

The Role of Agency-Communion on the Relationship between Power, Consumers' Perception of Ethical Products, and Purchase Intention: Mediation Model

Amira Sami Ahmed Mahmoud

Assistant Lecturer, Faculty of Commerce, Suez Canal University

Mohamed Abdallah El-Hendawy

Professor of Marketing, Faculty of Commerce, Damietta University

Amira Sayed Gad

Associate Professor, Faculty of Commerce, Suez Canal University

Mohamed Ahmed Lotfy

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Commerce, Suez Canal University

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 221 participants were recruited from a public university and randomly assigned to a regular (vs. ethical) attributes condition and asked to read an advertisement about a pair of headphones. The results provided evidence for the differential effects of power on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. However, the interaction between power and regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase

intention for regular and ethical products was not supported. In addition, the results supported the mediation effect of communion on the relationship between power and consumers' purchase intention, whereas the mediation effect of agency on the relationship between power and consumers' purchase intention was not supported. The present research contribute to findings in the literature of power, ethical products, and consumer behavior and highlight practical implications that can inform managers and policymakers on how to promote ethical products.

Keywords: ethical products, power, agency, communion, purchase intention

1. Introduction:

The electronics industry negative environmental impact is a significant concern especially because consumers across the globe increase the use of electronic devices to innovate and acquire new talents. For example, approximately 7 in 10 consumers are replacing devices prematurely and 41.6% replace smartphones, handhelds, and wearables simply for a newer model (Lacker 2022). The old electronic devices often end up in landfills and recycling bins since most smartphone batteries cannot be replaced and software companies push upgrades that do not run on old devices. The electronic waste can contain harmful materials like mercury and beryllium that pose environmental risks, and compacting flammable lithium batteries with paper recycling can be dangerous (Semuels 2019). As this

awareness of the electronics industry drawbacks emerged, changes should be made to reduce electronic waste and introduce new ethical solutions that reduce the negative impact electronic devices have on the environment. Therefore, the present research focuses on the electronics industry as it is imperative to better understand and identify ways to influence consumers' perception of an intention toward 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. Finally, we predict that these differences in consumers' product preferences are driven by their sense of agency versus communion, which then mediates their purchase intention.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development:

2.1 Ethical Aspects of 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). Ethical attributes can be related to a variety of social issues such as fair labor practices and animal protection, as well as environmental issues such as the use of recycled materials and avoiding pollution (Luchs et al. 2010; Paharia 2020; Reczek and Irwin 2015; Reczek et al. 2018). 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).

2.2 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 definition is distinguished from related concepts of leadership, status, and authority which are social roles that can endow individuals with power. Leadership is defined as "persuading other people to set aside for a period of time their individual concerns and to pursue a common goal that is important for the responsibilities and welfare of a group" (Anderson and Berdahl 2002, p. 1362). Thus, leaders are

generally afforded power as group members give them control over group resources and punishments to help them lead more effectively (Anderson and Berdahl 2002). Status is the amount of respect and prominence individuals hold in a social group, which can also lead to more control over resources especially those of a more social nature (Anderson and Berdahl 2002). However, it is possible to have power without status such as the corrupt politician and status without power such as a readily identified religious leader (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003). Authority is “an institutionalized role or arrangement that affords power” (Anderson and Berdahl 2002, p. 1363). However, power can exist in the absence of formal roles such as within informal groups (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003).

2.3 Agentic-Communal Model of Power:

Previous research has presented the idea that the psychological forces that drive the effects of power on thought and behavior could be understood through the lens of the agentic-communal model of power (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015, Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2016). Agency refers to the existence of the individual as an agent and manifests itself in self-assertion and direction toward own goals. In contrast, communion refers to a focus on other people and manifests itself in a reluctance to act without consideration of others (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). The agentic-communal model of power helps

explain the effects of power on social behavior and more specifically consumer behavior (Rucker and Galinsky 2016).

The possession of power either structurally or subjectively activates a psychological orientation towards agency and the lack of power activates a psychological orientation towards communion. High-power states are found to lead to a greater endorsement of agentic goals such as achievement, self-promotion, and focus on the self, whereas low-power states produce a greater endorsement of communal goals such as helping others, caring for others, and serving the community (Rucker and Galinsky 2016). Therefore, high-power increases consumers independence from others, possess the ability to act as individual agent within the environment, and satisfies their own needs and goals. In contrast, a lack of power increases consumers dependence on others, one's fate is more tightly bound to others, and cooperation with others is often required to satisfy their own goals (Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2016).

