Putting on a Show or Showing My True Self?

When and Why Consumers Signal Accurate versus Enhanced Self-View Information

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved April 2016 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2016

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the conditions under which people use consumption choices to signal accurate versus enhanced information about themselves to others. Across five studies, I demonstrate that activating a self-verification, as opposed to self-enhancement, motive leads consumers to choose products that signal accurate information about a self-view, even when this view is negative. I replicate this finding across several self-view domains, including physical attractiveness, power, and global self-esteem. However, I find that this effect is attenuated when consumers have a high fear of negative social evaluation. My findings suggest that this type of consumption, in which choice is driven by the desire to be seen accurately (vs. positively), can explain abundant real-world behavior; contradicting the notion that consumers choose products primarily for self-enhancement.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife Noemi, whose support, patience, and encouragement

during these years was an integral part of my successful completion of this program.

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INTRODUCTION

"Dressed like this, in the ugliest clothes I could muster, I set off for the estate where Anne Lisbet lived…[The] filthy, ugly clothes I was wearing, the drooping head, all of this was for her benefit, so that she would understand (Knausgaard 2009)."

In the above passage, the character who has been feeling sorry for himself for some time, responds to his girlfriend's apparent obliviousness by wearing the most unattractive clothing he can find. His hope is that his mere appearance will bring her to better understand what he is going through. Indeed, it often appears that consumers acquire and display products in an effort to accurately signal something about themselves to others, even when doing so makes others see them in a less positive light. For instance, the *People of Walmart* website features low socioeconomic status individuals who seem to intentionally wear unflattering clothes, hairdos, and makeup. Additionally, people who suffer from depression or low self-esteem may accurately signal how they feel about themselves by wearing clothes and listening to music associated with negative subcultural identities such as "Goth." This behavior is understandable given recent research showing that people, especially those who view themselves negatively, often feel misunderstood and receive inadequate social support (Marigold et al. 2014). However, it also contradicts the popular notion that consumers primarily purchase products in order signal highly positive information about themselves to others (e.g. Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2006). On the contrary, sometimes consumers strategically display products that signal accurate information regarding their traits and abilities. What accounts for this behavior?

My research investigates this question by looking at the process of self-verification (Swann 1983). According to self-verification theory, people sometimes seek to be known and understood by others in a manner that is consistent with how they see themselves. Importantly, studies find that self-verification motives are situationally activated and can be stronger predictors of behavior than self-enhancement motives under certain circumstances (Kraus and Chen 2009; Kwang and Swann 2010). Drawing on these findings, I demonstrate that consumers with an active self-verification motive increasingly prefer to acquire and display products that signal accurate, as opposed to positive, information about themselves to others, even in the domain of negative self-views. On the other hand, I show that when consumers have an active self-enhancement motive, they prefer products that signal positive information about themselves, regardless of underlying self-views of traits and abilities.

I make several contributions to the literature. First, I provide a more nuanced understanding of consumer signaling behavior by showing that consumers not only acquire and display products in order to signal positive information about themselves to others, but also to signal accurate information. In demonstrating this phenomenon, I also add to a growing literature exploring when consumers prefer identity-consistent, as opposed to identity-enhancing products. Research in this area has typically found that factors unrelated to a person's underlying self-view, such as increased focus on societal expectations (Rucker, Hu, and Galinsky 2014) or product performance (Rucker and Galinsky 2009) drive identity-consistent consumption preferences (e.g. low power consumers preference for low, as opposed to high, status products). In contrast, my research is the first to show that identity-consistent consumption preferences are driven

by perceptions that products accurately signal information about traits and abilities to others. Furthermore, I contribute to the self-verification literature itself. While the research in this area has largely focused on how self-verification motives drive feedback preferences and partner selection behavior, little research to date has explored whether these motives influence how people signal information about themselves to others, for example through their consumption choices. Finally, I demonstrate a trait-based boundary condition of self-verification motives by showing that consumers with negative self-views only prefer products that signal accurate information about themselves when they have a low, as opposed to high, fear of negative social evaluation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

*Competing Motives: Self-Verification versus Self-Enhancement*

People strive to create to maintain a positive view of who they are (Sedikides 1993). For instance, people tend to rate themselves as above average on a variety of traits and abilities (e.g. Alicke 1985), attribute positive outcomes to the self and negative outcomes to external sources (Blaine and Crocker 1993), engage in positive self-presentation (Baumeister 1982), and avoid self-threatening information and situations (Higgins 1987). The motive to self-enhance often leads people to misrepresent their actual traits and abilities. For example, people tend to have exaggerated perceptions of their control over outcomes (Taylor and Brown 1988). Based on the plethora of evidence that people want to achieve a positive self-image, several scholars have argued that self-enhancement is a universal human motivation (e.g. Taylor and Brown 1988; Sedikides 1993).

In contrast, proponents of self-verification theory (Swann 1983) have argued that people are not singularly motivated by self-enhancement goals. Instead, they have asserted that people also have a fundamental desire to be known and understood by others, even in domains of self-perceived flaws and shortcomings. For instance, several studies have demonstrated that people prefer interaction partners who give them accurate, as opposed to overly favorable evaluations of their skills and abilities in several self-view-related domains (e.g. physical attractiveness, intelligence, and athletic ability), even when these self-views are negative (Gómez et al. 2009; Hixon and Swann 1993; Kraus and Chen 2009; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 1992; Swann, Pelham, and Krull 1989;

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Swann et al. 1990; Swann et al. 1992). Other research has found that people who view themselves negatively prefer social support that validates negative feelings, as opposed to social support that positively reframes what they are experiencing (Marigold et al. 2014).

Research suggests two reasons why people sometimes prioritize self-verification over self-enhancement. First, receiving social confirmation of a self-view provides people with a sense of coherence about their world and themselves (Swann et al. 2003). Even negative self-views may serve as important sources of self-knowledge that must be maintained, not enhanced. For instance, a college student who views him- or herself as being bad at math may rely on this self-view to help him or her choose an appropriate major. Next, because people are motivated to engage in smooth interpersonal interactions, receiving social confirmation of a self-view also lets them know whether or not they are appropriately managing social expectations of their skills and abilities (Baumgardner and Brownlee 1987; Baumeister, Hamilton, and Tice 1985). For both of these reasons, people with an active self-verification motive strive to make others know and understand them better.

When are people most likely to self-verify, as opposed to self-enhance? Although research suggests that people typically engage in self-enhancement instead of self-verification (e.g. Baumeister 1989; Kraus and Chen 2009; Sedikides 1993), several situational factors can activate a strong self-verification motive. First, people are more likely to prefer accurate social feedback over highly favorable feedback about themselves when they have an opportunity to engage in self-reflection and access an underlying self-view (Hixon and Swann 1993). Second, self-verification motives are stronger when people prioritize seeking information that is diagnostic about who they are, as opposed to

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information that simply makes them feel good about themselves (Kwang and Swann 2010). Third, individuals are more likely to have an active self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive when they are among socially close, as opposed to socially distant, others. For instance, people prefer to receive self-confirming social evaluations from in-group, as opposed to out-group, members (Chen, Chen, and Shaw 2004; Gómez et al. 2009), significant others, as opposed to acquaintances (Kraus and Chen 2009), and long-term, as opposed to short-term relationship partners (Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon 1994). One explanation for these findings is that, because interactions with socially close others are more frequent and consequential, the views and opinions of these individuals are particularly important sources of self-knowledge. Thus, being viewed or treated by a close other in a manner that *not* consistent with a person's self-view can be particularly threatening to a person's system of self-knowledge (Swann et al. 1994).

In the following section, I briefly discuss the idea that consumers use products to signal information to others and review existing findings from this literature, which tend to support a view that self-enhancement motives drive signaling behavior. Later, I argue for the role of self-verification motives in signaling behavior and make predictions regarding their important influence on consumer choice.

*Using Products as Signals and Self-Enhancement*

Beyond their functional value, products can have symbolic meanings that communicate something about the person who owns them (Levy 1959). Thus, when making choices, consumers often consider how a product's symbolism influences what other people infer about who they are (e.g. their traits and abilities). For example, a pair of designer sunglasses may send a signal that the wearer has good taste in fashion or a lot

of discretionary income. Research has established that self-enhancement motives can drive consumer preferences for products that signal highly positive information about the self (Belk 1988; Berger and Health 2007; 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005). For instance, there is extensive evidence that people engage in conspicuous consumption of luxury products in order to signal social status and power (Belk 1985; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; 2009; Veblen 1899), attract mates and deter rivals (Griskevicius et al. 2007), and maintain or enhance self-esteem (Sivanathan and Pettit 2010). Consumers use products to signal other positive traits as well. For instance, they may signal that they are intelligent by acquiring books, magazines, or writing instruments (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009) or that they are "cool" by drinking alcohol (Berger and Rand 2008). Not only do self-enhancement motives lead consumers to choose products that signal positive information about themselves, they also lead them to avoid products associated with negative or undesirable information. For instance, men eschew products that signal feminine traits (White and Dahl 2006). Consumers also strive to use products that signal unique and differentiated social identities in order to avoid being seen as "conformists" (Berger and Heath 2007).

Further, research suggests that consumers prefer to be seen positively, rather than accurately by others (Landon 1974). For instance, Berger and Health (2007) showed that consumers use products that diverge from an in-group identity in order to signal something different or unique about themselves. Additionally, a large body of literature finds that people engage in compensatory consumption, in which they respond to negative self-threats by purchasing products that signal a positive identity (e.g. Rucker and Galinsky; Mandel et al. 2016). Also supporting this assertion, Ordabayeva and

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Chandon (2011) found that even bottom-tier consumers engaged in status-related consumption in order to increase their social position relative to others. In sum, prior research suggests that self-enhancement motives underlie consumer signaling behavior. Further, these findings indicate that the desire to signal positive information outweighs the desire to signal accurate information. In the next section, I investigate the possibility that consumers with an active self-verification motive have an increased need to acquire and display products that signal accurate information about themselves.

*Self-Verification and Signaling Accurate Self-View Information*

In this section, I argue that having an active self-verification, as opposed to self-enhancement, motive will drive consumers to prefer products that signal accurate, as opposed to positive, information about themselves, even in the domain of negative self-views. There are two reasons to believe this assertion. First, as previously discussed, self-verification motives increase peoples' desire to receive social confirmation of self-views, which in turn increases their need to feel that others know and understand them (Swann et al. 2003). Using products that signal accurate information about the self should satisfy this need by providing consumers with an increased sense of assurance that others see them in the same way that they see themselves, without having to explicitly engage in social interactions or elicit direct interpersonal feedback. Second, the need to feel known and understood should also lead people to increasingly want to manage social expectations of their actual skills and abilities. For instance, Cable and Kay (2012) found that job applicants who scored high on an individual difference score of self-verification were more open and honest about their strengths *and* weaknesses during their job interviews. Therefore, I using products that signal accurate information should also give

consumers increased confidence that they are correctly managing the expectations of others, even before they engage in interpersonal interaction.

