

SOCIAL CLASS AND CONSUMER CHOICE

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Marketing research is lacking in the study of how SES influences consumption choices beyond access to purely economic resources, which merely represent purchasing power without explaining consumer preference. The first essay of this dissertation addresses this gap by examining an understudied social resource known as cultural capital—internalized knowledge, skills and behaviors reflecting cultural competence—that can influence the types of products consumers choose. The second essay examines low SES politically conservative consumers' desire to use consumption choices as signals to attain more status. Together, this dissertation extends our understanding of how SES influences consumer preferences for hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products, as well as their preference for product acquisition via access-based consumption (vs. ownership). Furthermore, the psychological processes underlying these effects and the conditions and personality differences moderating these effects are uncovered. Managerial and theoretical implications are provided.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
SOCIAL CLASS AND CONSUMER CHOICE: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL.....	3
Social Class	4
Forms of Social Class Capital.....	6
Economic Capital and Consumer Choice	7
Cultural Capital and Consumer Choice	8
Hedonic and Utilitarian Consumption	9
Social Consumption	11
Plan of Studies.....	12
Study 1	13
Method	13
Results and Discussion	14
Study 2	15
Method: Sample and Procedure.....	16
Results and Discussion	17
Study 3	19
Method: Sample and Procedure.....	19
Results and Discussion	21
Study 4	23
Method: Sample and Procedure.....	25
Results and Discussion	26
Study 5	28
Method: Sample and Procedure.....	28
Results.....	29

Discussion.....	32
General Discussion.....	32
Theoretical Implications.....	33
Managerial, Societal, and Policy Implications	33
Limitations and Future Research	34
IN SEARCH OF STATUS: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY ON PRODUCT ACQUISITION CHOICES.....	36
Theoretical Background	38
Low Socioeconomic Status (SES).....	38
Political Ideology.....	40
Status-Signaling.....	41
Access-Based Consumption	42
Plan of Studies.....	44
Study 1	44
Sample and Procedure.....	45
Results and Discussion	46
Study 2	47
Sample and Procedure.....	47
Results and Discussion	49
Study 3	50
Sample and Procedure.....	51
Results and Discussion	52
Study 4	53
Sample and Procedure.....	53
Results and Discussion	54
General Discussion.....	55
Theoretical Implications.....	56
Managerial, Societal, and Policy Implications	57
Limitations and Future Research	58
CONCLUSION.....	61

REFERENCES..... 62

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Theoretical model. Dashed line represents a non-significant relationship.....	12
Figure 2: Behavioral intentions towards chocolate as a function of subjective SES and framing of chocolate as hedonic or utilitarian.	18
Figure 3: Utilitarian choice as a function of subjective SES and cultural capital. Dotted line indicates the JN point at 4.81 on the x-axis. The high and low CC groups are significantly different at all values of subjective SES higher than this point.	22
Figure 4: Utilitarian choice as a function of economic capital and cultural capital.	26
Figure 5: Expected enjoyment of bowling. Dotted lines indicate the JN points at 4.36 in the alone condition, and 5.11 in the social condition, along the x-axis. The hedonic and utilitarian groups are significantly different at all values of cultural capital below these points.....	31
Figure 6: Interaction of SES and political ideology on preference for access-based consumption. The dependent variable is preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) a car. Dotted lines represent non-significant slopes for middle and high SES. The vertical grey dashed line represents the JN point at 62.72 along the 100-point measure of political ideology.	46
Figure 7: Interaction of SES and political ideology on preference for access-based consumption. The dependent variable is preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) formal attire and textbooks. Vertical grey dashed lines represent JN points at 25.30 and 91.15 along the 100-point measure of political ideology.....	50
Figure 8: Interaction of SES and political ideology on preference for access-based consumption, mediated by status-signaling motives. The dependent variable is the preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) a car and house or apartment. The dotted line represents a non-significant path. Path coefficients represent non-standardized regression weights. * $p < .05$	53
Figure 9: Three-way interaction of SES, political ideology, and status-signaling prime on preference for access-based consumption. The dependent variable is preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) formal attire, textbooks, sports equipment, power tools, and a boat. Dotted lines represent non-significant slopes.	55

