

**Conspicuous Experiences as Unique Social Signals of Both Status and Warmth**

by

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## **Abstract**

Showing off expensive purchases signals wealth and status. To date, the literature exploring this conspicuous consumption process has largely focused on material goods (e.g., cars) while neglecting targets of consumption such as experiences (e.g., vacations) whose transitory nature may bring unique considerations from a signaling perspective. We contend that not only can expensive experiential purchases serve as strong status signals when displayed through certain channels (e.g., social media), but they also confer unique benefits in other interpersonal domains relative to the more traditional material conspicuous consumption. A first set of studies (Studies 1a-d) show that conspicuous experiences convey status equivalently to conspicuous material goods while simultaneously signaling communality better than material items. A second set of studies examine the mechanisms underlying the communal benefits of experiential conspicuous consumption (Studies 2a-c). One final study expands upon the type of status conferred to experiential conspicuous consumers, showing that experiential conspicuous consumption primarily affords prestige- (as opposed to dominance-) based status. These findings broaden our understanding of status perception and position conspicuous experiences as signaling tools with unique social value.

*Keywords:* conspicuous consumption, status perceptions, communal perceptions, experiences, consumer psychology

## Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2015, the hit musical *Hamilton* took Broadway by storm. Thanks to glowing reviews, admission prices upwards of \$1,000, and limited seating capacity, some dubbed tickets “the ultimate New York City status symbol” (Gardner & Lee, 2017). Indeed, those lucky few who scored tickets often filled their social media feeds with pictures of the iconic play bill, and celebrity attendees became “a torrential river of A-listers vying for premiere position” (#*Hamilbrag*, 2016). Such behaviors suggest that experiential purchases like *Hamilton* tickets can act as signals of wealth and prestige. Yet, the broad literature on status signaling through consumption behavior has been instead largely focused on material purchases like fancy cars and luxury watches (see Dubois et al., 2021). Some researchers even claim that popular musicals, extravagant vacations, and other luxury experiences are “relatively poor” indicators of wealth and status (Carter & Gilovich, 2012, p. 1314). In contrast, we make the case that *experiential conspicuous consumption* provides distinct social signaling benefits along two focal dimensions: perceptions of status and perceptions of communal traits.

### 1.1 Conspicuous Consumption as a Social Status Signal

Status seeking is considered a fundamental social motivation, the pursuit of which shapes our friendships, work alliances, and romantic relationships (Kenrick et al., 2010). Displaying expensive purchases is a signal of wealth and social status referred to as conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/1965; Miller, 2001). The showy status displays that typify conspicuous consumption are ubiquitous across time and culture (e.g., Bliege Bird & Smith,

2005). For example, ancient leaders constructed monumental architecture like the Pyramids of Giza that served as towering symbols of material resources (Trigger, 1990), whereas potlaches—rituals common amongst indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest involving the destruction and donation of possessions—demonstrated social rank based on who could afford to get rid of the most material items (Boone, 2017). Status displays also have biological roots in the animal kingdom, where display of metabolic resources and efficacy substitutes for economic expenditure (Grueter et al., 2015). Consider the brilliant plumage peacocks flaunt in front of mates, or the ferocious chest-beating of gorillas trying to establish dominance amongst their peers.

To be effective in the marketplace of human interaction, status signals must be costly (indicating you have the resources to incur significant economic burden) and observable by a relevant audience (making others aware of your resources). These costly, visible displays have piqued the interest of economists studying optimal luxury taxation (Bagwell & Bernheim, 2021), informed sociological perspectives on symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), and illuminated psychological processes surrounding consumer behavior, power, group identification, and income inequality (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Mazzocco et al., 2012; Berger, 2014; Berger & Ward, 2010; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011).

In psychological research, conspicuous consumption has been operationalized primarily through the purchase and display of material goods. For example, compared to people wearing non-luxury clothing brands, people adorned with luxury clothing brands enjoyed higher compliance when making requests (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) and more easily gained access to elite, exclusive spaces (Rivera, 2010). Perceivers judged other participants who mentioned preferences for luxury brands like Rolex and Prada to be more suitable for high status jobs than

participants who did not mention such preferences (Cannon & Rucker, 2019). And in romantic contexts, because heterosexual women commonly judge status to be important in their romantic partners (Buss, 1989), men who drove an expensive car were seen as more desirable than men who drove a cheap car (Sundie et al., 2011).

Material conspicuous consumption has shortcomings, however. In addition to the financial costs spent on displays, Cannon and Rucker (2019) found that, though luxury purchases boosted perceptions of status, they also diminished perceptions of interpersonal warmth and likability. Similarly, when evaluating new friends (Garcia et al., 2018) and group members (Srna et al., 2022, Study 3) people preferred individuals displaying modest, as opposed to conspicuous, purchases. Some research suggests this warmth cost stems from the inference that luxury purchases are made in order to present a favorable impression of oneself rather than being more intrinsically driven (Cannon & Rucker, 2019). Thus, material conspicuous consumption appears to provide a specific benefit (greater status) paired with a specific cost (lower warmth). How might the social value of experiential conspicuous consumption differ from that of material conspicuous consumption?

## **1.2 Experiential Purchases as an Overlooked Target of Conspicuous Consumption**

Even though sports cars and diamond watches are effective for boosting status perceptions (when the situation calls for it), displays of similarly expensive activities like international vacations and exclusive concert tickets are notably underrepresented in the conspicuous consumption literature. In a recent review highlighting “the latest advances in the psychology behind consumption of luxury objects and experiences” (Dubois et al., 2021), only 26% of the empirical articles (eight out of 31) mention experiences as luxury targets, and even then, studies that include both purchase types usually treat them as interchangeable. For instance,

a single conspicuousness index may be calculated by averaging across experiential and material purchases (Sundie et al., 2011; Goenka & Thomas, 2020, Study 6b; Griskevicius et al., 2007).

The lack of unique attention paid to conspicuous experiences is incongruent with the extensive work on differences between material and experiential consumption more generally (i.e., spending not intended for display). Two such differences between material and experiential purchases laid out in this literature are especially relevant to the current investigation. One involves the relative impermanence of experiences. Some researchers contend that this impermanence may reduce opportunities to observe displayed experiences as compared to displayed material items (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Given the choice between two equally costly items, such as a luxury bag and a Michelin-starred meal, the bag will provide a more enduring indicator of wealth and status by adorning your arm for years, while any visible evidence of your meal will dissipate soon after you leave the restaurant. Of course, this ignores the fact that experiences can live on through various communication channels—while Michelin-starred meals may only last an hour or two, they can be displayed through tales you tell of the handmade pastas and rare wines you enjoyed long after the experience is over. And today, thanks to the recent rise of social media, pictures or videos of these meals could be shown off online for hundreds, or even thousands, of people to see. Given these diverse opportunities for display, we expect that conspicuous experiences—those that are expensive and visible to others—also act as viable social status signals.

A second key difference between consumption types is that experiences tend to be more social than material purchases (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Howell & Hill, 2009). People who value experiential purchases are typically associated with positive interpersonal traits like humor and friendliness (Van Boven et al., 2010), suggesting that conspicuous experiences may be buffered against much of the warmth costs linked to material conspicuous consumption. That is, display of conspicuous experiences may signal communal traits to perceivers more than display of similar material items does. We expand on the implications of these possibilities next.

### **1.3 Expanding Theorizing Around the Social Value of Experiential Conspicuous Consumption**

If conspicuous experiences act similarly to (in terms of status) and distinctly from (in terms of communal traits) conspicuous material goods, we can extend theorizing about experiential conspicuous consumption in two fundamental ways.

First, if conspicuous experiences do signal communal traits, what psychological mechanisms underlie this signal? A number of plausible options exist. We detail one here that received empirical support (see Study 3), but also discuss two others that were not supported later in the paper and the supplement (see Studies S1-2). A mechanism of particular relevance, perceived impression management motives, is a key driver of the warmth costs associated with material conspicuous consumption (Cannon & Rucker, 2019). How might perceptions of these motives manifest when it comes to experiential conspicuous consumption? Consider hearing about a recent experiential purchase made by two of your colleagues: tickets to an exclusive, upscale art exhibition. One tells you they attended because of their long-standing interest in art history and particular admiration of the style that the artists featured in the exhibit displayed, whereas the other colleague simply delighted at the opportunity to rub shoulders with the cast of

notable attendees. Despite consuming (and displaying) the same experience, your impression of these people might be strongly influenced by their reasons for doing so—the intrinsic enjoyment of the experience by the former colleague versus external rewards like networking by the latter. In general, intrinsically motivated people tend to be more prosocial, and extrinsically motivated people tend to be less prosocial (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Kasser et al., 1995). Perceptions of these underlying motivations mediate how much people like experiential consumers and dislike material consumers (Van Boven et al., 2010). Further, when people buy products to fulfill an ulterior motive, those buyers are perceived as less authentic and liked less compared to people who buy products because they gain intrinsic value from them (Ferraro et al., 2013). Thus, we expect that experiential conspicuous consumption will be seen as more intrinsically motivated than material conspicuous consumption, and that this motivational difference will drive the communal buffer that experiential conspicuous consumers enjoy.

Second, although both material and experiential conspicuous consumption are predicted to boost status, the *type* of status associated with each of these forms of display may be distinct. Consider that, from an evolutionary perspective, status striving is often broken into two strategies: dominance and prestige. People seeking dominance-based status demand social influence through intimidation and aggression, whereas people seeking prestige-based status garner social influence through admiration and respect (Maner, 2017). Thus, dominance is associated with power and control while prestige is associated with communality and social relationships (de Waal-Andrews et al., 2015). Recently, researchers have begun to examine how these different status dimensions are related to material conspicuous consumption. Desmichel and Rucker (2023) find that people navigating dominance-based hierarchies prefer conspicuous material goods like clothing and watches, but people navigating prestige-based hierarchies do

not. Applying such findings to the context of experiential conspicuous consumption and following from our hypothesis that conspicuous experiences are more communal than conspicuous material goods, the prediction emerges: conspicuous experiences will confer higher levels of prestige and lower levels of dominance compared to conspicuous material goods.

In sum, we argue not only for greater *inclusion* of experiences in the conspicuous consumption literature, but also that *distinctions* should be made between experiences and material goods when discussing social benefits and costs of conspicuous consumption.

#### **1.4 Current Research**

The empirical section of this dissertation includes eight studies split across three chapters. The first four studies establish how perceptions of status and communal traits result from experiential and material conspicuous consumption and include direct and conceptual replications of the primary effects (Studies 1a-d). We expect that conspicuous experiences will be associated with perceptions of status, and we also expect that consumers of these purchases will be perceived as possessing higher levels of communal traits than consumers of conspicuous material goods. Second, three studies extend our understanding of these communal effects by testing multiple psychological mechanisms that could contribute to the communal outcomes. Third and finally, we test whether experiential and material conspicuous consumption differentially afford specific types of status, setting up future work to test the implications of these consumption behaviors for cooperation, punishment, and other foundational interpersonal behaviors.

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures for our studies. Pre-registrations, pre-test details, data, and code are found at: [https://osf.io/9fe8c/?view\\_only=2da473fa0a1240cf8fea92bbebec36bc](https://osf.io/9fe8c/?view_only=2da473fa0a1240cf8fea92bbebec36bc). Sensitivity analyses are



presented with each study. See the appendix for further details on materials, methods, robustness checks, and ancillary analyses. Our participants were recruited from the online platform Prolific Academic. Outcomes were adapted from the existing conspicuous consumption literature in order to expand on existing methods, and all original materials were pre-tested with independent samples.

## **Chapter 2 Perceptions of Experiential Conspicuous Consumption**

Studies 1a-d use a variety of stimuli and measures to test how experiential conspicuous consumption is perceived along status and communal dimensions, see Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of demographics, design stimuli, and measures for Studies 1a-c.

	Study 1a	Study 1b	Study 1c	Study 1d
<i>N</i>	197 (41 excluded)	199 (4 excluded)	120 (24 excluded)	421 (3 excluded)
Demographics	Age Range 18-84, mean age = 34.28, 52% female, 67% White	Age Range 18-70, mean age = 32.75, 53% female, 70% White	Age Range 18-72, mean age = 31.00, 46% female, 69% White	Age Range (18 – 77), mean age = 39.85, 50% female, 72% White
Design	2 (experiential, material) x 2 (inconspicuous, conspicuous); fully-within participants	2 (experiential, material) x 2 (inconspicuous, conspicuous) x 3 (status job, communal job, communal + low status job); fully-within participants	2 (experiential, material) x 2 (inconspicuous, conspicuous) x 2 (status job, communal job); fully-within participants	2 (experiential, material; between) x 2 (status traits, communal traits; within)
Sensitivity analysis	$d = .20$	$d = .20$	$d = .26$	$d = .25$
Stimuli	Written purchase descriptions	Written purchase descriptions	Purchase images scraped from social media	Images and written descriptions (same purchase: speaker system)
Status and communal measures	Trait evaluations	Suitability for status and communal jobs; trait evaluations (supplement)	Suitability for status and communal jobs	Trait evaluations

## 2.1 General Methods and Data Analytic Plan

Studies 1a-d followed a similar procedure. Participants learned about a purchase that someone had made and then evaluated this person on different interpersonal qualities. The purchases varied on Purchase Type (experiential, material) and Purchase Conspicuousness (inconspicuous, conspicuous; except for Study 1d which only included conspicuous purchases), and the interpersonal qualities represented dimensions of status or communality. Across these

studies, we expected that the focal effects would replicate: experiential conspicuous consumers would be evaluated as just as high status as material conspicuous consumers, and experiential conspicuous consumers would be evaluated as higher in communal traits than material conspicuous consumers.

Our focal research question compares material and experiential conspicuous consumption, and thus we present direct pairwise comparisons between these two product categories above and beyond the results from other pre-registered analyses. Inconspicuous products were included to validate that conspicuousness mattered, and across Studies 1a-c we replicated past findings that conspicuous purchases were seen as more high status than inconspicuous ones. Because this is not a primary theoretical focus, we focus here on experiential and material conspicuous consumption. Details on inconspicuous product comparisons are presented in the appendix.

## **2.2 Study 1a**

### ***2.2.1 Method***

Participants read through four, randomly-ordered responses to the statement “describe a purchase that you made recently,” each corresponding to the different consumption types. These responses were purportedly obtained from different participants in a previous study. Purchases were selected out of more than 30 products that we pre-tested to match on conspicuousness and desirability with an independent sample on Prolific Academic ( $N = 100$ , 55% women, mean age = 29). We selected two different stimuli sets that were seen as desirable and conspicuous: (a) jeans and concerts, (b) laptops and camping trips. For example, the conspicuous concert description was “I went to a music festival with a lot of famous singers and bands. I even bought backstage passes to meet some of them,” and the conspicuous jeans description was “I bought a

pair of nice, fitted blue jeans made from imported, top-of-the-line denim.” Results were largely the same between the two stimuli sets, so for all analyses we collapsed across stimuli set. For each purchase, participants rated (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) the person displaying the purchase on status traits (e.g., “upper class;”  $\alpha = .83$ ) and communal traits (e.g., “warmth,”  $\alpha = .86$ ) (Cannon & Rucker, 2019).

### 2.2.2 Results

Our primary pre-registered analyses were 2 (Purchase Type: experiential, material) x 2 (Purchase Conspicuousness: conspicuous, inconspicuous) repeated measures ANOVAs for status traits and for communal traits. Descriptive statistics are found in Table 2, panel A.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for status and communal traits (Studies 1a-c).

		Experiential Conspicuous Consumption	Material Conspicuous Consumption
A. Study 1a	Status trait evaluation	5.24 (1.21)	5.04 (1.23)
	Communal trait evaluation	4.28 (1.19)	3.90 (1.15)
B. Study 1b	Status job suitability	5.14 (1.29)	5.02 (1.30)
	Communal job suitability	4.76 (1.25)	4.00 (1.19)
C. Study 1c	Status job suitability	5.24 (0.96)	5.21 (0.88)
	Communal job suitability	3.86 (1.18)	3.31 (1.16)
D. Study 1d	Status trait evaluation	5.16 (1.14)	5.38 (1.28)
	Communal trait evaluation	4.41 (1.19)	3.96 (1.20)

*Note.* Means, with standard deviations presented in parentheses.

### **2.2.2.1 Status Traits**

Main effects of Purchase Type,  $F(1, 196) = 458.24, p < .001, f = 1.53, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.32, 1.73]$ , and Purchase Conspicuousness,  $F(1, 196) = 51.18, p < .001, f = 0.51, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.36, 0.66]$ , were qualified by an interaction,  $F(1, 196) = 22.18, p < .001, f = 0.34, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.19, 0.48]$ .

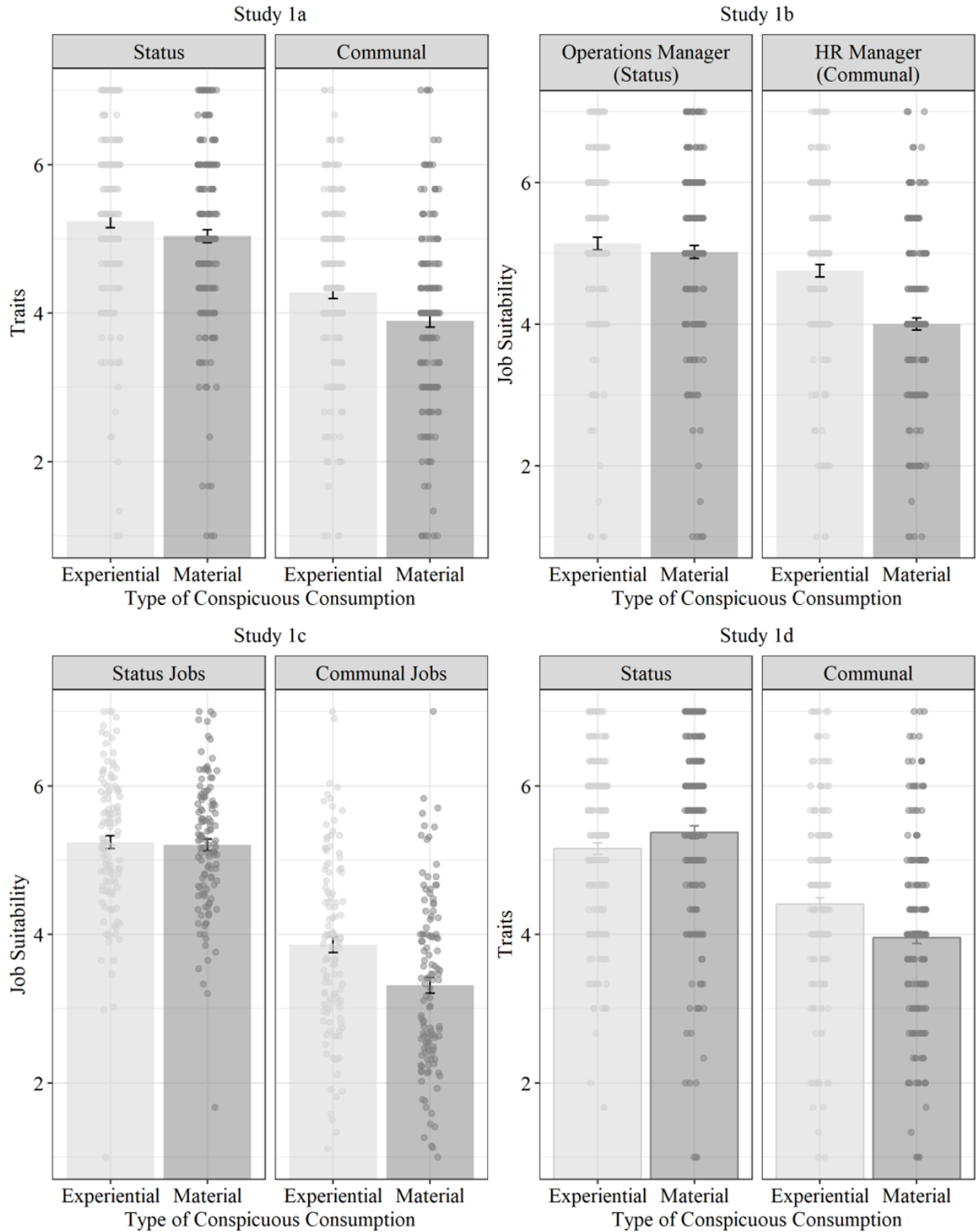
Pairwise comparisons indicated that experiential conspicuous consumption was seen as slightly higher status than material conspicuous consumption,  $t(196) = 2.18, p = .031, d = 0.16, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.003, 0.30]$ , an unexpected difference, but one that does support the perception of experiential conspicuous consumption as conveying status. See Figure 1.

