Conspicuous Self-Control: When Status Motives Lead Consumers to Signal Restraint
ABSTRACT

Extant research suggests that consumers associate high status with wealth, which leads them to behave indulgently by purchasing expensive (vs. less expensive) products when status-signaling motives are activated. We propose that consumers also associate high status with being goal-oriented, which leads them to conspicuously engage in self-control (vs. indulgence). A series of six studies finds that status motives lead consumers to choose products that signal self-control (e.g., healthy vs. unhealthy food, educational vs. entertainment programming) because status motives increase the desire to appear goal-oriented. The effect of status motives on conspicuous self-control is particularly apparent in contexts where the opportunity to signal wealth is absent. For example, the effect of status motives on conspicuous self-control is moderated by the variance in price among product options. Additional findings demonstrate that consumers with active status motives are more willing to conspicuously save (vs. spend) their money when they are reminded that saving behavior is a signal of self-control. This research has important implications for marketers and consumers regarding how and when status motivations can be harnessed to enhance self-control.
The desire to attain status is a fundamental human motivation that has been found to lead consumers to signal status through indulgent products associated with wealth (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Sundie et al. 2011). When consumers feel a lack of status, they are more willing to purchase conspicuous luxury products over less expensive options to signal wealth and status (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). For example, when status-signaling motives are active, a consumer may select an expensive Prada purse over a less expensive option that also meets their needs. Or, a consumer may choose to spring for the latest Mercedes-Benz automobile instead of a suitable Toyota Camry. In this way, status-signaling motivations lower a consumer’s price sensitivity and enhance their willingness to indulge.

While flaunting expensive, luxurious products can be effective in conveying high status and can lead to benefits, such as preferential treatment from others (Doob and Gross 1968; Nelissen and Meijers 2011), how might consumers signal status in contexts where they are unable to signal wealth? For example, when consumers are in a bookstore or at a café, how might they convey status? We argue that when consumers cannot signal wealth through conspicuous consumption, status motives will lead consumers to signal status through conspicuous acts of self-control. We hypothesize that status motives lead to conspicuous restraint because of a desire to appear goal-oriented (i.e., consistently setting goals and diligently pursuing them).

The current research examines when status motives lead to conspicuous indulgence versus conspicuous restraint. In six studies, we show that status-signaling motives lead consumers to favor products that convey self-control (studies 1 and 2) and attempt to make such products observable to others (study 3). We also demonstrate that this effect occurs because
Status motives increase consumers’ need to appear goal-oriented (vs. other alternative process mechanisms such as a desire to avoid embarrassment or to signal wealth or competence; study 4). Consistent with extant research, we find that the effect of status motives on the desire to signal self-control weakens when consumers can signal wealth through indulgent spending (study 5). However, even when the opportunity to signal wealth is present, a reminder that saving signals self-control can lead status-signaling consumers to be more willing to save relative to control participants (study 6).

This idea that a desire to signal status can motivate self-control is both theoretically novel and practically important. Theoretically, past research has focused on how status-signaling motivations lead to indulgent behavior, but such research has primarily examined how status-signaling motivations shift consumers’ preference from less expensive to more expensive products (Griskevicius et al. 2007). The current work demonstrates that status-signaling motivations can lead consumers to engage in self-control, a form of restraint, and forgo indulgence. From a practical perspective, our findings suggest that consumers can satisfy a status-signaling motivation through self-control instead of indulgence, even when they are tempted to spend indulgently. In what follows, we develop our theory and present six studies and two additional studies in a web appendix in support of our proposition. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for consumers and marketers.

**STATUS MOTIVATIONS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

Status refers to a person’s relative standing—whether social or professional—in society and reflects the respect that they receive from others around them (Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). Possessing and signaling high status can enhance how people are treated by their peers.
One central advantage is that high-status individuals are given priority access to resources when they are scarce, aiding in survival (e.g., shelter; Fowler 2018). High-status people are not held to the same societal constraints as lower-status people and are afforded more respect (Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Doob and Gross 1968; Reiman and Leighton 2015). Further, high-status people also receive preferential treatment from others. A classic study showed that drivers were less willing to act hostile toward drivers of high-status vehicles compared to drivers of low-status vehicles (Doob and Gross 1968). Society’s most respected institutions, such as the justice system, also favor high-status people. For instance, police officers are less likely to arrest high-status offenders, and high-status offenders also receive lighter sentences if convicted (Reiman and Leighton 2015). Consumers are motivated to signal high status to their peers to garner these positive benefits (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Sundie et al. 2011).

One of the most well-established ways that consumers attempt to convey high status is by purchasing and displaying expensive, luxurious possessions such as brand-name clothing, lavish accessories, or high-priced automobiles (Han et al. 2010; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Sundie et al. 2011). The expensive nature of luxury products leads them to be associated with status because such products are costly to obtain and therefore scarce (Nelissen and Meijers 2011). Research suggests that consumers believe that by publicly displaying that they are able to afford the cost associated with such products, consumers garner perceptions of high status from their peers (Otterbring et al. 2018; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). For example, Otterbring et al. (2018) found that men who experienced a threat to status spent 60% more on clothing than men who did not experience a threat to status. This difference in spending was the result of men selecting products that were on average more expensive, rather than men simply buying more items. Similarly, Rucker and Galinsky (2008) found that feeling low in power led consumers to desire
to signal high status, which increased their willingness to pay for products associated with wealth.

While the current state of the literature indicates that indulgent spending is a reliable consequence of consumers’ status motives (Rucker and Galinsky 2008), we know little about how consumers respond to status motives in contexts where they are unable to convey wealth. Given that the motivation to signal status is a ubiquitous feature of human nature (Durante and Griskevicius 2016), the alternative means by which consumers signal status are important to understand (Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Griskevicius et al. 2007). Because there is a positive association between being goal-oriented and status-related achievement (Barrick, Mount, and Strauss 1993; Lunenburg 2011), we reasoned that consumers associate high status with being goal-oriented, which may lead status-motivated consumers to engage in conspicuous displays of self-control in contexts where they cannot convey wealth.

**STATUS-SIGNALING MOTIVATIONS AND CONSPICUOUS SELF-CONTROL: A GOAL-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK**

Status, wealth, and career achievement are highly inter-correlated (Gattiker and Larwood 1990). While career achievement can lead to superiority, esteem, and ultimately wealth, such success often comes from being goal-oriented. We define being “goal-oriented” as consistently setting goals and diligently pursuing them\(^1\) (Locke and Latham 2013). Consumer scholars have

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\(^1\) Given our definition, being “goal-oriented” is different from having a specific “goal orientation” (Kaplan and Maehr 2007). A goal orientation involves being motivated out of a desire to perform well (i.e., a performance orientation) or being motivated out of a desire to achieve (i.e., an achievement orientation).
studied contexts that facilitate goal pursuit because people who are goal-oriented are more likely than others to achieve their goals (Bayuk, Janiszewski, and Leboeuf 2010; Campbell and Warren 2015; Etkin, Evangelidis, and Aaker 2015; Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Lunenburg 2011; Morisano et al. 2010; Zhang, Fishbach, and Dhar 2007). These individuals are also more likely to prosper in school and in their careers, which can lead to financial rewards (Barrick et al. 1993; Lee, Locke, and Latham 1989). Notably, academic success and career achievement raise an individual’s social status. Thus, while wealth is a signal of status, the catalyst to status is often one’s ability to set and pursue their goals (Barrick et al. 1993; Lunenburg 2011). For this reason, consumers may associate status with goal orientation.

If consumers associate high status with being goal-oriented, then a motivation to signal high status may lead consumers to attempt to display self-control. This is because self-control—the inhibition of immediate desires—facilitates the achievement of long-term goals (Campbell and Warren 2015; Duckworth and Seligman 2005; Fujita et al. 2006; Fujita and Sasota 2011; Galak et al. 2016; Galla and Duckworth 2015; Koole et al. 2014; Poynor and Haws 2009; Tanner et al. 2008; Wilcox, Kramer, and Sen 2011). By conspicuously displaying a focus on a higher-order, long-term goal, consumers may be able to convey to others that they are goal-oriented and ultimately high status. We verified this prediction in two pretests. Participants (N = 103) assumed that a person who had purchased self-control signaling products (i.e., a self-control computer application; a self-control video, or a banana) were more likely to be goal-oriented than a person who had non-self-control signaling products (movie-streaming computer application; relaxation video, or a packet of M&M’s; (M = 5.32, SD = .85 vs. 4.98, SD = .1.05; $F(1, 102) = 17.71, p < .001, h^2_p = .15)$. A separate cohort of participants (N = 150) assumed that a

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2 These items are the same items used and described in detail in the main studies.
person who appeared to be goal-oriented was higher in social status than a person who was less
goal-oriented ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.12$ vs. $4.78$, $SD = 1.16$; $F(1, 149) = 11.69$, $p < .001$, $h^2_p = .07$).