Support for the possibility that consumers will signal with products in order to satisfy a self-verification motive comes from research on behavioral self-consistency. Studies in this area argue that consumers make product choices that are consistent with their salient self-views in order to maintain the coherence and structure of those self-views (Coleman and Williams 2013; Oyserman 2009). For instance, Coleman and Williams (2013) found that consumers preferred products that elicited emotions consistent with a salient social identity, even when these emotions were negative (e.g. anger, sadness, and disgust). Therefore, it follows that when consumers choose products, they should also be concerned about the coherence of the information that these products signal in relation to their self-views.

In sum, I posit that activating a self-verification motive will influence consumers to prefer products that signal accurate information about themselves to others, even in the domain of negative self-views. For comparison purposes and consistent with previous research (Baumeister 1989; Kraus and Chen 2009; Sedikides 1993), I consider the relevant baseline condition to be one where consumers have a self-enhancement motive, as prior research has found that people are more practiced at making positive social impressions, as opposed to always being honest with others about themselves, which can be more cognitively taxing (Farrow et al. 2015; Swann et al. 1990). I expect that among consumers with an active self-enhancement motive, underlying self-views will not influence product preferences, as individuals in these conditions will be more concerned with acquiring a product that signal positive information, as opposed to information that

accurately reflects a self-view. Also of note, I do not predict a pattern that is entirely consistent with *compensatory* self-enhancement, which occurs when individuals with a negative self-view are much more motivated to self-enhance than individuals with a positive self-view, for instance due to a greater need to engage in symbolic self-completion (see Mandel et al. 2016 for a review). This is because the majority of my studies investigate how self-verification versus self-enhancement motives influence consumption responses to chronic or trait-based self-views, which are stable views developed over an individual's lifetime (Ehrlinger and Dunning 2003). As a result, in most of my studies, participants do not experience the type of explicit self-threat that creates a self-discrepancy, which can in turn lead to compensatory consumption. Therefore, my first prediction is as follows:

**H1:** There will be an interactive effect of self-views and motive on product preference. Consumers with an active self-verification motive will prefer products that are consistent with a self-view, such that consumers with a negative (vs. positive) self-view will exhibit a greater preference for products that signal negative information over products that signal positive information. Among participants with an active self-enhancement motive, no such relationship will exist.

As previously noted, people with an active self-verification motive strive to maintain a coherent view of themselves (Swann et al. 2003). This desire should lead people to want to signal accurate information about who they are, as doing so will make them feel that they are better known and understood by others. As a result, during product evaluation, people with a self-verification motive should be motivated to choose a

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product that signals accurate information about themselves to others. Consequently, they should draw on underlying self-views to determine the extent to which a product signals accurate information about who they are and, subsequently, base their choice on these perceptions. As an example, I posit that when a self-verification motive is active, a consumer with a more negative self-view will draw on this view to determine the extent to which a product signals accurate (e.g. negative) information to others. As a result, the consumer will perceive that a product with negative, as opposed to positive, symbolic associations signals more accurate information about themselves, increasing his or her preference for this product. In contrast, when consumers have a self-enhancement motive, they will likely *not* use underlying self-views when evaluating products. Instead, research indicates that consumers with a self-enhancement motive strive to maintain a highly positive view themselves (Sedikides 1993; Taylor and Brown 1988). As a consequence, consumers with a self-enhancement motive will be less sensitive to whether or not a product signals accurate information about an underlying self-view. Instead, they should be more likely attend to whether or not a product signals positive information to others.

The notion that self-views can guide how consumers evaluate products is supported by several studies examining the influence of salient identities on consumer behavior. These studies have found that activating salient identities can influence mental processes and behavior, such that consumers act and think in ways that are consistent with the salient identity (Oyserman 2009). For instance, Mercurio and Forehand (2011) demonstrated that increasing the salience of an identity led people to be more sensitive to identity-relevant cues during the encoding a retrieval of advertising information. In addition, studies find that identity salience increases positive evaluations of product

stimuli that is identity-consistent (Forehand and Desphande 2001). Therefore, it follows

that the desire to signal accurate information, as the result of an active self-verification

motive, should increase the role of self-views in consumer determinations of a product's

signaling accuracy.

> **H2:** When a self-verification motive is active, perceptions that a product
>
> accurately signals an underlying self-view will increase preference for that
>
> product. More specifically, activating a self-verification, as opposed to
>
> self-enhancement, motive will lead consumers with a negative (vs.
>
> positive) self-view to perceive that a product with negative (vs. positive)
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> symbolic associations signals accurate information about themselves to
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> others. In turn, increased perceptions that this products signals accurate
>
> information will lead to increased preference for the product.

*Fear of Negative Evaluation as a Boundary Condition of Self-Verification*

In the previous sections, I have suggested that activating a self-verification motive

will lead consumers to choose products that signal accurate information about a self-

view, even if this view is negative. However, how might this behavior change among

consumers who are averse to negative social evaluations? Specifically, people experience

varying degrees of social anxiety (Clark and Wells 1995; Rapee and Heimberg 1997).

Individuals with high social anxiety are particularly sensitive to the social evaluations of

others. As a result, socially anxious individuals tend to exaggerate the importance of even

mildly negative social feedback (Stopa and Clark 2001). For instance, during a

conversation they may be disconcerted by an awkward silence or a questioning glance, as

they perceive this to reflect their poor social acumen. These heightened concerns tend to

drive behavior aimed at avoiding negative social evaluations (Wells 1995). Drawing on these findings, I predict that fear of negative social evaluation will dampen the effect of a self-verification motive on the product preferences. More specifically, among consumers with a higher fear of negative social evaluation, I expect that individuals with a positive self-view will continue to want products that signal accurate self-view information. In contrast, I expect that individuals with a negative self-view will not want products that signal accurate self-view information, out of fear that this type of signaling will elicit a negative social response. For instance, lower power individuals may not act on a self-verification motive by purchasing a Kia if they fear that driving this car will draw a negative social reaction from others. In contrast, I expect to replicate my effect of self-verification motives in hypothesis 1 among individuals with low fear of negative social evaluation, as I do not believe that these individuals will be concerned with social feedback associated with signaling accurate information about a negative self-view. Thus, I hypothesize the following:

**H3:** There will be a three-way interaction between fear of negative evaluation, self-view, and motive. Among consumers with low fear of negative evaluation, activating a self-verification motive will lead consumers to prefer products that are consistent with a self-view, similar to the self-view × motive interaction predicted in hypothesis 1. Among consumers with a higher fear of negative evaluation, activating a self-verification motive will not lead consumers to prefer products that consistent with a self-view.

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*Overview of Studies*

I tested these predictions across five studies. To broaden the implications of my work, I investigated how activating a self-verification motive influenced consumption responses in three different self-view domains (physical attractiveness, power, and global self-esteem) and three different product classes. In study 1, I examined whether activating a self-verification motive led consumers who perceived themselves as physically unattractive, as opposed to attractive, to exhibit greater preference for a product that signaled something negative about this this self-view. In study 2, I replicated this effect using a different product and a different manipulation of self-verification. In studies 3A and 3B, I replicated my findings in a different self-view and product class domain (power and status signaling products), and looked for mediation. In study 4, I again replicated my prior results using a broader self-view measure: global self-esteem. Finally, in study 5, I tested hypothesis 3, which suggests that consumers' fear of negative social evaluation acts as a boundary condition of self-verification motives.

STUDY 1

In this study, I tested hypothesis 1 by investigating whether an active self-verification motive increased consumer evaluations of a product that accurately signals information about a negative self-view. In particular, I focused on whether activating a self-verification motive would lead participants who viewed themselves as physically unattractive, as opposed to attractive, to give higher evaluations to a graphic t-shirt with the tagline "Too Ugly for L.A." Physical attractiveness is an important self-view, as it is

highly visible to others (Karen, Berscheid, and Walster 1972). As such prior research

finds that physical attractiveness influences several behaviors and outcomes, including

social comparison, self-confidence, and well-being (Cash, Cash, and Butters 1983;

Thornton and Moore 1993). In the consumer literature, researchers have found that

people purchase and wear clothing and accessories (e.g. designer jeans, lipstick,

handbags) in order to look more attractive to others, consistent with a self-enhancement

explanation consumer signaling behavior (Durante, Griskevicius, and Perilloux 2011;

Hill et al. 2012; Hoegg et al. 2014; Lens et al. 2012). However, few studies have

investigated situations in which consumers use clothing that accurately signals something

negative about their self-view of physical attractiveness.

*Method*

    *Participants and Design.* I recruited two hundred and forty-nine participants (43%

female) from a large state university and randomly assigned them to a 2 (motive: self-

verification vs. self-enhancement) × continuous (physical attractiveness) design.

    *Procedure.* First, I measured how physically attractive participants perceived

themselves to be using a six-item appearance esteem scale (α =.82) (Heatherton and

Polivy 1991). Items in this scale included: "I feel unattractive," "I am dissatisfied with

my weight," and "I feel good about myself." Next, I manipulated a self-verification

versus self-enhancement motive using a validated writing response task, in which

participants wrote a short essay about either a socially close other (e.g. spouse, close

friend) or socially distant other (e.g. loose acquaintance) (Kraus and Chen 2009). As

discussed in the theoretical development section, prior research has shown that people

feel a greater need to be known, understood, and seen in a self-consistent manner when

among socially close, as opposed to distant, others(e.g. Swann et al. 1994). Thus, merely making participants think about a socially close versus distant other activates a self-verification motive (Kraus and Chen 2009). Based on this logic, in the self-verification condition, I prompted participants to think about a close other by asking them to write 3-4 sentences about that individual:

> "Please write 3-4 sentences about a person whom you have known for a long time, you like, is important to you, and with whom you tend to behave differently toward, compared to other people. This person should be someone who accepts you regardless of your strengths and weaknesses."