### **2.2.2.2 Communal Traits**

Main effects of Purchase Type,  $F(1, 196) = 29.10, p < .001, f = 0.39, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.24, 0.53]$ , and Purchase Conspicuousness,  $F(1, 196) = 78.10, p < .001, f = 0.63, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.48, 0.78]$ , were not qualified by an interaction,  $F(1, 196) = 0.81, p = .33, f = 0.06, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.20]$ .

Because our focus is on conspicuous consumption differences, we examined the pairwise comparison within this factor, revealing that experiential conspicuous consumption was seen as higher in communal traits than material conspicuous consumption,  $t(196) = 4.74, p < .001, d = .34, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.21, 0.48]$ . See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Perceived status and communal evaluations of experiential and material conspicuous consumers (Studies 1a-d).



## **2.3 Study 1b**

In Study 1b, participants made judgments about how suitable material and experiential conspicuous consumers would be for different professional roles where status or communal traits are diagnostic for success.

### **2.3.1 Method**

Participants read a job description (for a company with whom the research team was supposedly collaborating) and evaluated four applicants on suitability for that job based on responses to a seemingly irrelevant background question: “Describe a purchase that you made recently.” Purchases were drawn from Study 1a: a pair of jeans (material) and a concert (experiential). This procedure was repeated for three jobs in total: operations manager (status-framed; qualifications like “important that the individual has an air of prestige”), human resources manager (communal-framed; qualifications like “important that the individual is a people-person”), and assistant accounts team member (communal-framed but explicitly low status). The first two job descriptions were adapted from Cannon and Rucker (2019, experiment 3). Participants were asked to rate how necessary status and communal traits were for the respective jobs. The assistant accounts position was included as a more extreme version of the human resources position, but results showed that these two jobs were indistinguishable on trait perceptions. Therefore, analyses focus on operations manager and human resources manager positions only (see supplement for full results).

Applicant job suitability was evaluated using three items: “this applicant...would be a good fit for the job description/has the traits necessary to succeed at the job/would *not* do well in



the job described above” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Reliability was relatively poor across the three items due to the reversed framing of the last item ( $\alpha = .61$ ), so all analyses test a composite of the first two, highly correlated items ( $r = .88$ ). Including all three items does not meaningfully change the results (see appendix).

## **2.3.2 Results**

### **2.3.2.1 Preliminary job-trait analyses**

Consistent with expectations, participants thought that status traits were more necessary for the operations manager position ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) than the human resources manager position ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ),  $t(197) = -18.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = 1.32$ , 95% CI [1.12, 1.56], ruling out the possibility that both positions would be seen as high status. Additionally, participants thought that communal traits were more necessary for the human resources manager position ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than the operations manager position ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ),  $t(197) = 14.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.00$ , 95% CI [0.86, 1.18].

Our primary pre-registered analysis was a 2 (Purchase Type: experiential, material) x 2 (Purchase Conspicuousness: conspicuous, inconspicuous) x 3 (Job Type: status job, communal job, control job) repeated measures ANOVA.

### **2.3.2.2 Status Results**

Main effects of Purchase Conspicuousness,  $F(1, 198) = 152.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = .88$ , 95% CI [0.71, 1.04], and Purchase Type,  $F(1, 198) = 93.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = .69$ , 95% CI [0.53, 0.84] were qualified by a three-way interaction,  $F(1, 396) = 30.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = .39$ , 95% CI [0.25, 0.54]. Pairwise comparisons indicated that experiential conspicuous consumers were seen as equally suitable for the operations manager position as material conspicuous consumers,  $t(198) = 1.28$ ,  $p$

= .20,  $d = 0.09$ , 95% CI [-0.05, 0.24] (Figure 1). This null effect is consistent with our hypothesis that both experiential and material conspicuous consumption convey information about status.

### **2.3.2.3 Communal Results**

Experiential conspicuous consumers were seen as more suitable for the human resources manager positions than material conspicuous consumers,  $t(198) = 6.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.49$ , 95% CI [0.32, 0.69] (Figure 1). This supports the notion that, compared to material conspicuous consumption, experiential conspicuous consumption is a better signal of communal traits.

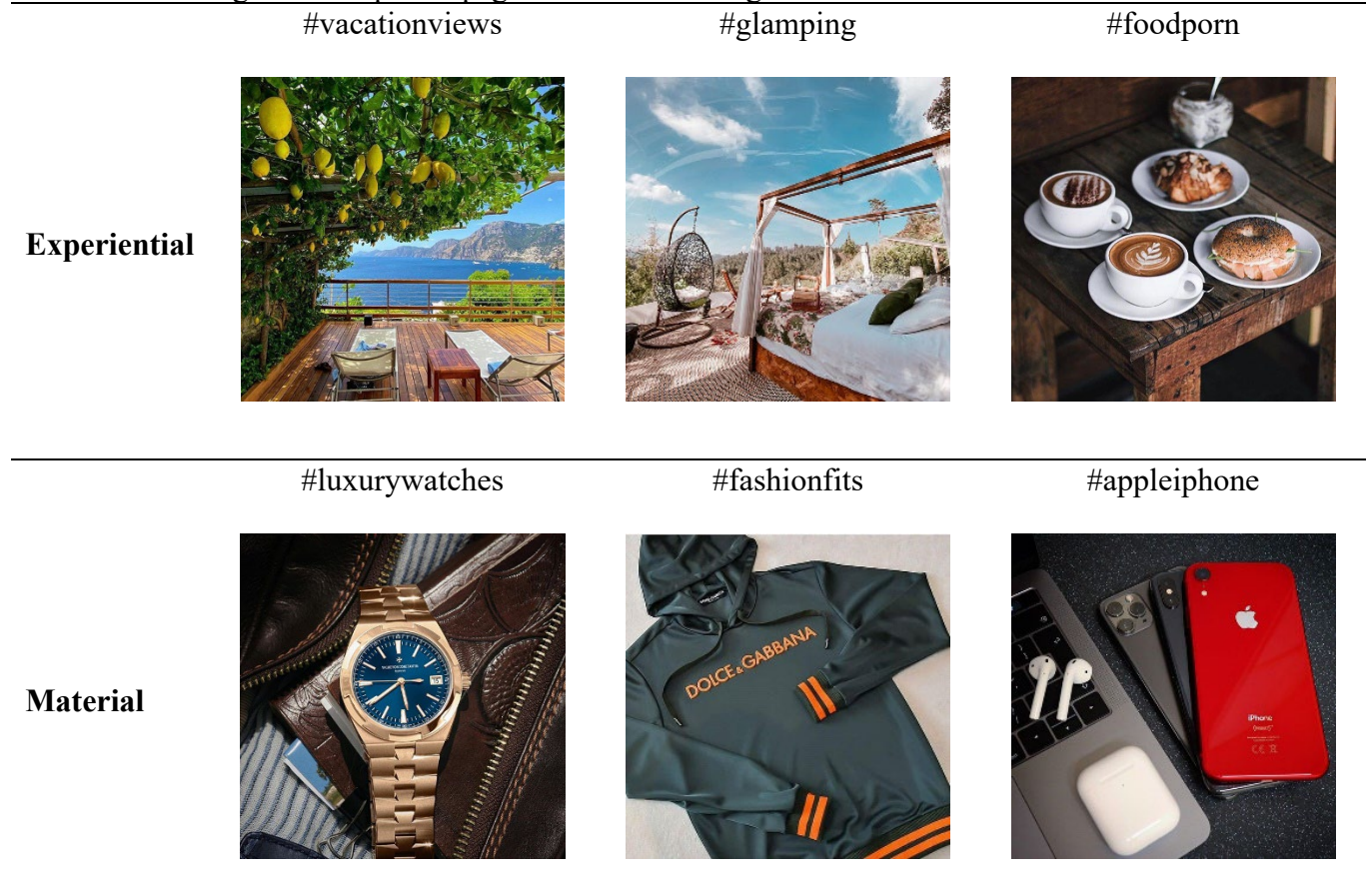
## **2.4 Study 1c**

Testing similar job suitability outcomes, Study 1c employed real purchases displayed scraped from social media and real professions that require either status or communal traits.

### **2.4.1 Pre-tests**

Our research team scraped pictures from Instagram using hashtags related to the focal purchase categories (e.g., #luxurytravel, #watchesofinstagram). One hundred independent participants (53% women, mean age = 33) rated the pictures on purchase conspicuousness (1 = not at all conspicuous, 7 = definitely conspicuous) and whether the picture represented a material purchase or an experience (material good, experience, not sure). For the primary study, we chose 24 pictures that were unambiguously evaluated as material or experiential, were matched on conspicuousness, and featured no faces which could add irrelevant information (see supplement). See Figure 2 for example purchases.

Figure 2: Example Instagram pictures (Study 1c). Hashtags represent the phrase that was searched on Instagram’s “explore” page to find those image stimuli.



To select realistic job stimuli, 100 new participants (61% women, mean age = 33) rated perceived status and communal trait level for 20 jobs. We selected three jobs that scored high on status traits and low on communal traits for status-typical occupations (engineer, lawyer, businessperson) and three of the reverse pattern for communal-typical occupations (farmer, social worker, childcare worker), see supplement for pre-test analyses.

### 2.4.2 Method

For each job, participants evaluated suitability based on purchases the target person posted on social media.

Job suitability was measured with three items ( $\alpha > .9$ ): “how suitable do you think the person who posted this picture would be for the following occupations?” (1 = extremely unsuitable, 7 = extremely suitable), “The person who posted this picture could fit in as a...” (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7), and “To what extent do you think the person who posted this picture has the traits and skills necessary to succeed in the occupations below?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We created a composite job suitability measure by aggregating across the occupations ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### **2.4.3 Results**

Updating our pre-registered plan with a more appropriate analysis, we fit a maximum likelihood estimation hierarchical linear model with random intercepts for the 24 pictures nested within Purchase Type and Purchase Conspicuousness factors, and the 6 occupations nested within the Job Type factor (using the lme4 package in R). This allows for tests of fixed effects while controlling for individual picture- and job-level variances. The results from this model and the pre-registered one are the same (see supplement).

Main effects of Purchase Conspicuousness,  $\beta = 1.08$ ,  $p < .001$ , Purchase Type,  $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p = .004$  and Job Type,  $\beta = 0.67$ ,  $p = .03$ , were qualified by a three-way interaction,  $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p = .002$  (see supplement for full regression table). Pairwise comparisons revealed that people who posted conspicuous experiential pictures were seen as equally suitable for status jobs (Figure 1), mean difference = 0.04,  $Z = .20$ ,  $p > .99$ , and more suitable for communal jobs (Figure 1), mean difference = 0.55,  $Z = 3.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , compared to people who posted conspicuous material pictures.

## **2.5 Study 1d**

The studies so far have examined different material and experiential purchases, and thus it is possible that the differences in communal traits we have observed are due to characteristics other than the material/experiential distinction at hand. That is, camping trips and laptops *do* vary along the material/experiential dimension, but they vary on other potentially relevant dimensions as well (e.g., one involves the outdoors and the other presumably does not).

To better align purchases and isolate status and communal effects to the material/experiential dimension, in this study we leverage a methodological technique called “experiential product framing” (Gallo et al., 2019), which has been fruitfully applied in many past studies focused on differentiating the psychological properties of material and experiential purchases (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). This approach entails taking the same product and framing it more in material terms (e.g., based on its physical properties) or experiential terms (e.g., based on the feeling of using the purchase).

### ***2.5.1 Methods***

Participants in both conditions viewed a Bose 520 Home Theater System and were told that it cost \$1,568. In the experientially-framed condition, participants saw a picture of this speaker system set up in a living room with a description of the purchase that highlighted its experiential aspects (“...It's not just about the equipment; it's about the unforgettable experiences it unlocks in your own living room...”). In the material-framed condition, participants saw a picture of this speaker system as it would be displayed in an online storefront (i.e., devoid of any background or contextual information). The description accompanying this picture highlighted its material aspects (“...Crafted from top-tier materials, each component reflects a commitment to delivering a visual and auditory performance of the highest quality...”).

These pictures and descriptions were selected based on pre-testing we conducted with an independent sample of 100 participants. We aimed to choose purchases that differed on the extent to which they were seen as being experiential vs. material but similar on levels of conspicuousness. In the pre-test, on a scale from 1 = much more like a material purchase to 7 = much more like an experiential purchase, the experientially-framed speaker system ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ) was seen as significantly more experiential than the material-framed speaker system ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ),  $t(94) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = 0.56$ , 95% CI [0.30, 1.75]. Additionally, the experientially-framed speaker system ( $M = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) did not differ significantly from the material-framed speaker system ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) on conspicuousness,  $t(97) = -0.14$ ,  $p = .89$ ,  $d = -0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.66, -.57].

Participants in the main study were then asked to think about someone who made the purchase described and rate them on the same status and communal traits as in Study 1a. As a manipulation check, we included the same measures of how experiential or material participants thought the purchase was (1 = much more like a material purchase, 7 = much more like an experiential purchase).

### **2.5.2 Results**

As expected, and consistent with our pre-test results, the experientially-framed speaker system was viewed as more experiential ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) than the material-framed speaker system ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ),  $t(417) = 3.16$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = 0.31$ , 95% CI [0.22, 0.96].

We fit a 2 (material, experiential; between) x 2 (status traits, communal traits; within) mixed ANOVA to test whether framing the speakers more in terms of material or experiential qualities influenced perceptions of status and communality. Consumers of the experientially-framed speaker system ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) and consumers of the material-framed speaker

system ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) were not rated differently on status perceptions,  $t(413) = -1.86$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $d = -0.18$ , 95% CI [-0.45, 0.01]. However, replicating Studies 1a-c, experiential-framing led to perception of higher communal traits ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) than did material-framing ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ),  $t(419) = 3.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.38$ , 95% CI [0.22, 0.68].

To further highlight this effect, we also conducted an exploratory analysis outside of our pre-registration. In this model we fit a mixed linear regression examining the influence of the continuous material-experiential manipulation check on status and communal ratings, controlling for condition. This revealed an interaction between continuous material-experiential ratings of the purchases and trait ratings,  $b = -0.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . Simple slopes analyses indicate that the more a purchase was rated as experiential, the more communal that consumer was rated to be,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $p < .001$ , but there was no relationship between material-experiential rating and status traits,  $b = -0.01$ ,  $p = .67$ .

## **2.6 Studies 1a-d Discussion**

Using methods that leverage researcher-derived purchases, real social media displays, and experiential framing, experiential conspicuous consumers were evaluated as high status (a mini-meta-analysis presented in the supplement found no difference in conferred status between material and experiential conspicuous consumers across studies), confirming that experiences can in fact act as indicators of wealth and status. Further, experiential conspicuous consumers were seen as more communal than material conspicuous consumers, indicating that conspicuous experiences are buffered against the warmth costs traditionally associated with conspicuous material goods.

## **Chapter 3 Psychological Factors Driving the Communality Difference**

Why might conspicuous experiences be buffered from the warmth costs found with material conspicuous consumption? We examined three possibilities: the association between experiential purchases and intrinsic motivation (Study 2a), the inherent sociality of experiences (Study 2b), and a general positivity bias towards experiences (Study 2c).

### **3.1 Study 2a**

Prior research suggests that impression-management motivations can be a key driver of communal perceptions associated with luxury consumption (Cannon & Rucker, 2019). As mentioned in the introduction, experiential conspicuous consumption may be seen as more intrinsically motivated than material conspicuous consumption. If intrinsic motivation is relatively associated with interpersonal warmth and liking (e.g., Van Boven et al., 2010), this could account for the difference in perceptions of communal traits across types of conspicuous consumption. To test this, we manipulated the information that perceivers received about the intrinsic/extrinsic nature of conspicuous displays. We expected that the experiential communal buffer observed in past studies would disappear when these pursuits are framed as extrinsic in nature (i.e., when the assumption of intrinsic motivation for experiential consumption is negated).

#### ***3.1.1 Method***



### **3.1.1.1 Participants and Design**

The experiment used a 2 (Purchase Type: experiential, material) x 3 (Motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, control) between-subjects design. Following our pre-registered criteria, we excluded one participant and obtained a final sample of 475 (Age range=18–78,  $M_{age} = 40.03$ ; 61% female, 63% White), allowing for detection of interaction effect sizes of  $f = .15$  at 80% power.

### **3.1.1.2 Procedure**

Participants viewed social media profiles created using a similar method as in Study 2 (see supplement). In the intrinsic and extrinsic conditions, profiles included written descriptions detailing the poster's social media use. The intrinsic description included phrases like “they like to post ...because they experience enjoyment from doing so,” while the extrinsic description included phrases like “they like to post...so that people will admire them.” Pre-testing confirmed these descriptions were perceived as intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, respectively ( $N = 278$ , 69% women, mean age = 36, see supplement). In the control condition, the profile included no accompanying text. Participants evaluated each profile using the same communal ( $\alpha = .94$ ) trait measures as Study 1a and Study 2.

### **3.1.2 Results**

Descriptive statistics for communal trait perceptions are presented in Table 3. A 3x2 ANOVA revealed a main effect of Motivation,  $F(2, 469) = 42.58, p < .001, f = 0.43$ , 95% CI [0.33, 0.52] and a main effect of Purchase Type,  $F(1, 469) = 37.03, p < .001, f = .28$ , 95% CI [0.19, 0.37]. There was no interaction between Motivation and Purchase Type,  $F(2, 469) = 1.03$ ,

$p = .36, f = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.15]$ . Our pre-registered 2x2 ANOVA excluding the control condition indicated the same results (see supplement).

