**Note:** ANOVA = Analysis of Variance.

Interestingly, participants assigned to the low-power condition reported greater willingness to buy ethical products ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) compared to participants assigned to the high-power condition ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). However, participants assigned to the high-power condition reported lower willingness to buy regular products ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) compared to participants assigned to the low-power condition ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ). Therefore, the results partially supported the second hypothesis.

### 3.3 Discussion:

The findings provided evidence for the differential influence of power on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. Surprisingly, the interaction between power and product attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products was partially supported. Specifically, the results found that consumers experiencing a state of low-power are more inclined to buy ethical products emphasizing ethical (vs. regular) attributes. In contrast, consumers

experiencing a state of high-power are less inclined to buy regular products emphasizing regular (vs. ethical) attributes.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

The present research examined the influence of power on consumers' responses to ethicality in the marketplace. Building on the agentic-communal model of power (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015, Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2016), we examined the effects of power on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. In addition, we examined the effects of the interplay between power states and products regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products.

The results provided evidence that power affected consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. However, the results showed that the interaction between power states and regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products was partially supported. Specifically, the results showed that low-power increased consumers' tendency to buy ethical products promoted on the basis of ethical (vs. regular) attributes. In contrast, high-power decreased consumers' tendency to buy regular products promoted on the basis of regular (vs. ethical) attributes. These findings were probably driven by the nature of the sample (i.e., online study) as well as the sample size could be insufficient to provide adequate power to detect interaction effects.

In conclusion, the present research examines power as one of the likely roots of ethical behaviors. In congruence with previous research on the factors that influence consumers' purchases of ethical products and agentic-communal model of power, I found consistent evidence that power have diverse effects on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. These findings are informative as they not only shed light on how ethical products are evaluated by consumers but also suggest a number of ways that companies interested in manufacturing ethical products may best communicate those efforts.

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