In the self-enhancement condition, I asked participants to write 3-4 sentences about a distant other. As previously discussed, I consider this to be the baseline or control condition, as by default people are more likely to try and make more positive, as opposed to accurate, social impressions (Farrow et al. 2015; Sedikides 1993; Swann et al. 1990):

> "Please write 3-4 sentences about a person whom you have not known for a long time and do not currently know well, but whom you like and might become close to in the future."

I pre-tested the effect of this manipulation on a two-item self-verification motive scale developed by (Weisenfeld et al. 2007). The items in this scale are: "It is important that others understand who I am" and "It is important that others see me as I see myself." (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) ($\alpha$ = .72). Consistent with expectations, participants reported greater self-verification motives after writing about a socially close versus distant other ($M_{\text{close other}}$= 5.57 vs. $M_{\text{distant other}}$ = 5.22; $F(1, 149) = 3.92$, $p = .05$). Next, I gave participants a supposedly unrelated study, in which I informed them that I

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was working with a local custom t-shirt store to develop new graphic designs. I then asked them to "imagine that you are in a custom t-shirt store and see the following shirts." I then showed participants a sample shirt, which had the tagline "Too Ugly for L.A" written on the front (see Appendix B). I then measured participants' evaluations of the t-shirt using two separate two-item scales. The first scale measured participants' likelihood of purchasing the shirt ($\alpha$ =.93): "How likely would you be to purchase this shirt?", "How interested would you be in purchasing this shirt?" The second scale measured participants' desire to wear the shirt in public ($\alpha$ =.93): "How likely would you be to wear this shirt in front of others?", and "To what extent would you want others to see you wearing this shirt?"(1=not at all; 7=very much so).

*Results*

In the self-verification condition, I expected participants who rated themselves as physically unattractive to evaluate the "ugly" graphic t-shirt higher than participants who rated themselves as physically unattractive. However, in the self-enhancement condition, I expected there to be no relationship between perceptions of physical attractiveness and evaluations of the shirt, as all participants in this condition would be motivated to avoid signaling something negative about themselves.

*Purchase Likelihood.* I performed a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement) × continuous (physical attractiveness) multiple regression analysis on purchase likelihood of the 'ugly' graphic t-shirt. There was no significant main effect of motive ($b$ = .12, $t(245)$ = .61, $p$ = .54) or physical attractiveness ($b$ = .10, $t(245)$ = .76, $p$ = .45). Consistent with predictions, I found a significant motive × physical attractiveness interaction ($b$ = -.38, $t(245)$ = -2.02, $p$ = .04) (see Figure 1).

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Next, I probed this interaction by analyzing the simple slopes of physical attractiveness at each level of motive (Cohen et al. 2003). Supporting hypothesis 1, when participants wrote about a close other, activating a self-verification motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness increased purchase likelihood for the "ugly" shirt ($b = -.28$, $t(245) = -2.06$, $p = .04$). In contrast, when participants wrote about a distant other, activating a self-enhancement motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness did not increase purchase likelihood for the "ugly" shirt ($b = .10$, $t(245) = .76$, $p = .45$).

*Desire to Wear in Public.* I performed a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement) × continuous (physical attractiveness) multiple regression analysis on participants' desire to wear the "ugly' graphic t-shirt in public. There was no significant main effect of motive ($b = .18$, $t(245) = 1.03$, $p = .30$) or physical attractiveness ($b = .11$, $t(245) = .98$, $p = .33$). However, consistent with predictions, I found a significant motive × physical attractiveness interaction ($b = -.42$, $t(245) = -2.54$, $p = ..01$). I again analyzed the simple slopes of physical attractiveness at each level of motive. Supporting hypothesis 1, when participants had an active self-verification motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness increased desire to publically wear the "ugly" shirt ($b = -.31$, $t(245) = -2.57$, $p = .01$). In contrast, when participants had an active self-enhancement motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness did not increase purchase likelihood for the "ugly" shirt ($b = .11$, $t(245) = .98$, $p = .33$).

*Discussion*

The results of study 1 provide preliminary support for hypothesis 1. I found a significant motive × physical attractiveness interaction. Specifically, among participants with an active self-verification motive, those who rated themselves as physically

unattractive, as opposed to attractive, evaluated the "ugly' graphic t-shirt higher along two distinct dimensions: purchase likelihood and desire to wear in public. On the other hand, among participants with an active self-enhancement motive, physical attractiveness did not significantly influence evaluations of the graphic t-shirt. By using a product that signaled negative information about physical attractiveness in this study, I demonstrated the power of an active self-verification in driving consumers to signal accurate self-view information, even when it comes at the expense of looking good. A limitation of this study is that, although I found the predicted pattern of results, evaluations of the t-shirt were low in all conditions. This finding may be due to several reasons not associated with signaling behavior, including the possibility that participants did not like the design, fit, or style of the shirt.

STUDY 2

In study 2, I again tested my hypothesis that activating a self-verification motive would drive consumers to evaluate a product higher when it accurately reflected an underlying self-view. I again looked at this question in the self-view domain of physical attractiveness. However, this study differed from study 1 in several important ways. First, I used a different manipulation of self-verification versus self-enhancement motives. Second, I asked participants to evaluate a pair of jeans, which is a more common clothing product for consumers to evaluate. Third, I randomly assigned participants to evaluate either a pair of unattractive or attractive jeans.

*Method*

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*Participants and Design.* I recruited three hundred participants (52% female) from a large state university and randomly assigned them to a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement) × 2 (jeans: less attractive vs. more attractive) × continuous (physical attractiveness) design.

*Procedure.* To measure participants' self-views of physical attractiveness, I asked them to complete an initial survey that included the six-item appearance esteem scale from study 1 ($\alpha$ =.87) (Heatherton and Polivy 1991). Next, I gave participants a second, supposedly unrelated study, in which I asked them to read a Forbes Magazine article entitled "Should You Be Yourself in a Job Interview?" (see Appendix B). Researchers have previously used this type of manipulation to activate participant goals and mindsets (e.g. Levy, Stroessner and Dweck 1998). In the self-verification condition, the article argued that interviewees should share accurate information about themselves during the job interview ("…candidates should do all they can to emphasize their true selves, even if means acknowledging their weaknesses…"). In the self-enhancement condition, the article argued that interviewees should only share highly positive information about themselves during the job interview ("…candidates should do all they can to emphasize the positive aspects of themselves, while downplaying the negatives…"). After reading the article, participants completed the same two-item measure of desire for self-verification from study 1 ("It is important that others understand who I am," "It is important that others see me as I see myself.") (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) ($\alpha$ = .73) (Weisenfeld et al. 2007).

After a brief delay, I asked participants to complete another study, in which I informed them that I was "working with a local clothing retailer to determine how likely

students are to buy certain types of merchandise." I then randomly assigned participants to a condition in which I showed them either a pair of more attractive or less attractive jeans and asked to them how likely they would be to purchase the item (see Appendix B). Prior studies have used jeans as an attractive clothing option (Hill et al. 2012; Hoegg et al. 2014). To make the attractiveness-signaling properties of each pair of jeans salient, I informed participants that a previous sample of students had tried the jeans and rated them along dimensions of comfort, affordability, and attractiveness and showed them the ratings. While I kept ratings of comfort and affordability constant between the more and less attractive jeans, I varied attractiveness ratings to indicate that students had rated the more attractive jeans as more attractive to others than the less attractive jeans. A pretest of this manipulation using a paired sample t-test revealed that while participants did not rate the jeans as significantly different in perceived comfort ($t(49) = 1.43$, $p = .16$), the jeans did significantly differ in perceptions of affordability ($M_{more\ attractive} = 4.0$ vs. $M_{less\ attractive} = 4.9$; $t(49) = 4.58$, $p < .001$) and attractiveness ($M_{more\ attractive} = 4.84$ vs. $M_{less\ attractive} = 2.86$; $t(49) = 6.37$, $p < .001$). After viewing either the more or less attractive jeans, participants indicated the likelihood that they would purchase the jeans using the two-item purchase likelihood scale from study 1 ($\alpha = .96$). Importantly, prior to evaluating the jeans, I asked participants to assume that they could find a pair of jeans in their size and that they could afford the pair of jeans.

*Results*

   I predicted that activating a self-verification motive would make participants who rated themselves as physically unattractive, as opposed to attractive, more likely to purchase the less attractive jeans and less likely to purchase the more attractive jeans. However, I predicted that activating a self-enhancement motive would make this relationship go away, such that perceived physical attractiveness would not affect purchase likelihood for either the less or more attractive jeans.

   *Desire for Self-Verification.* Participants reported a greater self-verification motive after reading the "be yourself" versus "enhance yourself" article ($M_{\text{self-verification}}$ = 5.67 vs. $M_{\text{self-enhancement}}$ = 5.33; $F(1, 298) = 8.96, p = .003$).

   *Purchase Likelihood.* I performed a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement, between) × 2 (jean attractiveness: less attractive vs. more attractive, between) × continuous (physical attractiveness) multiple regression analysis on the two-item purchase likelihood measure from study 1. I found no significant main effect of motive ($b = .18, t(292) = .73, p = .46$) or physical attractiveness ($b = -.02, t(292) = -.15, p = .88$). In contrast, there was a significant main effect of jean attractiveness ($b = -1.36, t(292) = -5.54, p < .001$), such that participants were more likely to say that would purchase the more attractive jeans over the less attractive jeans. There were no significant two-way interactions. I also found a significant three-way interaction between motive, jean attractiveness, and physical attractiveness ($b = -.68, t(292) = -2.15, p = .03$) (see Figure 2).

   I probed this interaction by first analyzing purchase likelihood of the less attractive jeans at each level of motive. Supporting hypothesis 1, when I activated a self-

verification motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness marginally increased purchase likelihood for the less attractive jeans ($b = -.26$, $t(292) = -1.69$, $p = .09$). On the other hand, when I activated a self-enhancement motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness did not increase purchase likelihood for the less attractive jeans ($b = .07$, $t(292) = .43$, $p = .67$). Next, I analyzed purchase likelihood of the more attractive jeans at each level of motive. Consistent with predictions, when I activated a self-verification motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness decreased purchase likelihood for the more attractive jeans ($b = .32$, $t(292) = 2.07$, $p = .04$). When I activated a self-enhancement motive, lower perceptions of physical attractiveness did not decrease purchase likelihood for the more attractive jeans ($b = -.02$, $t(292) = -.15$, $p = .88$)..