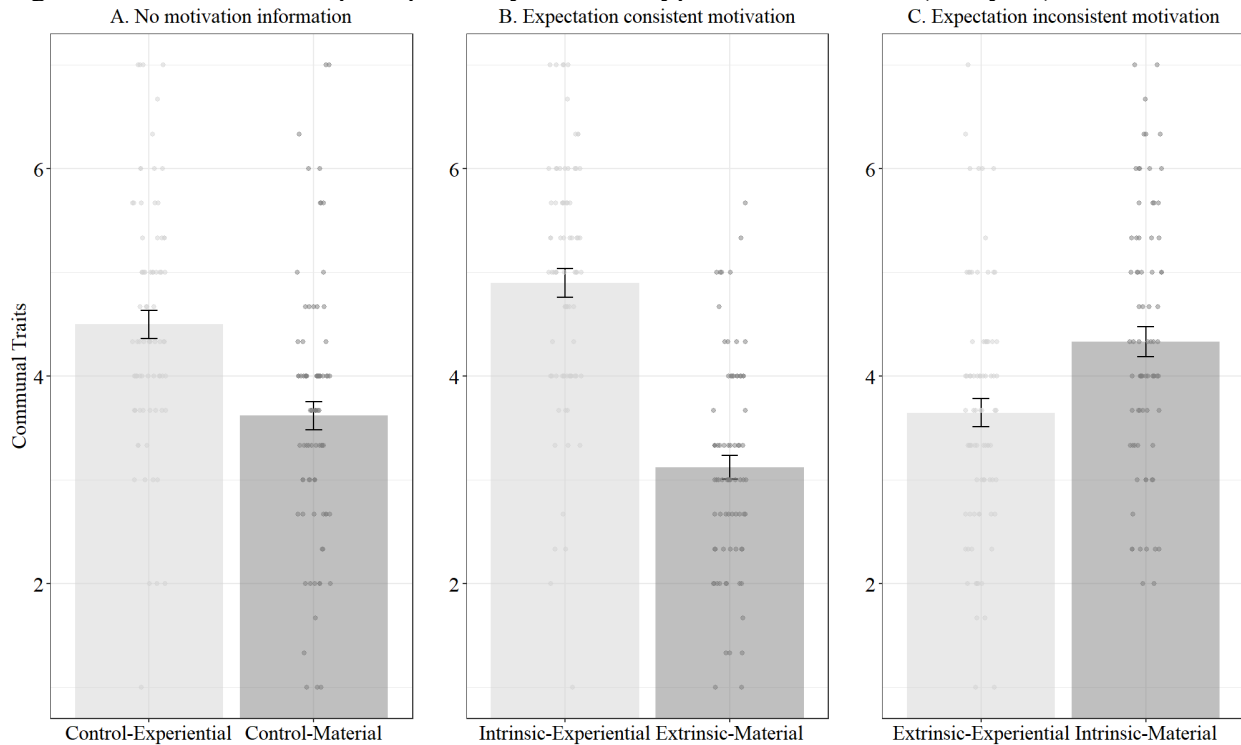
Next, using pre-registered planned contrasts, we replicated our previous findings that, absent outside information about motivations for purchasing (i.e., in the control condition), experiential conspicuous consumers were seen as higher in communal traits than material conspicuous consumers,  $t(470) = 4.72, p < .001, d = 0.37, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.26, 0.62]$ . See Figure 3, panel A. This difference persisted when expectation-consistent motivational information was included (i.e., experiential-intrinsic, material-extrinsic; see Figure 3, panel B),  $t(470) = 9.39, p < .001, d = 1.59, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.41, 2.15]$ . However, when the profiles were accompanied by motivational information *inconsistent* with expectations, the pattern just described was reversed, with experiential-extrinsic consumers seen as lower in communal traits than material-intrinsic consumers,  $t(470) = -3.61, p < .001, d = -0.55, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.06, -0.31]$ . See Figure 3, panel C.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for communal traits (Study 2a).

Motivation	Experiential Conspicuous Consumption	Material Conspicuous Consumption
No motivation information	4.50 (1.18)	3.62 (1.23)
Expectation consistent motivation (Experiential-intrinsic; material-extrinsic)	4.90 (1.21)	3.12 (1.02)
Expectation inconsistent motivation (Experiential-extrinsic; material-intrinsic)	3.65 (1.21)	4.33 (1.25)

*Note.* Means, with standard deviations presented in parentheses.

Figure 3: Communal trait perceptions by Product Type and Motivation (Study 2a).



*Notes.* “Expectation consistent motivation” represents conditions where the match between consumption type and motivational information is *the same* as that derived in the absence of motivational information. “Expectation inconsistent motivation” represents conditions where the match between consumption type and motivational information is *reversed* from that in the expectation consistent conditions.

To highlight the strength of this communal reversal, we compared expectation-inconsistent product profiles against ones with no motivational information (these tests were not pre-registered). Intrinsic-material consumers and control-experiential consumers were perceived as identical in communal traits,  $t(470) = 0.86, p = .39, d = 0.14, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.21, 0.54]$ , as were extrinsic-experiential consumers and control-material consumers,  $t(470) = -0.14, p = .89, d = 0.02, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.39, 0.34]$ .

### 3.2 Study 2b

Another reason why experiential conspicuous consumers are seen as warmer than material conspicuous consumers is that experiences tend to be more social than material goods.

The sociality and the involvement of others is a fundamental distinction between experiential and material purchases (Gilovich et al., 2015) that is primarily seen in how experiences are consumed. Going out to dinner with friends or taking your family on a vacation are inextricably tied to social connection. Indeed, people feel happiest when they are engaging in social experiences (Caprariello & Reis, 2013) and feel more connected to people in general after reflecting on an experiential purchase (Gilovich et al., 2015). Given these patterns, it may be that the communal boost conferred by experiential conspicuous consumption is driven by the associations between experiential purchases and the involvement of others. In Study 2b, we test the role of perceived sociality of a conspicuous experiential or material purchase influences perceptions of communal traits. We expected that the communal boost between conspicuous experiential and material purchases would be smaller for explicitly solitary conspicuous experiences. We also expected that explicitly social conspicuous experiences would make people seem warmer than other kinds of conspicuous experiences.

### ***3.2.1 Method***

We pre-registered primary and exploratory analyses for this study through AsPredicted (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=mi2n48>).

#### ***3.2.1.1 Participants and Design***

Participants were recruited from Academic Prolific in exchange for monetary compensation. Following our exclusion criteria outlined in the pre-registration, we obtained a final sample of 451 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.90$ ; 48% female, 73% White). The experiment used a 5 group (Control Experiential, Control Material, Solitary Experiential, Solitary Material, Social

Experiential) between subjects design. Sample sizes allowed for detection of effect sizes of  $f^2 = .02$  at 80% power for all pairwise effects.

### ***3.2.1.2 Procedure***

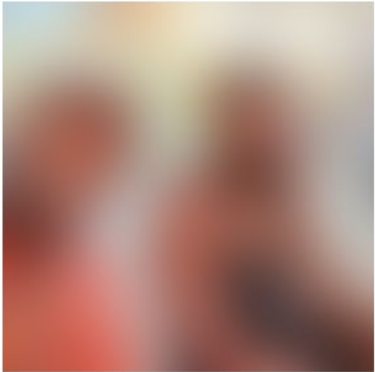
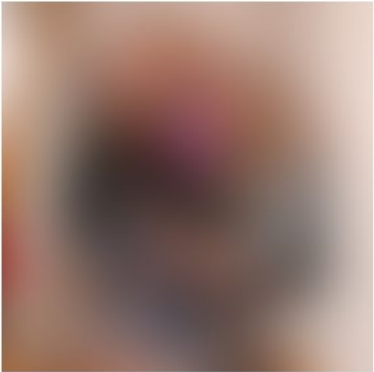
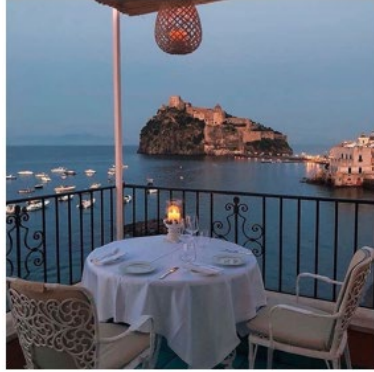
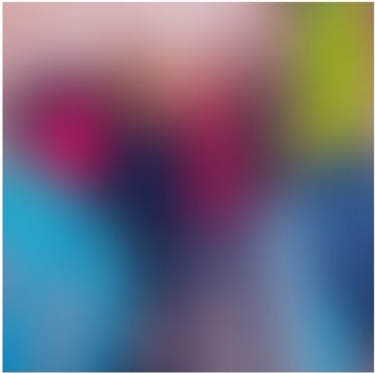
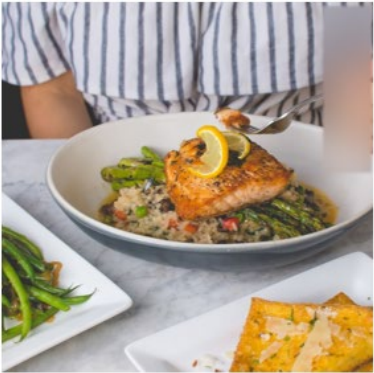
Participants were told they would be evaluating people based on pictures posted on their social media profile. Each participant saw two profiles corresponding to one of the five conditions: Control Experiential, Control Material, Solitary Experiential, Solitary Material, Social Experiential. Note that we intentionally did not include a social material condition. We did this because material products intended to be used with others blur the lines between material and experiential purchases (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Guevarra & Howell, 2015). Additionally, the focal contrasts we cared about were between solitary experiences and solitary material goods, control experiences and social experiences, and control experienced and control material goods. For both of these reasons, we therefore decided not to include profiles that highlighted social material purchases. Each profile contained three pictures that indicated either conspicuous experiential or material purchases. Because the primary comparisons dealt with different communal effects among conspicuous experiential and material purchases, we did not include any inconspicuous profiles.

To manipulate whether the profile was perceived as social or solitary, we told participants that each profile contained a number in the lower left-hand corner that indicated how many people were with the person when the picture was taken. For example, a 3 meant that there were three other people involved in the picture, while a 0 meant that there were no other people involved in the picture. We designed this to be similar to the picture “tagging” mechanic employed by social media sites like Instagram or Facebook. In the control experiential and control material conditions there were no numbers associated with the pictures.

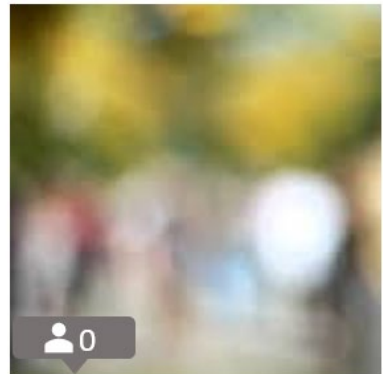
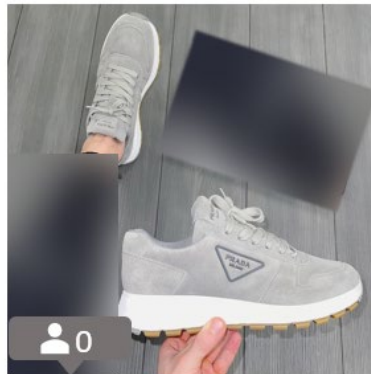
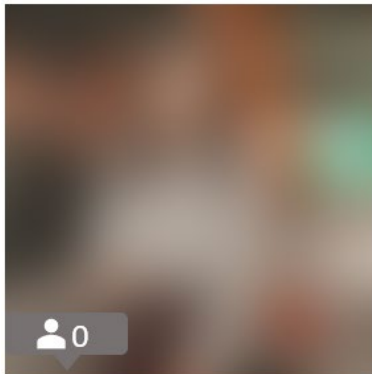
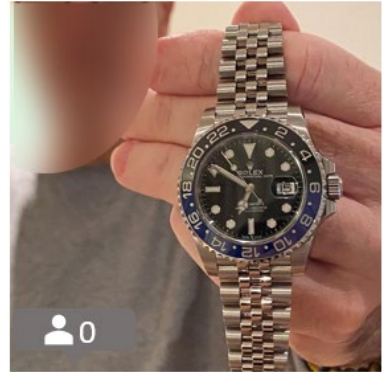
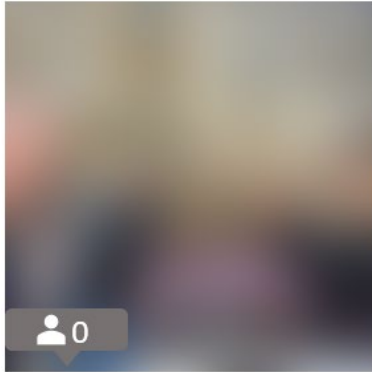
To ensure that participants understood this social vs. solitary manipulation, we recruited 120 participants from Academic Prolific to pre-test perceptions of the social vs. solitary nature of the profiles. As expected, the experiential profiles with larger numbers in the pictures were seen as more social ( $M = 4.63, SD = 0.83$ ) than experiential profiles with smaller numbers in the pictures ( $M = 2.83, SD = 1.32$ ) and experiential profiles with no numbers at all ( $M = 4.06, SD = 0.97$ ). Material profiles with no numbers at all were seen as more social ( $M = 3.00, SD = 0.68$ ) than material profiles with small numbers ( $M = 1.93, SD = 0.90$ ). For examples of the different profiles, please see Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Example stimuli from Study 2b.

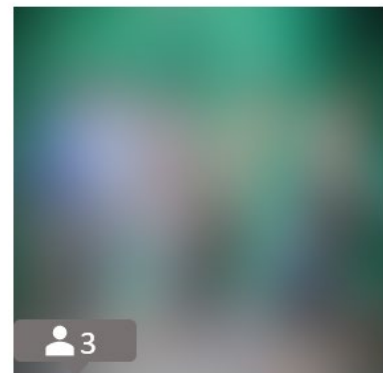
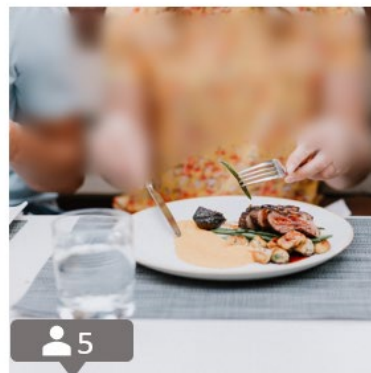
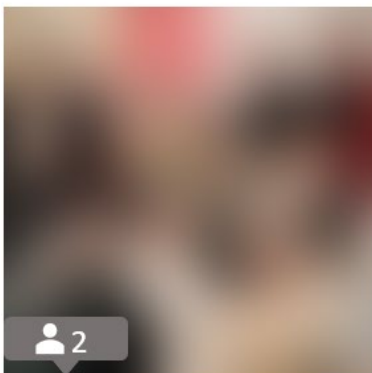
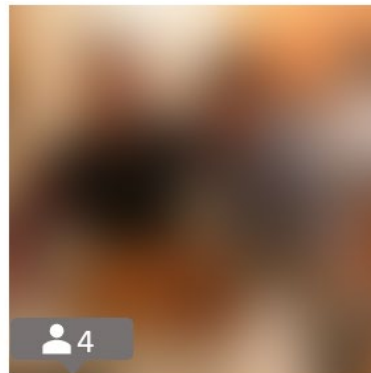
A: Control Experiential



B: Solitary Material



C: Social Experiential





For each profile, we asked participants the extent to which they thought the person who posted the pictures in the profile had the following traits: high status, prestigious, upper class, warmth, caring, friendly (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). These are the same traits use in Study 1. High status, prestigious, and upper class represented a status dimension ( $a = .94$ ). Warmth, caring, and friendly represented a communal dimension ( $a = .94$ ).

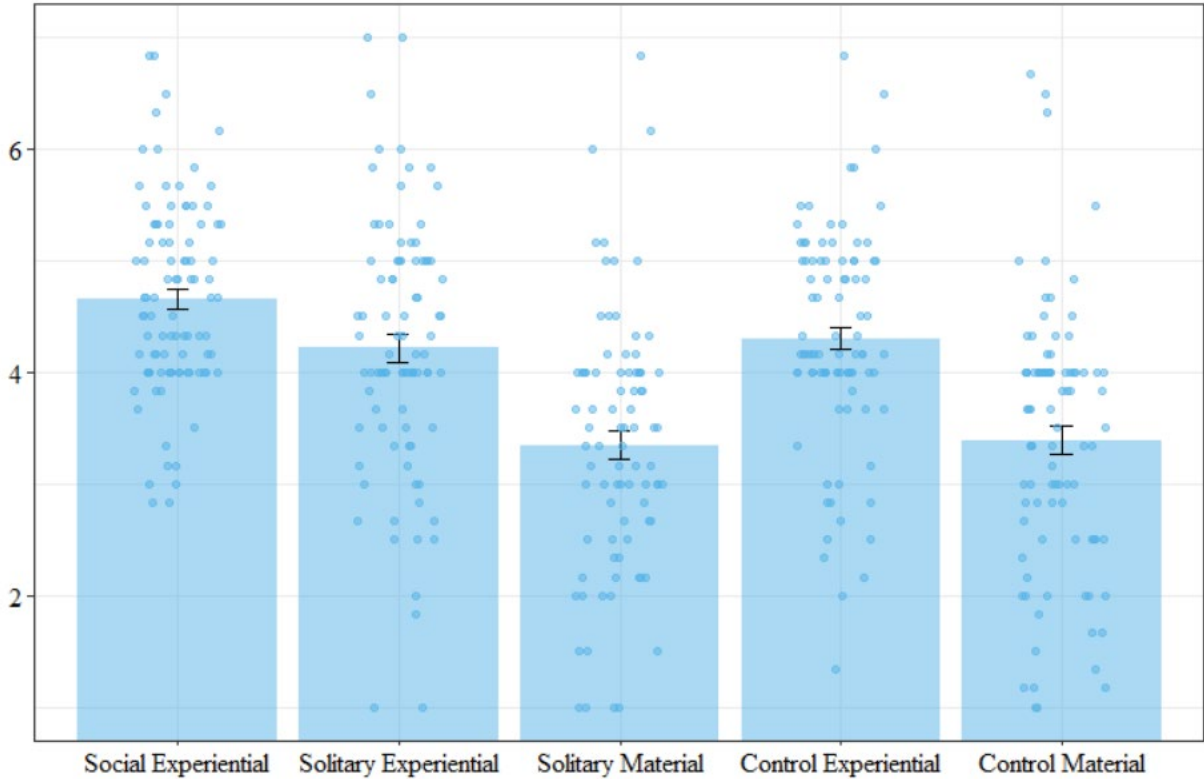
### **3.2.2 Results**

Our primary pre-registered analyses involved testing differences in perceptions of communal traits across the five types of profiles. A oneway ANOVA confirmed that there were in fact differences in communal traits conferred depending on profile condition,  $F(4, 446) = 27.04, p < .001, f = .49, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.40, 0.57]$ . See Figure 5 below. Replicating previous studies, planned contrasts revealed that Control Experiential profiles conferred more communal traits ( $M = 4.30, SD = 0.98$ ) than Control Material profiles ( $M = 3.39, SD = 1.17$ ),  $t(446) = 5.80, p < .001, d = 0.86, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.56, 1.15]$ .

