The Effect of Sense of Power on Conspicuous Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

Grounded in costly signaling theory, this research investigates the effect of power on conspicuous prosocial behavior. Five experiments reveal that power increases individuals' willingness to engage in conspicuous prosocial behavior. Specifically, high- (vs. low-) power individuals exhibit a greater propensity to purchase conspicuous prosocial products, demonstrate increased willingness to make conspicuous donations with higher monetary amounts, and show greater participation in conspicuous prosocial acts. The underlying mechanism is that high-power individuals possess stronger self-presentation motives. This research offers theoretical contributions to understanding power' s influence on individual behavior and enriching the literature on power and prosocial behavior, while providing practical value for effectively guiding high-power individuals toward prosocial engagement.

Full Text

The Effect of Sense of Power on Conspicuous Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

Based on costly signaling theory, this study investigates the influence of sense of power on conspicuous prosocial behavior. Five experiments demonstrate that

a heightened sense of power increases individuals' willingness to engage in conspicuous prosocial acts. Specifically, individuals with high (vs. low) power show greater preference for purchasing conspicuous prosocial products, higher willingness to make conspicuous donations with larger amounts, and stronger inclination to participate in conspicuous benevolence. The underlying mechanism is that high-power individuals possess stronger self-presentation motivation. These findings contribute theoretically to understanding how power affects individual behavior and enrich the literature on power and prosocial behavior, while offering practical value for effectively guiding high-power individuals toward prosocial engagement.

Keywords: sense of power; conspicuous prosocial behavior; public acknowledgment; self-presentation motivation
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Since ancient times, cultural values have expected those with resources and high status to contribute more to society, as reflected in classical sayings such as "When ancient people achieved their ambitions, they bestowed blessings upon the people" and "When successful, one should help the world" (*Mencius*). Individuals in positions of power or status typically experience a heightened sense of power, which exerts subtle influences on cognition, emotion, and behavior (Zhai, 2015). The question arises: Do high-power individuals fulfill these societal expectations by engaging in more prosocial behavior?

Existing research generally suggests that high power leads to self-interested behavior while inhibiting prosocial tendencies (Cai et al., 2016). However, mounting evidence indicates that powerful individuals also exhibit positive prosocial behaviors. For instance, the 2018 China Charity Rankings showed that 100 listed entrepreneurs donated a total of 17.31 billion RMB in cash, representing a 66% increase from the previous year. Empirical studies have also found that power can amplify individuals' inherent altruistic traits (Galinsky et al., 2011; Caprara et al., 2012). Moreover, situational factors moderate the relationship between power and prosocial behavior, making high-power individuals more likely to engage in prosocial acts under certain conditions (Lammers & Galinsky, 2009; Overbeck & Park, 2001).

These findings reveal that the relationship between power and prosocial behavior warrants further investigation. Notably, prior research has primarily focused on psychological variables and situational contexts (Chen et al., 2001; Vescio & Guinote, 2010), paying less attention to how specific characteristics or attributes of prosocial behavior itself might enhance or inhibit the prosocial tendencies of individuals with varying power levels. Some scholars have begun examining the signaling properties of prosocial acts, focusing on their conspicuous features, such as conspicuous consumption of prosocial products (Johnson et al., 2018), conspicuous donation behavior (Grace & Griffin, 2009), and blatant benevolence (Griskevicius et al., 2007).

Drawing on costly signaling theory and using conspicuousness as the entry point,

this study investigates how power influences prosocial behavior across three specific behavioral manifestations: green product purchasing, donation, and benevolence (referring specifically to public welfare activities; see Griskevicius et al., 2007). Unlike previous research, this paper reveals from an impression management perspective that the conspicuous signaling feature of prosocial behavior serves as a novel motivator prompting high-power individuals to engage in prosocial acts through self-presentation motivation.

1.1 The Relationship Between Sense of Power and Prosocial Behavior

Power, defined as asymmetric control over valued resources, represents a core element of social relationships (Rucker et al., 2012). Sense of power refers to individuals' subjective feeling of having or lacking power (Galinsky et al., 2014). The inhibitory effect of power on prosocial behavior primarily stems from power-induced differences in self-focus (Rucker et al., 2012). The agentic-communal orientation associated with power determines that high-power individuals tend toward self-orientation, making them more concerned with their own values and interests (Rucker et al., 2011). This leads to more self-interested decisions in resource allocation and valuation, less consideration for others'feelings, and indifference to others' suffering (Lammers & Stapel, 2011). Furthermore, the agentic orientation increases interpersonal distance, causing high-power individuals to maintain independence and distance from others, reducing their willingness to cooperate and help (van Kleef et al., 2004). High-power individuals' self-focus can also lead them to misinterpret others' kindness as self-serving, thereby inhibiting gratitude and reciprocity (Inesi et al., 2012).

Conversely, positive effects of power on prosocial behavior arise from personality traits and situational factors. First, individuals with altruistic traits become more altruistic when empowered. For example, high-power individuals with high agreeableness are better at recognizing others' emotional needs and serving others (Caprara et al., 2012); those with prosocial orientation show higher empathic accuracy (Côté et al., 2011); and those with strong moral identity exhibit organizational citizenship behavior (DeCelles et al., 2012). Second, situational factors can promote prosocial behavior among high-power individuals, such as when external accountability goals exist, when their power base is unstable, or when the other party poses no power threat (Lammers & Galinsky, 2009; Overbeck & Park, 2001).