*Discussion*

In study 2, I replicated the finding that activating a self-verification motive makes consumers purchase a product that that accurately reflects their self-view of physical attractiveness. Further, I built on study 1 in three important respects. First, I used a different manipulation of self-verification and self-enhancement. Second, I asked participants to evaluate a new product: jeans. Third, I replicated the results from study 1 in the less attractive jean condition, while also showing that self-verification motives similarly influenced evaluations of the more attractive jeans, such that physically unattractive participants were less likely to purchase the more attractive jeans than physically attractive participants. However, a possible alternative explanation is that participants in the self-verification conditions were choosing jeans on the basis of how well they would fit their body type. In my next study, I had participants evaluate a different product class (cars), in which fit was not a consideration.

STUDY 3A


In studies 3A and 3B, I built upon my prior findings in several ways. First, I wanted to replicate my results in a new self-view domain: power. Power refers to an individual's capacity to influence others, which primarily stems from having control over valuable resources (French, Raven, and Cartwright 1959). Second, based on prior research showing that consumers use status-related products to signal power (e.g. Rucker and Galinsky 2008; 2009), I investigated how self-verification motives influenced the relationship between power and preference for low versus high status products. Third, I tested the mediation mechanism proposed in hypothesis 2. In both studies 3A and 3B, I predicted that activating a self-verification motive among low power participants would increase their preference for a low status product over a high status product, relative to high power participants, consistent with a desire to signal accurate information about their self-view of power. However, I predicted that activating a self-enhancement motive would dampen this effect, such self-views of power would not influence preference for status. Although both studies 3A and 3B used power as the focal self-view, study 3A measured chronic power (Anderson and Galinsky 2008), while study 3B manipulated power (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Thus, study 3B also provided a critical test of whether my prior results would replicate when participants were primed with a temporary self-view of power.

*Method*

*Participants and Design.* I recruited 356 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (47% female) and randomly assigned them to a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement) × continuous (chronic power) design.

*Procedure.* Participants first completed an 8-item scale of chronic power (Anderson and Galinksy 2006), which measured their perceptions of having influence within their relationships with others ($\alpha =.87$). Items in the scale included: "I can get people to listen to what I say" and "If I want to, I get to make the decisions." Next, I activated a self-verification versus self-enhancement motive using the magazine article manipulation from study 2. After participants read the article, I told them that I was interested in their brand preferences after viewing different advertisements. Participants then viewed an advertisement featuring a picture of a Kia brand car and an advertisement featuring a picture of a Lexus brand car (see Appendix B). Prior research has used Kia to represent a low status car and Lexus to represent a high status car (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006). In pre-testing, after viewing both ads, participants rated Kia as lower in status than the Lexus ($M_{Kia} = 3.6$ vs. $M_{Lexus} = 5.7$; $t(75) = 7.92$; $p < .001$). Once participants had viewed both ads, I asked them to indicate their preference between Kia and Lexus brands using two distinct measures. First, I asked them to allocate a total of 100 points between the two brands, with a higher number indicating a stronger preference for the Kia over the Lexus (Mandel et al. 2006). I also had them respond to the two-item desire for public consumption measure from study 1 ($\alpha = .71$): "Between the Kia and the Lexus, which car would you prefer others to see you driving?" and "Between the Kia and the Lexus, which car would you be most likely to drive in front of others (1=Lexus; 7=Kia)?" Next, I tested for mediation by asking participants to rat the extent to which the

Kia, as opposed to the Lexus, would signal accurate information to others using a single-item measure adapted from Berger and Heath (2007): " Between the Kia and the Lexus, which car would allow you to most accurately express yourself to others (1=Lexus; 7=Kia)?" Importantly, in both studies 3A and 3B, prior to the product choice task I told all participants to assume that they were making a comfortable salary and could afford both products, but that they might have to give up some other purchases in exchange for the products. Finally, I sought to control for the possibility that differences in performance between Lexus and Kia, as opposed to signaling concerns, were partially driving my significant effects in the self-verification condition (Rucker and Galinsky 2009). Therefore, I additionally asked participants to indicate the extent to which performance drove their preference between Lexus and Kia: "How important is performance in determining your preference between Kia and Lexus automobiles (1=not at all; 7=very much so)?"

*Results*

I predicted that activating a self-verification motive would increase preference for Kia over Lexus among lower, as opposed to higher, power participants. I further predicted that activating a self-enhancement motive would mitigate the influence of power on preference for Kia over Lexus, consistent with a desire to only signal positive information.

*Points Allocated to Kia versus Lexus.* I performed a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement, between) $\times$ continuous (chronic power) multiple regression analysis on participants' preference for the Kia over Lexus, as indicated by point allocation. I found no significant effect of motive ($b = .60$, $t(352) = .22$, $p = .83$) or

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chronic power ($b$ = .31, $t(352)$ = .18, $p$ = .86). However, consistent with expectations, I found a significant motive × power interaction ($b$ = -4.68, $t(352)$ = -2.00, $p$ < .05) (see Figure 3).

I analyzed the simple slopes of chronic power at each level of motive. Supporting hypothesis 1, when I activated a self-verification motive, lower power increased the number of points allocated Kia over Lexus ($b$ = -4.37, $t(352)$ = -2.79, $p$ < .01). In contrast, when I activated a self-enhancement motive, lower power did not increase the number of points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b$ = .31, $t(352)$ = .18, $p$ = .86).

*Public Consumption of Kia versus Lexus.* A 2 × continuous multiple regression analysis on public consumption preference revealed no main effect of motive ($b$ = -.13, $t(352)$ = -.82, $p$ = .41) or chronic power ($b$ = -.05, $t(352)$ = -.53, $p$ = .60). However, I did find a significant motive × power interaction ($b$ = -.31, $t(352)$ = -2.30, $p$ = .02). Simple slopes analysis revealed that when I activated a self-verification motive, lower power increased the number of points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b$ = -.36, $t(352)$ = -4.02, $p$ < .001).When I activated a self-enhancement motive, lower power did not increase the number of points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b$ = -.05, $t(352)$ = -.53, $p$ = .60).

*Accuracy.* Recalling my discussion in the theoretical development section, I predicted that activating a self-verification motive would increase consumers' desire to signal accurate information to others. As such, I posited that they would be more likely to draw on self-views of chronic power when determining the extent to which Kia (vs. Lexus) would signal accurate information about themselves. I predicted that lower, as opposed to higher, power consumers would perceive that the Kia (vs. Lexus) signals

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more accurate information, based on its low status associations, which would increase their preference for the Kia.

I ran a 2 × continuous multiple regression analysis on participants' perceptions of signaling accuracy and found no main effect of motive ($b$ = -.05, $t$(352) = -.28, $p$ = .78) or chronic power ($b$ = --.08, $t$(352) = -.64, $p$ = .52). There was a non-significant motive × power interaction ($b$ = -.19, $t$(352) = -1.20, $p$ = .23). Analysis of simple slopes at each level of motive revealed a pattern similar to the one I observed in the analyses of preference for Kia over Lexus. Specifically, among participants with an active self-verification motive, lower chronic power increased evaluations of the Kia as signaling more accurate self-view information than the Lexus ($b$ = -.26, $t$(352) = -2.51, $p$ = .01). Among participants with an active self-enhancement motive, lower chronic power did not increase evaluations of the Kia as signaling more accurate self-view information than the Lexus ($b$ = -.08, $t$(352) = -.64, $p$ = .52). I tested for moderated mediation using model 8 of the Hayes 2012 bootstrapping process with 5,000 samples. In the self-verification condition, evaluations of the Kia as a more accurate self-view signal than the Lexus mediated the effect of chronic power on 1) the amount of points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b$ = -3.05, 95% CI [-5.58, -.71]) and 2) preference for public consumption of Kia over Lexus ($b$ = -.16, 95% CI [-.29, -.03]). In the self-enhancement conditions, I did not find mediation for either points allocated ($b$ = -.87, 95% CI [-3.92, 2.16]) or preference for public consumption ($b$ = -.04, 95% CI [-.21, .11]).

*Performance Covariate.* I performed two 2 × continuous multiple regression analyses on 1) points allocated to Kia over Lexus and 2) preference for public consumption of Kia over Lexus including performance as a covariate. These analyses

revealed that the motive $\times$ power interactions remained significant in both cases: ($b = -4.64$, $t(351) = -1.99$, $p < .05$) and ($b = -.30$, $t(351) = -2.32$, $p = .02$), respectively. Further, in the self-verification condition, simple slopes analysis demonstrated that lower power participants continued to prefer Kia over Lexus to a greater extent than higher power participants; both in points allocated ($b = -3.90$, $t(351) = -2.49$, $p = .01$) and in preference for public consumption ($b = -.31$, $t(351) = -3.58$, $p < .001$) when controlling for performance.

*Discussion*

Activating a self-verification motive drove lower power participants to prefer Kia over Lexus to a greater extent than higher power participants. However, activating a self-enhancement motive damped this effect. Underlying these results, my mediation analysis showed that participants in the self-verification condition formed their preferences based on how accurately the cars signaled their power. In particular, lower power increased perceptions that Kia was a more accurate signal than Lexus, which in turn increased preference for the Kia over the Lexus.

<div align="center">STUDY 3B</div>

In study 3B, I attempted to replicate my findings in study 3A using a temporary manipulation of power, a different product class, a discrete binary choice dependent variable, and a sample from a different population.

*Method*

       *Participants and Design.* I recruited 282 participants (55% female) from a large

state university and randomly assigned them to a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-

enhancement) × 2 (power: high vs. low) design. I removed 7 (2%) participants who did

not do the writing task for the power manipulation, leaving 275 participants.

       *Procedure.* Participants first completed an episodic recall task, in which they

wrote about a situation where they either had power over someone else or someone else

had power over them (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Afterwards, to check the effectiveness

of the power manipulation, I asked participants to complete the 8-item chronic power

scale from study 3A. Next, I activated a self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive

using the magazine article manipulation from studies 2 and 3A. Then, I informed

participants that they would be evaluating different pairs of sunglasses. Participants first

saw a selection of "luxury" brand sunglasses from Neiman Marcus whose brands

included Gucci, Ray-Ban, Diesel, and Dolce and Gabbana. Afterwards, participants saw

another selection of "budget" brand sunglasses from J.C. Penney whose brands included

Claiborne, Arizona, Dockers, and St. John's Bay (see Appendix B). Once participants

viewed both selections of sunglasses, I asked them to "please imagine that you are

interested in purchasing a pair of sunglasses for going out socially with a bunch of other

college students. All of them would see the sunglasses you are wearing and maybe even

ask you about them." I then asked participants whether they would choose a pair of

budget sunglasses from J.C. Penney or a pair of luxury sunglasses from Neiman Marcus.