How did the social or solitary nature of experiences influence communal evaluations? We pre-registered three other sets of contrasts to test this question. First, people still viewed the Solitary Experiential profiles as more communal ( $M = 4.21, SD = 1.15$ ) than the Solitary Material profiles ( $M = 3.34, SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(446) = 5.40, p < .001, d = 0.82, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.51, 1.12]$ . Second, Social Experiential profiles were seen as more communal ( $M = 4.65, SD = 0.86$ ) than Control Experiential profiles ( $M = 4.3, SD = .98$ ),  $t(446) = 2.22, p < .001, d = 0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.04, 0.62]$ . Finally, the difference between Control Experiential and Control Material profiles ( $M_{dif} = .87$ ) was statistically the same as the difference between Solitary Experiential and Solitary Material profiles ( $M_{dif} = .91$ ),  $t(446) = .18, p = .86, d = .09, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.12, .21]$ . In other

words, the communal boost enjoyed by conspicuous experiential consumption was present even for explicitly solitary experiences.

Figure 5: Communal Traits by Profile Type.



Contrary to our expectations, the communal boost enjoyed by experiential conspicuous consumers relative to material conspicuous consumers held even for profiles displaying experiences absent the involvement of others. The social or solitary nature of experiences, as manipulated here through a “tagging” method in the stimuli, is therefore not a sufficient mechanistic explanation for relatively higher communal evaluations conferred to experiential conspicuous consumers. It is possible that to truly capture the sociality of an experience or material purchase, descriptions of how others were actually included in the experience (or pictures of them being actively involved) would be stronger manipulations of sociality than the method employed in our study here.

### **3.3 Study 2c**

Because conspicuous experiences are less tangible and more diffuse than conspicuous material items, they may afford a greater breadth of information for perceivers. Communal perceptions thus may be simply one category of traits amongst other positive traits attributed to consumers of those experiences, consistent with prior research showing that experiential consumers in general (absent conspicuousness) are associated with more favorable traits than materialistic consumers (Van Boven et al., 2010). In Study 2c, we test other positive traits associated with both experiential and material conspicuous consumption. We expected that experiential conspicuous consumption would be associated with more positive traits in general, outside of status and communal domains, than material conspicuous consumption.

#### ***3.3.1 Method***

We pre-registered primary and exploratory analyses for this study through AsPredicted ([https://aspredicted.org/ZGY\\_7TN](https://aspredicted.org/ZGY_7TN)).

#### ***3.3.2 Participants and Design***

Participants were recruited from Academic Prolific in exchange for monetary compensation. Following our exclusion criteria outlined in the pre-registration, we obtained a final sample of 165 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 33.18$ ; 46% female, 62% White). The experiment used a 2 group (experiential, material; Purchase Category) repeated measures design. Sample sizes allowed for detection of effect sizes of  $f = .11$  at 80% power for primary analyses.

#### ***3.3.3 Procedure***

Participants were told that they would be looking at pictures of different purchases people have made and that they would be asked about what traits they associated with people make these purchases. They saw eight pictures in total, four representing experiential purchases and four representing material purchases. All pictures were rated as conspicuous by an independent sample of 135 participants on Academic Prolific. For each picture, they indicated which traits out of a list of 12 they associated with someone who made that purchase. Participants could select anywhere from 0 to 12 traits for each picture. There were three status traits (prestigious, elite, upper class), three communal traits (caring, kind, friendly), and six positive traits that were not associated with either status or communal dimensions (alert, discrete, fair, firm, idealistic, lyrical). The positive traits were adapted from past work on desirable traits in social partner choice (Cottrell et al., 2007). The dependent variables of interest were how many status, communal, and unrelated traits that participants selected for experiential vs. material purchases.

### **3.3.4 Results**

An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation showed that traits prestigious (0.57), elite (0.64), and upper class (0.51) all loaded onto one factor. Caring (0.58), kind (0.70), and friendly (0.50) loaded onto a second factor, and alert (0.55) and firm (0.48) loaded onto a third. Discrete, fair, idealistic, and lyrical did not load onto any of the factors.

A linear mixed model with pictures nested within Purchase Category revealed no significant difference in the average number communal traits assigned to experiential vs. material pictures,  $\beta = -.004$ ,  $t(1320) = -0.06$ ,  $p = .96$ , 95% CI [-0.16, 0.15]. See Table 4 for total number of traits assigned for each category.

Table 4. Total status, communal, and other traits associated with experiential and material purchases across all participants.

	Total status traits	Total communal traits	Total other traits
Experiential	1414	229	553
Material	1154	226	554

Instead of just looking at the communal traits associated with experiential and material purchases, we also ran a linear mixed model with pictures nested within Purchase Category and communal *and* other traits as the dependent variable. We similarly see no difference between number of communal and other traits assigned to experiential vs. material pictures,  $\beta = -.003$ ,  $t(1320) = -0.03$ ,  $p = .98$ , 95% CI [-0.24, 0.23].

Contrary to our expectations, these results suggest that experiential purchases were not associated with a broader set of positive traits compared to material purchases.

### 3.4 Studies 2a-c Discussion

When experiential conspicuous consumers show off their products for extrinsic goals (and material conspicuous consumers show off their products for intrinsic goals), the communal buffer observed in previous studies not only disappears, but completely reverses. In addition to confirming that experiential conspicuous consumers are seen as more intrinsically (and less extrinsically) motivated than material conspicuous consumers, these findings present a strong case that motivational inferences represent one mechanism underlying the communality difference between experiential and material conspicuous consumers.

Counter to our predictions, the communal boost we observed was not influenced by the factors tested in Studies 2b (sociality of experiences) and 2c (experiential positivity bias). Future

work might benefit from exploring these null effects. Consider the sociality of experiences hypothesis examined in Study 2b. From a methodological standpoint, the way we manipulated sociality through specific features of a social media profile (i.e., “tagging” multiple other people in a picture to indicate sociality) may have been less interpretable to participants unfamiliar with information conveyed in social media posts. Also, perhaps the mere presence of others does not translate into perceptions of specific communal traits like friendliness. After all, the simple fact that someone from New York City is necessarily surrounded by more people than someone from Bemidji, Minnesota provides little information about how friendly that person is.

Alternatively, it indeed may be that these two potential mechanisms do not serve to explain the communal boost/buffer effect found in the earlier studies. This is itself an interesting possibility, given that the sociality of experiences and the general positivity associated with experiential consumers are well-documented and focal distinctions in the literature examining experiential vs. material consumption (e.g., Gilovich et al., 2015). One possibility to be explored in future work is that when experiential purchases are made conspicuous they become more psychologically similar to material purchases on certain dimensions. That is, the null effects we observed are not simply due to methodological issues with our stimuli, but more so because the types of experiential vs. material differences we were testing were uniquely similar given their conspicuous nature.

## **Chapter 4 Distinctions in Status Perceptions Between Experiential and Material Conspicuous Consumption**

Despite the fact that conspicuous experiences and conspicuous material goods were seen as conveying equally high status across Studies 1a-c, it is possible that the distinct nature of experiential conspicuous consumption makes it a better strategy for signaling some dimensions of social status over others. As mentioned in the introduction, dominance and prestige represent two distinct ways that individuals strive for higher social rank (Maner, 2017). Because (1) prestige-based status striving is associated with more communal orientations (de Waal-Andrews et al., 2015), (2) conspicuous experiences were seen as more communal than conspicuous material goods in Studies 1a-d, and (3) material conspicuous consumption is prevalent in dominance-based hierarchies (Desmichel & Rucker, 2023), we expect that experiential conspicuous consumption will be more associated with prestige whereas material conspicuous consumption will be more associated with dominance. We test these hypotheses in Study 3.

### ***4.1.1 Method***

#### ***4.1.1.1 Participants and Design***

Following our pre-registered criteria, we excluded 22 participants and obtained a final sample of 305 (Age range = 19–79,  $M_{age} = 37.4$ ; 44% female, 70% White). The experiment used a 2 (Purchase Type, between: conspicuous experiential, conspicuous material) x 2 (Status type, within: dominance, prestige) mixed design. Sample sizes allowed for detection of effect sizes of  $f = .10$  with 80% power.

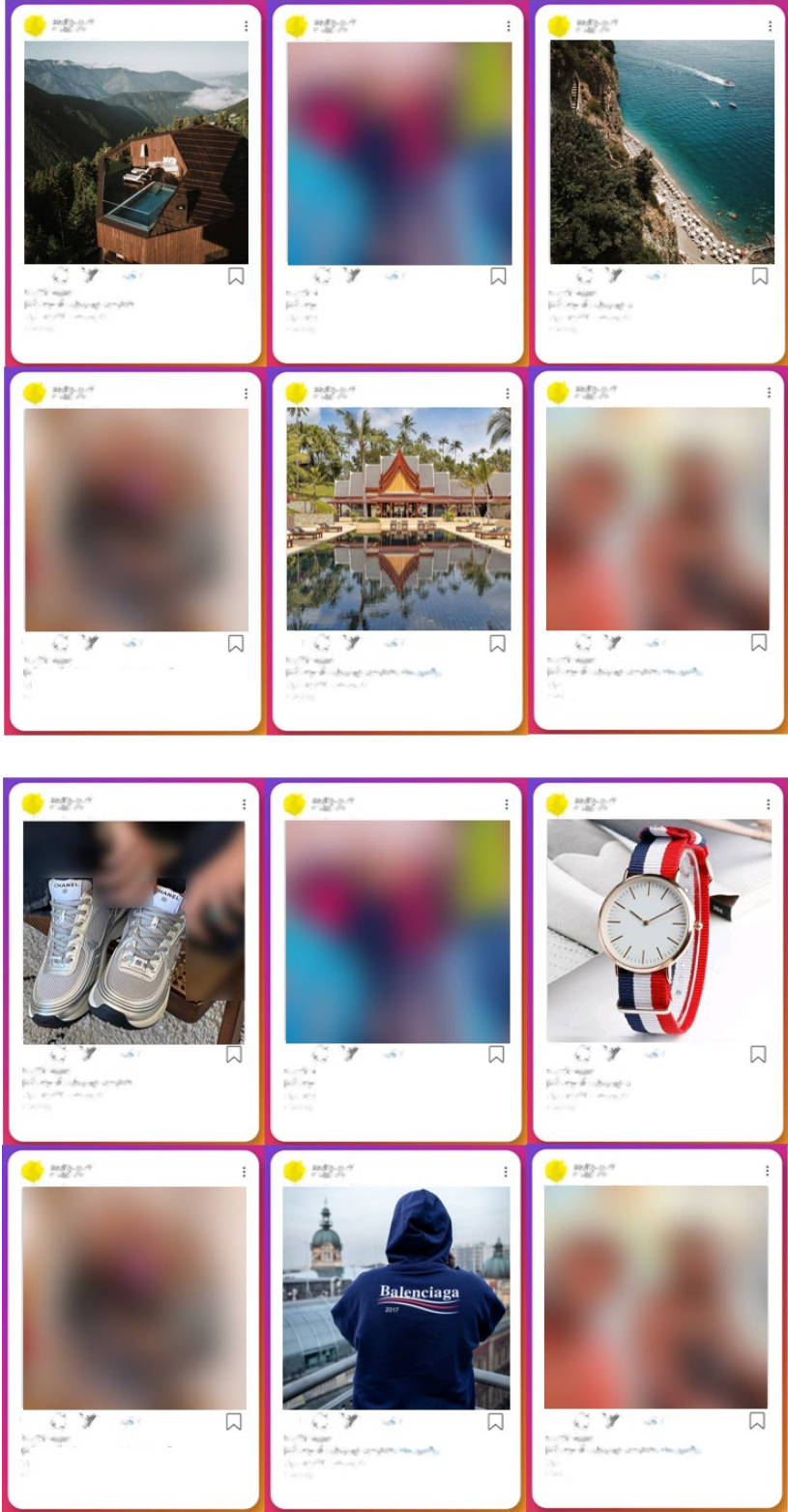
#### **4.1.1.2 Procedure**

Participants viewed social media profiles purportedly collected from participants in a previous study. In reality, experiential and material profiles were constructed from Instagram pictures similar to Study 1c. Each profile contained six pictures: three target purchases and three blurred pictures included to heighten realism (see Figure 6). These profiles were pre-tested to ensure similarity on the assumed gender of the poster, conspicuousness of the profile, and realism of the purchases ( $N = 100$ , 56% women, mean age = 36, see supplement).

Participants saw one profile and then judged dominance (e.g., “they enjoy having control over other members of their group,” four item  $\alpha = .92$ ) and prestige (e.g., “members of their group respect and admire them,” four item  $\alpha = .87$ ) of the poster (1 = not at all, 7 = very much; Redhead et al., 2019). Participants also rated the profile they saw on the same communal trait measures from Study 1a.



Figure 6. Study 3 profiles displayed to participants.



### ***4.1.2 Results and Discussion***

See Table 3 for descriptive statistics. A 2x2 mixed ANOVA revealed an interaction between Purchase Type and Status Type,  $F(1, 299) = 31.84, p < .001, f = 0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.21, 0.44]$  (see Figure 5). As predicted, pairwise comparisons show that the conspicuous experiential profile was seen as lower in dominance,  $t(299) = -2.98, p = .003, d = -0.34, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.57, -0.13]$  and higher in prestige,  $t(299) = 4.00, p < .001, d = 0.46, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.23, 0.70]$ , than the conspicuous material profile.

These results add nuance to our understanding of the social status benefits of experiential conspicuous consumption. Because conspicuous experiences are more associated with prestige, whereas conspicuous material goods are more associated with dominance, the benefits of each form of conspicuous consumption depend on which form of status is more diagnostic of success within a given hierarchy. For example, building on Studies 1b-c, display of conspicuous experiences should benefit people angling for professions that value prestige more than those that value dominance.

Figure 7. Dominance and prestige evaluations by purchase type (Study 3).

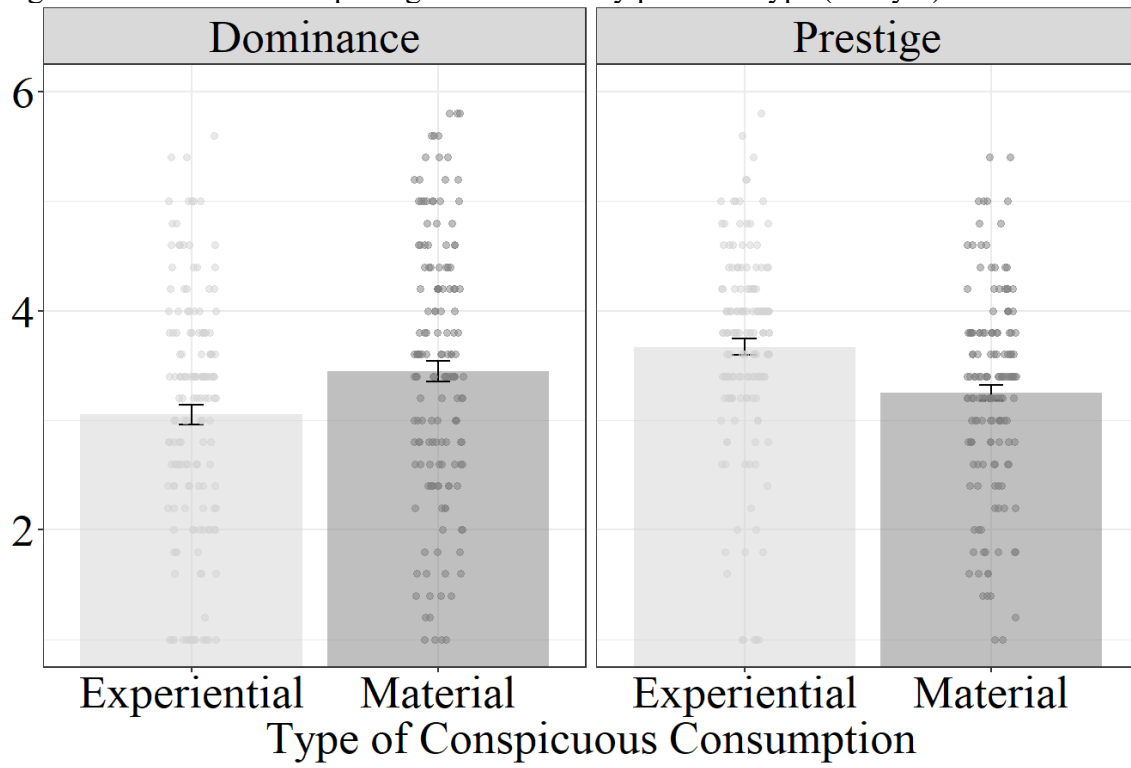


Table 5: Descriptive statistics for dominance and prestige (Study 3).

Status type	Experiential	Material
Dominance	3.05 (1.12)	3.45 (1.18)
Prestige	3.67 (0.91)	3.25 (0.90)

*Note.* Means, with standard deviations presented in parentheses.

## Chapter 5 General Discussion

Throughout the animal kingdom and across human societies, status signals take many forms. However, research on the psychology of conspicuous consumption, the flaunting of lavish purchases to show off wealth, has largely focused only on the display of tangible, material items. In contrast, our examination of experiential conspicuous consumption is appreciative of the diverse forms of consumption that can be made conspicuous and advances theorizing around contemporary status signaling in two primary ways. First, we find that experiential conspicuous consumption is a viable form of status signaling (in general) and has specific benefits in communicating certain kinds of status (prestige). Complementing anecdotal evidence from viral conspicuous experiences, such as the musical *Hamilton*, across four studies, U.S. participants consistently evaluated targets who displayed experiences like expensive concerts as high in trait-level status and suitable for high-status occupations (Studies 1a-d). Further, the type of status conferred to experiential conspicuous consumers is somewhat distinct from their material counterparts—conspicuous experiences were associated with higher levels of prestige whereas conspicuous material goods were associated with higher levels of dominance (Study 3). Second, conspicuous experiences appear to offer a communal buffering effect compared to conspicuous material goods. People displaying luxury experiences were perceived as more communal and more suitable for occupations requiring high levels of communal traits than people displaying luxury material products (Studies 1a-d). This unique communal buffer suggests that the recently identified negative interpersonal consequences of conspicuous

consumption (e.g., Cannon & Rucker, 2019) may depend on what is being conspicuously consumed and how that consumption is being communicated. To help explain the communal buffering effect of experiential conspicuous consumption, we tested three possible psychological mechanisms. This communal buffer seems to be driven in part by inferences about impression management motives—specifically, the fact that conspicuous experiences enjoy higher assumed intrinsic than extrinsic purchase motivations than conspicuous material goods (Study 2a). We found no support for either an inherent sociality of experiences explanation (Study 2b) or a general positivity bias explanation (Study 2c).

## **5.1 Theoretical Contributions**

These findings contribute to our understanding of status signaling in three primary ways. First, though experiences may be temporary, they still act as cues to status, especially prestige. Whether shared conversationally (Studies 1a-b) or through social media profiles (Studies 1c, 2, 3), displays can endure long after an experience is over. This finding complements other work that broadens theoretical conceptualizations of status signaling beyond material items (e.g., time consumption; Bellezza et al., 2017) and examines features of purchases that shift status signal interpretations (e.g., ephemeral vs. iconic goods; Desmichel et al., 2020).