Consistent with the idea that high-power individuals foster an agentic-orientation and low-power individuals foster a communal-orientation, high-power was found to increase people resistance to conformity pressures (Galinsky et al. 2008), make people focus on their own attitudes and experiences (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Galinsky et al. 2008; Hirsh, Galinsky, and Zhong 2011), and promote one's needs and goals (Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh 2001; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003). In

contrast, low-power is associated with greater tendency to engage in other-beneficial unethical behavior (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015), ability to recognize the threatening emotions of others (Anderson and Berdahl 2002), and propensity to spend on others (Rucker, Dubois, and Galinsky 2011).

The above evidence suggests that high-power individuals exhibit greater agency and low-power individuals are fundamentally dependent on others. Therefore, we propose that high-power consumers may have greater tendency to buy regular products because they exhibit greater concern for the self that can increase their focus on the conventional attributes of the product. In contrast, low-power consumers may have greater tendency to buy ethical products because they exhibit greater concern for others that can increase their focus on the benefit to the larger community.

To summarize, 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. We also examine how power states interacts with products' regular (vs. ethical) attributes to moderate consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. In addition, we explore the mediating role of agency versus communion on the relationship between power states and consumers' purchase intention for

regular and ethical products. Therefore, I formulate the following hypotheses:

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

H2: 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.

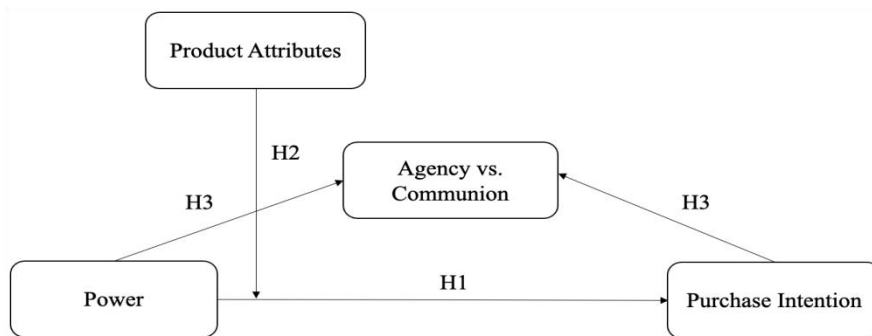
H3a: Agency mediates the influence of high-power on consumers' purchase intention for regular products.

H3b: Communion mediates the influence of low-power on consumers' purchase intention for ethical products.

As a consequence of the conceptual links offered in the preceding sections, the present research examines the influence of power on consumers' tendency to buy ethical products (for a conceptual framework, see figure 1). High-power consumers would prefer regular products because they exhibit agency and a focus on the self, whereas low-power consumers would prefer ethical products because they exhibit communion and a focus on

helping others and serving the community. This proposition is built on the assumption that high-power states allow consumers to focus on their internal motivations and desires, whereas low-power states allow consumers to attend to the salient motive of enhancing others' welfare (Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2016).

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 also examined mediating role of agency versus communion on the relationship between power and consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. This study used advertisements to promote headphones as the focal product along with environmental impact as the ethical issue of interest (i.e., whether products were new or

preowned). We predicted that power differently influences consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products (H1). We also predicted that high-power would increase consumers' tendency to buy regular products featuring regular attributes and low-power would increase consumers' tendency to buy ethical products featuring ethical attributes (H2). In addition, we expected that agency versus communion mediates the effects of power on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. Specifically, we expected that high-power activates feelings of agency, which in turn influence consumers' purchase intention for regular products (H3a). In contrast, we expected that low-power activates feelings of communion, which in turn influence consumers' purchase intention for ethical products (H3b).

3.1 Research Method:

3.1.1 Design and Participants:

A total of 221 college students were recruited from a public American university to participate in the study in exchange for partial course credit. The target sample size in this study was conservatively selected based on recommended minimum of 50 participants 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 (product attributes: regular vs. ethical) between-subjects experimental design, with power measured as a continuous variable.

3.1.2 *Experimental Procedures:*

Participants were informed that they would complete two ostensibly unrelated studies. In the first study, participants were asked to participate in a marketing study interested in consumer preferences. Before reading the marketing study, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions and received details about the headphones, which were identical across conditions including picture, price, and specifications. Following the marketing study, participants reported their purchase intention toward the product and answered manipulation check items.