We detail these pretests further in the web appendix. For this reason, a motivation to express
high status may lead consumers to attempt to convey that they have high self-control.

In summary, extant research has shown that consumers respond to status-signaling
motivations with conspicuous indulgence (i.e., spending on luxury products). We propose that
when faced with the opportunity to convey self-control instead of indulgence in contexts where
monetary cost is controlled, such as a choice between a $10 healthy salad and a $10
cheeseburger, or between a $500 tablet with self-control applications and one that is $500 with
gaming applications, status motives should lead consumers to favor the self-control option (i.e.,
the healthier salad or the tablet with self-control applications). This will occur because
consumers associate high status with being goal-oriented and attempt to signal that they are goal-
oriented by purchasing products associated with self-control. Formally:

**H1a**: A desire to signal high status (vs. control) will increase the preference for products
associated with self-control in non-wealth signaling contexts.

**H1b**: A desire to signal high status (vs. control) will increase the desire to flaunt products
associated with self-control in non-wealth signaling contexts.

**H2**: A need to convey being goal-oriented will mediate the effect of a desire to signal
high status (vs. control) on the preference for products associated with self-control in
non-wealth signaling contexts.
Given that extant research shows that a desire to signal high status increases consumer motivation to select expensive, wealth-signaling products, we expect that the extent to which a consumer can convey wealth through their product choice will alter the effect of status motives on conspicuous self-control. According to our theory, if a consumer is in a non-wealth signaling context, such as if the product options are similar in price, status-signaling motivations should lead consumers to attempt to signal self-control. However, when faced with the opportunity to signal wealth by purchasing an indulgent product versus self-control, consumers will prefer the product that signals wealth (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Thus, when the cost of the indulgent product is more expensive than the self-control product, the effect of status-signaling motivations on the choice of a self-control product should reverse. Formally:

**H3**: The effect of a desire to signal high status (vs. control) on the preference for products associated with self-control should reverse in wealth-signaling contexts.

Why should status motives draw consumers toward indulgence spending and away from the less expensive option when they could convey wealth through self-control? If self-control is a signal of status, then saving behavior would allow consumers to signal high status and keep their money and increase wealth. We suspect that this effect—signaling wealth through conspicuous indulgence—occurs because when faced with product options that differ largely in price, consumers neglect that saving behavior signals self-control. When consumers are faced with products that vary in price, their attention is drawn to the more expensive option (Audrin et al. 2018). This may focus a consumer’s attention on how the expensive product can convey status
instead of on how the less expensive product can convey status through conspicuous self-control. If this is the case, a reminder that saving behavior is a signal of self-control may increase (relative to controls) a consumer’s willingness to save when status-signaling motivations are active. Formally:

**H4:** The effect of a desire to signal high status (vs. control) on the preference for expensive products should weaken when consumers are reminded that saving behavior signals self-control.

**FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

![Conceptual Model Diagram]
STUDY 1: LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOOD FIELD STUDY

Study 1 aimed to examine hypothesis 1a by demonstrating that a motivation to signal high status increases the choice of self-control signaling products. This study also aimed to provide strong ecological validity to the proposed effect and speak to practical methods to increase self-control among consumers. We were particularly interested in how health officials could use this research to positively influence healthy choices (i.e., selecting healthy food options over less healthy food options) among low-income consumers, who are disproportionately targeted with unhealthy food options (Smoyer-Tomic et al. 2008).

Accordingly, we conducted this study in a low-income area of a large metropolitan city. Two experimenters approached individuals in public. The experimenters gave each participant one of two flyers, one of which we designed to manipulate a desire to signal high status and the other which was a control flyer. Afterward, the experimenters offered the participant a healthy banana (i.e., self-control signaling product) or an indulgent M&M’s packet, their choice of which served as the key dependent variable of interest. Given that this study took place in a public environment where others can observe one’s status signals, we predicted that those whom we gave the flyer manipulating a desire to signal high status would attempt to signal high status through their meal choice and be more likely to select the self-control signaling, healthier option—the banana—than those in the control condition.
Method

*Participants and design.* Two experimenters approached 110 participants on streets, at parks, and at train stations in a low-income neighborhood of a large city to participate in this study. The experimenters avoided people if they had food or drinks with them, as their meal choices could impact the snack choice in the current study. We excluded the data of 16 participants because they either knew one of the researchers or had food allergies. The final sample size was 94 participants (50% female, $M_{age} = 35.60, SD = 15.27$). Participants reported their annual household income from eight categories ranging from <$15,000 to > $150,000. The median income range was $35,001-$55,000, which was considered low income in the city where we ran this study (Astudillo 2019).

*Status manipulation.* When the experimenters approached adults in the aforementioned public settings, they handed them one of two flyers (see Appendix A for stimuli). The experimenters followed a script telling each participant that they were giving out snacks as a part of an outreach program from a nearby university. We gave those in the desire to signal high status condition a flyer stating, “Wanting high status? Craving respect? Desiring to be more admired than peers? Get started with a snack!” We gave those in the control condition a flyer that said, “It’s just another day. Get started with a snack!” The experimenters randomized these flyers among the participants, ensuring that the experimental conditions did not vary by time of the day or day of the week. Furthermore, one of the experimenters reiterated information on the

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3 Before running all studies, we decided to exclude participants across all studies if they had taken a similar study before, had food allergies (for food studies), or recognized one of the researchers.
flyer to the participant to ensure that the participant understood the information that they had read. Afterward, the experimenters asked participants if they preferred a healthy banana or indulgent M&M’s packet. These items each retailed for $0.50. Participants selected their snack and then provided demographic details, including their age, gender, income, and allergies. Finally, we debriefed and dismissed the participants.

We verified that the status-signaling flyer led to a stronger motivation to signal high status relative to the control flyer. We presented a separate cohort of participants (N = 52) with one of the two flyers used in the main study. We had the participants imagine that they were approached by a research assistant in a metropolitan city to participate in a study. As in the main study, the researcher read them the flyer and asked them if they would be willing to answer a few questions. After responding, they reported whether they agreed to the following two statements: “It is important that I manage the way that others currently see me in terms of respect and status” and “I need to focus on increasing the respect and status that I have in the eyes of others” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .79). As expected, participants who received the status-signaling flyer were more likely to agree to these statements than those who received the control flyer (M = 5.64, SD = 1.60 vs. M = 4.85, SD = .93; t(50) = 2.17, p = .03, h²p = .09). To pretest the snacks, we asked another set of participants (N = 50) whether the package of M&M’s or the banana was healthier, tastier, and more expensive (0 = M&M’s, 1 = banana). We also asked them whether selecting the M&M’s packet or the banana requires more self-control and signals more self-control (0 = M&M’s, 1 = banana). As expected, participants perceived the banana to

4 Given that bananas are, on average, 100 calories, we used the 100 calorie M&M’s packets for this study as the unhealthy option. Doing so kept perceptions of how filling these options are constant while also offering a discrepancy in the healthiness of these items, in that bananas are healthier and more nutritious than M&M’s.
be healthier ($M = .94, SD = .24$ vs. equal; $t(49) = 12.97, p < .001, 1.76$) and less tasty ($M = .34, SD = .48$ vs. equal; $t(49) = -2.36, p < .001, d = -.33$), but not more expensive ($M = .44, SD = .50$ vs. equal; $t(49) = -.85, p > .40$) than the M&M’s packet$^5$. Additionally, participants believed that selecting the banana requires significantly more self-control ($M = .64, SD = .49$ vs. equal; $t(49) = 2.04, p = .05, d = .29$) and signals higher self-control than selecting the M&M’s ($M = .74, SD = .44$ vs. equal; $t(49) = 3.83, p < .001, d = .55$). Since participants perceived the banana to be healthier, less tasty, and a stronger signal of having self-control than the M&M’s, we expected that those in the desire to signal high status condition would be more likely to select the banana than those in the control condition. Additionally, the perceived cost of the banana and M&M’s was similar, and consequently, price is unlikely to explain an increased banana choice over the M&M’s$^6$.