Second, experiential conspicuous consumption acts somewhat distinctly, and beneficially, from its material counterpart by serving as a better signal of a particular form of status (prestige) and by better preserving perceptions of interpersonal communality (the communal buffering effect). This distinction stands in contrast to the existing conspicuous consumption literature where experiences have, at best, been methodologically lumped in as equivalent to material goods and, at worst, ignored completely. Because the communal buffer that experiential conspicuous consumers enjoy is in part driven by associations with intrinsic

motivation, our findings highlight the importance to researchers of considering contexts where impression management is less relevant (at least explicitly) and thinking about contexts in which conspicuous consumption is deemed intrinsically motivated (or not).

Third, though some literature indicates a tradeoff between perceptions of traits akin to those investigated here (i.e., warmth vs. competence; Kervyn et al., 2009; Holoien & Fiske, 2013), it may be that experiences can deliver, at least in part, the “best of both worlds” for people trying to convey status and communal traits. Consider the finding that material conspicuous consumption is seen as attractive by heterosexual women for short- (but not long-) term romantic partners due to the status this consumption signals (Sundie et al., 2011). To the extent that communal traits like friendliness are important for long-term romantic partners (e.g., Valentine et al., 2020), experiential conspicuous consumers should be seen as relatively attractive for both short- and long-term romantic relationships.

A broader question posed by the current findings is, if conspicuous experiences provide both a compelling status signal and a communal buffer, why do people still show off luxury material possessions? One reason lies in our Study 3 results: in dominance-based hierarchies where status is conferred through punishment, conspicuous material goods may be stronger signals to social rank than conspicuous experiences. Thinking about this question on a broader scale, however, the answer may also require attention to a range of cultural, economic, and technological factors. Take the relative ease of making different kinds of consumption conspicuous. Whereas consumption and display can be intertwined for material purchases—one way to make a Porsche visible is to simply drive it around town—the same is not necessarily true for experiences, as they require communication to overcome their transient, intangible limitations. Historically, this involved rather restrictive word-of-mouth or written accounts. But

the widespread adoption of networked digital recording and communication technologies has eliminated many limitations of sharing experiences. A smartphone can capture video of one zip lining across a canyon, or even stream it live as it happens. As penetration of such technologies widens, and people become regular users (as is the case for much of the younger world), it may be that experiences become much more common means of conspicuously consuming.

## **5.2 Limitations and Future Directions**

Future work on the topic of experiential conspicuous consumption would benefit from four specific considerations associated with this investigation. First, our results are derived from relatively WEIRD (Henrich et al., 2010) samples in the United States. Because previous conspicuous consumption research has relied on samples with similar characteristics (e.g., Cannon & Rucker, 2019; Van Boven et al., 2010; Sundie et al., 2011), our approach is appropriate for a direct comparison with most of the existing literature. However, this sampling approach does raise questions about boundary conditions for the experiential conspicuous consumption effects we outlined. Given that perceptions of conspicuous consumption are sensitive to a host of cultural and moral dimensions (e.g., Goenka & Thomas, 2020), future work should explore contexts that moderate both the viability of experiences as status signals and their communal buffering properties. For example, we may find that in social contexts where it is more difficult to memorialize and display experiences (e.g., in countries with more restricted access to social media), the temporary nature of experiences does in fact preclude them from being viable social signals. Perceived differences in the properties underlying experiential and material goods also may vary depending on individual factors like social class. While experiences are generally thought to provide greater happiness than material purchases, this is not the case amongst people relatively low in socioeconomic status (Lee et al., 2018). We may

therefore expect our effects to be somewhat muted among people who do not psychologically differentiate as much between material and experiential purchases.

Second, because of variation in the kinds of conspicuous material and experiential purchases available to consume, there are conceivably attributes that differentiate the purchase stimuli we used on dimensions other than “material” and “experiential” categories. Across our studies, we made attempts to minimize the likely impact of many such differences. We tested a diverse array of purchases (35 in total) that span six of the eight prototypical material and experiential purchase categories identified by Van Boven and colleagues (2010). We even employed an “experiential framing” method (Study 1d) which attempts to address the possibility of extraneous category differences by framing the same purchase in terms of its material or experiential qualities (see Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Gallo et al., 2019). Material and experiential purchase categories are inherently distinct in important ways, and our studies were designed to reveal some of these distinctions while keeping these purchases aligned as much as possible. Of course, future research should continue to consider novel methods through which to better compare experiential and material stimuli.

Third, as we showed in Study 2a, the exact same purchase can be perceived differently depending on how it is displayed. This finding suggests that methodological paradigms that focus only on a purchase itself, and not how it is displayed, may be insufficient to fully understand conspicuous consumption phenomenon (and status signaling more generally). For instance, operationalizing conspicuous consumption through budgeting tasks (e.g., Sundie et al., 2011) or household expenditure (Charles et al., 2008) neglect the display process entirely. Because the method of display can alter the inferences made about why items and experiences



are being displayed at all, future research on the social consequences of conspicuous consumption should be sure to consider both the what and the how of the display process.

Fourth and finally, there are two sides to every social signaling story. The present research demonstrates that perceivers associate experiential conspicuous consumption with both status and communal traits, and that these perceptions are moderated by perceptions of motivational intent underlying a purchase. However, these perceptions do not imply that decision-makers (those actually making consumption decisions) recognize how perceivers will respond. To better understand this, and to stimulate a number of additional empirical questions, future research should more thoroughly explore the perspective of experiential decision-makers as a complement to the perceiver perspective laid out here.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

Whereas material purchases like Gucci handbags and Rolex watches have typically reigned supreme in the discussion of conspicuous consumption, the present work draws attention to the unsung benefits of conspicuous experiences. From *Hamilton* tickets to Hawaii trips, strolling Burgundy vineyards to eating Kobe beef, expensive and exclusive experiences can be prominently displayed through a number of avenues. Not only can purchases like these serve as viable status signals compared to conspicuous material goods, they also lead to increased perceptions of communal traits through assumptions about why experiences (versus material goods) are bought and displayed. We hope that our emphasis on experiential conspicuous consumption, and the unique visibility and display considerations that come with it, expands theoretical conceptualizations of how status and other interpersonal traits can be signaled.

## Appendix

### Supplemental Materials

All materials for the manuscript “Conspicuous Experiences as Unique Social Signals of Both Status and Warmth” can be located at this here:

[https://osf.io/9fe8c/?view\\_only=2da473fa0a1240cf8fea92bbebec36bc](https://osf.io/9fe8c/?view_only=2da473fa0a1240cf8fea92bbebec36bc).

Study 1a

#### Product pre-test

Our two sets of materials (jeans, laptop) and experiential (concert, camping) were selected from 30 products pre-tested by an independent Academic Prolific sample (N = 100). In this pre-test, products were evaluated on conspicuousness (“a conspicuous purchase is one that involves spending money in a way that shows others you have money. It involves displaying your purchase in the sense that, in addition to the enjoyment that you get from the purchase itself, these conspicuous purchases could help you gain status and impress others around you;” adapted from Sundie et al., 2011, 1 = not at all conspicuous, 7 = definitely conspicuous) and desirability (“we’d like you to rate each purchase on how desirable the product or experience is in the description. When rating these, think about how much you or other people would like to have the item or the experience”, 1 = extremely undesirable, 7 = extremely desirable). The two sets of products we selected (concert/jeans, camping/laptop) clearly had a high and low conspicuous option and were both seen as desirable. For example, the imported, top-of-the-line jeans ( $M_{conspicuous} = 5.24$ ) were rated as more conspicuous than the casual jeans ( $M_{conspicuous} = 1.49$ ), and both were seen as desirable ( $M_{desirable} = 5.00$ ,  $M_{desirable} = 4.03$ , respectively). Additionally, the material/experiential pairings were matched on overall ratings of both conspicuousness and desirability. For example, the concert with backstage passes was seen as similarly conspicuous and desirable ( $M_{conspicuous} = 5.51$ ,  $M_{desirable} = 5.48$ ) as the imported, top-of-the-line jeans ( $M_{conspicuous} = 5.24$ ,  $M_{desirable} = 5.00$ ).

#### List of measures

##### *Product set #1*

“I bought tickets to see a concert featuring a few local bands.” (Inconspicuous, experiential)

“I went to a music festival with a lot of famous singers and bands. I even bought backstage passes to meet some of them.” (Conspicuous, experiential)

“I wanted some casual blue jeans, and I bought a pair made from cheap denim.” (Inconspicuous, material)

“I bought a pair of nice, fitted blue jeans made from imported, top-of-the-line denim.” (Conspicuous, material)

##### *Product set #2*

“I like hiking, so last year I went on a rustic camping strip and stayed in a backwoods ‘cabin.’ It was more of a shack.” (Inconspicuous, experiential)

“I enjoy getting away from things, so last summer I went to the mountains and stayed at a high-end cabin with lots of amenities and an awesome view” (Conspicuous, experiential)

“I bought a refurbished laptop that came out three years ago because it wasn’t fancy.”  
(Inconspicuous, material)

“I wanted a laptop with state-of-the-art processing power for personal use, so I bought a new laptop that came out this year.” (Conspicuous, material)

*To what extent do you think this person has the following traits?*

High status (status)

Prestigious (status)

Upper class (status)

Warmth (communal)

Caring (communal)

Friendly (communal)

Trendy (materialist)

Insecure (materialist)

Judgmental (materialist)

Self-centered (materialist)

Outgoing (experientialist)

Inquisitive (experientialist)

Humorous (experientialist)

Easy going (experientialist)

1 = not at all, 7 = very much

*Impression management motivations (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)*

This person made this purchase...

In order to impress other people

In order to gain approval of others

*Intrinsic motivation*

This person made this purchase because of the enjoyment or stimulation the product or experience would provide them (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

*Extrinsic motivation*

Because of the external rewards such as money, grades, or status that the product or experience may produce (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

*Likability*

How favorably do you view this person? (1 = very unfavorably, 7 = very favorably)

How likable do you find this person? (1 = very unlikable, 7 = very likable)

## **Robustness checks**

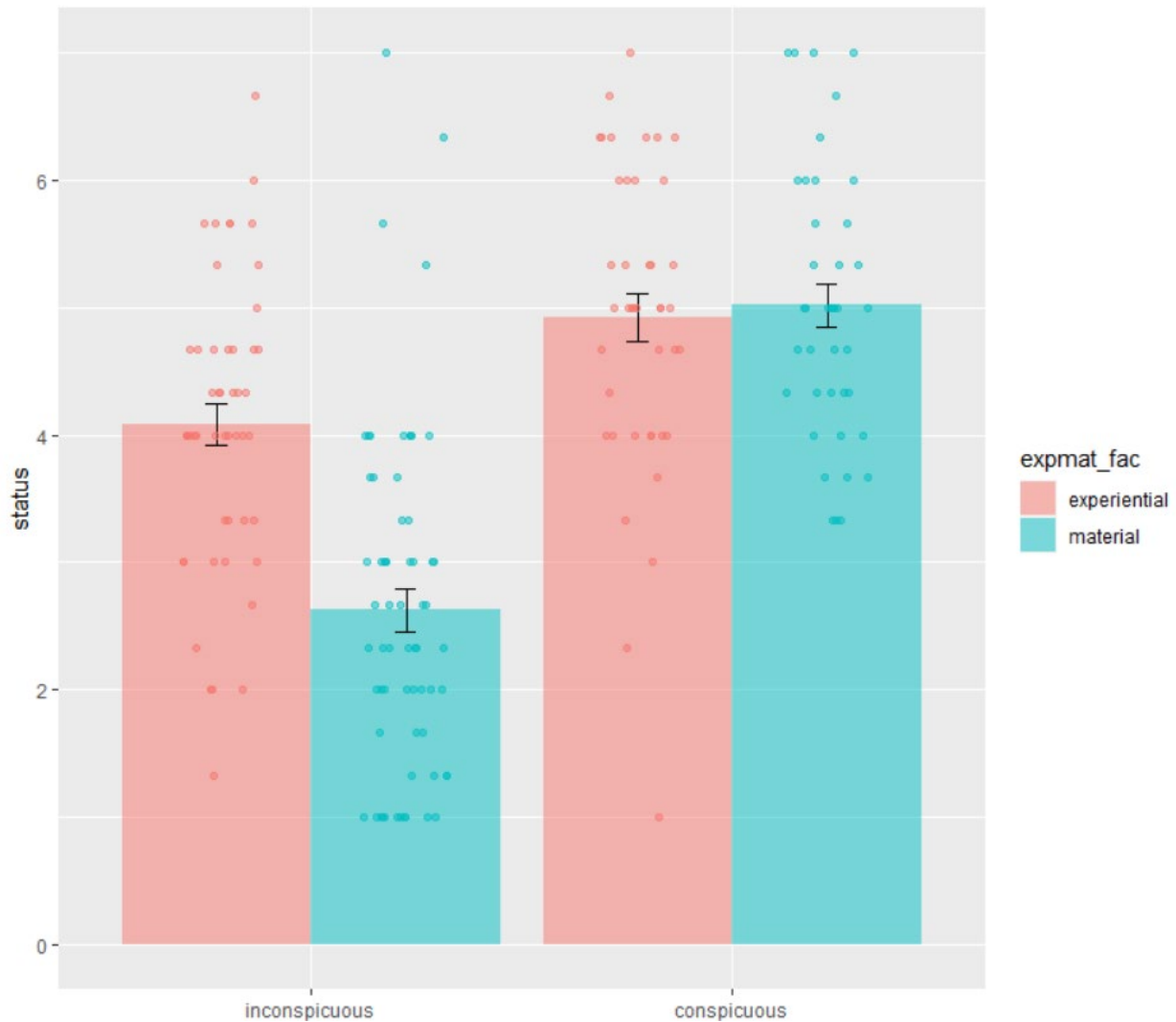
### **Between subjects analysis**

Because of the repeated measures nature of the study design, it is possible that participants’ evaluation of target consumers was in part influenced by the previous targets they had evaluated. To account for this possibility, we conducted a fully between subjects analysis

measuring only the first target that each participant evaluated. As we report below, patterns for this model are the exact same as what is reported in the repeated measures analyses in the main manuscript.

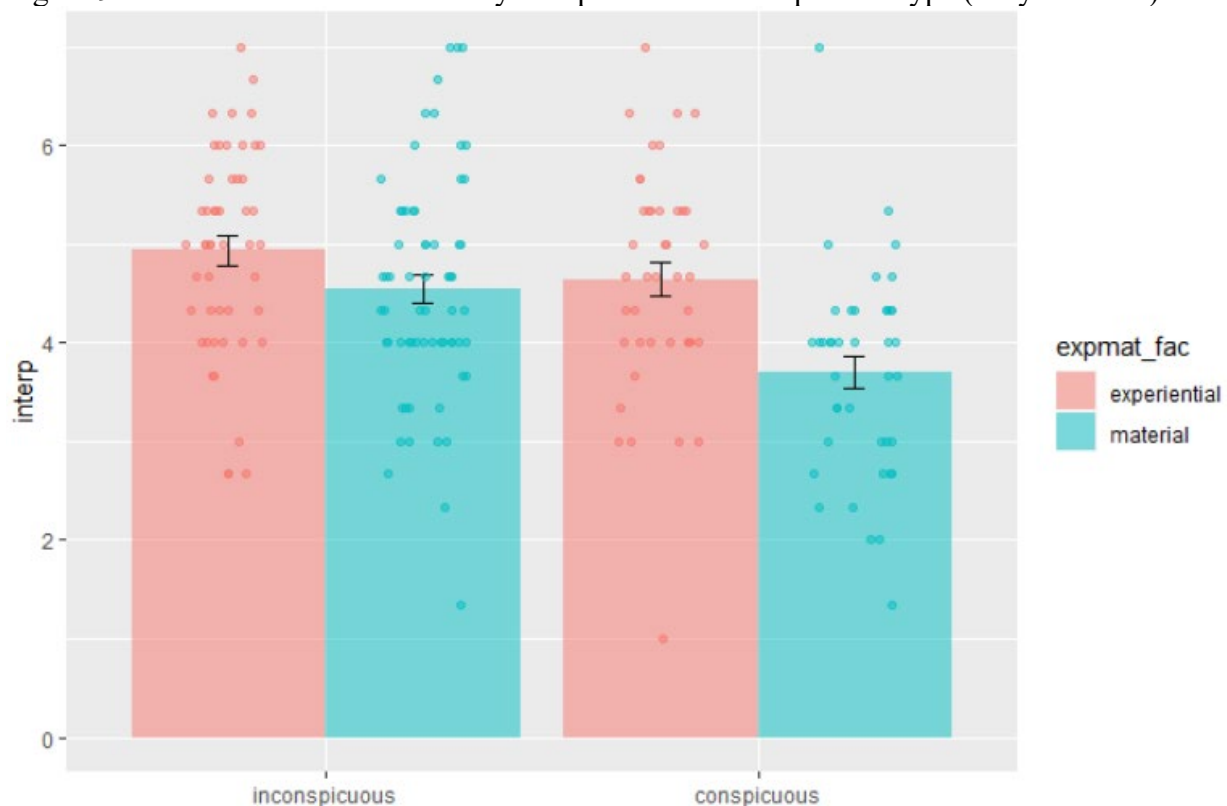
A two way ANOVA revealed that participants evaluated people displaying conspicuous products as higher status than people displaying inconspicuous products,  $F(1,196) = 89.15, p < .001, f = 0.68, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.52, 0.84]$ . Participants also evaluated people displaying experiential products as higher status than people displaying material products,  $F(1,196) = 27.47, p < .001, f = 0.38, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.23, 0.52]$ . There was a significant interaction such that differences in status between material and experiential goods were larger for inconspicuous goods than for conspicuous goods,  $F(1,196) = 19.62, p = .01, f = 0.32, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.17, 0.46]$ . Pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying conspicuous experiential goods ( $M = 4.92, SD = 1.22$ ) were seen as equally high status compared to people displaying conspicuous material goods ( $M = 5.02, SD = 1.06$ ),  $t(80) = -0.38, p = .71, f = -0.04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.51, 0.35]$ . See Figure 8.

Figure 8. Perceived status traits by conspicuousness and product type, between subjects model.



Examining communal traits, people displaying conspicuous products were seen as having lower levels of communal traits than people displaying inconspicuous products,  $F(1, 196) = 13.05, p < .001, f = 0.26, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.12, 0.40]$ . People displaying experiential products were seen as having higher levels of communal traits than people displaying material products,  $F(1, 196) = 14.09, p < .001, f = 0.27, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.13, 0.41]$ . There was a marginal interaction between conspicuousness and product type,  $F(1, 196) = 2.93, p = .09, f = 0.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.26]$ . Pairwise comparisons indicate that experiential conspicuous consumers ( $M = 4.64, SD = 1.15$ ) were seen as having higher levels of communal traits than material conspicuous consumers ( $M = 3.70, SD = 1.05$ ),  $t(81) = 3.91, p < .001, f = .43, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.41, 1.43]$ . See Figure 9. Together, this suggests that the potential comparisons between targets that is made possible by our repeated measures design did not influence evaluations of the targets.