In the second study, participants completed a personality and self-evaluation questionnaire in which I measured power, mediators, and some filler questions. At the end of the session, participants reported their demographics (e.g., age, gender), were debriefed, and were probed for suspicion.

3.1.3 *Measures and Manipulations:*

Product Attributes. As part of the product description, participants were given information about the attributes of the headphones they were supposed to purchase. One group of participants received information about the headphones in general (i.e., regular attributes condition) and another group

received information framing the headphones as ethical “Renewed Premium” and “Climate Pledge Friendly” (i.e., ethical attributes condition).

Power. Power was assessed using eight items on seven-point scales anchored (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree): (1) I can get people to listen to what I say, (2) My wishes do not carry much weight (Reversed), (3) I can get others to do what I want, (4) Even if I voice them, my views have little sway (Reversed), (5) I think I have a great deal of power, (6) My ideas and opinions are often ignored (Reversed), (7) Even when I try, I am not able to get my way (Reversed), and (8) If I want to, I get to make the decisions. These items were reported in past research to assess individuals’ subjective power (e.g., Anderson and Galinsky 2006; Anderson, John, and Keltner 2012; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Rucker and Galinsky 2016), in which high numbers reflect higher power.

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; Peloza, White, and Shang 2013; White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012; Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales 2019).

Agency and Communion. Participants completed four items on seven-point scales anchored (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree): (1) My needs are the center of my focus, (2) At this moment, I am more focused on myself, (3) Other people's needs are the center of my focus (Reversed), and (4) At this moment, I am more focused on other people (Reversed). These agency and communion items were used and validated by prior research (Santana and Morwitz 2021; Zhang, Feick, and Mittal 2014), in which high numbers reflect a more agentic self-focused orientation.

Manipulation Check. 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 ($F(1,219) = 5.094$, $p = 0.025$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.023$). Participants assigned to the ethical attributes condition perceived the ethical headphones to be more ethical ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.93$) than did participants in the regular attributes condition ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.01$), suggesting that the manipulation of product attributes was successful.

3.2.2 Hypotheses Testing:

Purchase Intention. We predicted that power influences consumers' purchase intention for ethical products relative to regular products (H1). The second hypothesis predicted that a two-way interaction between power and products' regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. A multiple regression analysis with power (mean-centered), product (coded as 0 for regular attributes, coded as 1 for ethical attributes), and their interaction as independent variables and purchase intention as the dependent variable was conducted. The results indicated a marginally significant simple effect of power on consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = -0.165$, $t(3) = -1.781$, $p = 0.076$), a significant simple effect of product attributes on consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = -0.191$, $t(3) = -2.895$, $p = 0.004$), and a non-significant two-way interaction between power and product attributes on consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.070$, $t(3) = 0.751$, $p = 0.454$). Therefore, the results supported the first hypothesis. The parameter estimates of the regression model are summarized in table (1).

Table (1) Regression Analysis on Purchase Intention

Variables	β	SE	t	VIF
Power	-0.165	0.174	-1.781	1.973
Product Attributes	-0.191**	0.201	-2.895	1.001
Interaction	0.070 ^{ns}	0.248	0.751	1.977

Note: SE = Standard Error. VIF = Variance Inflation Factors. ^{ns} = non-significant, ** $p < 0.01$.

Agency and Communion. The third hypothesis predicted that agency versus communion mediates the effects of power on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. A multiple regression analysis with power (mean-centered), product attributes (coded as 0 for regular attributes, coded as 1 for ethical attributes), and their interaction as independent variables and agency versus communion as the dependent variable was conducted. The analysis revealed a significant simple effect of power on consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.235$, $t(3) = 2.132$, $p = 0.034$), a marginally significant simple effect of product attributes on consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.219$, $t(3) = 1.717$, $p = 0.087$), and a non-significant interaction between power and product attributes on consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.139$, $t(3) = 0.881$, $p = 0.379$). The parameter estimates of the regression model are summarized in table (2).

Table (2) Regression Analysis on Agency and Communion

Variables	β	SE	t	VIF
Power	0.235*	0.110	2.132	1.973
Product Attributes	0.219*	0.127	1.717	1.001
Interaction	0.139 ^{ns}	0.157	0.881	1.972

Note: SE = Standard Error. VIF = Variance Inflation Factors. ^{ns} = non-significant, * $p < 0.05$.