Scholars have explored why power produces these opposing effects on prosocial behavior. Research indicates that high-power individuals possess cognitive flexibility (Guinote, 2007), enabling them to adjust their behavioral tendencies according to their current primary goals. For instance, when goals require long-term focus or reduced social distance, powerful individuals display prosociality (Eyal & Liberman, 2012). However, existing research has focused primarily on the role of individual power and its boundary conditions, with scarce literature examining how attributes of prosocial behavior itself influence the prosocial tendencies of different power holders—precisely the direction this study seeks to

expand.

1.2 Conspicuous Prosocial Behavior

Building on conspicuous consumption theory, West (2004) proposed the concept of conspicuous compassion as a means to enhance one' s image in others' eyes, manifested in donation behavior through wearing compassion ribbons. Grace and Griffin (2006) defined conspicuous donation as donating to charity through visible displays of charitable merchandise or public recognition of donations. This highlights that conspicuous behavior' s key lies in visibility and public perception (Grace & Griffin, 2009). Therefore, we define conspicuous prosocial behavior as publicly displayable prosocial acts that help improve one' s image in others' eyes (Johnson et al., 2018).

Research shows that consumers with strong status motives prefer purchasing less luxurious but conspicuous green products over more luxurious non-green alternatives in public settings, and favor higher-priced green products (Griskevicius et al., 2010). Griskevicius et al. (2007) found that romantic motives make women (vs. men) more likely to engage in publicly visible conspicuous benevolence (e.g., volunteering at children' s hospitals) to signal ideal partner qualities (kindness, benevolence), while men are more willing when behaviors signal heroism and dominance. These results demonstrate that individuals believe conspicuous prosocial behaviors (green product purchasing, donation, benevolence) can signal their prosociality and willingness to sacrifice, thereby shaping their image.

1.3 Sense of Power and Conspicuous Prosocial Behavior

Costly signaling theory posits that altruistic behavior is a communicative signal conveying not only prosociality but also the ability to bear costs (Bird & Smith, 2005). In other words, altruism indicates that an individual has both the willingness and capacity to sacrifice for public welfare (Griskevicius et al., 2010). Research shows that prosocial behavior builds prosocial reputations (Semmann et al., 2005), with helpful individuals perceived as more trustworthy (Barclay, 2004) and desirable as friends, allies, and romantic partners (Iredale et al., 2008). Thus, conspicuous prosocial behavior helps actors signal their prosociality and capability, enhancing their image and yielding benefits such as prestige and status. Consequently, conspicuous prosocial behavior represents a self-presentation act with self-sacrificial form but essentially self-interested motivation (Choi et al., 2018; Griskevicius et al., 2007).

How might prosocial behavior's conspicuous signaling features affect individuals with different power levels? We propose that when the value benefits of altruistic behavior become salient and personally advantageous, high-power individuals abandon purely self-interested behavior for competitive altruism. Supporting evidence comes from several sources. First, the agentic-communal model suggests that high (vs. low) power individuals develop agentic orientation, promoting

self-focus and attention to self-protection, self-enhancement, and self-expression (Rucker et al., 2012). Thus, whether target benefits serve personal interests becomes the criterion for high-power individuals' behavior. Second, situated focus theory posits that high-power individuals have superior ability to weigh target benefits and adjust attention, selectively focusing on self-advantageous goals (Guinote, 2007). Moreover, high-power individuals tend toward high construal levels with abstract thinking, facilitating impulse control and delayed gratification, focusing on long-term goals while inhibiting short-sighted behavior (Lammers & Stapel, 2009). We therefore hypothesize that when impression management' s long-term benefits become primary goals, high-power individuals can flexibly shift from short-term self-interest to altruism.

In summary, when prosocial behavior has conspicuous features, it helps maintain a positive public image, build and maintain costly prosocial reputations (Miller, 2000), and obtain intangible returns related to public recognition. Public prosocial behavior enhances actors' social status and reputation (Willer, 2009), helps high-power individuals correct stereotypical biases (Caza et al., 2011), adapt to accountability (Keltner et al., 2003) and social norms, and satisfies their intrinsic self-presentation motivation, thereby achieving self-improvement and crafting an image of being "both capable and warm." We propose:

H1: Compared to low-power individuals, high-power individuals are more willing to engage in conspicuous prosocial behavior.

1.4 The Mediating Role of Self-Presentation Motivation

Goffman (1959) introduced self-presentation based on symbolic interactionism, using theatrical metaphors to explain how people present themselves across situations. Following the principle that "perception is reality," self-presentation is the process of constructing self by strategically emphasizing or concealing self-relevant information to project a specific impression to one' s "audience," thereby obtaining social approval and material rewards (Jones & Nisbett, 1971).

Self-presentation stems from two key motives: the desire to be liked and the desire to demonstrate competence and gain respect (Baryła, 2014; Bergsieker et al., 2010). To satisfy the need to be liked, individuals employ other-focused strategies such as acknowledging others and eliciting sympathy (Zivnuska et al., 2004). However, liking depends primarily on how behaviors affect the holder' s interests and well-being (Baryła, 2014). To gain respect, individuals use self-promotion strategies emphasizing positive traits and attributes (Leary et al., 2011), which helps demonstrate competence, enhance status perception, and win respect (Bergsieker et al., 2010).

