

# Buying a BMW: How do social expectations influence your purchases?

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People who drive BMWs and wear expensive suits must surely occupy roles of power and authority. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, when we can separate societal expectations of power from how power makes us feel, we have better control over what it means to be powerful.

"When a person is placed into a powerless or powerful role, they sometimes conform to the expectations of that role. But when they are focused on the internal feeling of having or lacking power, we observed the opposite patterns of behavior," write authors Derek D. Rucker (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University), Miao Hu (University of Hawaii at Manoa), and Adam D. Galinsky (Columbia University).

The authors studied how a person's perception of power could hinge on what they are focused on at the time. That is, when a person is focused on how an experience of power makes them feel, they should respond based on those feelings. Conversely, when they are focused on the expected behavior associated with being powerless or powerful, people should respond based on those feelings.

The authors studied the impact of power on participants' feelings. When participants were made to focus on what was expected of them (for example, their role within a company), they were more likely to purchase status-signaling products like a BMW. When asked to focus on the internal feelings of having or lacking power, the researchers found

that only the participants who felt powerful were likely to purchase similar items.

These results provide insight for brands selling luxury items to consumers in powerful roles. Such brands may consider emphasizing social expectations and roles at work. In contrast, when promoting status-signaling products to powerless consumers, brands might consider suggesting how high-status products can compensate for their lack of power. "For consumers, the current research helps us better understand the psychological drivers behind our preferences and purchase decisions," the authors conclude.

**More information:** Derek D. Rucker, Miao Hu, and Adam D. Galinsky. "The Experience versus the Expectations of Power: A Recipe for Altering the Effects of Power on Behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

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