Results and Discussion

We coded the choice of the M&M’s packet as “0” and choice of the banana as “1.” A binary logistic regression showed a positive relationship between status condition and choice of the healthy, self-controlled product ($B = .44, SE = .22, Wald = 4.16, p = .04, d = .43$). Participants in the desire to signal high status condition were more likely to select the healthy snack option than those in the control condition ($M = 52\%$ vs. 31\%). Including the participant’s

$^5$ In all results, we assessed effect sizes using Cohen’s $d$ for mean comparisons of independent samples and partial eta-squared in each ANOVA.

$^6$ Given the importance of the perceived price of the products used across all studies, we asked a separate cohort of participants their willingness to pay for all the products that we used across the studies without giving them price information of each item. Overall, there were no significant differences between the willingness to pay for the products. Further details about this study are provided in the web-appendix.
age and gender as covariates in supplementary analyses in this study did not change the conclusions of any of these results.

Notably, consumers in the control condition preferred the M&M’s packet to the banana, which is consistent with the proposition that choosing the banana might require and signal self-control. A higher desire to signal high status increased the choice of the healthier option. These findings are important because the exposure to a flyer, which was shown in a pretest to increase the desire to signal high status, led consumers to choose healthier products that could signal self-control (H1a). We observed these effects among adults in a low-income neighborhood as they went about their daily activities, implying that subtle reminders of a desire to signal high status are powerful enough to impact real choices that involve self-control. The strength, but also limitation, of this study is that we collected data in the field. Our main interest was to facilitate self-control in such environments; hence, this intervention and demonstration is important. However, in study 2, we replicated these results in a controlled environment. The design in study 2 allowed us to test hypothesis 1a in an environment in which extraneous variables are less likely to confound results.

**STUDY 2: DESIRE TO SIGNAL HIGH STATUS PREDICTS CHOICE OF SELF-CONTROL VIDEOS**

In study 2, we conceptually replicated the effect shown in study 1 with several changes. While study 1 was conducted in the field, this study was conducted in a controlled environment. Second, we used a different dependent measure. In study 1, the dependent measure was the choice between two food items. While a strength of this dependent variable was that we tested
our effect in a context that could lead to healthier behaviors, a weakness is that participants in the status-signaling condition may have favored the banana for reasons separate from its healthiness (e.g., selecting the banana may have made them look skinnier, and perhaps they were motivated to appear thin to enhance their physical attractiveness and ultimately to signal high status; Webster Jr. and Driskell Jr. 1983). We chose to use a food choice in the field study because of the important role of self-control in food selection and the growing obesity epidemic in the United States (Smith and Smith 2016). Nevertheless, we used a non-food product as the key dependent variable of interest in study 2 to provide stronger direct evidence of hypothesis 1a.

Third, instead of priming a desire to signal high status with a flyer, we gave participants a hypothetical scenario in which they were with two individuals in their life by whom they wanted to be perceived as a high-status person. Compared to the first study, this design is more consistent with how status-signaling motivations are generally activated in consumers, in that such motivations are often context-dependent on a consumer’s desire to signal to a specific individual. Participants had the option of sharing one of two videos (self-control signaling vs. non-signaling) with these two individuals. We expected that those who were motivated to signal high status would be more willing to select the self-control signaling video. To motivate participants to answer truthfully and accurately to their preferences, this study was incentive compatible. We told participants that they would be given the link to the video clip that they preferred. This allowed them to keep the video and access it freely in the future. Finally, we preregistered the design, hypotheses, and exclusion criteria at osf.io/n3xru.
Method

Participants and design. We recruited 200 participants to complete this survey online for a small monetary compensation using TurkPrime (38% female, $M_{age} = 35.77, SD = 10.97$). All participants passed the exclusion criteria. The study employed a 2-cell (desire to signal high status vs. control) design whereby preference for the self-control signaling video clip over the entertaining video clip served as the key dependent variable of interest.

Procedure. Participants first read that the study involved a scenario on video preferences. All participants read a short story in which they were sitting at home with two people – a colleague and a friend – and that they were all browsing the internet. Participants in the high status-signaling condition imagined that these two individuals were people in their lives to whom they wanted to appear to be a high-status, well-respected person. Those in the control condition imagined being with two people but did not imagine two people to whom they wished to convey high status. Our goal with this design was that by imagining real people in their lives around whom they were concerned about appearing respected and admired, their product choice would align with their desired signal relative to controls.

In the hypothetical scenario, the participants and these two people were all sharing videos with one another on their computer. They had two clips to choose from to share with these individuals:

Relaxing video clip: This video clip involves a short, enjoyable relaxation task. This video clip is sure to help you indulge in relaxation and bring out the relaxing side of your energy
that you’ve always had. This video clip is only available to those who value indulging in relaxation!

**Self-control clip:** This video clip involves a few cognitive tricks to highlight your disciplined side. This video is sure to be useful to you, and help you bring out your disciplined side. This video clip is only available to those who value self-control and self-discipline!

We strategically selected these two videos. Extant research suggests that researchers can weaken the likelihood of demand effects by offering participants two ways to engage in seemingly appropriate behaviors through their choice (Zizzo 2010). For this reason, the non-self-control signaling product was a relaxation video clip. Since the self-control video clip could cue that the participant had self-control while the relaxation video clip would cue that the participant had a relaxing personality, both products allowed the participant to convey a desirable signal about themselves. By offering the participants two products that they believed could signal a desirable attribute, we weakened the possibility of the demand effect of the participant merely selecting the product that they perceived to be more appropriate in public contexts.

We then asked participants which video they would prefer to show to their friends. We also told them that both of the videos were free for them to access on the internet and that we would share the link of the clip that they preferred later in the survey so that they could refer back to it in the future. In this way, the study was incentive compatible and involved receiving a

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7 We included a pretest of these items supporting this claim in the web appendix. The pretest also further validated that the consumers had a similar willingness to pay for these products absent price information.
real product. Participants reported their preference using a 6-point scale (1 = relaxing video clip; 6 = self-controlled video clip).

Afterward, participants watched the video clip that they had preferred. That is, if the participant reported 1 to 3 on the scale, they watched the relaxation video clip. If they reported 4 to 6, they watched the self-control video clip. We gave them the video link to keep. Each video clip was approximately 1.5 minutes long. As a manipulation check, participants reported the extent that they agreed with two statements: that they had been motivated to distinguish themselves as a high-status individual and that they had been motivated to be seen as a high-status individual (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .90$). After providing these responses, we gave participants the links to their preferred video, asked participants to report standard demographic questions, and then thanked and debriefed the participants.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA on desire to signal high status revealed the expected main effect. Participants who were primed to signal high status were more likely than control participants to report having felt more motivated to signal high status ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.93$ vs. $M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.47$; $F(1, 198) = 12.79, p < .001$, $h_p^2 = .06$). Additionally, when asked which product would signal to their colleague and friend that they are a person who values high self-control, they favored the self-control video over the relaxing, indulgent video ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.66$ vs. mid-point; $t(199) = 12.79, p < .001$, $d = .83$).
Hypothesis testing. A one-way ANOVA on the effect of the status condition on video preference revealed a significant main effect ($F(1, 198) = 8.70, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .04$; see Figure 1). As we predicted, participants who were motivated to signal high status ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.61$) preferred the self-control video more than control participants ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.88$). Additional exploratory analyses found that the mean of those in the control condition was not significantly different from the mid-point of the scale ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.88$ vs. mid-point; $t(99) = .53, p = .49$), suggesting that these participants valued the two products equally. However, those in the desire to signal high status condition had a preference for the self-control video ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.61$ vs. mid-point; $t(99) = 9.78, p < .01, d = .22$).

**FIGURE 2**

VIDEO PREFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF STATUS-SIGNALING

Using a real choice in a controlled setting, we found additional support for our focal hypothesis (H1a) that a desire to signal high status can increase preferences for self-control signaling products. Participants who visualized being with two real people whom they wanted to appear to as a high-status person preferred to share a video clip that they believed would convey a strong value of self-control compared to participants who were not motivated to signal high
status. Importantly, this effect is unlikely to have occurred because of price given, as participants were informed that both video clips were available for free online. After demonstrating our basic effect in the field and in a controlled environment, our goal in study 3 was to test hypothesis H1b. If a desire to signal high status enhances consumers’ desire to signal that they have high self-control, they may favor products that allow them to make self-control signaling product choices visible to others. In the following study, we highlighted the signaling aspect of our effect by allowing consumers to choose either a transparent or opaque container for self-control signaling products (healthier foods) or indulgence-signaling products (less healthy, tasty foods). In doing so, we offer important marketing implications into the packaging of self-control signaling products.