After participants made their choice, I tested for mediation by asking participants the

same question from study 3A: "Between the budget sunglasses from J.C. Penney and the

luxury sunglasses from Neiman Marcus, which pair would allow you to most accurately express yourself to others (1=luxury sunglasses; 7=budget sunglasses)?" Finally, to ensure that participants perceived the luxury sunglasses as higher in status than the budget sunglasses, I asked all participants to what extent they associated each with status.

*Results*

*Power.* Participants in the low power condition indicated that they felt significantly less powerful than participants in the high power condition following the writing task ($M_{low power} = 4.76$ vs. $M_{high power} = 5.06$; $F(1, 273) = 6.72$, $p = .01$).

*Status of Budget versus Luxury Sunglasses* I performed a paired sample t-test on the extent to which participants associated each selection of sunglasses with status. As expected, participants indicated that the budget sunglasses were significantly less associated with status than the luxury sunglasses ($M_{budget} = 3.28$ vs. $M_{luxury} = 5.34$ vs.; $t(274) = 16.16$, p < .001).

*Choice of Budget versus Luxury Sunglasses.* I performed a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement) $\times$ 2 (power: high vs. low) multiple logistic regression analysis on participants' choice for the budget sunglasses over the luxury sunglasses. I found no significant effect of motive ($\chi^2 = .70$, $p = .40$) or power ($\chi^2 = 0.35$, $p = .55$). Consistent with expectations, I found a significant motive $\times$ power interaction $\chi^2 = 4.07$, $p = .04$) (see Figure 4).

Replicating the results from study 3A, when I activated a self-verification motive, low power individuals chose the budget sunglasses over the luxury sunglasses with significantly greater frequency than high power individuals ($M_{low power} = 33\%$; $M_{high power} = 11\%$; $\chi^2 = 4.55$, $p < .03$). However, when I activated a self-enhancement motive, power

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did not significantly affect choice of the budget versus luxury sunglasses ($\chi^2 = .36$, $p = .55$).

*Accuracy.* I ran a $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on the signaling mediator and found no main effect of motive ($F(1, 271) = 1.09$, $p = .30$) or power ($F(1, 271) = .37$, $p = .54$). There was a significant motive $\times$ power interaction ($F(1, 271) = 4.30$, $p = .04$). Planned contrasts revealed a pattern similar to the one I observed in my analyses of choice for the luxury sunglasses over the budget sunglasses. Specifically, among participants with an active self-verification motive, low power individuals evaluated the budget, as opposed to the luxury, sunglasses as more accurately signaling their self-view than high power individuals ($M_{\text{low power}} = 3.2$ vs. $M_{\text{high power}} = 2.6$; $F(1, 271) = 5.21$, $p = .02$). Among participants with an active self-enhancement motive, there was no such difference ($F(1, 271) = .37$, $p = .54$). I tested for moderated mediation using model 8 of the Hayes 2012 bootstrapping process with 5,000 samples. Consistent with hypothesis 2, in the self-verification condition, evaluations that the budget, as opposed to luxury, sunglasses accurately signaled self-views mediated participants' choice for the budget sunglasses over the luxury sunglasses ($B = -.66$, 95% CI [-1.35, -.06]). In the self-enhancement condition, I did not find mediation ($B = .17$, 95% CI [-.44, .78]).

*Discussion*

Across studies 3A and 3B, activating a self-verification motive led lower power participants to exhibit greater preference for a low status product over a high status product, relative to higher power participants. However, among participants with an active self-enhancement motive, self-views of power did not influence preference for status. In the self-verification condition, I demonstrated moderated mediation in both

studies. Specifically, participants with an active self-verification motive evaluated the

extent to which each product accurately signaled their power and, in turn, chose the

product that they perceived to be the most accurate signal of this self-view. A limitation

of study 3B is that I did not replicate Rucker and Galinsky's (2008) finding that

temporary threats to power increase preference for high status products. This may be

explained by the fact that I activated a self-enhancement motive among both low and

high power participants. In particular, the fact that high power participants also had a

salient motive to self-enhance likely dampened the compensatory effect, which depends

on only participants in the self-threat condition being motivated to self-enhance, for

instance out of a need for symbolic self-completion.


STUDY 4


Until this point, I have investigated domain-specific self-views of power and

physical attractiveness. Nevertheless, I was also interested in whether people would also

use products in order to verify a broader self-view: global self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965).

Thus, my main goal in this study was to see if I could replicate my results from prior

studies using global self-esteem as my focal self-view measure. Consistent with prior

research, I defined global self-esteem as "an individual's positive or negative attitude

towards the self as a totality" (Rosenberg 1965). Similar to study 3, I investigated this

question in the domain of status-related products, as prior research has shown that

consumers also use status-related products in order to signal self-esteem (Sivanathan and

Pettit 2010). I also addressed two potential alternative explanations associated with the

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writing task I used in this and previous studies to activate a self-verification versus self-enhancement motive. First, in the self-verification condition, I believed that writing about a close, as opposed to distant, other could have given participants the feeling that they had a more meaningful existence, which could have decreased their need to self-enhance, leading to more identity-consistent product preferences (Lee and Shrum 2012). Next, writing about a close other in the self-verification condition could have also served as an indirect self-bolstering strategy, consistent with findings on self-affirmation, which could have also reduced the need to self-enhance and led to more identity-consistent product choices. I tested these alternative explanations by including measures of sense of meaningful existence (Zadro, Williams, and Richardson 2004) and self-affirmation (Sherman et al. 2009).

*Method*

*Participants and Design.* I recruited three hundred and forty-three participants (50% female) from a large state university and randomly assigned them to a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement, between) × continuous (global self-esteem) design.

*Procedure.* I gave participants an initial study that included a ten-item measure of global self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965). Next, I manipulated self-verification versus self-enhancement motives by randomly assigning participants to write about either a close or distant other, similar to study 1 (Kraus and Chen 2009). Following the writing task, participants completed measures of sense of meaningful existence (Zadro et al. 2004) and self-affirmation (Sherman et al. 2009). Next, I gave participants a second study, in which I asked them to view a pair of ads: one for Kia and one for Lexus (see Appendix B). To

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ensure that status signaling was a salient factor in participants' preferences I used a different pair of ads from those in study 3A. In particular, I modified the Lexus ad to include the tagline "Be Respected. Be Admired." In the Kia ad, I made no mention of status. Pre-testing indicated that participants perceived Kia as significantly lower in status than Lexus after viewing these stimuli ($M_{Kia}$ = 3.6 vs. $M_{Lexus}$ = 5.7; $t(66)$ = 12.2; $p$ = .000). After viewing both ads, participants indicated their preference between Kia and Lexus brands by allocating a total of 100 points between the two brands, consistent with a measure used in study 3A.

*Results*

In the self-verification condition, I predicted that activating a self-verification motive would lead lower self-esteem participants to indicate a greater preference for Kia over Lexus relative to higher self-esteem participants, consistent with a desire to signal accurate self-view information. However, I predicted that activating a self-enhancement motive would dampen the effect of self-esteem on preference for Kia over Lexus.

*Points Allocated to Kia versus Lexus.* I performed a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement) × continuous (global self-esteem) multiple regression analysis on participants' preference for Kia over Lexus, as indicated by point allocation. There was no significant main effect of motive ($b$ = 3.48, $t(339)$ = 1.49, $p$ = .14) or global self-esteem ($b$ = -.09, $t(339)$ = -.07, $p$ = .94). However, consistent with predictions, I found a significant motive × global self-esteem interaction ($b$ = -4.47, $t(339)$ = -2.61, $p$ < .01) (see Figure 5).

Next, I looked at the simple slopes of global self-esteem at each level of motive. Consistent with predictions, when I activated a self-verification motive, lower self-esteem

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increased the amount of points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b$ = -4.55, $t(339)$ = -3.71, $p <$ .001). In contrast, when I activated a self-enhancement motive, lower self-esteem did not increase the amount of points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b$ = -.09, $t(339)$ = -.07, $p =$ .94).

*Alternative Explanation.* I looked at whether my motive manipulation could have influenced participants' feelings of meaningful existence and self-affirmation. Participants reported no significant differences in either sense of meaningful existence $F(1, 342)$ = .99, $p$ = .32) or self-affirmation ($F(1, 342)$ = 1.51, $p$ = .22), indicating that the manipulation did not influence either of these constructs. Additionally, neither of these constructs mediated preference in the self-verification condition.

## Discussion

While my previous studies found evidence that an active self-verification motive influenced consumption responses to domain specific self-views (e.g. power and physical attractiveness), study 4 replicated these results using a broader self-view measure: global self-esteem). Thus, this study was an important demonstration that the effects of self-verification motives are generalizable and drive consumption related to more expansive definitions of consumer self-view.

STUDY 5

The previous four studies have demonstrated that activating a self-verification motive drives consumers to prefer products that accurately signal information about themselves to others. In hypothesis 3, I proposed that fear of negative evaluation acts as a boundary condition of this effect. I tested this idea in the self-view domain of power, similar to study 3. In this study, I also included Watson and Friend's (1969) twelve–item Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation scale, a trait-based measure of the extent to which a person fears unfavorable evaluations while in social situations. Additionally, because the focus of this study was to identify a boundary condition of self-verification motives only, I used a neutral control condition, as opposed to explicitly priming self-enhancement motives for comparison purposes. Thus, another important feature of this study is to confirm my previous suggestions that activating a self-enhancement motive elicits consumption preference that are consistent with participants' default or baseline behavior (Baumeister 1998; Sedikides 1993).

*Method*

*Participants and Design.* I recruited one hundred and eighty-eight participants (45% female) from a large state university and assigned them to a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. control) × continuous (fear of negative evaluation) × continuous (power) design.

*Procedure.* First, participants completed a number of personality measures, which included Anderson and Galinsky's (2006) eight-item measure of chronic power ($\alpha = .80$) and Watson and Friend's (1969) twelve-item Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale ($\alpha$

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= .82). Items on this scale included "I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings," and "I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make." Next, I asked participants in the self-verification condition to write 3-4 sentences about a close other, while I asked participants in the control condition to write about their knowledge of trees (Kraus and Chen 2009). I then gave participants a separate study asking them to view the Kia and Lexus advertisements from study 4. After participants viewed both car ads, they indicated their preference between Kia and Lexus by allocating a total of 100 points between the two brands, with a higher number indicating a stronger preference for the Kia over the Lexus, similar to studies 3A and 4.