Figure 9. Perceived communal traits by conspicuousness and product type (fully between)

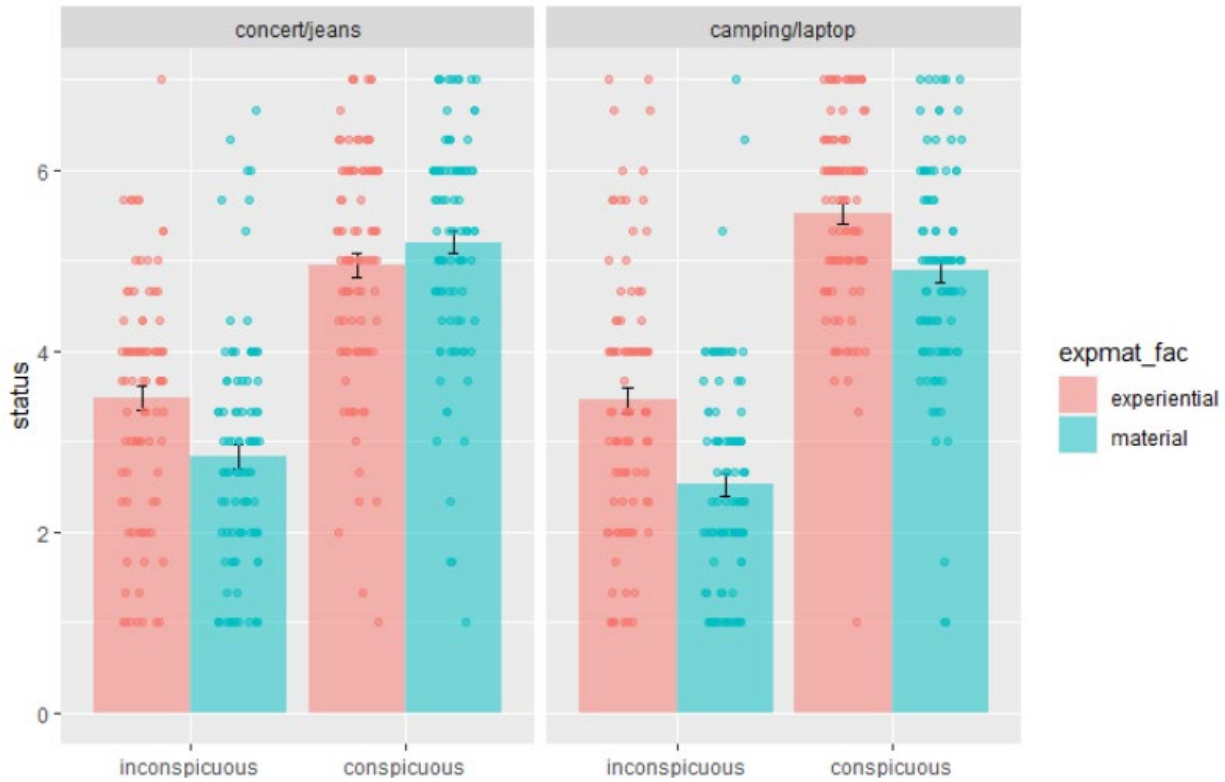


### Mixed models product comparison

To compare patterns across product types, we conducted a 2 (concert, camping; between) x 2 (jeans, laptop; between) x 2 (inconspicuous, conspicuous; within) linear mixed model. Conspicuous consumers were seen as higher in status traits than inconspicuous consumers,  $F(1, 585) = 729.24, p < .001$ . Experiential consumers were seen as higher in status traits than material consumers,  $F(1, 585) = 42.29, p < .001$ . There was no difference in status traits attributed to targets in the concert/jeans condition versus the camping/laptop condition,  $F(1, 195) = .03, p = .86, f = 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.13]$ . Pairwise comparisons reveal a difference in status traits attributed to the conspicuous concert ( $M = 4.95, SD = 1.28$ ) and the conspicuous camping trip ( $M = 5.51, SD = 1.08$ ),  $t(186) = -3.35, p < .001, f = -0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.79, -0.21]$ . All other comparisons across product sets were insignificant. Most importantly, in both conditions the

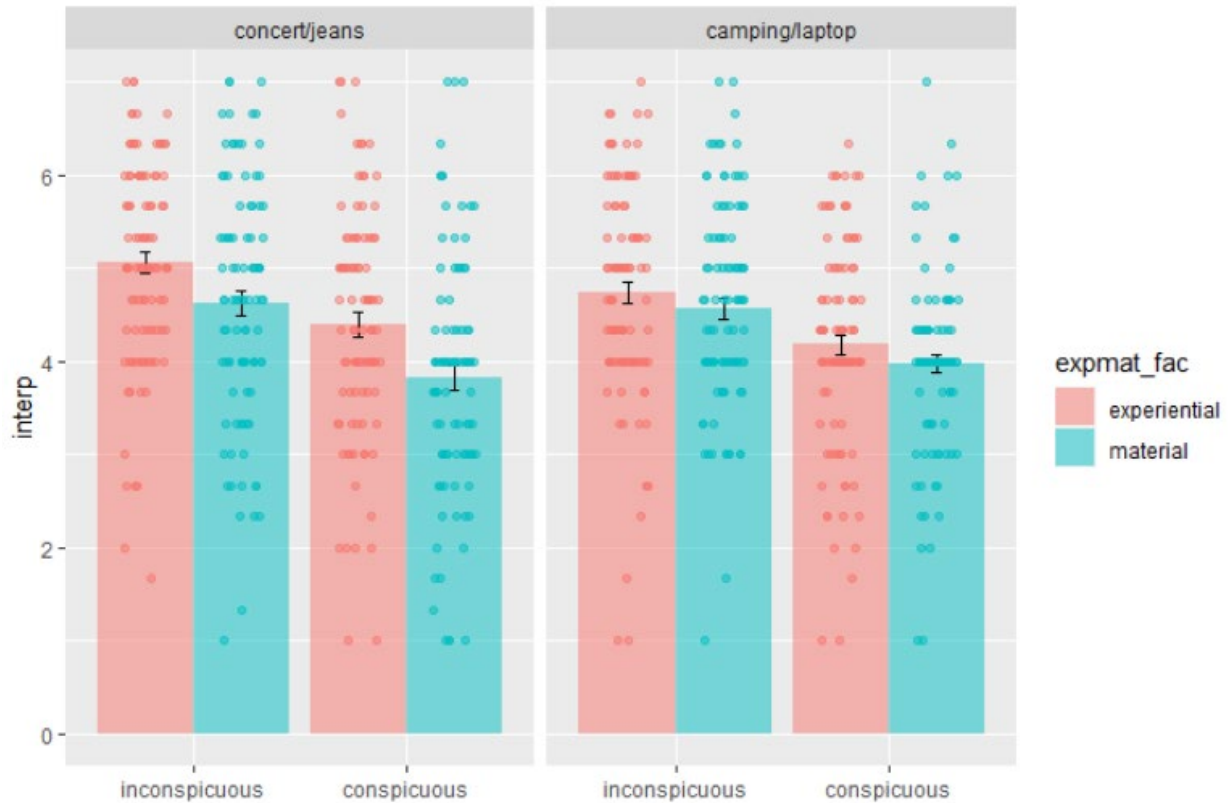
conspicuous experiential purchase elicits higher status evaluations than the inconspicuous experiential purchase. See Figure 10.

Figure 10. Status traits split by product sets.



We ran the same model with communal traits as the dependent variable. Conspicuous consumers were seen as having fewer communal traits than inconspicuous consumers,  $F(1, 585) = 106.89, p < .001, f = 1.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.01, 1.22]$ . Experiential consumers were seen as having more communal traits than material consumers,  $F(1, 585) = 13.00, p < .001, f = 0.27, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.19, 0.35]$ . There was no difference in communal traits attributed to targets in the concert/jeans condition versus the camping/laptop condition,  $F(1, 195) = .21, p = .65, f = 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.13]$ . Pairwise comparisons reveal that communal traits for each conspicuousness x product type largely the same across the two product sets. The only marginal difference came from the inconspicuous concert ( $M = 5.06, SD = 1.12$ ) and the inconspicuous camping trip ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.17$ ),  $t(195) = 1.98, p = .05, f = .14, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.56]$ . See Figure 11.

Figure 11. Communal traits split by product sets.

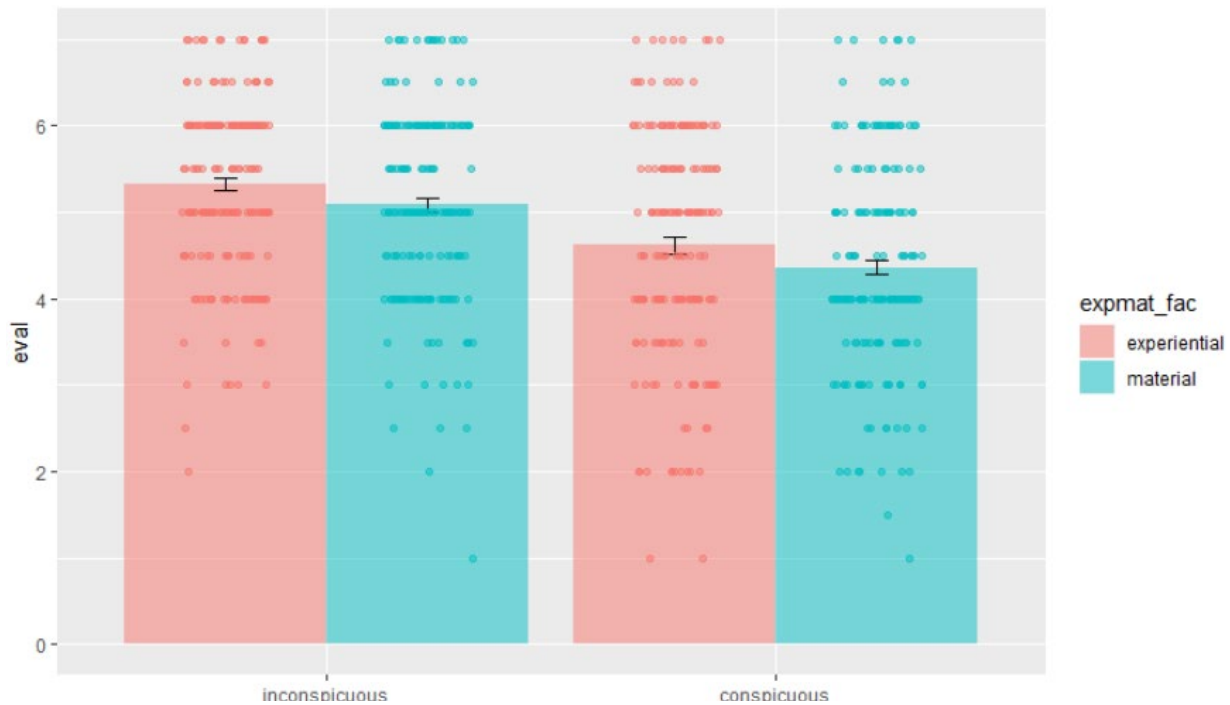


## Exploratory analyses

### Overall impressions.

A repeated measures ANOVA revealed that people displaying inconspicuous purchases were evaluated more favorably than people displaying conspicuous purchases,  $F(1, 196) = 77.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = 0.63$ , 95% CI [0.47, 0.78]. People displaying experiential purchases were evaluated more favorably than people displaying material purchases,  $F(1, 196) = 12.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = 0.25$ , 95% CI [0.11, 0.39]. There was no interaction between conspicuousness and product type,  $F(1, 196) = 0.005$ ,  $p = .945$ ,  $f = 0.005$ , 95% CI [0.00, 0.09]. Pairwise comparisons suggest that the experiential conspicuous consumer ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) were perceived more favorably than the material conspicuous consumer ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ),  $t(197) = 2.77$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $f = .10$ , 95% CI [0.06, 0.35]. See Figure 12. This suggests that the experiential nature of a conspicuous purchase can somewhat buffer against negative likability and favorability judgments that come with conspicuous material purchases.

Figure 12. Overall impressions of consumers by conspicuousness and product type.



### Impression management.

Higher impression management motivations indicate that the person made the purchase to impress other people and gain the approval of others. A repeated measures ANOVA revealed that conspicuous consumers were perceived to have higher impression management motivations than inconspicuous consumers,  $F(1, 196) = 328.94, p < .001, f = 1.30, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.10, 1.48]$ . Surprisingly, experiential consumers were perceived to have higher impression management motivations than material consumers,  $F(1, 196) = 3.91, p = .05, f = 0.14, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.28]$ . There was a significant interaction between conspicuousness and product type such that the difference between impression management motivations was significantly larger between inconspicuous experiential and material consumers than between conspicuous experiential and material consumers,  $F(1, 196) = 21.75, p < .001, f = 0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.19, 0.48]$ . Pairwise comparisons suggest that the experiential conspicuous consumer ( $M = 4.42, SD = 1.74$ ) was not significantly different in impression management than the material conspicuous consumer ( $M = 4.64, SD = 1.83$ ),  $t(196) = -1.60, p = .11, d = -0.11, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.26, 0.02]$ . See Figure 13. This suggests that experiential conspicuous consumption can be perceived as a strategy to impress others in a similar manner to material conspicuous consumption.

Figure 13. Impression management by conspicuousness and product type.

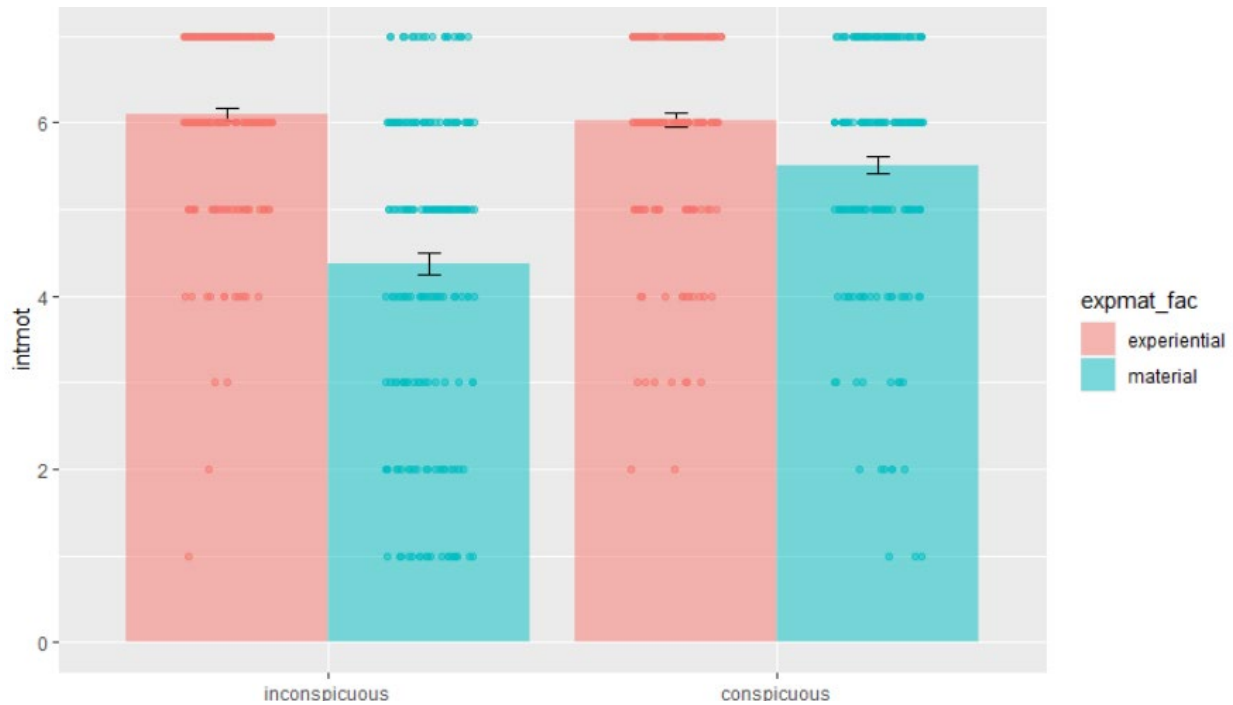




### Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

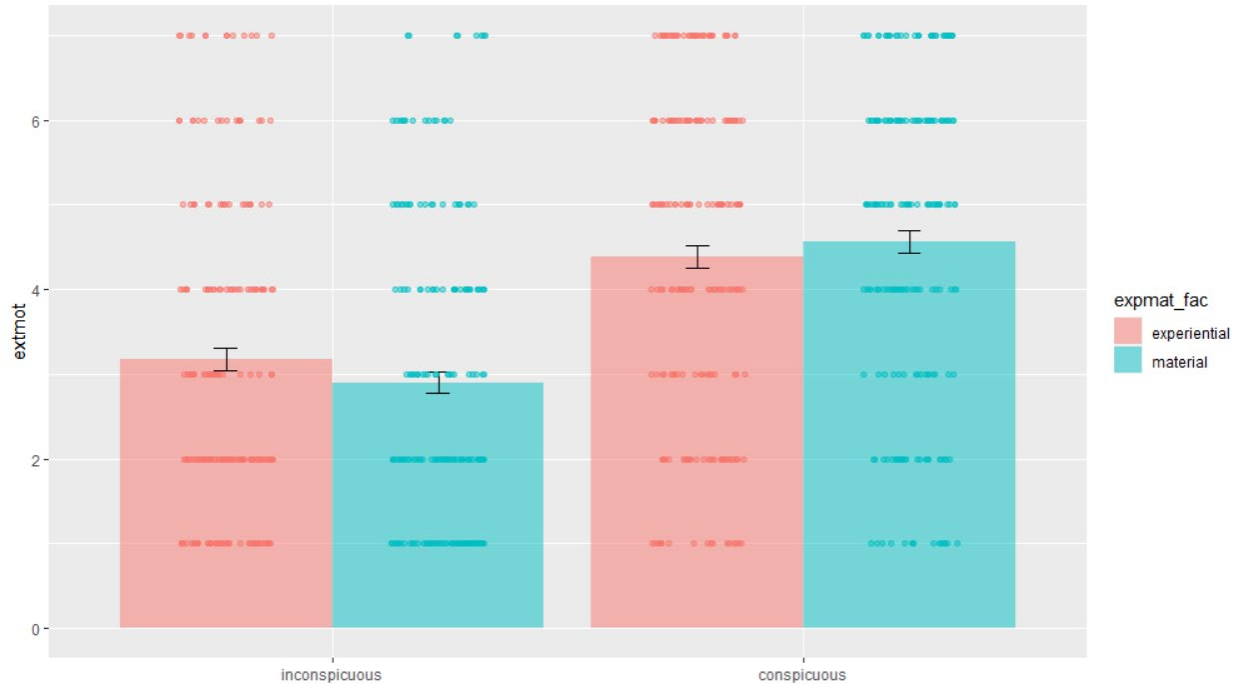
Experiential consumers were perceived to have higher levels of intrinsic motivation than material consumers,  $F(1, 196) = 137.04, p < .001, f = 0.84, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.67, 1.00]$ . Interestingly, conspicuous consumers were perceived to have higher levels of intrinsic motivation than inconspicuous consumers,  $F(1, 196) = 34.60, p < .001, f = 0.42, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.27, 0.57]$ . There was also an interaction between conspicuousness and product type such that the difference in intrinsic motivation between inconspicuous experiential and material purchases was larger than the difference between conspicuous experiential and material purchases,  $F(1, 196) = 60.96, p < .001, f = 0.56, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.41, 0.71]$ . Pairwise comparisons reveal that experiential conspicuous consumers ( $M = 6.03, SD = 1.13$ ) were seen to be more intrinsically motivated than material conspicuous consumers ( $M = 5.51, SD = 1.37$ ),  $t(196) = 4.78, p < .001, d = .34, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.22, 0.47]$ . See Figure 14.