As noted, power' s agentic orientation makes high-power individuals focus more on self-improvement, self-realization, and self-enhancement (Rucker et al., 2012), shaping ideal selves through various means. Perfect self-presentation can achieve self-construction goals by correcting stereotypical biases (Caza et al., 2011), conforming to social norms (Leary et al., 2011), and assuming social responsi-

bility (Keltner et al., 2003). Thus, high-power individuals are more likely to present prosociality and self-sacrifice, signaling their willingness and ability to engage in prosocial behavior, thereby gaining prosocial reputation and social rewards. Moreover, conspicuous prosocial behavior objectively benefits others and improves their welfare, with effectiveness equal to general prosocial behavior. Therefore, individuals engaging in conspicuous prosocial behavior will be liked and favored by at least some people (potential beneficiaries). Consequently, conspicuous prosocial behavior not only demonstrates competence and gains respect but also enhances likability. Finally, high-power individuals possess strong cognitive coordination abilities, adjusting information processing to align attitudes and behaviors with situational demands (Liu et al., 2016), suggesting that when impression management becomes primary, high-power individuals strategically shift from self-interest to altruism to satisfy self-presentation motives. Since conspicuous prosocial behavior is inherently a self-presentation act with self-interested motives (Choi et al., 2018), individuals with higher self-presentation intentions are more inclined toward conspicuous prosocial behavior to craft an altruistic image and achieve self-realization.

We therefore predict that compared to low-power individuals, high (vs. low) power individuals, to shape an image of being "both capable and willing" in prosocial domains and maintain their current power status, have stronger desires to demonstrate competence and gain respect or to be liked and favored. Thus, high (vs. low) power individuals exhibit higher self-presentation intentions and prefer "visible" prosocial behaviors. We propose:

H2: Self-presentation motivation mediates the effect of sense of power on conspicuous prosocial behavior.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examined how sense of power influences purchase intentions for conspicuous prosocial products. We first conducted two independent pretests to select the most conspicuous prosocial product from 11 options for the main experiment. We then primed participants' sense of power and compared their purchase intentions for conspicuous prosocial products to test the relationship between power and conspicuous prosocial behavior.

2.1 Pretest

The pretest aimed to determine the experimental stimulus through a two-step process. First, we identified the most prosocial products from 11 options (those scoring above the mean on prosociality), then selected the most conspicuous among them.

Prosociality of products. Sixty participants (32 female) completed an online experiment. Following Griskevicius et al. (2010), we asked participants to rate 11 products on 9-point Likert scales for prosociality (e.g., "Are people who buy or own this product friendly, caring, and altruistic?" $\alpha = 0.92$). Six products

were selected for the second pretest: charity T-shirts (M = 7.87, SD = 1.51), reusable shopping bags (M = 7.90, SD = 1.07), hybrid cars (M = 7.87, SD = 1.07), natural household cleaners (M = 7.85, SD = 1.12), "pink ribbon" bracelets (M = 7.82, SD = 1.44), and eco-friendly backpacks (M = 7.72, SD = 1.13).

Conspicuousness of prosocial products. Sixty-two participants (38 female) completed an online experiment. We asked them to rate the six products' conspicuousness on 9-point Likert scales adapted from Grace and Griffin (2009), e.g., "By using or wearing this product, I can show people my prosocial behavior (prosocial behavior benefits others and society, such as environmental protection and donation)" ($\alpha = 0.95$). Results showed the most conspicuous prosocial product was the eco-friendly backpack (featuring a recycling logo and made from recycled materials) (M = 6.43, SD = 1.61), while the least conspicuous was natural household cleaners (M = 5.31, SD = 1.86; t(61) = -8.05, paired $p < .001$). We therefore used the eco-friendly backpack as the stimulus in Experiment 1.

2.2 Method

Experiment 1 used a single-factor two-level (power: high vs. low) between-subjects design. We recruited 145 participants through a marketing research lab for an online experiment, yielding 139 valid responses (six were excluded for excessive inconsistent extreme responses). Each participant received 2 RMB compensation. The sample included 89 women (64.03%) with a mean age of 26.29 years (SD = 4.21, range 18–45).

First, we manipulated sense of power using a hierarchical role imagination task (Rucker et al., 2011). Participants were randomly assigned to high- or low-power conditions. High-power participants imagined being a large company' s boss, while low-power participants imagined being an employee. They read role descriptions, recorded their thoughts and feelings, and reported their current sense of power and emotional state.

Next, we measured product preferences. Participants read descriptions of two eco-friendly backpack designs (Wu et al., 2013). The cover story stated: "M Company produces and sells backpacks and plans to launch two eco-friendly designs made from sustainable organic fibers and recycled polyester, minimizing waste, toxic emissions, and resource consumption; the backpacks are recyclable and safely returnable to nature at end-of-life; price: 268 RMB. The product development team proposed two design options. The only difference is that Backpack B features a recycling logo (indicating environmental benefit)." This logo was highly visible, making Backpack B more conspicuous.

Finally, we measured purchase intention using three items on 7-point Likert scales ($\alpha = 0.96$) (Wu et al., 2013). Scores near 1 indicated preference for non-conspicuous prosocial products, while scores near 7 indicated preference for conspicuous prosocial products. Demographic variables were collected before debriefing.