**STUDY 3: DESIRE TO SIGNAL HIGH STATUS INCREASES DISPLAY OF PRODUCTS ASSOCIATED WITH SELF-CONTROL**

If status-signaling motives underlie choices of self-control signaling products, then when people make such choices to signal status, they should prefer to make these choices observable to others (Berger and Ward 2010; Griskevicius et al. 2007; Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010; Sundie et al. 2011). On this basis, in the current study, we manipulated status-signaling desire (high, low, vs. control) and meal type (self-control related – healthy; indulgent related – unhealthy). The dependent measure was the type of container participants chose for their meal: a transparent or an opaque container. The transparent container allowed for status-signaling because the food inside the container would be observable to others. Accordingly, we expected that preferences for the transparent container for healthy meals would be significantly higher
among people with a high (vs. low or control) desire to signal status who make healthy choices. We did not expect a corresponding effect when selecting a container for unhealthy meals.

Method

Participants and design. We recruited 187 students to a behavioral laboratory to complete this study for course credit. Of these students, 38 indicated that they had completed a similar survey before, leading to a final sample size of 149 participants (52% female, $M_{age} = 22.09$ years, $SD = 5.57$).

Procedure. This study employed a 3 (status-signaling motivation: high, low, vs. control) × 2 (meal type: healthy vs. unhealthy) between-subjects design in which preference for a transparent versus an opaque container was our dependent variable of interest. Participants began the study by completing a descriptive writing task. Participants assigned to the high desire to signal status condition described a time they felt lower status, meaning, a time when they felt a lack of respect from other people. Extant research on licensing effects and compensatory consumption suggests that such an experience can make people incidentally feel lower in status, thus, stimulate a stronger desire to signal high status (Khan and Dhar 2006; Koles, Wells, and Tadajewski 2018; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Participants assigned to the low status-signaling condition instead described a time when they felt of higher status, meaning, a time when they felt well-respected by other people. Consistent with the extant literature on licensing effects and compensatory consumption, we expected that completing this task would make people incidentally feel of higher status and lead to a relatively lower desire to signal high status, as
these individuals should not feel a need to compensate for a deficient trait and therefore may feel licensed to indulge. Participants in the control condition wrote about a typical day in their lives. Participants in all conditions described the requested situation in detail, explaining what happened and how they felt.

After this task, we randomly assigned participants to a healthy meal or an unhealthy meal condition. All participants imagined that they were getting lunch with a few people whom they had just met, but we varied the meal that they had decided to purchase. Those in the healthy meal condition imagined they were purchasing lunch from a local restaurant that served healthy meals. Those in the unhealthy meal condition imagined they were purchasing lunch from a local restaurant that served unhealthy meals. All participants then described what meals they might select that featured these qualities. Participants also stated the meals that they visualized in provided written space. After participants completed this task, we showed them images of two containers, both square and of similar depth. One of the containers was transparent (i.e., a clear container) while the other was opaque (see Appendix B for stimuli). We asked participants which of the two containers they would prefer to use to carry their meal (1 = opaque container, 9 = clear container). Finally, as a manipulation check for the status manipulation, participants reported the extent that the writing task made them feel of higher or lower status\(^8\) (1 = lower status, 9 = higher status). They then reported standard demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, and income).

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\(^8\) The web appendix provides further tests validating the effects of the writing task and meal scenarios on the intended manipulation.
Pretest. To verify that the participants perceived the containers to be similar except in translucence, in a pretest, participants \((N = 52)\) reported which of the two containers was better for the environment, had a better design, and made them feel better about their meal \((0 = \text{opaque container}, 1 = \text{clear container})\). Participants’ responses to these questions did not favor one container over the other \((all\ ps > .27)\). However, participants perceived the clear container to be more transparent than the opaque container \((M = .92, SD = .27 \text{ vs. equal}; t(51) = 11.34, p < .001, d = 1.56)\).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. A 3 (desire to signal status) × 2 (meal type) ANOVA on perceived status revealed only the main effect of desire to signal status \((F(2, 143) = 15.68, p < .001, h^2_p = .18)\). As we expected, participants who wrote about feeling low status reported feeling lower status than those in the control condition \((M = 4.15, SD = 2.06 \text{ vs. } M = 4.96, SD = 1.87; t(143) = -2.31, p = .02, d = -0.41)\) and those who wrote about feeling high status \((M = 6.33, SD = 1.67; t(143) = -5.55, p < .001, d = -1.17)\). Those who wrote about feeling high status also felt significantly higher status than those in the control condition \((t(143) = 3.72, p < .001, d = .78)\).

Hypothesis testing. The 3 (desire to signal status) × 2 (meal type) between-subjects ANOVA on container preference revealed only a significant interaction \((F(2, 143) = 3.67, p = .03, h^2_p = .05; \text{main effects: } ps > .12; \text{ see Figure 3})\). As we predicted, participants who had status-signaling motivations preferred the transparent container more for a healthy meal compared to an unhealthy meal \((M = 6.12, SD = 3.26 \text{ vs. } M = 3.67, SD = 2.48; t(143) = 2.65, p = .009, d = .88)\).
Container preference did not vary based on meal type for those with a low status-signaling desire ($M = 4.50, SD = 3.11$ vs. $M = 5.50, SD = 3.35$; $t(143) = -1.14, p > .25$) or for those in the control condition ($M = 4.26, SD = 3.25$ vs. $M = 3.40, SD = 3.01$; $t(143) = .98, p > .32$). Hence, participants with a desire to signal status, unlike participants with a low or no desire to signal status, preferred a transparent container for a healthy (vs. unhealthy) meal.

Furthermore, participants with a high status-signaling desire reported an increased preference for a transparent container for a healthy meal compared to those in the control condition ($t(143) = 1.90, p = .06, d = .57$) and those in the low status-signaling condition ($t(143) = 1.80, p = .07, d = .51$). We also found that participants in the low status-signaling condition, who had written about feeling of high status, preferred a transparent container more for their unhealthy meal choices compared to those in the other two conditions (vs. high status-signaling condition: $t(143) = 2.02, p = .05, d = .65$ vs. control: $t(143) = 2.23, p = .03, d = .67$).

**Figure 3**

CONTAINER PREFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF STATUS-SIGNALING DESIRE AND MEAL TYPE
Supplementary Analysis. We analyzed the written responses by participants to identify common themes in the events recollected. Responses generally had to do with the participants’ experiences of status based on group membership and their insights, knowledge, or abilities being (de)valued by others. For example, a participant that we had asked to write about a time that they felt low status (i.e., high status-signaling condition) wrote, “When I was in the fifth grade and my swim team which was relatively small combined with other teams to attend this big event, I was put on the slower relay…” Another wrote, “At a family gathering, my brother's advice was taking [sic] over my own. I believe this to have happen because of his large vocabulary and having a college degree…” A participant that we had asked to write about a time that they felt high status (i.e., low status-signaling condition) wrote, “I felt respected during my probate in which I was being brought into my fraternity. Brothers came out from all over and showed love and support and viewed me as one of their own.” Another wrote, “When I first worked part-time as a cashier at a bakery, another worker who just came in started to respect me after I taught her how to do many things. After teaching her and guiding her how to make drinks and display dishes, she started to ask me more questions than other coworkers.” Only two participants wrote about feeling high or low status due to a financial situation. Extant research has shown financial deprivation can impact meal choice (Briers and Laporte 2013); however, financial deprivation results in an effect that is opposite of what we found. This underscores the novelty of our effect.
Discussion

In sum, we manipulated the desire to signal high status and the opportunity to signal status with a healthy meal choice given that healthier food choices are associated with self-control (H1b). We found that consumers who considered themselves as lower in status, and thus, had a high desire to signal status, preferred transparent containers for healthy meals more than unhealthy meals. They also preferred transparent containers for healthy meals compared to baseline participants and participants with a low status-signaling desire, and this pattern of results did not emerge for unhealthy choices. These results thus suggest that consumers use products associated with self-control to signal status. Notably, we did not observe differences in preferences for container type among baseline participants.