*Results*

I predicted that, among participants with a low fear of negative evaluation, lower, as opposed to higher, power individuals with an active self-verification motive would display an increased preference for Kia over Lexus, replicating my previous studies. In contrast, I predicted that the effect of self-verification motives on preference for Kia over Lexus would be attenuated among participants with a high fear of negative evaluation.

*Points Allocated to Kia versus Lexus.* I performed a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. control) × continuous (fear of negative evaluation) × continuous (chronic power) multiple regression analysis on participants' preference for Kia over Lexus, as indicated point allocation. I found no main effect of motive ($b = 3.47$, $t(180) = 1.10$, $p = .27$), fear of negative evaluation ($b = .41$, $t(180) = .18$, $p = .86$), or chronic power ($b = .40$, $t(180) = .15$, $p = .88$). I found a marginally significant chronic power × fear of negative evaluation interaction ($b = -4.53$, $t(180) = -1.81$, $p = .07$). Of note, there was a significant two-way motive × power interaction ($b = -7.18$, $t(180) = -1.95$, $p = .05$), which replicated my

previous experiments. Most importantly, there was a significant motive $\times$ fear of negative evaluation $\times$ chronic power interaction ($b = 8.02$, $t(180) = 2.25$, $p < .03$) (see Figure 6).

I further analyzed this interaction by examining the motive $\times$ power interaction at one standard deviation above and below mean fear of negative evaluation. Consistent with predictions, among participants with a low fear of negative evaluation, when I activated a self-verification motive, lower power increased points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b = -10.27$, $t(180) = -3.07$, $p = .003$). In contrast, in the control condition lower power did not increase points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b = 4.93$, $t(180) = 1.34$, $p = .18$). Also consistent with predictions, among participants with a high fear of negative evaluation, the effect of a self-verification motive on preference was attenuated, such that lower power did not increase points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b = -3.29$, $t(180) = -.89$, $p = .38$). Similarly, in the control condition, lower power did not increase points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b = -4.13$, $t(180) = -1.11$, $p = .27$).

*Discussion*

In study 5, I identified an important boundary condition of self-verification motives on consumption behavior. In particular, I found that while consumers with a low fear of negative social evaluation preferred the product that accurately signaled information about both negative and positive self-views in response to an active self-verification motive, those with a high fear of negative social evaluation did not prefer the product that signaled accurate information about a negative self-view. Instead, these individuals displayed a systematic preference for products that signaled positive information about themselves, similar to participants in the control condition. This finding was important, as it demonstrated that not all consumers signaled accurate self-

view information in response to a self-verification motive. Instead, this behavior appeared to be limited to individuals who had little anxiety that signaling accurate information about a negative self-view via consumption choice would result in negative social feedback.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research examined how activating a self-verification motive led consumers to exhibit a greater preference for products that signaled accurate information about a self-view, even when this self-view was negative. In studies 1 and 2, I found that activating a self-verification motive led participants who considered themselves physically unattractive, as opposed to attractive, to increase their evaluations of products that accurately signaled information about this self-view. In studies 3A and 3B, I replicated this finding in the self-view domain of power. In these studies, I additionally demonstrated mediation in the self-verification condition. Specifically, I showed that consumers' preferences were based on evaluations of how accurately products signaled their power to others. In study 4, I again replicated my results using a broader self-view measure: global self-esteem. Finally, in study 5, I identified a boundary condition of self-verification behavior, finding that fear of negative social evaluation dampened the desire for products that expressed accurate information among participants with a negative self-view.

This work stands to make several contributions to the literature. First, I contribute to existing knowledge regarding how consumers use products to signal information about

themselves to others (e.g. Berger and Heath 2007; 2008). While prior studies find that consumers choose products on the basis of signaling positive information to others, my research finds that consumers also choose products on the basis of signaling accurate information about themselves, even in the domain of negative self-views. In demonstrating conditions under which consumers prefer products that signal accurate self-view information, I further contribute to literature looking at when consumers choose identity-consistent products over identity-enhancing products. Specifically, prior studies have found that consumers display identity-consistent preferences when they focus on factors that are unrelated to an experienced self-view, such as product performance or societal expectations (Rucker and Galinsky 2009; Rucker et al. 2014). In contrast, my research is the first to show that the desire to accurately signal a self-view can also lead to identity-consistent consumption. Additionally, my research contributes to self-verification theory itself. While prior research focuses on how self-verification motives influence the type of social feedback people prefer, no studies to date have investigated whether these motives can also affect signaling behavior. Finally, I demonstrate a boundary condition of the effect of self-verification. In particular, I find that consumers with a high fear of negative evaluation do not prefer products that signal accurate information about a negative self-view.

*Theoretical Implications*

An important implication of my research is that I provide a theoretical rationale for why people engage in consumption behavior aimed at signaling a negative identity to others. At first glance, it appears counterintuitive that any consumer would knowingly use a product or service in order to signal their flaws or shortcomings to others. However,

people with negative self-views often feel misunderstood and prefer social support that validates the negative feelings that they have about themselves (Marigold et al. 2014). My findings indicate that products that signal negative information about the self may provide another form of "retail therapy" by giving consumers a simple and unspoken way to feel better understood by others. Interestingly, this suggests the possibility that using products to signal negative self-view information could actually increase consumer well-being, if this type of consumption leads to heightened perceptions of social support.

Across my studies, I found evidence that perceptions of signal strength played a role in the extent to which participants with negative self-views responded to an active self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive. In particular, contrasts of participant preferences in the self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) condition at one standard deviation below mean self-view revealed significant differences in preference in studies 1, 4, and 5. Interestingly, these are the studies in which I most explicitly associated products with a self-view signal. For instance, in studies 4 and 5, I used car ads with explicit status-related taglines and found that consumers with negative self-views have a significantly greater preference for Kia over Lexus in the self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) condition. On the other hand, in study 3A, where the car ads did not have any taglines, consumers with negative self-views displayed no significant differences in preference for Kia over Lexus. This observation suggests that consumers may only respond to an active self-verification motive through consumption when they perceive that the product will be a salient information signal to others.

A feature of this research is that the majority of my studies investigate predictions by measuring chronic or trait-based self-views, as opposed to temporarily manipulating

these views. Although most studies in the consumer literature investigate how people respond to temporary manipulations of a self-view, for instance by activating a self-threat, chronically held self-views play a distinct, yet understudied, role in consumption behavior. For instance, Rucker and Galinsky (2012) found that consumers who were low, as opposed to high, in chronic power did not exhibit an increased preference for status following a power threat. This finding is in line with the notion that people with chronically negative self-views are more comfortable dealing with negative affect (Wood, Heimpel and Michela 2003) and more realistic when provided with negative feedback about themselves (Keller, Lipkus, and Rimer 2002; Swann et al. 1992). Despite their importance, research on consumption responses to chronic self-views is mixed. While some studies have found evidence that consumers manage chronically negative self-views by engaging in self-enhancing (e.g. compensatory) consumption (Rucker and Galinsky 2009; Sivanathan and Pettit 2010), other studies have supported the notion that people do not attempt to enhance these views (e.g Finkelstein and Fishbach; Keller, et al 2002; Riis, Simmons, and Goodwin 2008; Rucker and Galinsky 2012). Our research helps to reconcile these discrepant findings by demonstrating that consumers with an active self-verification motive are more likely to prefer products that confirm or validate a chronic self-view, while consumers with an active self-enhancement motive are more likely to enhance that view.

One limitation of my research is that, while I found abundant evidence that activating a self-verification motive could increase relative preference for products that signal accurate self-view information, participants still exhibited a generally low absolute preference for these products. Future research could investigate additional conditions and

traits that lead consumers to have strong preferences for products that signal negative information about consumers. Perhaps this research could do a qualitative investigation of individuals or groups that already use products associated with a negative self-view. Next, although my research demonstrated how self-verification motives influenced product choice, I did not look at how these motives influence post-choice consumer behavior. Future research could explore how using products that accurately signal information about a self-view influence consumers' interactions with others. Perhaps expressing an accurate (vs. enhanced) identity makes consumers more honest in other aspects of their behavior. For instance, maybe they are less likely to engage in cheating behavior (Wirtz and Kum 2004). Finally, given the general lack of research on the effects of self-verification in the consumer literature, researchers could investigate how activating this motive influences other aspects of consumer behavior. For instance, would activating a self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive make consumers more receptive to ad campaigns that appeal to a desire to be 'real,' such as "The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty?"

*Managerial Implications*

I believe that my research stands to make an important contribution to practice. First, managers may find it beneficial to activate a self-verification motive by using simple taglines or slogans in their promotional campaigns. For instance, given that thinking about a close other activates a self-verification motive, ads could show consumers shopping with their family in order to prime the desire to purchase self-view-consistent products. This might be especially beneficial to low-end brands who are trying to get low- to middle-income consumers to embrace their products, as opposed to looking

for self-enhancing, high-end brands. Another area where I believe my findings are important is in managerial decision-making associated with product line expansion. In particular, while research indicates that down-market product line extensions (e.g. Vera Wang's Kohl's clothing line or BMW'S 1 Series) can hurt the equity of premium brands (Randall, Ulrich, and Reibstein 1998), there is little discussion related to how up-market product line extensions (e.g. Kia's K900 or Hyundai's Equus) can negatively impact the equity of non-premium brands. For instance, it is possible that a large proportion of Kia's middle income consumers do not want to be associated with the status-related halo that the introduction of the K900 gives to their brand because it doesn't accurately reflect their socioeconomic status. Therefore, managers may want to carefully consider marketing strategies that are intended to create overly positive social perceptions of products and brands used by low-tier customers.