Figure 14. Intrinsic motivation by conspicuousness and product type.



Conspicuous consumers were evaluated as having higher extrinsic motivation than inconspicuous consumers,  $F(1, 196) = 158.59, p < .001, f = 0.90, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.73, 1.06]$ . Material and experiential consumers were evaluated as having the same levels of extrinsic motivation,  $F(1, 196) = .22, p = .64, f = 0.03, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.17]$ . There was an interaction between conspicuousness and product type,  $F(1, 196) = 5.62, p = .02, f = 0.17, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.02, 0.31]$ . Pairwise comparisons revealed that conspicuous experiential consumers ( $M = 4.39, SD = 1.93$ ) had the same levels of extrinsic motivation as conspicuous material consumers ( $M = 4.56, SD = 1.87$ ),  $t(196) = -1.27, p = .21, d = -0.10, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.24, 0.04]$ . See figure 15.

Figure 15. Extrinsic motivation by conspicuousness and product type.



## **Study 1b**

### **List of measures**

#### *Instructions and cover story*

In this survey, our lab at [redacted for review] has partnered with a private company to help them with their hiring process. We have compiled a number of job applications for some positions this company is trying to fill. We'd like you to review certain parts of these applications and rate how well the candidates might fit a given job. We have found that crowdsourcing application evaluations like this on Prolific has led to better hiring outcomes.

In particular, we would like you to read responses that applicants provided to the company's application supplement. In these supplements, the applicants answer questions about themselves that aren't directly related to their job experience – things like their hobbies, a purchase they've made recently, or their ideal day. We believe that responses to questions like these can influence how well an applicant would be able to perform for the company, and your responses will help us determine which candidates we recommend that the company interviews. As you're thinking about these applications, please disregard any influence that the COVID-19 pandemic might have on job restrictions, hobbies, etc.

To ensure that your evaluations are independent and bias-free, we will only provide one question from each applicant's supplement. You will be reading responses to the question “**describe a purchase that you made recently.**” Other Prolific participants will be reading responses to other questions or other applicants, and we will compile all of the data on each candidate to make our decisions. All information that could identify the applicant will be anonymized.

You will be asked to evaluate several applicants on how well you think they would fit for three different job positions. You may believe an applicant would be good for more than one of the positions listed, and that's ok. For example, it's fine to rate some candidates as great fits for all of the positions, but rate other candidates as bad fits for all of them.

#### *Job descriptions*

Operations manager (status): The job requires networking with elite members of society, managing connections to media outlets, and knowing the right people to boost the company's image. It is important that the individual has an air of prestige, is revered as someone who has status and who people would generally look up to.

Human resources manager (communal): The job requires communication with diverse others within the company, alleviating interpersonal issues, and making sure things run smoothly. It is important that the individual is a people-person that is able to get along with anyone, has a friendly disposition, and is generally likable.

Assistant accounts team member (control): The job requires being able to work on multiple internal teams, provide exemplary customer service to external clients, and listen to instructions from superiors. It is important that the individual is trustworthy, knows how to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and is a sociable person who is friendly with everyone.

#### *Product set*

Same as product set #1 from Study 1a

### *Job suitability*

The applicant would be a good fit for the job described

This applicant has the traits necessary to do the job

This person would not do well in the job described above

1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree

*How much do you associate the following traits with this job (regardless of who the applicant is)?*

Same as traits for Study 1a

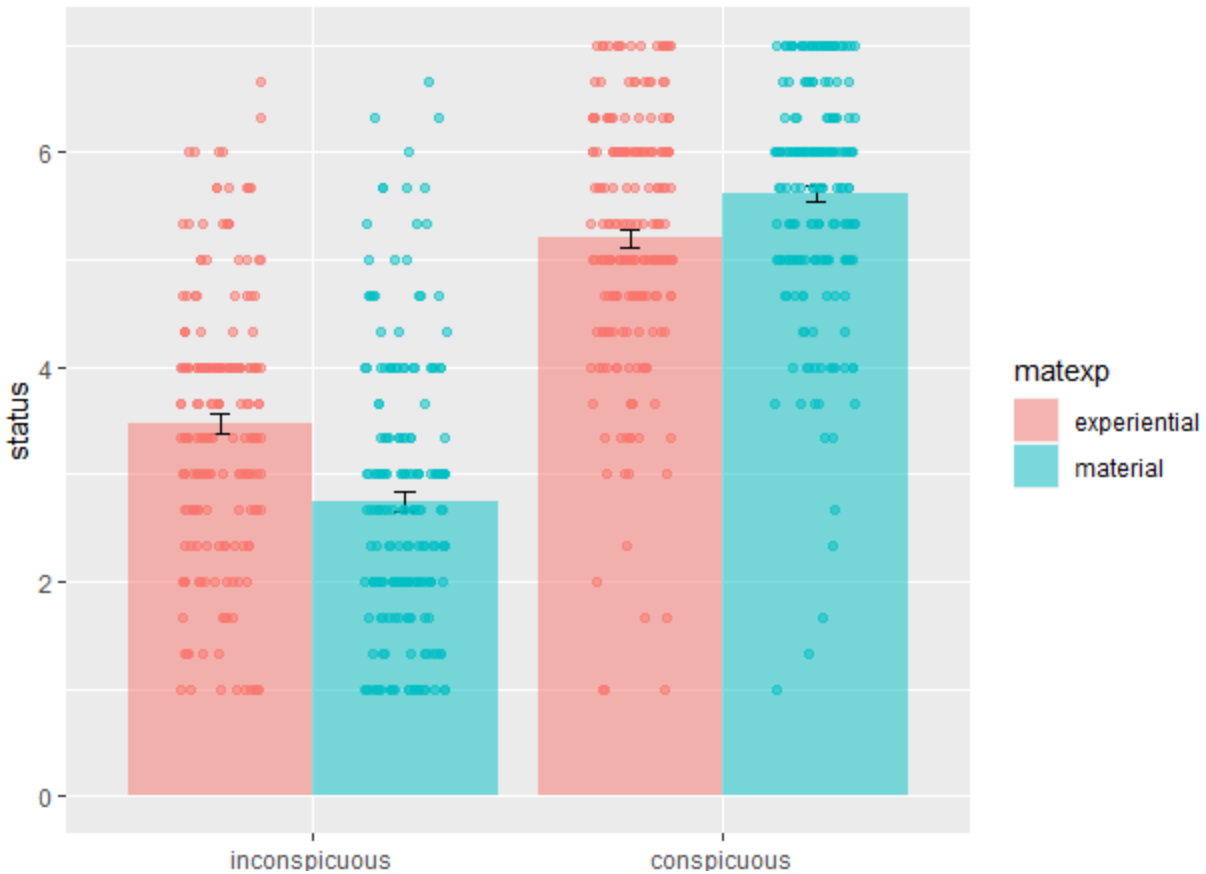
### **Preliminary Analyses**

Consistent with expectations, participants thought that status traits were more necessary for the operations manager position ( $M=5.97$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) than the human resources manager position ( $M=3.54$ ,  $SD=1.43$ ),  $t(197)=-18.4$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $f=0.66$ , 95% CI [0.56,0.78], ruling out the possibility that both positions would be seen as high status. Additionally, participants thought that communal traits were more necessary for the human resources manager position ( $M=6.03$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ) than the operations manager position ( $M=4.48$ ,  $SD=1.32$ ),  $t(197)=14.1$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $f=0.50$ , 95% CI [0.43,0.59].

### **Replicating study 1a**

A repeated measures ANOVA on status traits revealed that participants evaluated people displaying conspicuous products as higher in status traits than people displaying inconspicuous products,  $F(1,197) = 443.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = 1.50$ , 95% CI [1.30, 1.70]. Participants also evaluated people displaying experiential products as higher in status traits than people displaying material products,  $F(1,197) = 7.50$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $f = 0.20$ , 95% CI [0.05, 0.34]. There was a significant interaction between product type and conspicuousness,  $F(1,197) = 109.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f = 0.75$ , 95% CI [0.59, 0.90]. Pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying conspicuous experiential goods ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) were seen as significantly lower in status traits than people displaying conspicuous material goods ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ),  $t(199) = 5.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.36$ , 95% CI [0.22, 0.51]. See Figure 16.

Figure 16. Replication of Study 1a status results.



A repeated measures ANOVA on communal traits revealed that participants evaluated people displaying conspicuous products as lower in communal traits than people displaying inconspicuous products,  $F(1,197) = 63.12, p < .001, f = 0.57, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.42, 0.72]$ . Participants also evaluated people displaying experiential products as higher in communal traits than people displaying material products,  $F(1,197) = 102.32, p < .001, f = 0.72, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.56, 0.88]$ . There was a significant interaction between product type and conspicuousness,  $F(1,196) = 11.10, p = .001, f = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.10, 0.38]$ . Pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying conspicuous experiential goods ( $M = 4.62, SD = 1.13$ ) were seen as significantly higher in communal traits than people displaying conspicuous material goods ( $M = 3.91, SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(199) = 9.36, p < .001, f = 0.67, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.52, 0.82]$ . See Figure 17. Across status and communal traits, the main effect of conspicuousness on status perceptions and the higher levels of communal traits for conspicuous experiences mirror general patterns from Study 1.

Figure 17. Replication of Study 1a communal results.



### Robustness checks

#### Three-item job suitability DV

When running the analyses for study 1b with the three-item job suitability dependent variable instead of the two item dependent variable (as reported in the body of the manuscript), the patterns of results are the same. See Table 6 for descriptive statistics about the means for each of the conditions. See below for full results with the three-item job suitability dependent variable. All of the tests reported in this section are exactly the same as the tests reported in the manuscript, with the only difference being our use of the three-item job suitability measure instead of the two-item measures reported in the manuscript.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for job suitability, three-item suitability DV.

Position	Product	Conspicuousness	Mean	SD
Status (Operations manager)	Experiential (Concert)	Inconspicuous	3.97	1.01
		Conspicuous	4.99	1.10
	Material (Jeans)	Inconspicuous	3.29	1.13
		Conspicuous	4.87	1.16
Communal (Human resources manager)	Experiential (Concert)	Inconspicuous	4.60	1.01
		Conspicuous	4.66	1.07
	Material (Jeans)	Inconspicuous	4.20	0.97
		Conspicuous	4.03	0.96
Control (Assistant accounts team member)	Experiential (Concert)	Inconspicuous	4.62	0.99
		Conspicuous	4.61	1.09
	Material (Jeans)	Inconspicuous	4.19	1.00
		Conspicuous	4.22	0.89

A repeated measures ANOVA revealed a main effect of conspicuousness such that participants evaluated people displaying conspicuous products as more suitable job candidates than people displaying inconspicuous products,  $F(1, 198) = 76.31, p < .001, f = 0.62, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.47, 0.77]$ . There was also a main effect of product type such that participants evaluated people displaying experiential products as more suitable job candidates than people displaying material products,  $F(1, 198) = 96.26, p < .001, f = 0.70, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.54, 0.85]$ . There was a significant threeway interaction between product type, conspicuousness, and job description  $F(1,198) = 13.71, p < .001, f = 0.26, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.16, 0.36]$ .

For the operations manager (status) job description, pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying a conspicuous experiential good ( $M = 4.99, SD = 1.10$ ) were seen as equally suitable for the role as people displaying a conspicuous material good ( $M = 4.87, SD = 1.16$ ),  $F(1, 198) = 2.68, p = .10, f = 0.17, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.32]$ . These patterns suggest that experiential and material conspicuous consumers are both seen as suitable for a job that requires high levels of status.

For the human resources manager (communal) job, pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying a conspicuous experiential good ( $M = 4.66, SD = 1.07$ ) were seen as more suitable for the role than people displaying a conspicuous material good ( $M = 4.04, SD = 0.96$ ),  $F(1, 198) = 46.3, p < .001, f = 0.31, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.17, 0.53]$ . These patterns suggest that inconspicuous and conspicuous experiential consumers are both seen as suitable for a job that requires high levels of communal traits.

### **Mixed models analyses**

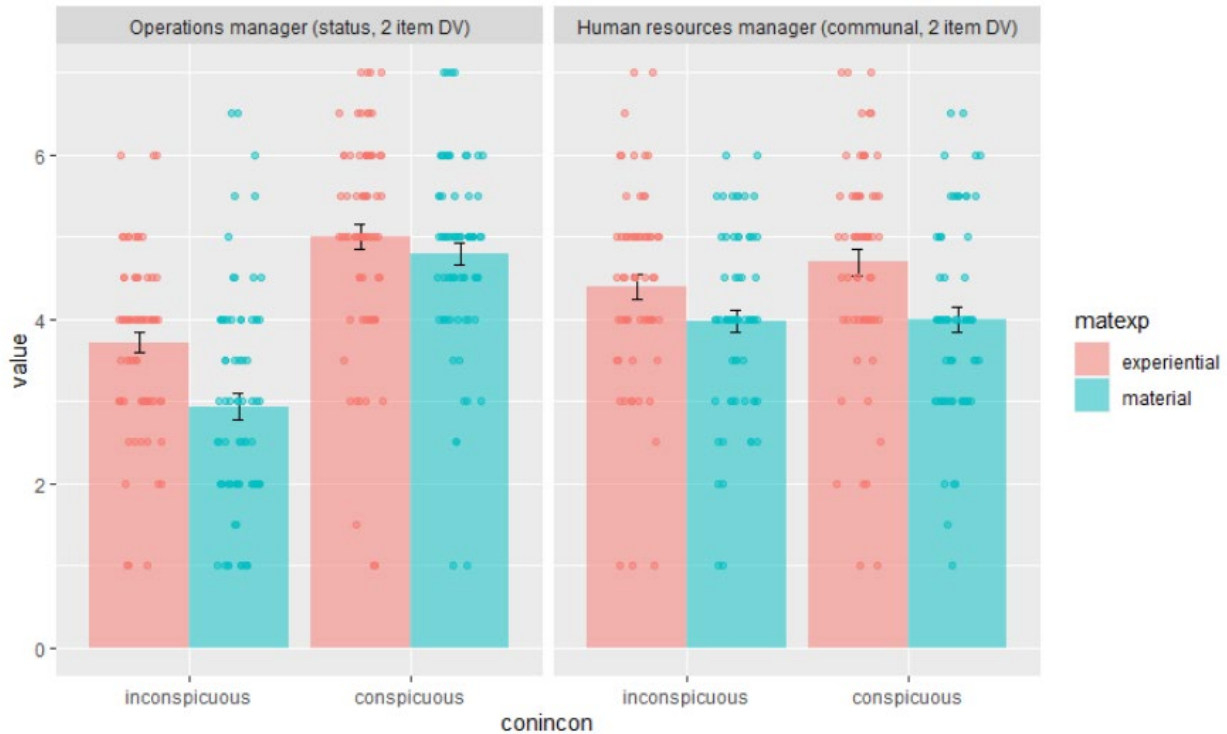
Similarly to Study 1a, the repeated measures nature of our study design makes it possible that participants' evaluation of target consumers for a given job was in part influenced by the previous job descriptions they had read. To account for this possibility, we conducted a mixed model analysis measuring only the first job description that each participants evaluated targets for. As we report below, patterns for this model are the exact same as what is reported in the repeated measures analyses in the main manuscript.

A 2 (experiential, material; within) x 2 (inconspicuous, conspicuous; within) x 3 (job description; between) linear mixed model revealed a fixed effect of conspicuousness such that participants evaluated people displaying conspicuous products as more suitable job candidates than people displaying inconspicuous products,  $\beta = 1.30, t(588) = 7.67, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.97, 1.63]$ . There was also a fixed effect of product type such that participants evaluated people displaying experiential products as more suitable job candidates than people displaying material products,  $\beta = -0.78, t(588) = 4.59, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.11, -0.45]$ . There was a significant interaction fixed effect between conspicuousness and job description such that conspicuous consumers were seen as significantly more desirable than inconspicuous consumers for the operations manager position, but this difference was attenuated for the human resources manager position,  $\beta = -1.00, t(588) = -4.03, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.48, -0.52]$ . There was also a significant threeway interaction fixed effect such that conspicuous material consumers were seen as particularly suitable for the operations manager position, but less suitable for the human resources manager position,  $\beta = -0.85, t(588) = -2.44, p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.53, -0.17]$ . See Figure



18. All of these results, and the comparisons reported below, reflect the same patterns as the model reported in the main text.

Figure 18. Job suitability with job as a between subjects factor.



For the operations manager (status) job description, pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying a conspicuous experiential good were seen as equally suitable for the role as people displaying a conspicuous material,  $t(588) = 1.24, p = .99, d = 0.20, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.36, 0.78]$ . For the human resources manager (communal) job, pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying a conspicuous experiential good seen as more suitable for the role than people displaying a conspicuous material good  $t(588) = 3.88, p = .008, d = 0.68, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.09, 1.31]$ .

### Pairwise comparisons including assistant accounts team member

In the main manuscript we report only comparisons between the operations manager position and the human resources manager position. For completeness, here we also report models including comparisons with the assistant accounts team member.

For the assistant accounts team member (control) job, pairwise comparisons indicate that people displaying a conspicuous experiential good ( $M = 4.66, SD = 1.32$ ) were seen as more suitable for the role than people displaying a conspicuous material good ( $M = 4.19, SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(198) = 4.83, p < .001, d = 0.34, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.17, 0.52]$ . These patterns are exactly the same as patterns for the human resources position. See Figure 19.

Figure 19. Job suitability including assistant accounts team member.



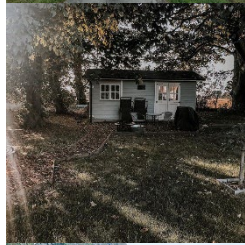
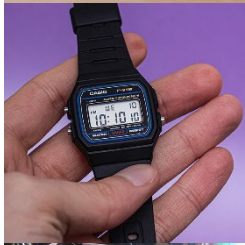
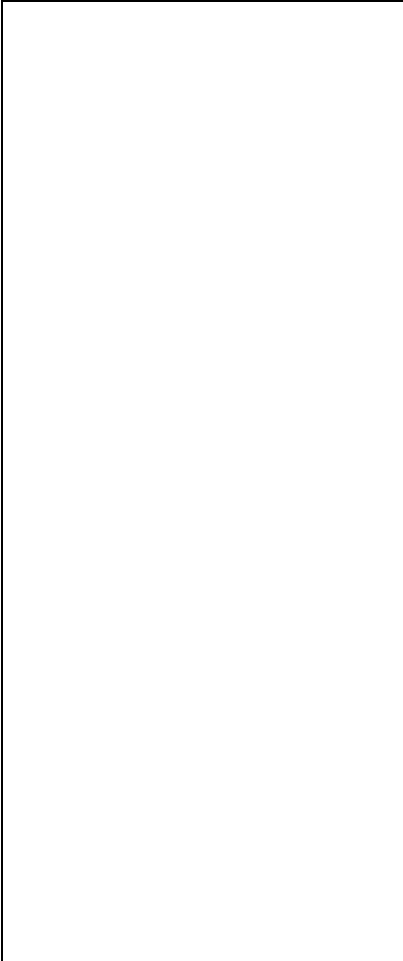
Study 1c

**Product pre-test**

Products were matched on conspicuousness across Product Type. Of the pictures chosen, conspicuous experiential goods ( $M = 5.78, SD = 1.56$ ),  $t(151) = 14.1, p < .001, d = 1.14$ , 95% CI [5.53, 6.03] and material goods ( $M = 6.27, SD = 1.22$ ),  $t(159) = 23.5, p < .001, d = 1.86$ , 95% CI [6.08, 6.46] were significantly above the mid-point on conspicuousness,  $ps < .001$ . The selected conspicuous material and experiential products were perceived to cost the same, on average,  $t(161) = -0.86, p = .39, d = -0.10$ , 95% CI [-0.26, 0.10]. See Figure 20 for all pictures used in the main study.