2.3 Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. After the power manipulation, participants reported their sense of power and emotional state. Results confirmed successful activation: high-power group (M = 6.17, SD = 0.97) vs. low-power group (M = 3.46, SD = 2.04) showed significant difference ($F(1,137) = 99.97$, $p < 0.001$, partial $^2 = 0.42$). No significant difference emerged in overall emotion between groups (M_{high} = 5.30, SD = 1.48; M_{low} = 4.85, SD = 1.52; $F(1,137) = 3.05$, $p = 0.083$, partial $^2 = 0.02$). Prior research has repeatedly shown that power manipulations have minimal or no effect on emotion (Smith & Trope, 2006). Therefore, we did not discuss emotion in subsequent power manipulation experiments.

Purchase intention. A one-way ANOVA with power as the independent variable and purchase intention as the dependent variable, controlling for gender, age, monthly income (or spending for students), and student status, revealed that high-power participants (M = 5.92, SD = 1.27) showed significantly higher purchase intentions than low-power participants (M = 5.18, SD = 1.76; $F(1,133) = 12.41$, $p = 0.001$, partial $^2 = 0.09$). High-power individuals thus preferred conspicuous prosocial products more than low-power individuals. Student status marginally significantly affected conspicuous prosocial behavior ($F(1,133) = 3.29$, $p = 0.072$, partial $^2 = 0.02$), while gender, age, and monthly income did not ($ps > 0.1$).

Experiment 1 demonstrated significant differences in purchase intentions for conspicuous prosocial products across power levels, with high-power individuals showing greater willingness. This provides initial support for H1 from the perspective of conspicuous prosocial product purchasing. However, since product purchasing represents only one form of conspicuous prosocial behavior, Experiments 2a and 2b employed different power priming methods and examined public acknowledgment of donations to retest H1, as public acknowledgment confers conspicuousness to donations (Grace & Griffin, 2009), helping verify whether conspicuousness motivates high-power individuals' prosocial behavior.

Experiment 2a

Experiment 2a re-examined H1 from the perspective of monetary donation using an alternative conspicuousness method. Research indicates that public acknowledgment makes donations conspicuous, helping donors obtain intangible returns like social status and prestige (Grace & Griffin, 2009; Willer, 2009). This experiment investigated the interactive effect of power and public acknowledgment on donations to further validate H1.

3.1 Method

Experiment 2a used a 2 (power: high vs. low) × 2 (public acknowledgment: public vs. private) between-subjects design. We recruited 160 participants through

a marketing research lab, yielding 147 valid responses (13 failed to complete the recall task as instructed). Each participant received 3 RMB compensation. The sample included 72 women (48.98%) with a mean age of 23.05 years (SD = 3.02, range 18–37).

First, we manipulated power using a recall task (Rucker et al., 2011). Participants were randomly assigned to high- or low-power conditions. High-power participants recalled an incident where they had power over others, while low-power participants recalled an incident where others had power over them. All participants wrote down the recalled events.

Next, we measured donation willingness and amount. Participants imagined encountering a Tencent Charity Foundation project called "Love Parcel, Student Dream" while using their mobile phone (see Appendix A). In the public acknowledgment condition, participants learned their names would be displayed on Tencent Charity' s official website to thank them for their contribution (Han et al., 2010). They then reported their donation willingness and responded to: "Suppose you have 100 RMB to spend freely, how much would you donate?" In the private condition, participants reported donation willingness and amount without public acknowledgment. Finally, demographic information was collected.

3.2 Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. Following the recall task, we verified the power manipulation using the same method as Experiment 1. Results confirmed successful manipulation (M_{high}-power = 5.16, SD = 1.52; M_{low}-power = 2.64, SD = 1.52; F(1,145) = 101.15, p < 0.001, partial ^{2} = 0.41).

Donation willingness and amount. ANOVAs with power and public acknowledgment as independent variables, controlling for monthly income (or spending), age, gender, and student status, revealed no significant main effects of power (F(1,139) < 0.01, p = 0.98, partial ^{2} < 0.001) or public acknowledgment (F(1,139) = 0.22, p = 0.64, partial ^{2} = 0.002) on donation willingness. However, the interaction between power and public acknowledgment was significant, F(1,139) = 6.81, p = 0.010, partial ^{2} = 0.05. Specifically, under public acknowledgment, high-power participants (M = 5.30, SD = 1.34) showed greater donation willingness than low-power participants (M = 4.69, SD = 1.37; F(1,139) = 3.93, p = 0.050, partial ^{2} = 0.03). Conversely, in the private condition, power had a marginally significant negative effect (M_{high} = 4.71, SD = 1.13; M_{low} = 5.44, SD = 1.03; F(1,139) = 3.13, p = 0.071, partial ^{2} = 0.02) [Figure 1: see original paper]. Monthly income did not significantly affect donation willingness (ps > 0.1).

For donation amount, neither power (F(1,139) = 0.35, p = 0.56, partial ^{2} < 0.01) nor public acknowledgment (F(1,139) = 2.55, p = 0.113, partial ^{2} = 0.02) showed significant main effects, but their interaction significantly predicted donation amount (F(1,139) = 8.93, p = 0.003, partial ^{2} = 0.06). Under public ac-

knowledgment, high-power participants donated significantly more (M = 50.09, SD = 28.69) than low-power participants (M = 34.14, SD = 26.72; F(1,139) = 7.10, p = 0.009, partial ^{2} = 0.05). In contrast, in the private condition, high-power participants donated marginally less (M = 42.00, SD = 21.47) than low-power participants (M = 55.42, SD = 28.26; F(1,139) = 2.94, p = 0.089, partial ^{2} = 0.02). Monthly income significantly affected donation amounts (F(1,139) = 6.22, p = 0.014, partial ^{2} = 0.04), while age had a marginal effect (F(1,139) = 2.81, p = 0.096, partial ^{2} = 0.02). Gender and student status did not significantly affect donation amounts (ps > 0.1).