We expected and found that those in the low status-signaling condition, who had written about a time that they felt highly respected and admired, were less likely than those in the status-signaling condition to select the clear container for their healthy meals. They were also equally likely as those in the control group to select the clear container for their healthy meals. We expected these results given extant literature on compensatory consumption and licensing effects (Khan and Dhar 2006; Koles et al. 2018; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Those in the low status-signaling condition were more willing to select the clear container for their unhealthy meals than controls and status-signaling participants. This result is also consistent with research on licensing effects and compensatory consumption, in which a person who feels that they already have a desirable trait feels no need to compensate and instead feels licensed to turn down opportunities.
to further advance that trait within themselves (Dunning 2007; Khan and Dhar 2006; Kouchaki and Jami 2018).

Our goal in study 4 is to provide evidence of our mediator, a need to demonstrate being goal-oriented, as underlying the effect of a desire for high status on preference for healthier options. Accordingly, in study 4, we (a) manipulated desire to signal high status as an independent variable, and (b) measured need to demonstrate that one is goal-oriented as our proposed mediator. We also tested the validity of alternative process mechanisms.

**STUDY 4: NEED TO SIGNAL BEING GOAL-ORIENTED MEDIATES THE EFFECT OF A DESIRE TO SIGNAL HIGH STATUS ON SELF-CONTROL SIGNALING APPLICATIONS**

In this study, we investigate the validity of hypothesis 2, that a desire to signal high status leads to a preference for products signaling self-control because it heightens a need to convey being goal-oriented. We randomly assigned participants to a status-signaling condition or a baseline condition. They then indicated their preference between a computer application associated with self-control or an application associated with entertainment. We expected that a

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9 An example of the effects of licensing and compensatory consumption is provided by Monin and Miller (2001). The researchers asked participants who they would choose to be a police officer: an African American candidate or a European American candidate. To appear egalitarian and unbiased, most participants in the control condition selected the African American candidate. However, participants who had just completed a questionnaire stating how anti-prejudice they are chose the European American at a greater rate. The authors concluded that these participants felt licensed to choose the European American given that they had already demonstrated that they were anti-prejudice. Similarly, in the current study, participants who had already demonstrated that they were high status were more willing to flaunt their unhealthy meal options relative to controls. That is, they may have felt licensed to do so after already having validated that they were high in social status.
desire to signal high status would increase preference for the self-control signaling product relative to the control group. Additionally, we expected the need to demonstrate being goal-oriented to mediate the effect of desire to signal high status on preference for self-control signaling products.

Method

*Participants and design.* We recruited 198 participants to complete this study online. All participants passed the exclusion criteria (42% female, $M_{age} = 34.73$, $SD = 11.81$).

*Procedure.* The experiment began with the desire to signal status manipulation. We asked each participant to imagine that they were planning on upgrading their laptop, and as they leave for the store, two friends offer to accompany them. Those in the status-signaling condition imagined that the two friends that accompanied them were two people in their life whom they wanted to appear to be a high-status person. Those in the control condition were not given this additional information about their two friends.

We then told all participants that they had selected the laptop that they wanted to purchase but learned that it came with a free application that they could choose to have preinstalled on the product. They chose between the following two different options:

*SCAnonymous:* is a simple, free app that helps you focus by letting you block websites or anything else on the internet (such as mail servers) as you see fit. It will help you accomplish distraction-free focus sessions for whatever task you need to accomplish.
**WatchIt**: is a simple, free movie streaming app that will allow you to view thousands of movies right from your TV. In this immense movie collection, you are sure to find something that you like. This app will keep you entertained for hours.

We informed participants that the applications described were real applications with fake names and that they would receive access to the application that they selected. Participants selected one of the two options using a 2-point scale (-1 = WatchIt, 1 = SCAnonymous). To check the status manipulation, participants reported whether they had been motivated to distinguish themselves as a high-status individual and whether they had been motivated to appear as a high-status individual (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; α = .92).

Next, participants responded to a set of items aimed to examine the process mechanism underlying their product preference. We asked participants how much they had wanted to show that they were diligently pursuing long-term goals and focusing on long-term goals (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; α = .93). We also tested several competing hypotheses. It could be that those motivated to signal high status were more concerned about being embarrassed than control participants. Perhaps they assumed that they would be looked down upon for selecting the movie application instead of the self-control application. To test this alternative, we asked participants how much they had wanted to avoid feeling embarrassed (1 = not at all; 7 = a great deal). Alternatively, their product choice could have also been driven by their desire to appear competent, which has been shown to be associated with high status (Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan 2017). In this case, selecting the SCAnonymous application may signal that they are competent at achieving tasks. To address this alternative, we asked participants how much they
wanted to appear competent and how much they wanted to appear capable (1 = not at all; 7 = a great deal; \( \alpha = .89 \)). Finally, even though we told participants that the products were equal in price in that they were both free, they may have still thought that the self-control product was more expensive and therefore desired to convey wealth by selecting the self-control product. For this reason, we asked participants the extent that they had wanted to appear to be wealthy and how much they had wanted to appear rich (1 = not at all; 7 = a great deal; \( \alpha = .95 \)). We randomized the presentation order of all the mediation questions.

We also included several items about the participant’s perceptions of the applications. As in study 2, our goal was to weaken the likelihood of a demand effect by offering the participants the choice between two products that could both signal a desirable attribute. We picked the WatchIt application as the control product. We expected participants to believe that selecting the product would signal that they were fun and entertaining. By contrast, the SCAnonymous application would signal that the participant was a person relatively higher in self-control. To verify these expectations, we asked participants which application would help them appear higher in self-control and which application would help them appear to be a more fun and entertaining person (1 = WatchIt, 7 = SCAnonymous). These questions were randomized in the same section where they answer the mediation questions. After responding to these measures, participants provided demographic details, including their age, gender, and income. Finally, we debriefed and dismissed the participants.


Results and Discussion

*Manipulation checks.* As we expected, participants rated selecting the SCAnonymous application as more likely to signal self-control ($M = 5.25, SD = 2.06$ vs. mid-point; $t(197) = 8.54, p < .001, d = .61$) and the WatchIt app as more likely to signal being a fun person ($M = 2.62, SD = 2.16$ vs. mid-point; $t(197) = -8.99, p < .001, d = -.64$). Furthermore, participants in the signal high-status condition were more likely to report being motivated to signal high status than controls ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.92$ vs. $M = 2.77, SD = 1.98$; $t(196) = 36.65, p < .001, h^2_p = .20$).

*Product preference.* We coded the choice of WatchIt as “0” and the choice of the SCAnonymous as “1.” A binary logistic regression showed a positive relationship between desire to signal status and selection of the self-control application ($B = 1.16, SE = .31, Wald = 14.10, p < .001, d = .30$).

*Need to demonstrate being goal-oriented.* An ANOVA predicting the need to demonstrate being goal-oriented revealed a significant main effect ($F(1, 196) = 30.20, p < .001, h^2_p = .62$). Those in the desire to signal high-status condition ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.60$) had a stronger need to demonstrate being goal-oriented compared to the control condition ($M = 3.45, SD = 2.05$).
FIGURE 4
APPLICATION PREFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF STATUS-SIGNALING

*Mediation analysis.* We next analyzed the mediation results. The PROCESS software allowed us to enter multiple mediators and simultaneously analyze their independent effect sizes. Accordingly, we ran a mediation model (PROCESS Macro Model 4) with the desire to signal high status as the independent variable, the predicted mediator (the need to demonstrate being goal-oriented) and alternative mediators (concern for embarrassment, competence, or wealth) as the mediator, and product preference as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed that high status-signaling increased the need to demonstrate being goal-oriented relative to the control condition ($B = .72$, $SE = .13$, $t(196) = 5.50$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .13$). High status-signaling also increased the concern for embarrassment ($B = .71$, $SE = .15$, $t(196) = 4.73$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .10$), desire to appear competent ($B = .62$, $SE = .13$, $t(196) = 4.79$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .11$), and desire to signal wealth ($B = .80$, $SE = .14$, $t(196) = 5.69$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .14$).