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APPENDIX A

FIGURES

FIGURE 1

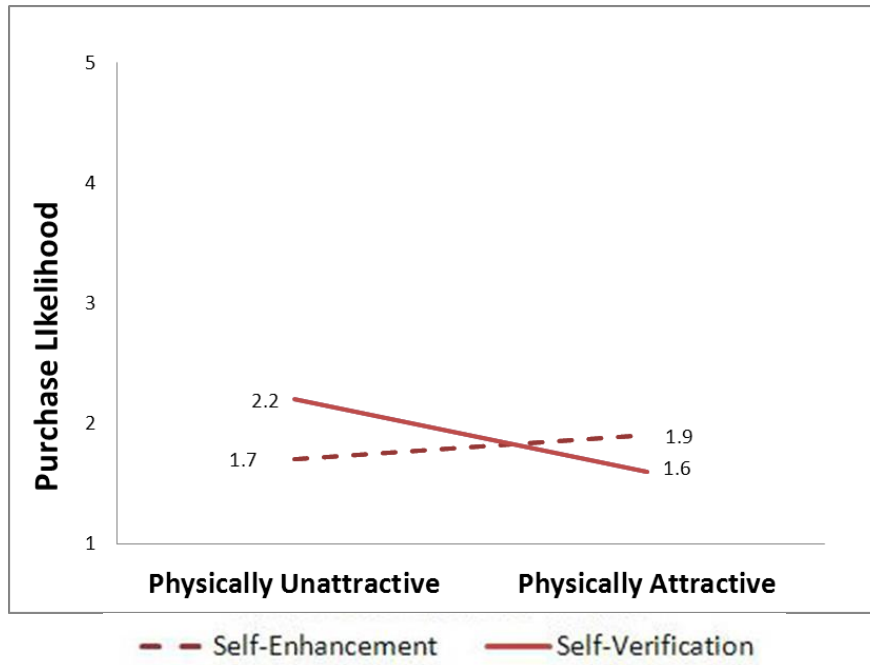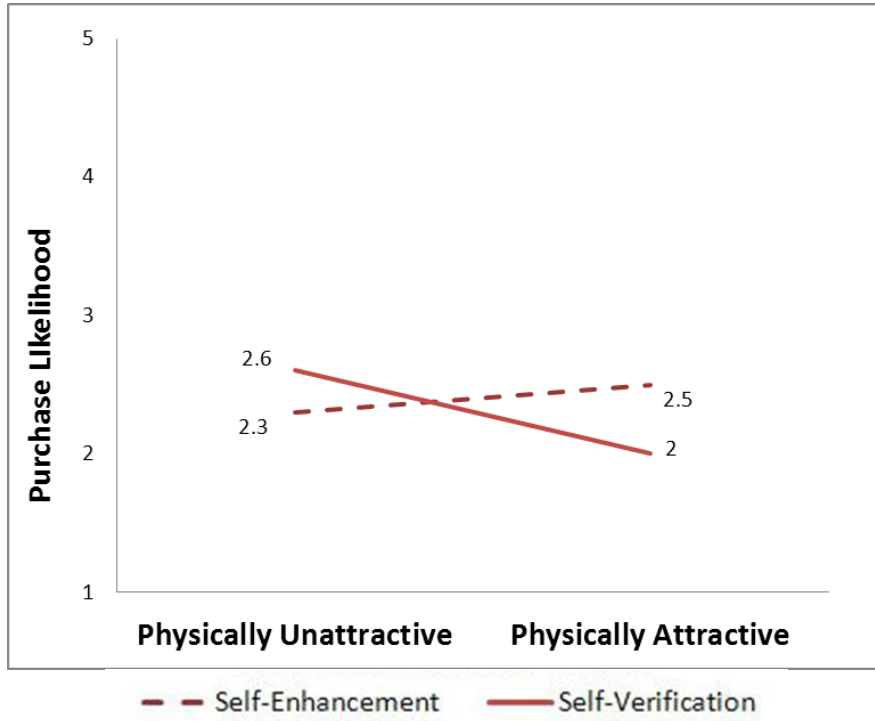STUDY 1 RESULTS: PURCHASE LIKELIHOOD OF "UGLY" GRAPHIC T-SHIRT