Experiment 2a demonstrated that public acknowledgment moderates power' s effect on donation willingness and amount. As predicted, under public acknowledgment, high-power individuals showed higher donation willingness and gave more than low-power individuals. Conversely, in the control condition, we replicated prior findings that low-power individuals donate more than high-power individuals (Liu, 2019). Given that public acknowledgment confers conspicuousness, these results support that high (vs. low) power individuals are more willing to engage in conspicuous prosocial behavior, validating H1 from an alternative angle.

Experiment 2b: Power and Hematopoietic Stem Cell Donor Behavior

This experiment used actual behavior as the dependent variable to enhance ecological validity. Since power is closely linked to status (Rucker et al., 2012) and conspicuous prosocial behavior helps actors gain status (Griskevicius et al., 2010), status maintenance might represent an alternative mechanism. This experiment aimed to rule out this competing explanation.

4.1 Method

Experiment 2b used a 3 (power: high vs. low vs. control) × 2 (public acknowledgment: public vs. private) between-subjects design. We recruited 240 participants through a marketing research lab. Nineteen existing hematopoietic stem cell donors were ineligible, and 11 failed attention checks, yielding 210 valid responses. Each participant received 3 RMB compensation. The sample included 117 women (55.71%) with a mean age of 24.77 years (SD = 5.06, range 18–45).

The procedure resembled Experiment 2a with several modifications. First, we added a control group to the power manipulation, asking control participants to recall and write about yesterday' s experiences (Wu et al., 2013). Second, the experimental scenario involved hematopoietic stem cell donation. After brief education about stem cells and transplantation, participants reported whether they were already registered donors. We then informed them that over 80,000 patients urgently needed matching stem cells as of January 31, 2020, and that the China Marrow Donor Program sought more volunteers, presenting a public service advertisement (see Appendix B). All data and materials came from

the official China Marrow Donor Program website. Third, in the private condition, participants learned that becoming a volunteer donor would increase patients' chances of finding matches. We verified the conspicuousness manipulation (Grace & Griffin, 2009) with items like "Becoming a volunteer donor allows me to show people my prosocial behavior" ($\alpha = 0.78$). Fourth, the dependent variable was whether participants left their e-mail address, with instructions that volunteers would receive the "Hematopoietic Stem Cell Donor Agreement" and assistance scheduling blood sample collection. Fifth, all participants reported need for status (Eastman et al., 1999) using items like "I am willing to engage in prosocial behaviors that help me gain status and prestige" ($\alpha = 0.80$), with higher scores indicating stronger status motivation.

4.2 Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. After the recall task, participants reported their sense of power. Results confirmed successful manipulation: significant differences emerged among high-power (M = 5.32, SD = 1.47), low-power (M = 3.04, SD = 1.72), and control groups (M = 4.20, SD = 1.52; F(2,207) = 36.52, p < 0.001, partial ^{2} = 0.26). Conspicuousness manipulation verification showed that prosocial behavior was more conspicuous in the public (M = 5.14, SD = 0.10) than private condition (M = 4.74, SD = 0.10; F(2,208) = 8.39, p = 0.004, partial ^{2} = 0.04).

Donation behavior. Overall, 122 of 210 participants (58.10%) left their e-mail addresses (high-power: 42; low-power: 43; control: 37). Logistic regression with power, public acknowledgment, their interaction, and demographics as predictors of e-mail provision revealed a marginally significant interaction effect (Wald = 3.39, p = 0.065, Exp(B) = 1.95), while demographics showed no effects (ps > 0.1). Chi-square tests showed that under public acknowledgment, high-power participants left e-mail addresses more frequently (78.79%, 26/33) than low-power (53.33%, 16/30) and control participants (52.50%, 21/40; Pearson ^{2}(2) = 6.35, p = 0.042). Conversely, in the private condition, low-power participants left e-mails more often (71.10%, 27/38) than high-power (42.11%, 16/38) and control participants (51.61%, 16/31; Pearson ^{2}(2) = 6.66, p = 0.036) [Figure 2: see original paper]. H1 was again supported.

Need for status. Using Muller et al.' s (2005) moderated mediation approach, we tested whether need for status mediated the interactive effect of power and public acknowledgment on e-mail provision. Step 1 showed the interaction significantly predicted e-mail provision (B = 0.76, SE = 0.35, Wald = 4.65, p = 0.031). Step 2 showed the interaction did not significantly predict need for status (B = -0.14, SE = 0.15, t = -0.92, p = 0.361). Thus, need for status does not mediate the moderating effect of public acknowledgment on the power-behavior relationship.

Experiment 2b showed that under public acknowledgment, high-power participants were more likely to donate than low-power and control participants, while

in private conditions, low-power participants donated more. H1 was supported, demonstrating that high-power individuals prefer conspicuous prosocial behavior. Furthermore, need for status did not mediate the effect, ruling out this alternative explanation.