In turn, the need to demonstrate being goal-oriented was associated with a stronger preference for the self-control application ($B = .47$, $SE = .23$, $z(196) = 2.07$, $p = .04$). The
embarrassment and wealth-signaling measures did not significantly affect the dependent measure (all ps > .28). The competence measure had a significant negative effect on the selection of the self-control application ($B = -.43$, $SE = .19$, $z(196) = -2.32$, $p = .02$). In other words, the more that participants were concerned about conveying that they were highly competent, the less likely they were to select the SCAnonymous application. When we accounted for the effect of a desire to signal competence on the dependent variable, the overall effect of a desire to signal high status on the selection of the self-control application strengthened. We confirmed the mediating effect of the need to demonstrate being goal-oriented on increased preference for the self-control application through a 5000 samples bootstrapping analysis ($IE = .34$, $SE = .18$, 95% CI = .06, .77). We also confirmed the mediating effect of the need to appear competent on increased preference for the self-control application through a 5000 samples bootstrapping analysis ($IE = -.27$, $SE = .14$, 95% CI = -61, -.06).

Discussion

Study 4 made several contributions. It replicated the earlier results in that we found that status-signaling motivations increased the preference for products that convey self-control. It also showed that the need to demonstrate being goal-oriented mediated the effect. Therefore, it provided important process evidence showing why a desire to signal status increases preference for products associated with self-control. We also found evidence that weakened alternative process explanations of a desire to address concern for embarrassment, signal competence, or wealth. The effect is best explained by a motivation to signal that one has a goal-oriented mindset.
Thus far, we showed across field, laboratory, and online studies that a desire to signal high status increases preference for products associated with self-control (studies 1-4). They do so because the desire for high status increases their need to demonstrate being goal-oriented (study 4), and being goal-oriented is signaled through self-control (pretest). Accordingly, selecting products associated with self-control can signal status to others. In line with this theorizing, the increase in preference for products associated with self-control also leads consumers who wish to signal high status to be more likely to attempt to make products signaling self-control observable to others.
STUDY 5: THE ROLE OF PRODUCT PRICE IN THE EFFECT OF STATUS-SIGNALING MOTIVES ON SELF-CONTROL

This study highlights the role of price to explain the divergence in the current research from extant work. Although extant research has shown that consumers often respond to status-signaling motivations by enhancing indulgence (Rucker and Galinsky 2008), we show that it can also enhance self-control. We propose that the answer to this inconsistency is that the effect depends on whether consumers can convey wealth by engaging in indulgence. When consumers can convey high status by signaling wealth, they will willingly engage in indulgence to meet this goal. However, we expect that when they are unable to signal wealth through their product choice yet can convey self-control through their selection, status-signaling motivations will enhance willingness to engage in self-control. In the earlier studies of the current research, we used food options, videos, and applications as the dependent measures, and we presented these options to participants as similar in price. In the current study, we allowed participants to choose between two products presented as similar or dissimilar in price. We expected to find that consistent with extant research, status-signaling consumers who chose between products that varied in price would favor the more expensive option even if it were the product that would not signal self-control. On the other hand, control participants should decrease preference for the indulgent product if it becomes more expensive given the increased cost. We preregistered the design, hypotheses, and exclusion criteria at https://osf.io/ckhjb.
Method

Participants and design. We recruited 500 participants through TurkPrime for a small compensation. We excluded seventy-eight participants for having taken a similar survey, leaving a final sample of 426 participants (48% female, $M_{age} = 32.64$ years, $SD = 10.47$). The study followed a 2 (desire to signal high status: high vs. control) × 2 (price of products: similar vs. varied) between-subjects design in which the perceived status of the chooser served as the key dependent variable.

Procedure. The experiment began with the same desire to signal status manipulation as in study 4 with one adjustment; instead of a new laptop, we told participants that they were purchasing a new tablet. They had two options from which to choose, and were given the descriptions shown below:

Londi: This tablet is very functional. It comes with many preinstalled useful apps, many of which are aimed at accomplishing goals and helping you maintain high self-control.

Monics: This tablet is very entertaining. It comes with many preinstalled entertaining apps, many of which will keep you entertained for hours.

The goal of selecting these two products was such that selecting the Londi would signal self-control while selecting the Monics would convey indulgence. Furthermore, because the Monics was a fun tablet, it would still be desirable and able to convey a different desirable attribute – having a fun and entertaining personality. We told those assigned to the similar price condition that both products were $150. We told those assigned to the varied price condition that
the Londi was $150 and that the Monics was $350. By setting the Monics as the more expensive product, the results would allow us to see if status-signaling participants were engaging in wealth-signaling or self-control signaling\(^{10}\).

Participants reported their preferred product using a 6-point scale (1 = Definitely the Monics; 6 = Definitely the Londi). To make this study incentive compatible, we told participants that several people would be selected at random to receive a voucher for a percentage off the value of a tablet like the one that they preferred. Indeed, two participants received a $50 voucher for their preferred tablet. Next, participants answered the same two questions used in study 4 to examine if the manipulation worked as intended. They also reported which product would demonstrate high self-control (1 = Definitely the Monics; 7 = Definitely the Londi). To examine whether the indulgent product would still allow the consumer to convey a positive trait about themselves, we asked participants which product would signal that they are a fun and entertaining person\(^{11}\) (1 = Definitely the Monics; 7 = Definitely the Londi). After responding to these measures, participants provided demographic details, including their age, gender, and income. Finally, we debriefed and dismissed the participants.

\(^{10}\) We did not include a condition where the self-control tablet was the more expensive option for two important reasons. First, doing so would be uninformative in highlighting whether status-signaling motivations lead consumers to favor wealth-signaling over self-control signaling. Second, doing so would equivocate the operationalization of our constructs, in that the self-control product would require heightened spending, which we equated with increased indulgence at the outset of this paper. In this case, one could argue that selecting the self-control tablet was indulgent because it involved overspending and that selecting the gaming tablet was a self-control act by engaging in saving behavior.

\(^{11}\) These two items, as well as the primary dependent variable, are reverse scaled from the manner that we presented these items to participants in the study. We did this to keep consistency in the presentation of results across all studies. This did not affect the significance of any of the results.
Manipulation checks. Participants rated the Londi as more likely to signal self-control ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.75$ vs. mid-point; $t(425) = 18.54$, $p < .001$, $d = .90$). An exploratory analysis also revealed that the Monics was seen as more likely to signal being a fun person ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.46$ vs. mid-point; $t(425) = -25.26$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.14$). Furthermore, participants in the signal high-status condition were more likely to report being motivated to signal high status than controls ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.95$ vs. $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.57$; $t(424) = 66.70$, $p < .001$, $h^2_p = .14$).

Product preference. A 2-way ANOVA revealed only the expected interaction ($F(1, 422) = 17.69$, $p < .001$, $h^2_p = .04$; all other $ps > .79$). As we predicted, participants with a status-signaling motive had a stronger preference for the self-control product than control participants when the products were equal in price ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.68$ vs. $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.71$; $F(1, 422) = 9.89$, $p = .002$, $h^2_p = .02$). When the products varied in price, however, participants with a status-signaling motive had a weaker preference for the self-control product than control participants ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.91$ vs. $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.64$; $F(1, 422) = 7.87$, $p = .005$, $h^2_p = .02$). Looked at differently, control participants had a stronger preference for the self-control product when the products varied in price than when they were similar in price ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.64$ vs. $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.71$; $F(1, 422) = 10.26$, $p < .001$, $h^2_p = .02$). Participants with a status-signaling motive, however, had a weaker preference for the self-control product when the products were similar in price than when the products varied in price ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.91$; $M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.68$; $F(1, 422) = 7.57$, $p = .006$, $h^2_p = .02$). We also reran all analyses presented while including the participant’s age and gender as covariates in supplementary analyses. All effects remained the same.
We conducted an exploratory analysis by comparing each mean to the midpoint of the scale. Those in the control condition valued the products equally when the products were equal in price, in that the mean did not differ from the mid-point of the scale ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.71$ vs. mid-point; $t(106) = .59$, $p = .56$). When the products varied in price, control participants had a stronger preference for the cheaper, self-control product than the more expensive, indulgent product ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.64$ vs. mid-point; $t(110) = 5.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.22$). These findings were reversed for participants with status-signaling motivations. These participants favored the self-control product when the options were equal in price ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.68$ vs. mid-point; $t(107) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.25$). They equally valued the products when the indulgent product was more expensive ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.75$ vs. mid-point; $t(99) = .94$, $p = .35$).
Discussion. Study 5 is important for several reasons. First, it further validates hypotheses 1a and 1b that status-signaling motivations can increase the desire to signal self-control. These results also support hypothesis 3, in that we found that the effect only occurred when status-signaling consumers are choosing between products similar in price. In this case, participants were less able to convey wealth through their product choice. Instead, they relied on their opportunity to convey that they were goal-oriented to address their status-signaling motivation. However, when the products varied in price, the effect reversed. While control participants had a stronger preference for the self-control product, those with status-signaling motivations had a weaker preference for the self-control product. That is, control participants – who originally valued both products equally when they were equally price – favored the self-control product as the indulgent option became more expensive. This finding is consistent with extant research suggesting that when consumers are not motivated to signal high status, price increases lower the attractiveness and utility of a product (Homburg, Hoyer, and Koschate 2005; Sen, Gürhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001). However, status-signaling participants had a stronger desire for the indulgent option as it became more expensive.