FIGURE 2

STUDY 2 RESULTS: PURCHASE LIKELIHOOD OF JEANS
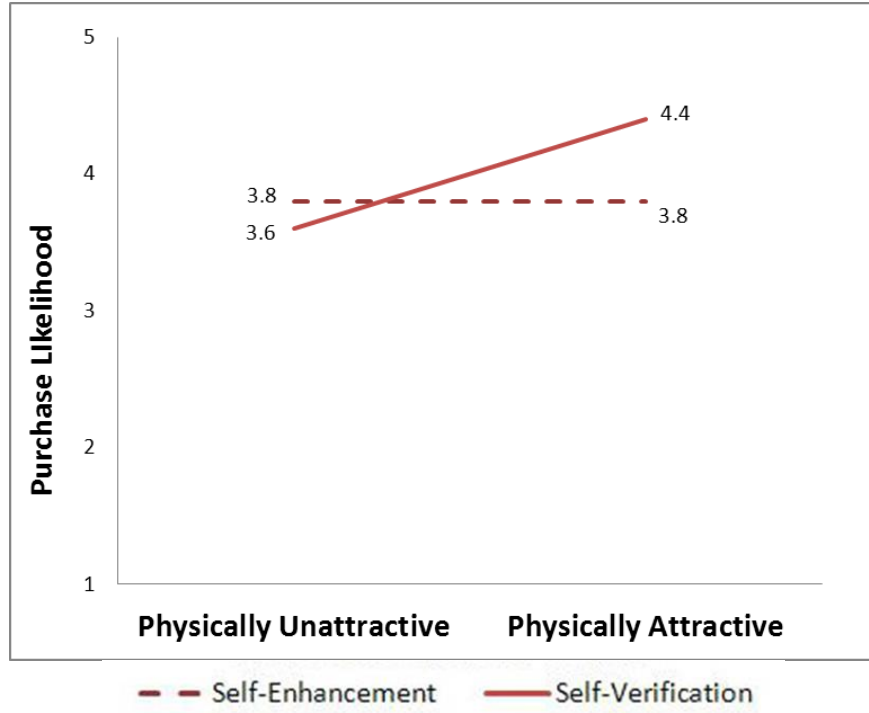
A. LESS ATTRACTIVE JEANS

## B. MORE ATTRACTIVE JEANS

FIGURE 3

STUDY 3A RESULTS: POINTS ALLOCATED TO KIA (VS. LEXUS)
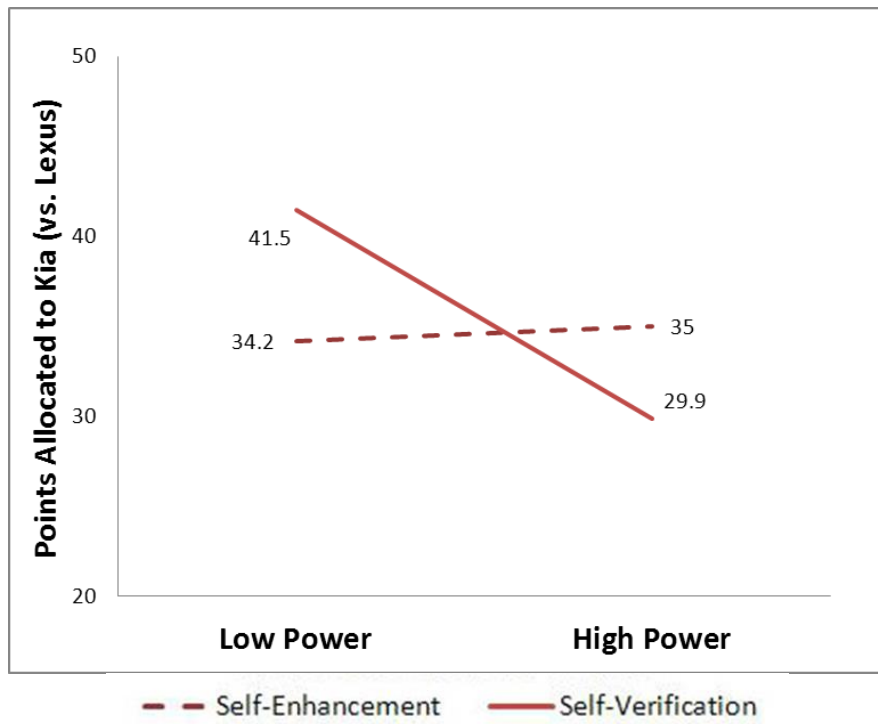
FIGURE 4

STUDY 3B RESULTS: PERCENTAGE CHOOSING BUDGET (VS. LUXURY)
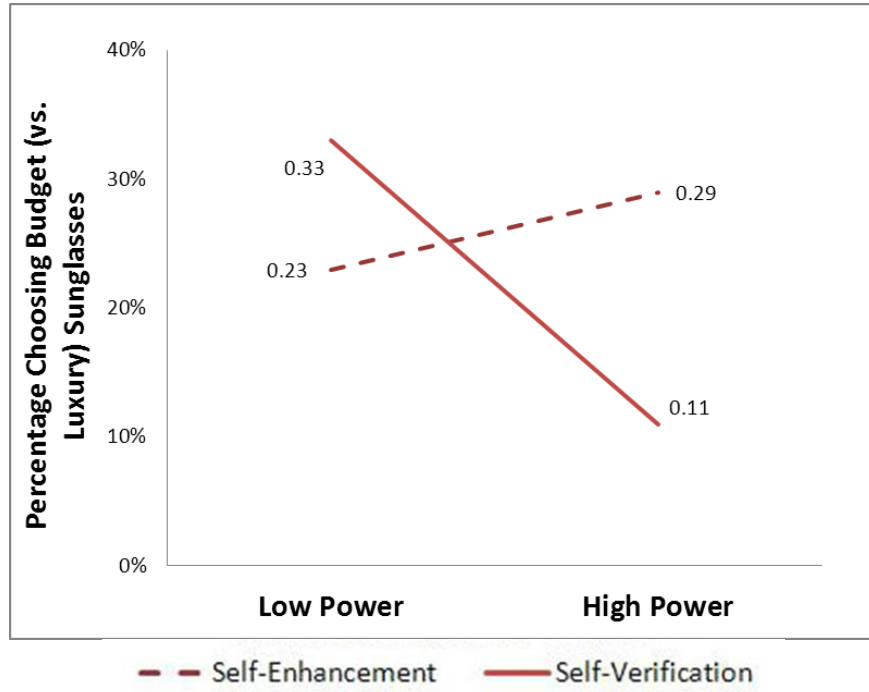
SUNGLASSES

FIGURE 5

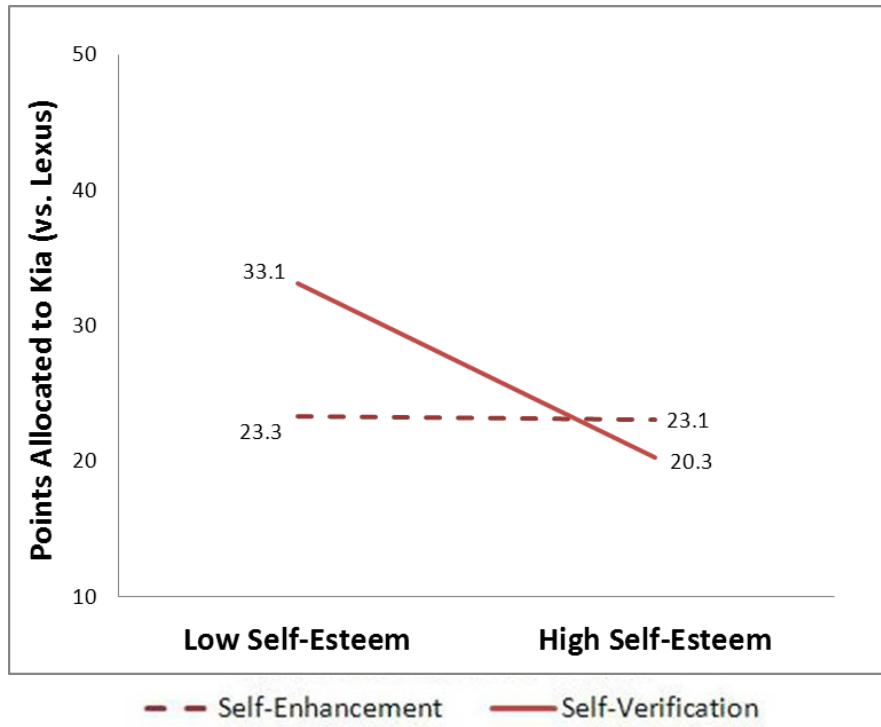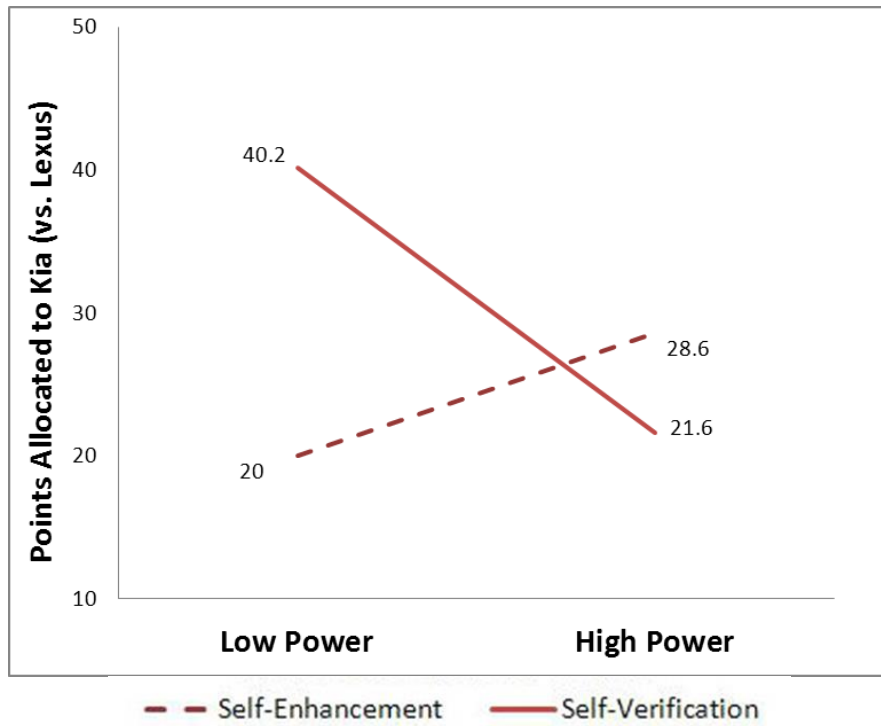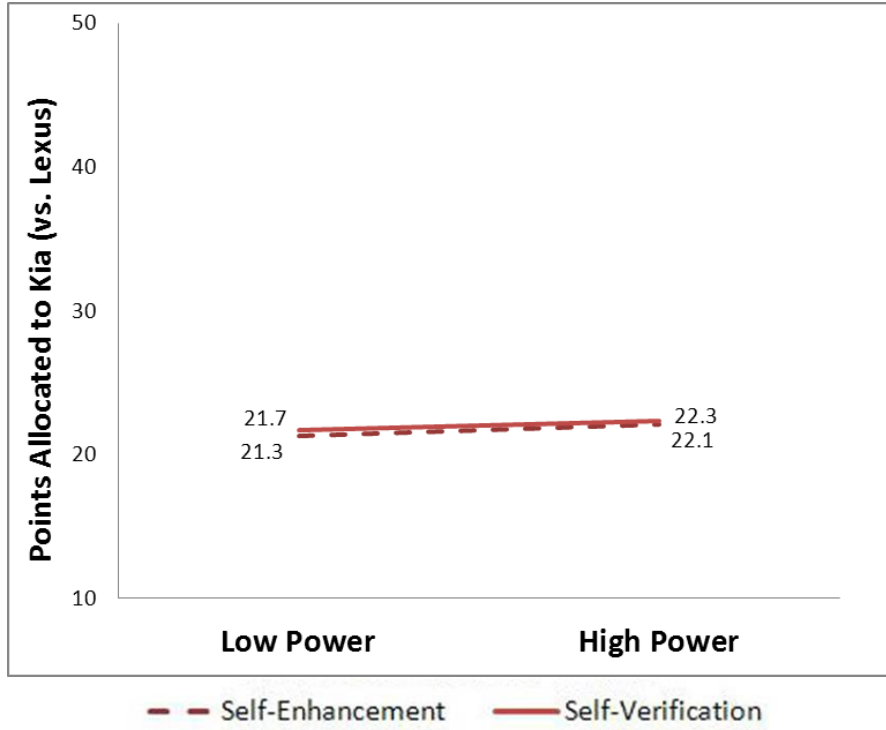STUDY 4 RESULTS: POINTS ALLOCATED TO KIA (VS. LEXUS)

# FIGURE 6

## STUDY 5 RESULTS: FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION AND POINTS

## ALLOCATED TO KIA (VS. LEXUS)

## A. LOW FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION

## B. HIGH FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION

APPENDIX B

EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI USED

Study 1 Stimuli: Graphic T-Shirts

A. Men's Shirt



B. Women's Shirt

Study 2 Stimuli: Articles used to activate a self-verification and self-enhancement motive

A. Self-Verification Motive Article

# Forbes

## Should You Be Yourself in a Job Interview?

By CAMILLE SWEENEY  JAN 19, 2015

Think you should do everything you can to impress potential employers during a job interview? You are probably *wrong*. I recently had the chance to talk to a B-school Career Services Director who had some important advise for today's undergrads.

"The job market is improving, but there is still a lot of competition for internships and entry level jobs. B-school students who want to be successful in this environment need to do everything they can to be themselves during the interview process, so that employers understand them and accept them for who they really are."

She continued, "It's a common misconception that employers want candidates to always put their best foot forward and project a very positive image in the interview." This is wrong. Hiring managers expect candidates to be themselves and put both their strengths *and* their weaknesses on display during a job interview."

This view seems to be the correct one. Recent studies by Dr. David Foster at Harvard Business school have shown that the most successful job candidates get hiring managers to understand who they really are, rather than act like someone they are not. "Candidates should do all they can to emphasize their true selves, even if it means acknowledging their weaknesses," asserts Dr. Foster. "The upside of being your 'real' self definitely outweighs the costs of potentially looking bad."

What's the takeaway? Hiring managers expect you to be honest about who you really are during the short time they spend with you. Make sure you 'keep it real,' not just by showing your best qualities, but also by bringing them to recognize any limitations you may have.

# Forbes

## Should You Be Yourself in a Job Interview?

By CAMILLE SWEENEY  JAN 19, 2015

Think you should do everything you can to impress potential employers during a job interview? You are probably *right*. I recently had the chance to talk to a B-school Career Services Director who had some important advise for today's undergrads.

"The job market is improving, but there is still a lot of competition for internships and entry level jobs. B-school students who want to be successful in this environment need to do everything they can to make themselves look good in front of potential employers during the interview process."

She continued, "It's a common misconception that employers want candidates to be themselves and put both their strengths *and* weaknesses on display during a job interview. This is wrong. Hiring managers expect candidates to put their best foot forward and project a very positive image in the interview."

This view seems to be the correct one. Recent studies by Dr. David Foster at Harvard Business school have shown that the most successful job candidates are those who do all they can to be respected by the company's hiring team. "Candidates should do all they can to emphasize the positive aspects of themselves, while downplaying the negatives." asserts Dr. Foster. "The upside of being your 'real' self just doesn't outweigh the costs if you come out looking bad."

What's the takeaway? Hiring managers expect to be impressed during the short time they spend with you. Make sure they see your best qualities and, by all means, don't "keep it real."

Study 2 Stimuli: Unattractive and Attractive Jeans

A. Men's Jeans

We gave pairs of these jeans to a sample of 56 male students to wear last semester and

asked them to rate them on their comfort, affordability, and attractiveness. Please take a

few moments to evaluate how students rated this pair of jeans:


**LESS ATTRACTIVE**

Comfort rating: 8.3/10
(1=uncomfortable; 10=comfortable)

Affordability rating: 6.5/10
(1=unaffordable; 10=affordable)

Attractiveness rating: 4.7/10
(1=unattractive; 10=attractive)


**MORE ATTRACTIVE**

Comfort rating: 8.3/10
(1=uncomfortable; 10=comfortable)

Affordability rating: 6.5/10
(1=unaffordable; 10=affordable)

Attractiveness rating: 8.2/10
(1=unattractive; 10=attractive)

B. Women's Jeans

We gave pairs of these jeans to a sample of 56 female students to wear last semester and asked them to rate them on their comfort, affordability, and attractiveness. Please take a few moments to evaluate how students rated this pair of jeans:

### LESS ATTRACTIVE

Comfort rating: 8.3/10
(1=uncomfortable; 10=comfortable)

Affordability rating: 6.5/10
(1=unaffordable; 10=affordable)

Attractiveness rating: 4.7/10
(1=unattractive; 10=attractive)

### MORE ATTRACTIVE

Comfort rating: 8.3/10
(1=uncomfortable; 10=comfortable)

Affordability rating: 6.5/10
(1=unaffordable; 10=affordable)

Attractiveness rating: 8.2/10
(1=unattractive; 10=attractive)

Study 3A Stimuli: Advertisements for Kia and Lexus

A. Kia Ad



A. Lexus Ad

Study 3B Stimuli: Selections of Budget and Luxury Sunglasses

A. Selection of Budget Sunglasses



B. Selection of Luxury Sunglasses

Study 4 and 5 Stimuli: Ad for Kia and Lexus with Tagline

A. Kia Ad



B. Lexus Ad