Experiment 3: Power and Conspicuous Tendency

The first three experiments established that high (vs. low) power individuals prefer conspicuous prosocial behavior, but does this reflect a general conspicuous tendency or one specific to prosocial contexts? Although research confirms low-power individuals prefer conspicuous consumption (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009), this doesn' t fully answer the question. Experiment 3 investigated whether high-power individuals have a general conspicuous tendency. Additionally, since high-power individuals may act to maintain their power status (Garbinsky et al., 2014) and conspicuous prosocial behavior yields social rewards, power maintenance might be an alternative mechanism. This experiment tested this competing explanation.

5.1 Method

Experiment 3 used a 2 (power: high vs. low) × 2 (product conspicuous dimension: prosocial vs. non-prosocial) between-subjects design. Two hundred forty participants were recruited through a marketing research lab, yielding 237 valid responses (three failed attention checks). Each received 2 RMB compensation. The sample included 116 women (48.95%) with a mean age of 24.93 years (SD = 5.27, range 16–45).

Power was primed using the same method as Experiment 1. Participants then reported whether they owned an Apple Watch Series 5; only those without one were eligible. Eligible participants imagined planning to purchase a smartwatch and viewed an Apple Watch Series 5 advertisement (see Appendix C). In the prosocial condition, the ad emphasized the product' s prosocial attributes (made from recyclable materials) with the slogan "Show Your Public Welfare 'Core.' " In the non-prosocial condition, it highlighted data tracking functions with the slogan "Show Your Digital 'Core.' " We then measured purchase intention and power maintenance tendency (Garbinsky et al., 2014) using two items: "I hope my current power status remains unchanged" ($\alpha = 0.88$). We also measured brand familiarity (Zhou et al., 2010): "The Apple brand is unfamiliar to me" ($\alpha = 0.82$), and brand loyalty (Chiou & Droge, 2006): "If I buy a smartwatch, I would choose Apple" ($\alpha = 0.74$), all on 7-point scales. Demographics were collected before debriefing.

5.2 Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. After the role imagination task, participants reported their sense of power. Results confirmed successful manipulation (M_{high} = 5.47,

SD = 1.54; M_{low} = 3.36, SD = 1.68; F(1,235) = 96.66, p < 0.001, partial ^{2} = 0.29).

Purchase intention. ANOVA with power and product dimension as independent variables and purchase intention as the dependent variable, controlling for gender, age, monthly income (or spending), and education, revealed no significant main effects of power (F(1,233) = 1.37, p = 0.243, partial ^{2} = 0.01) or product dimension (F(1,233) = 0.12, p = 0.733, partial ^{2} < 0.01). However, the interaction was significant (F(1,228) = 8.49, p = 0.004, partial ^{2} = 0.04). For conspicuous prosocial products, high-power individuals showed stronger purchase intentions (M = 5.25, SD = 1.19) than low-power individuals (M = 4.51, SD = 1.49; F(1,228) = 8.18, p = 0.005, partial ^{2} = 0.04). For conspicuous non-prosocial products, no significant difference emerged between high- and low-power individuals (M_{low} = 4.99, SD = 1.12; M_{high} = 4.66, SD = 1.46; F(1,228) = 1.61, p = 0.205, partial ^{2} = 0.01) [Figure 3: see original paper]. Monthly income significantly affected purchase intention (F(1,228) = 4.23, p = 0.041, partial ^{2} = 0.02), while other demographics did not (ps > 0.1).

Power maintenance. Using Hayes' s (2013) bootstrap method (Model 4, 5,000 samples), we tested whether power maintenance mediated the interactive effect of power and product dimension on purchase intention. Results showed power maintenance significantly affected purchase intention (B = 0.10, SE = 0.05, p = 0.049). However, the direct effect of the interaction was not significant (0.39, 95% CI: [-0.04, 0.81]), nor was the indirect effect (0.11, 95% CI: [-0.004, 0.26]). Power maintenance does not mediate power' s effect on conspicuous prosocial behavior.

Experiment 3 showed that when product conspicuousness emphasized prosocial attributes, high (vs. low) power individuals exhibited stronger purchase intentions, but no difference emerged for non-prosocial conspicuousness. Thus, high-power individuals lack a general conspicuous tendency; they prefer conspicuousness specifically in prosocial contexts. This finding does not contradict prior research showing low-power consumers prefer conspicuous consumption, as those products signal status (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009), whereas Experiment 3' s conspicuous dimension did not involve status attributes. Additionally, power maintenance cannot explain power' s effect on conspicuous prosocial behavior, ruling out this alternative explanation.

Experiment 4

Experiment 4 had two primary objectives: first, to test whether self-presentation motivation mediates power' s effect on conspicuous prosocial behavior (H2); second, to replicate H1 using blatant benevolence (public welfare activities) and measure chronic sense of power to examine robustness.

6.1 Pretest

The pretest identified experimental stimuli for conspicuous benevolence. Following Griskevicius et al. (2007) and adapting to the Chinese context, we selected three conspicuous benevolence acts (e.g., volunteering at nursing homes) and three non-conspicuous benevolence acts (e.g., taking short showers to conserve water).

One hundred seventeen participants (76 women, 65%) completed the pretest, receiving 1 RMB compensation. They rated each act' s conspicuousness (Griskevicius et al., 2007), e.g., "To what extent do you consider the following behaviors public and visible to others?" ($\alpha = 0.84$). Results confirmed that conspicuous benevolence acts were perceived as more public and visible (M = 5.89, SD = 0.92) than non-conspicuous acts (M = 4.21, SD = 1.25; t(116) = 16.32, paired $p < 0.01$), and more likely to be shared with others (M_{conspicuous} = 5.40, SD = 1.30; M_{non}-conspicuous = 3.92, SD = 1.31; t(116) = 14.19, paired $p < 0.01$).