In sum, although the present research suggests that consumers with status-signaling motives strive to engage in self-control to signal high status, extant research and study 4 suggests that they favor indulgent spending to signal wealth and high status if given the opportunity. Notably, our findings suggest that instead of overspending to signal wealth, consumers could choose to save their money and signal high status by conveying self-control. This would allow them to accomplish their status-signaling goal while also allowing them to allocate their money to other expenses or increase their wealth. Why do consumers favor conveying wealth instead of self-control to meet their status-signaling goals?
We proffer that when given the opportunity to engage in wealth-signaling by spending versus self-control signaling by saving, status-signaling consumers favor conveying wealth because they over focus on how selecting the expensive product would address their status-signaling desires. This may occur because extant research suggesting that a consumer’s attention is drawn to expensive (vs. less expensive) luxury options when such products are available (Audrin et al. 2018). This may lead status-signaling consumers to consider how acquiring the expensive (vs. less expensive) product would help them reach their status-signaling goals by conveying wealth, instead of considering how acquiring the less expensive product would help them reach their status-signaling goals by conveying self-control.

Suppose a consumer is reminded that saving behavior can signal self-control. In this case, this reminder could lead status-signaling consumers to focus on how purchasing a less expensive product could help them reach their status-signaling goal. For this reason, we hypothesized that if consumers are reminded that saving behavior signals self-control, status-signaling motivations may enhance their willingness to save relative to control participants. Such a finding would be important as it would imply that consumers may be encouraged to respond to status-signaling motivations by engaging in self-control, even if that means saving their money. We tested this hypothesis (H4) next.
STUDY 6: WHEN STATUS-SIGNALING MOTIVES INCREASES SELF-CONTROL IN SPENDING BEHAVIOR COMPARED TO CONTROLS

In this study, we randomly assigned participants to a status-signaling condition or a baseline condition. Afterward, we reminded half the participants that saving behavior signals self-control. We gave the other half an alternative reminder. They all then indicated their preference between an expensive product or a less expensive product. Our dependent variable was their willingness to engage in self-control by selecting the less expensive product with a lower price-per-attribute ratio over a more expensive product with a higher price-per-attribute ratio. We expected that participants who were motivated to signal status but who we reminded that saving behavior could signal self-control would have a stronger preference for the less expensive product than controls. Such a finding would reverse the effect found in extant literature and study 4. However, this effect should not occur for those who did not consider how saving behavior signals self-control.

Method

Participants and design. We recruited 300 participants through TurkPrime for a small compensation. Three-hundred and five ended up completing the survey. All participants met the exclusion criteria (39% female, $M_{age} = 34.80$ years, $SD = 10.59$). The study followed a 2 (desire to signal high status: high vs. control) $\times$ 2 (reminder: self-control vs. wealth) between-subjects design. The cell phone preferred was the key dependent variable of interest.
Procedure. Participants began the study by watching a fabricated video commercial. We created and pretested two commercials, one of which was designed to promote a desire to signal high status. A pretest \((N = 123)\) verified that status-signaling video increased a desire to signal high status relative to the control video. Those that watched the high-status video were more likely to report a higher motivation to signal high status than control participants \((M = 4.20, SD = 1.79 \text{ vs. } M = 3.46, SD = 1.71; t(121) = 2.16, p = .20, \ h_p^2 = .04)\).

We randomly assigned half of the participants to watch the status-signaling video, while the other half watched the control video. In each commercial, the participants viewed scenes from San Francisco. The conditions varied only in the text overlaid on the screen. Those in the status-signaling condition read the following:

*If only you were more respected. More valued, celebrated, and accomplished. By society, by peers, by superiors. If only they would see you as someone with status. If only. That’s why we’re here. Gabra — clothing for those who are seeking respect.*

Those in the control condition read the following:


After watching the commercials, participants proceeded to an ostensibly separate study on interpersonal perception. This portion of the study served as the self-control reminder.
moderator. Half of the participants completed the self-control reminder task, while the rest of the participants completed a different reminder task on wealth signals. Specifically, those who were in the self-control reminder condition were shown two hats. One was $20 and the other was $150. We asked participants which hat a person would choose if they were high in self-control. The goal of this design was to make the idea that saving signals self-control salient for the participant. The results would imply whether encouraging consumers to consciously hold such thoughts in their minds when status-signaling motivations are active encourage people to save.

Those in the wealth reminder condition viewed the same two hats but instead reported which hat a wealthy person would choose. This manipulation allowed us to hold constant that all participants were given a reminder of a way to signal a positive trait (self-control or wealth). In doing so, we did not have a true control in this study analogous to that used in the prior study and extant research, in that all participants were given a reminder before making their product selection. This was intentional in that it allowed us to establish whether reminders of how others may interpret a person’s spending behaviors reinforce saving and spending behavior by drawing their attention to these positive signaling capacities. Thus, we did not hypothesize whether a wealth reminder would replicate the same effect found in extant research and study 5. Rather, we hypothesized that when given a reminder that saving signals self-control, consumers with status-signaling motivations should have a stronger preference for less expensive products relative to those without status-signaling motivations (H4).

After completing the manipulation, participants proceeded to a final study on product choice. They imagined that they had been planning to upgrade their phone. As they left for the store, a colleague and friend offered to accompany them. At the store, they narrowed their choices to two phones: the Londi and the Monics. The Londi, which was $680, had a 14-hour
battery life, a triple-lens 12 MP rear camera, and 15 GB in storage. The Monics, which was $880, had a 16-hour battery life, a triple-lens 12 MP rear camera, and 16 GB in storage (see Appendix C). The Londi was the cheaper, less aesthetically pleasing phone, but it offered a higher per dollar return for each hour of battery life and gigabyte cheaper. Specifically, this product costs $49 per battery hour and $45 per gigabyte. The Monics, on the other hand, costs $55 per battery hour and $55 per gigabyte. Hence, choosing between these two products would allow participants to demonstrate self-control by selecting the less expensive, higher-value product over the more aesthetically pleasing, yet more expensive and lower-value product. As in the earlier studies, we attempted to weaken the likelihood of demand effects by making each product desirable in different ways. The Londi would allow the consumer to save their money and receive a higher return per dollar spent, but the Monics was a more aesthetically pleasing product than the Londi.

Participants chose between the two products using a dichotomous scale (-1 = Monics; 1 = Londi) and a continuous scale (1 = Monics; 6 = Londi). This choice was incentive compatible, in that we told them that several participants would be selected to receive money toward a phone similar to the product that they selected in this task. Indeed, we selected two participants to receive funding for their preferred product. Afterward, we offered the participants a manipulation check by asking them which product someone who had high self-control would be more likely to have. This question allowed us to verify that they indeed viewed selecting the Londi as a signal of self-control rather than selecting the Monics. They responded using a 7-point scale (1 = Monics; 7 = Londi). Finally, participants reported standard demographic questions (gender, country, income, education, and age). Then, we dismissed them from the study.
Results

*Manipulation checks.* Participants rated the Londi as more likely to signal self-control (\(M = 4.56, SD = 1.75\) vs. mid-point; \(t(304) = 4.65, p < .001, d = .32\)).

*Product preference.* A 2-way ANOVA revealed only the expected interaction\(^\text{12}\) (\(F(1, 300) = 5.77, p < .012, h_p^2 = .02;\) all other \(ps > .10\)). As we predicted, when we reminded participants that saving behavior signals self-control, status-signaling consumers had a stronger preference for the cheaper phone than control participants (\(F(1, 300) = 4.27, p < .04, h_p^2 = .01\)). When we did not remind participants that saving behavior signals self-control, but instead reminded them that spending behavior signals wealth, status-signaling participants were directionally more likely to favor the expensive phone relative to controls, but this effect was not significant (\(F(1, 300) = 1.77, p = .18\)). Looked at differently, status-signaling participants had a stronger preference for the self-control product when we reminded them that saving signals self-control than when they were reminded that spending signals wealth (\(F(1, 300) = 8.16, p < .001, h_p^2 = .03\)). This effect was not present for control participants (\(F(1, 300) = .30, p = .58\)).