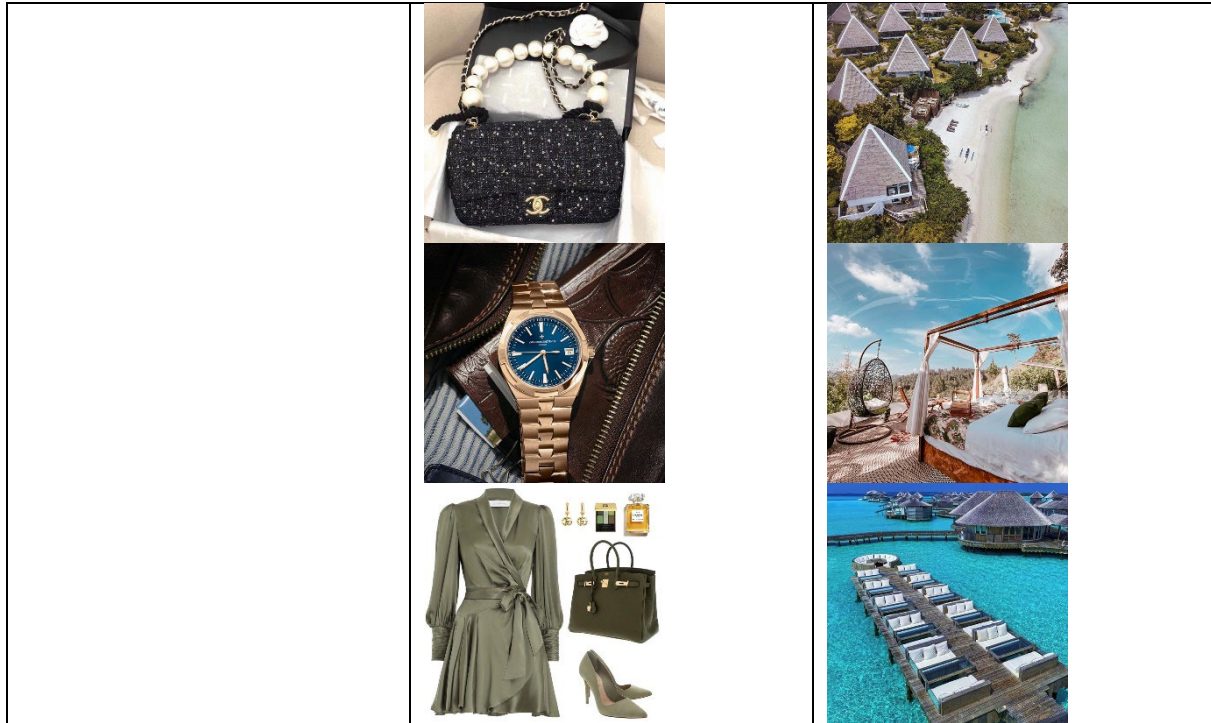
Figure 20. Products used in main study.

	Material	Experiential
Inconspicuous	 	 



Conspicuous





### Job pre-test descriptive results

To represent “status” jobs we selected those that were perceived as needing high levels of status traits and low levels of communal traits. To represent “communal” jobs we selected those that were perceived as needing high levels of communal traits and low levels of status. See Table 7 below. Together, the status jobs required significantly more status traits than the communal jobs,  $t(296) = 24, p < .001, d = 1.42, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.3, 2.7]$ . The communal jobs required significantly more communal traits than the status jobs,  $t(296) = 19, p < .001, 05\% \text{ CI } [1.7, 2.1]$ .

Table 7: Descriptive statistics for job ratings of status and communal traits, means (standard deviations)

Position	Status	Communal
Farmer	2.68 (1.37)	5.63 (1.26)
Social worker	3.08 (1.51)	5.63 (1.26)
Childcare worker	2.84 (1.55)	6.18 (1.00)
Businessperson	5.19 (1.13)	3.56 (1.42)
Engineer	5.14 (1.37)	3.77 (1.30)
Lawyer	5.90 (1.03)	3.63 (1.40)

### List of measures

*Job suitability*

Same as Study 2a



### Gender stereotype check

To address potential pre-existing beliefs about the gendered nature of the jobs (e.g., assumptions that childcare workers are typically women), we told participants in the main study that relatively equal numbers of men and women hold those jobs. Additionally, to control for potential effects of gender stereotypes across occupations, participants reported their presumed gender breakdown for each occupation on a sliding scale from 0 – 100 (100 = entirely men, 0 = entirely women).

### Robustness checks

#### Pre-registered ANOVA analyses

**Primary Analyses.** As in Study 1b, participants evaluated people displaying conspicuous purchases as more suitable job candidates than people displaying inconspicuous purchases,  $F(1,119)=12.76, p<.001, f=0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.14,0.51]$ , and they evaluated people displaying experiences as more suitable job candidates than people displaying material products,  $F(1,119)=9.87, p=.002, f=0.29, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.14,0.51]$ . There was a significant three-way interaction between Purchase Type, Conspicuousness, and Job Type,  $F(1,119)=7.38, p=.008, f=0.25, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07,0.43]$ .

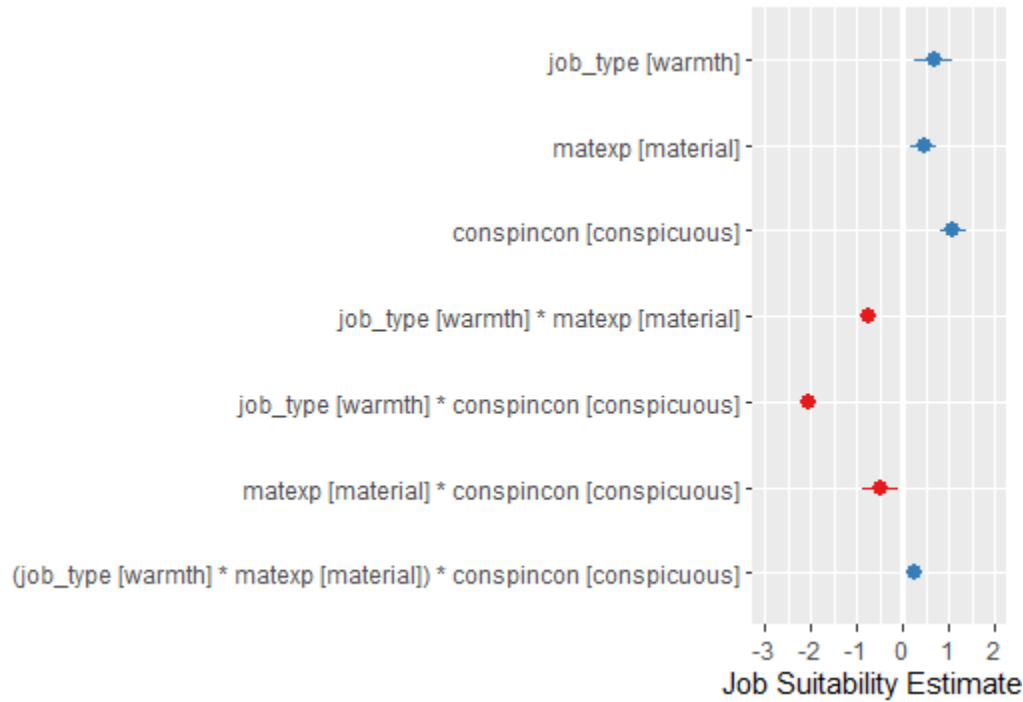
#### Hierarchical linear model

For the hierarchical linear model we nested the 24 different pictures within their respective Product Type x Product Conspicuousness level and the six different jobs within the Job Type factor. See Table 8 below for the fixed effects for this model. Controlling for picture and job-level variance, these results mirror the omnibus ANOVA test reported in the main manuscript.

Table 8. Fixed effects of job type, material/experiential, and conspicuousness on job suitability

<i>Relative to status, experiential, inconspicuous</i>	Estimate	SE	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Intercept	4.15	.19	3.78 – 4.53	<.001
Communal job category	0.67	.21	0.27 – 1.08	.029
Material product	0.46	.14	0.18 – 0.74	.004
Conspicuous product	1.09	.14	0.91 – 1.37	<.001
Communal x material	-0.75	.05	-0.86 – -	<.001
Communal x conspicuous	-2.05	.05	-2.16 – -	<.001
Material x conspicuous	-0.49	.20	-0.89 – -	.023
Communal x Material x Conspicuous	0.23	.08	0.09 – 0.39	.002

Figure 21. Fixed effects of job type, material/experiential, and conspicuousness on job suitability.



### Internal meta-analysis

To address small variations in how experiential conspicuous consumption was perceived across our first three studies, we conducted an internal meta-analysis of status and communal outcomes to estimate overall reliability and effect size. Because of the variation across studies in outcomes (traits versus job suitability), we used a random effects model through R’s metafor package (Viechtbauer, 2010).

Across these studies, there was no significant difference between the status prescribed to experiential versus material conspicuous consumers,  $f = 0.05$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .09$ , 95% CI [-0.01, 0.10]. However, experiential conspicuous consumers were seen as more communal than material conspicuous consumers,  $f = 0.28$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.18, 0.38]. Each of these findings is consistent with our pre-registered predictions described in the earlier studies. The results of this internal meta-analysis encapsulate how experiential conspicuous consumption is perceived: experiences can act as strong status signals, and they also offer unique communal benefits compared to material goods.

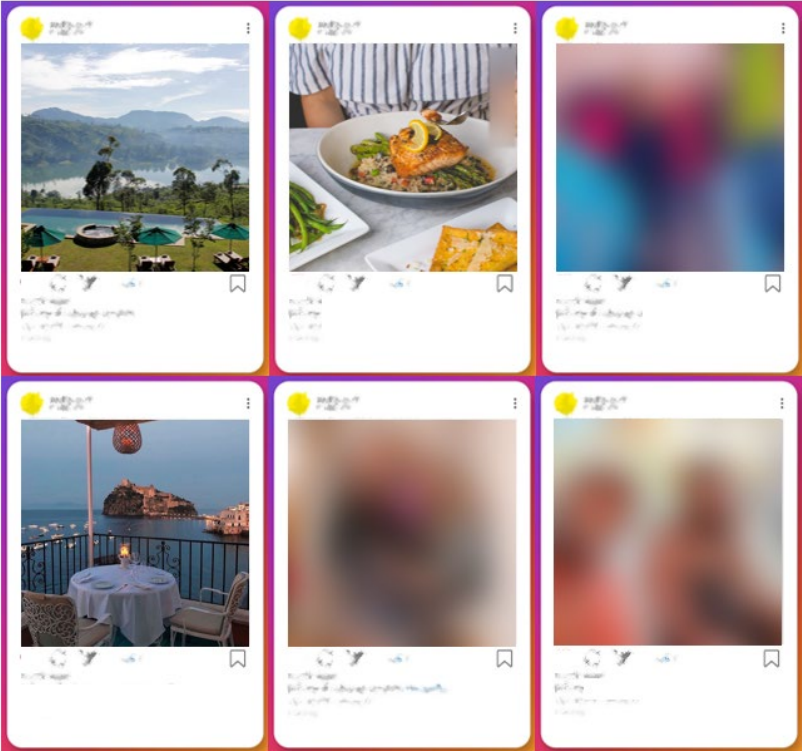
### Study 2

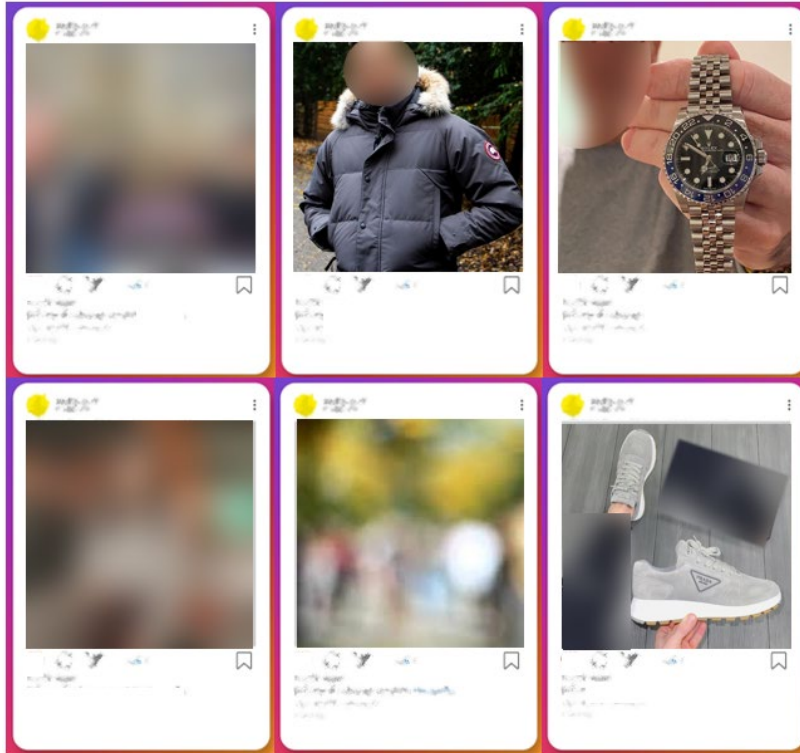
#### *Instructions and cover story:*

“In a previous study, we asked people to take screenshots of six pictures currently on one of their social media profiles and send them to us. [Then we conducted a brief interview to learn more about them and their social media usage]. Now, we are interested in your impressions of these social media profiles.

On the following page you will see a social media profile [with some information we learned about the person through their interview]. To ensure complete anonymity, we have blurred out parts of some pictures containing any identifying information like faces or other pieces of personal information. [To further protect people’s identities, we will also refer to the people by their initials only.]” (Note: bracketed information was not presented in the control condition)

**Profiles**





## Motivation descriptions

### *Intrinsic*

Name: CM

Three words that describe you: Honest, genuine, goal-driven

Personal motto: “Choose a job that you love and you will never have to work a day in your life”

CM said they like to post pictures on social media because they experience enjoyment from doing so and it is fulfilling to them. CM told us that they prioritize being sincere and authentic in their profile. Throughout the interview CM mentioned that they hope to establish and maintain social relationships with others through their posts.

### *Extrinsic*

Name: CM

Three words that describe you: Competitive, ambitious, goal-driven

Personal motto: “Payday will be worth all the nights I stayed up”

CM said they like to post pictures on social media so that people will admire them. CM told us that they prioritize looking good and appearing attractive to other people in their profile.

Throughout the interview, CM mentioned that they hoped to gain more followers and higher status through their posts.

### **Motivation pre-test**

To ensure descriptions for each condition appropriately manipulated intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, 278 participants from Prolific Academic rated the descriptions on motivation (1=primarily intrinsic rewards, 7=primary extrinsic rewards). As expected, the text that described posting on social media for enjoyment was seen as less extrinsically (and more intrinsically) motivated than the text that described posting on social media so people would admire them,  $t(256)=15.17, p<.001, d=1.82, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.47, 3.21]$ .



### Pre-registered 2x2 ANOVA

We conducted a 2x2 ANOVA that excluded the no-text control condition. People who posted their purchases for intrinsic reasons were seen as higher in communal traits than people who posted their purchases for extrinsic reasons,  $F(1,308)=86.49, p<.001, f=.53, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.41,0.65]$ . Experiential conspicuous consumers were seen as higher in communal traits than material conspicuous consumers,  $F(1,308)=17.11, p<.001, f=.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.12,0.35]$ . There was no interaction between motivation and purchase type,  $F(1,308)=0.04, p=.85, f= 0.008, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.10]$ .

### Motivation results from main study

Supporting a baseline difference in perceptions between consumption types, when presented without any accompanying motivational information, experiential conspicuous consumers ( $M=5.05, SD=1.31$ ) were seen as more intrinsically/less extrinsically motivated than material conspicuous consumers ( $M=5.86, SD=1.14$ ),  $t(470)=-3.83, p<.001, f=-0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.61,-0.20]$ .

### Status results

Descriptive statistics for status trait perceptions are presented in Table 9. We conducted an omnibus 2 x 3 ANOVA. A main effect of motivation showed that posting for intrinsic reasons was associated with stronger status traits than posting for extrinsic reasons,  $F(2, 470) = 4.29, p = .01, f = 0.13, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.02, 0.22]$ . We also found that experiential conspicuous consumers are seen as higher status than material conspicuous consumers,  $F(1, 470) = 17.03, p < .001, f = 0.19, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.10, 0.28]$ . There was no interaction between motivation and purchase type,  $F(2, 470) = 0.01, p = .99$ .

Table 9: Descriptive statistics for status traits (Study 3).

Motivation	Experiential	Material
No motivation information	5.15 (1.24)	4.65 (1.33)
Expectation consistent motivation (Experiential-intrinsic; material-extrinsic)	4.92 (1.20)	4.24 (1.51)
Expectation inconsistent motivation (Experiential-extrinsic; material-intrinsic)	4.73 (1.14)	4.45 (1.19)

*Note.* Means, with standard deviations presented in parentheses. “Expectation consistent motivation” represents conditions where the match between consumption type and motivational information is *the same* as that derived in the absence of motivational information. “Expectation inconsistent motivation” represents conditions where the match between consumption type and motivational information is *reversed* from that in the expectation consistent conditions.

### Factor analysis and list of measures

We conducted an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation to test whether the eight items loaded as expected onto corresponding factors.

	Factor 1	Factor 2
They enjoy having control over other members of their group	.86	
They often try to get their own way regardless of what others in the group may want	.88	
They are willing to use aggressive tactics to get their way	.80	
They try to control others rather than permit others to control them	.87	
Members of their group respect and admire them		.81
Their unique talents and abilities are recognized by others in the group		.89
They are considered an expert on some matters by members of the group		.72
Members of their group seek their advice on a variety of matters		.73

### Profile pre-test

We recruited an independent sample of 100 participants from Prolific Academic. The experiential ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $t(161) = 5.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.44$ , 95% CI [4.45, 4.94] and material ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ),  $t(137) = 7.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.66$ , 95% CI [4.77, 5.30] pictures we selected were seen as above the mid-point on conspicuousness. Participants were also asked to guess whether they thought a man or a woman posted the picture: “if you had to guess, what do you think the gender is of the person who posted these photos?” (1 = definitely a woman, 7 = definitely a man). The experiential ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and material ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) pictures we selected were seen as equivalent on this gender item,  $t(270) = 0.04$ ,  $p = .97$ ,  $d = 0.004$ , 95% CI [-0.32, 0.34].

### Replicating Studies 1a-c

The experiential profile was also seen as higher in communal traits than the material profile,  $t(288) = 7.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.84$ , 95% CI [0.53, 0.91].

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