6.2 Method

Experiment 4 recruited 213 participants through a marketing research lab, yielding 206 valid responses (seven failed attention checks). Each received 2 RMB compensation. The sample included 109 women (52.91%) with a mean age of 23.33 years (SD = 3.86, range 18–48).

The questionnaire comprised four sections presented in random order for the first three sections. Section 1 measured sense of power using eight items adapted from Anderson et al. (2012), e.g., "I can get people to listen to me" ($\alpha = 0.93$). Section 2 measured self-presentation motivation (Hewitt & Flett, 1993) with four items: "It is important for me to always perform at my best" ($\alpha = 0.88$). Section 3 measured willingness to engage in the three conspicuous benevolence acts from the pretest ($\alpha = 0.78$). Section 4 collected demographics.

6.3 Results and Discussion

Willingness to engage in conspicuous benevolence. Linear regression with power as the predictor and willingness as the outcome, controlling for demographics, showed power significantly predicted willingness (B = 0.26, SE = 0.07, t(201) = 3.55, $p < 0.001$). Demographics showed no significant effects (ps > 0.1).

Mediation analysis. Linear regression revealed power positively predicted self-presentation motivation (B = 0.36, SE = 0.07, t(201) = 4.93, $p < 0.001$), while demographics showed no effects (ps > 0.1).

Using Hayes' s (2013) bootstrap method (Model 4, 5,000 samples) with power as the independent variable, self-presentation motivation as the mediator, willingness as the dependent variable, and demographics as covariates, we found self-presentation motivation significantly predicted willingness (B = 0.20, SE = 0.07, p = 0.003). The direct effect of power was significant (0.18, 95% CI:

[0.03, 0.32]), as was the indirect effect (0.07, 95% CI: [0.03, 0.14]) [Figure 4: see original paper]. Self-presentation motivation thus mediated power' s effect on conspicuous benevolence willingness, supporting H2.

Experiment 4 demonstrated that power affects willingness to engage in conspicuous benevolence, with higher power predicting greater willingness, replicating H1 and establishing robustness. Crucially, it also confirmed self-presentation motivation' s mediating role, supporting H2.

General Discussion

7.1 Research Conclusions

This study examined how sense of power influences conspicuous prosocial behavior and its underlying mechanism. Five experiments investigated this relationship across three behavioral manifestations: prosocial product purchasing, donation, and benevolence. High-power individuals showed higher purchase intentions for conspicuous prosocial products (Experiments 1 and 3). Under public acknowledgment, high-power individuals demonstrated greater donation willingness and gave more (Experiments 2a and 2b), with public acknowledgment conferring conspicuousness (Grace & Griffin, 2009). Finally, high-power individuals exhibited higher willingness to participate in conspicuous benevolence (Experiment 4). Collectively, these results confirm that high (vs. low) power individuals prefer conspicuous prosocial behavior. Experiment 4 further demonstrated that self-presentation motivation mediates this effect.

7.2 Discussion

Our findings exemplify costly signaling theory (Grafen, 1990), which posits that altruistic behavior is a communicative signal conveying not only prosociality but also the ability to bear costs (Bird & Smith, 2005). Beyond signaling prosocial orientation, altruism demonstrates that one possesses sufficient time, energy, money, or other valuable resources—precisely why high-power individuals engage in visible conspicuous prosocial behavior.

Notably, prior research suggests prosocial behavior generates warmth (Ali & Bodur, 2019) and promotes social harmony, with low-power individuals preferring warmth-related information and being more persuaded by it (Dubois et al., 2016). We argue this does not contradict our findings. First, conspicuousness may reduce expressions of pure altruistic motivation. Low-power individuals, whose altruistic motives dominate, may experience diminished warmth from conspicuous prosocial behavior and may even lose warm feelings upon perceiving utilitarian purposes. Second, prosocial behavior also signals competence. For instance, cause-related marketing may emphasize either warmth (caring for environment) or competence (direct economic benefits) (Lu & Sinha, 2017). In self-purchasing contexts, consumers may not directly perceive warmth value, while conspicuous features better signal competence and willingness to engage in

prosocial behavior. Thus, high-power individuals, being sensitive to competence attributes, show greater willingness toward conspicuous prosocial behavior.

Our research connects to but differs from other studies on prosocial behavior, morality, and self-interest. For example, social comparison research (Zheng et al., 2015) examines a different construct—social comparison involves broad self-evaluation through upward, downward, or lateral comparisons (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), which may include power comparisons. Though distinct, such research suggests downward power comparisons may increase power perception and prosocial behavior.

Resource scarcity research finds that scarcity cues increase self-focus, leading to selfish behavior that can manifest as either harming others or helping them indirectly through generosity (Roux et al., 2015). This seems contradictory to power research, as lacking power often means lacking resource control, yet prior work suggests low power promotes prosocial behavior. This tension calls for deeper investigation. Our study aligns with prior work in that when resource scarcity increases self-focus, competitive altruism (Van Vugt et al., 2007) becomes the dominant motivational tendency (Roux et al., 2015).