The results for the continuous dependent measure were overall consistent with those of the dichotomous measure (\(F(1, 301) = 3.45, p = .06, h_p^2 = .01\)). When we reminded participants that saving behavior signals self-control, status-signaling consumers had a stronger preference for the cheaper phone than control participants (\(F(1, 301) = 4.14, p = .04, h_p^2 = .01\)). When we did not remind participants that saving behavior signals self-control, but instead reminded them that spending behavior signals wealth, status-signaling participants were directionally more

\(^{12}\) One participant skipped the dependent measure.
likely to favor the expensive phone relative to controls, but this effect was not significant ($F(1, 301) = .36, p = .55$). The simple effects for those in the self-control reminder and the wealth reminder conditions were not significant for this measure ($ps > .10$).

**FIGURE 7 STUDY 6**

PHONE PREFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF STATUS DESIRE AND REMINDER

![Graph showing phone preference as a function of status desire and reminder](image)

*Discussion.* Study 6 showed that when reminded that saving behavior signals self-control, status-signaling participants had a stronger preference for the cheaper product than control participants (H4). This effect is notable because it effectively reversed the effect found in extant literature that has consistently shown that status-signaling consumers are more likely to spend indulgently than consumers without such motivations. Furthermore, these findings suggest that when faced with products that differ in price, consumers do not automatically think about how saving behavior signals self-control and may focus on their ability to convey wealth by selecting the more expensive option. A simple reminder that saving behavior signals self-control can encourage status-signaling consumers to save.
When we reminded participants that spending behavior can signal wealth, status-signaling participants were directionally more likely to favor the expensive phone relative to controls, but this effect was not significant. Given that extant literature has not given consumers reminders that overspending signals wealth in the published work showing that status-signaling motivations enhance indulgent spending, it may be that such reminders lead consumers to reactance (Fitzsimons 2004; Laran, Dalton, and Andrade 2011; Levav and Zhu 2009). That is, over-focusing on how spending signals wealth dampens the effect of status-signaling motivations on indulgence. We leave this finding open for scholars to address in future research.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Six studies and several pretests examined the link between a desire to signal high status on preference for products associated with self-control. We found that a desire to signal high status predicted the choice of self-control signaling products in field (study 1) and controlled settings (study 2). A desire to signal high status also increased the desire to make self-control signaling products visibly observable (study 3). The need to signal that one is goal-oriented mediated this link (study 4). While these studies found that status-signaling motivations strengthened preferences for self-control signaling products, this effect weakened when consumers had an alternative means to signal high status by signaling their wealth (study 5). However, even when faced with the ability to signal wealth by purchasing more expensive product options over less expensive product options, status-signaling consumers could be motivated to save their money more than control participants if they recalled that saving behavior can signal self-control (study 6).
This research provides several relevant theoretical insights. First, we advance theoretical understanding of how consumers respond to status-signaling motivations. Before this work, extant research suggested that consumers respond to status-signaling motivations primarily by engaging in indulgence, in that they are more willing to spend indulgently to purchase wealth-signaling products. The current research suggests that status-signaling motivations only lead to indulgence in certain contexts, one of which is when they can signal wealth by overspending. Outside of this context, consumers respond to status-signaling motivations by attempting to engage in self-control. With this finding, we add nuance to our understanding of the effects of status-signaling motivations on a consumer’s indulgence and overall welfare. Furthermore, we show how the underlying mental association between status and being goal-oriented may make consumers respond to status-signaling motivations by saving instead of spending when they are reminded that saving behavior signals self-control. By doing so, we reverse the effect of status-signaling motivations on spending that has been found in extant research.

This research also extends upon extant literature by considering how consumers respond to status-signaling motivations outside of wealth-signaling contexts. While a large amount of work has focused on the effect that status-signaling behavior has on their motivation to convey wealth and the subsequent effects on their willingness to spend, we studied what occurs when the products that consumers are choosing between are relatively homogenous in price and unable to function as signals of wealth. Our findings demonstrate that the way that consumers respond to status-signaling motivations depends on whether they can convey wealth or not. By doing so,
this work highlights the importance of considering how behavioral responses to status-signaling motivations vary based on which attributes a consumer can and cannot signal in a given context.

Practical Implications and Future Research

This research also provides important practical implications. From a consumer welfare perspective, this research gives consumers a new tool to help them motivate them to engage in self-control. Given that self-control positively predicts long-term achievements such as effective school performance, career success, financial security, high income, and savings (Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth and Carlson 2013; Feldmann, Martinez-Pons, and Shaha 1995; Moffitt et al. 2011; Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone 2004), understanding cognitive processes that encourage consumers to engage in self-control may improve a consumer’s welfare from a variety of standpoints. We offer that status-signaling motivations lead to a desire to signal that one is goal-oriented, and that consumers perceive a person’s level of self-control as a signal of how goal-oriented they are. On this basis, consumers may be more motivated to engage in self-control when status-signaling goals are activated. Studies 1-5 suggest that active status-signaling motivations can encourage consumers to engage in self-control. Considering the importance of their social standing may encourage them to make healthier choices and invest in products that can help them succeed academically and in their careers. Furthermore, considering how saving behavior signals self-control can also help them manage their desires to overspend when status-signaling motivations are activated.

This work is useful from a managerial standpoint as well. Currently, many marketers who sell conspicuous luxury products use status appeals in their advertisements to motivate
Our research opens several new areas for future research. Given that we show how consumers may have multiple methods (i.e., signaling wealth, signaling self-control) to signal high status which impact their product choices, scholars may continue to examine how competing status-signaling motivations affect a consumer’s behavior. For example, research suggests that competence is also associated with high status (Bellezza et al. 2017). How do status-signaling consumers respond when they can signal self-control or competence, but not both? Furthermore, scholars may find additional ways that consumers respond to status-signaling desires when they are unable to signal wealth, competence, nor self-control. How might status-signaling desires affect their preferences in the product’s color, sound (e.g., the sound of a Harley motorcycle), or density? Inquisitions into how status-signaling behaviors impact these product aspects as well could help guide marketers and consumers.

Our research also opens a new area of study on the self-control relevant effects of feeling as if one has achieved high status compared to the feeling that one needs to compensate for a
lack of status. Study 3 showed that consumers are more willing to flaunt self-control signaling products when they consider how they are lower status than others, an effect that did not occur when consumers felt that they had already attained high status. Scholars may wish to further examine when consumers who feel that they have attained high status are more (vs. less) willing to engage in status-signaling behavior.

Finally, scholars may wish to study how reminders of how others interpret one’s spending behavior impact product choice. In study 6, we found that when given reminders that saving behavior signals self-control, status-signaling consumers were more willing to select a less expensive product than control participants. A reminder, however, that spending behavior signals wealth did not make status-signaling consumers more willing than control participants to purchase the more expensive product suggests that such reminders may make status-signaling consumers somewhat reactant to engage in status-signaling. Future research may wish to examine how wealth-signaling reminders impact a consumer’s psychology and subsequent product preferences.
APPENDIX A

STUDY 1 DESIRE FOR HIGH-STATUS FLYER

Wanting high status? Craving respect? Desiring to be more admired than peers?

Get started with a snack!

Rutgers University

STUDY 1 CONTROL FLYER

It’s just another day.

Get started with a snack!

Rutgers University
APPENDIX B

STUDY 3 WRITING PROMPT USED TO MANIPULATE STATUS

High (Low) Desire to Signal Status Condition

Please recall a particular incident in which you felt low [high] status, as in a lack of respect from other people [respected by other people]. By a lack of respect [respected], we mean a situation in which you felt that someone looked up to others more than they looked up to you [someone looked up to you more than they looked up to others]. This situation may be one in which they said or did something that made you think that they saw you as a low [high] status individual.

Please describe this situation in detail - what happened, how you felt, etc.

STUDY 3 STIMULI USED AS CONTAINER CHOICES FOR MEAL
APPENDIX C

STUDY 6 STIMULI USED FOR PRODUCT CHOICES

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