Mediation Analysis. A bootstrap mediation analysis (Model 4 in PROCESS) using 5,000 resamples was used to test the indirect effect of power on consumers' purchase intention through agency and communion. The analysis revealed that power significantly predicted agency ($\beta = 0.322$, $t(1) = 3.410$, $p < 0.001$), significantly predicted communion ($\beta = -0.277$, $t(1) = -2.886$, $p < 0.01$), and had a non-significant effect on consumer's purchase intention ($\beta = -0.132$, $t(1) = -1.029$, $p = 0.304$). The analysis also revealed that communion significantly predicted consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.224$, $t(1) = 2.381$, $p < 0.01$), whereas agency had a non-significant effect on consumers' purchase intention ($\beta = -0.042$, $t(1) = -0.44$, $p = 0.659$). The mediation analysis showed a non-significant indirect effect of power on consumers' purchase intention through agency ($a \times b = -0.013$, 95% CI = [-0.087, 0.050]) and a significant indirect effect of power on consumers' purchase intention through communion

($a \times b = -0.062$, 95% CI = $[-0.147, -0.047]$). Therefore, the results partially supported the third hypothesis. The results of the mediation analysis is presented in table (3).

Table (3) Mediation Analysis Results

Variables	β	SE	t	CI (95%)
Direct Effects:				
Power → PI	-0.132	0.128	-1.029	(-0.384 to 0.120)
Agency → PI	-0.042	0.095	-0.440	(-0.230 to 0.146)
COM → PI	0.224**	0.094	2.381	(0.038 to 0.409)
Power → Agency	0.322***	0.945	3.410	(0.136 to 0.508)
Power → COM	-0.277*	0.096	-2.886	(-0.466 to -0.087)
Indirect Effects:				
Power → Agency → PI	-0.013	0.034	–	(-0.087 to 0.050)
Power → COM → PI	-0.062	0.037	–	(-0.147 to -0.004)

Note: COM = Communion. PI = Purchase Intention. SE = Standard Error. CI = Confidence Intervals. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

3.3 Discussion:

The results provided evidence for the differential effects of power on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. However, the results showed a non-significant interaction between power and products' regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. In addition, the results showed that power

influenced both agency and communion, but these constructs differentially mediated the effect of power on consumers' purchase intention. Specifically, the results confirmed the mediation effect of communion on the relationship between power and consumers' purchase intention, whereas the mediation effect of agency on the relationship between power and consumers' purchase intention was not supported.

4. Conclusion:

The present research explores the relationship between possessing power and consumers' purchase intention toward products advertised as providing either ethical or regular attributes. We also explore the interaction between power states and products' regular (vs. ethical) attributes on consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. In addition, we aim to show that power affects consumers' product preferences for regular versus ethical products because it affects their sense of agency versus communion. In other words, we aim to show that the effects of power on consumers' preferences for regular versus ethical products is mediated by their sense agency versus communion.

The results documented the relationship between power and consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. Contrary to our second prediction, 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. These results were probably driven by the nature of the ethical product used because the ethical attributes were not salient and inherent in the positioning of the headphones as "Renewed Premium" and "Climate Pledge Friendly". Nevertheless, these findings complement prior research on consumers' perception of and intention to buy ethical products (e.g., Edinger-Schons et al. 2018; Garvey and Bolton 2017; Luchs et al. 2010; Peloza, White, and Shang 2013; Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales 2019). In addition, these findings are consistent with prior research showing that powerful individuals engage in unethical behavior that benefits the self and powerless individuals engage in behavior that takes into account the needs and concerns of others (e.g., Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh 2001; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Lammers and Stapel 2009).

Finally, the results partially supported our argument that the observed effects are mediated by shifting consumers focus on agency versus communion. Specifically, the results supported that power indirectly influenced consumers' purchase intention through communion, with no evidence that power indirectly influenced consumers' purchase intention through agency. In addition, the results showed that power had diverse effects on agency versus communion, which in turn influenced consumers' purchase intention for regular and ethical products. The influence of power on agency versus communion is consistent with prior

research suggesting that high-power states activates a psychological orientation towards agency and the lack of power activates a psychological orientation towards communion (e.g., Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015, Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2016).

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