Research on power motive and social presence (Wang & Dai, 2020) is also relevant. Power motive—an individual' s desire for power as a stable trait—differs from sense of power, which is a relatively static psychological state resulting from having or lacking power. Low-power individuals may have high power motive from desiring power, while high-power individuals may have high or low power motive depending on stability concerns. Our study focuses on sense of power, complementing research showing that strong power motive combined with social presence cues promotes prosocial behavior, by demonstrating that even those already possessing power engage in prosocial behavior for impression management.

Finally, research on power, morality (Lammers et al., 2015), and selfishness (Dubois et al., 2015) differs from our focus. Morality involves prescriptive norms everyone should follow (Lammers et al., 2015), whereas prosocial behavior is voluntary and positive but not mandatory (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Prosocial behavior can be moral but is not required by moral codes. Selfishness prioritizes personal benefit, while immoral behavior specifically violates laws or moral standards (Mazar et al., 2008), including deception. Thus, moral, non-selfish, and prosocial behaviors are not equivalent—prosocial behavior (e.g., buying green products) can stem from self-interest or altruism, and being prosocial is not an absolute indicator of morality.

7.3 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several theoretical contributions. First, it validates the link between power and conspicuous prosocial behavior across three behavioral forms. While Cai et al. (2016) noted that prior research examined power' s effect on prosocial behavior through individual traits, situational factors, and power'

s nature, our study investigates how prosocial behavior' s conspicuous features influence different power holders' tendencies. This enriches prosocial behavior literature and provides a new perspective on power's effect on consumer behavior, suggesting that high- and low-power consumers' behaviors may signal specific images to audiences. For instance, high (vs. low) power individuals' preference for competence (warmth) information (Dubois et al., 2016) can be interpreted as building a competent (warm, approachable) image, while low-power consumers' conspicuous consumption (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009) may signal status.

Second, this study explains the mechanism underlying power' s effect on conspicuous prosocial behavior. While prior research examined self-presentation' s conceptualization, motives, and outcomes (e.g., self-realization, self-esteem, positive emotions; Sezer et al., 2018), it did not address power' s effect on self-presentation or the self-presentational value of conspicuous prosocial behavior. We demonstrate that power is an antecedent of self-presentation, and activated self-presentation motivation promotes visible prosocial behavior, enriching self-presentation literature. Additionally, we extend dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1959), which distinguishes front-stage (selective, public) from back-stage behavior. Front-stage altruism specifically refers to helping others without expectation of return. While prior research focused on entrepreneurs' front-stage behaviors (Huang et al., 2013) and their effects on brand and performance (Zhu et al., 2014), we generalize these effects from entrepreneurs to general high-power individuals, complementing dramaturgical theory.

Third, since social class is a source of power, this research supplements social class-prosocial behavior literature. Prior work suggests social class and power produce similar effects, with high-class individuals showing self-interested immorality and low-class individuals showing altruistic immorality, with power mediating the class-immorality relationship (Dubois et al., 2015). However, class and power are distinct yet related concepts (Rucker et al., 2012)—one can have high status without power or power without high class—and prosocial behavior differs from morality. Our study extends social class effects on prosocial behavior through the lens of power and sense of power.

7.4 Managerial Implications

These findings offer important practical guidance for motivating high-power individuals toward prosocial causes. Results show high-power individuals prefer conspicuous prosocial behavior, so practitioners can increase visibility to appeal to their self-display and reputation-building needs. For example, companies can add environmental logos to green products to increase conspicuousness and boost high-power consumers' purchase intentions. Charities can use public acknowledgment to more effectively persuade high-power individuals to donate or volunteer.

Second, these results guide marketing campaigns promoting prosocial behavior. When targeting high (low) power individuals, practitioners should emphasize

(avoid) conspicuous features. They can also manipulate sense of power through environmental cues like bass-heavy music ($±$15dB) or ambient scent (cold vs. warm) (Hsu et al., 2015; Madzharov et al., 2015) to match high (low) power states with conspicuous (non-conspicuous) prosocial behaviors, enhancing persuasion effectiveness.

7.5 Limitations and Future Research

Despite supporting our hypotheses, this study has limitations. First, we focused on why high-power individuals engage in conspicuous prosocial behavior but did not deeply examine why low-power individuals dislike it. Future research should explore this mechanism. Additionally, the underlying purposes of high-power individuals' self-presentation motivation—whether to demonstrate competence and gain respect, to be liked, or both—warrant further distinction and measurement.

Second, while we verified power' s effect and its mechanism, we did not explore boundary conditions. Future research should examine moderating factors, such as whether the high-power individual' s signals are correctly received by their "audience," which may represent a potential boundary condition.

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Appendix A: Experimental Stimulus for Experiment 2a

The "Love Parcel, Student Dream" campaign, jointly launched by the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation and Tencent Charity Foundation, aims to support elementary students in impoverished and disaster-affected areas through donated parcels. Each 100 RMB donation purchases a student stationery package containing basic supplies, art materials, a water bottle, and a backpack.

Appendix B: Public Service Advertisement for Experiment 2b

[Image description: A public service advertisement for hematopoietic stem cell donation from the China Marrow Donor Program]

Appendix C: Advertisement Images for Experiment 3

Prosocial condition: Advertisement emphasizing the product' s prosocial attributes (made from recyclable materials) with slogan "Show Your Public Welfare 'Core' "

Non-prosocial condition: Advertisement emphasizing data tracking functions with slogan "Show Your Digital 'Core' "

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.