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CC – Cultural Capital

EC – Economic Capital

SES – Socioeconomic Status (a.k.a social class)

INTRODUCTION

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a person's relative ranking within a social hierarchy, based on their access to social and economic resources (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009). Social resources are intangible things that provide a person elevated status within the social hierarchy, including education, occupational prestige, social connections, and valued cultural knowledge—acquired customs and knowledge that display competence and refinement (Bourdieu 1986, 1987; Kraus and Stephens 2012; Holt 1998). Economic resources include accumulated wealth, income, and material possessions (Bourdieu 1986, 1987).

While traditionally viewed by marketers as merely a segmentation variable describing potential consumers on a basis of their spending potential (an economic resource; see Rich and Jain 1968), recent research has begun to examine psychological aspects of SES to better understand how people in different social classes think and behave. For example, research shows that SES plays an important role in influencing life satisfaction and societal wellbeing (Martin and Hill 2012; 2015), self-esteem and materialism (Chaplin, Hill, and Roedder John 2014), ethical decisions (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Piff et al. 2010), and even how a person's choices are judged by others (Olson et al. 2016). However, research in marketing has yet to study how SES influences consumption choices beyond access to purely economic resources, which merely represent purchasing power without explaining consumer preference.

The first essay of this dissertation addresses this gap by examining an understudied aspect of social class known as *cultural capital*—internalized knowledge, skills and behaviors reflecting cultural competence—that can influence the types of products consumers choose. Specifically, we examine how SES predicts shifts between hedonic and utilitarian product

choices based on consumers' perceived cultural capital, while controlling for economic capital (i.e., income). Across five studies, we find that higher SES consumers generally prefer hedonic products, because they reflect an elevated cultural capital. Lower SES consumers generally prefer utilitarian products, representing more practical choices reflective of their lack of cultural capital. Importantly, these effects hold beyond the influence of access to economic capital. Furthermore, we find that when people consume with others in a social context, low SES consumers shift from utilitarian to hedonic choices, whereas high SES consumers shift from hedonic choices to utilitarian when consuming alone.

The second essay focuses specifically on the resource scarcity experienced by low SES consumers to explain when and how these people seek to elevate their status through signaling behaviors. Specifically, we examine low SES politically conservative consumers' desire to use consumption choices as signals to attain more status. Chronic resource scarcity facing these individuals and their concern for attaining and preserving social hierarchy stimulated engagement in access-based consumption (market mediated transactions in which no transfer of ownership takes place) as a financially viable means to signal status. Findings across four studies provided convergent evidence of these effects.

Together, this dissertation extends our understanding of how SES influences consumer preferences for hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products, as well as their preference for product acquisition via access-based consumption (vs. ownership). Furthermore, the psychological processes underlying these effects and the conditions and personality differences moderating these effects are uncovered. Theoretical, managerial, and societal implications are provided.

SOCIAL CLASS AND CONSUMER CHOICE: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Social class (or socioeconomic status—SES) is fundamental to who we are and how we live our lives (Holt 1998; Veblen 1899; Weber 1978). Considerable research across the last six decades has examined how SES impacts behavior in numerous domains (Fiske and Markus 2012). For example, in psychology the literature indicates that low SES individuals are short-term focused and impulsive, whereas high SES individuals are more apt to delay gratification, favoring long-term goals (Griskevicius et al. 2011a; 2011b; Mittal et al. 2015; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014). Other research indicates that higher SES behave more unethically and selfishly than lower SES people (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Piff et al. 2012).

Despite this important work, research on the influence of SES on consumer decisions remains limited (Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). Some notable exceptions investigate consumer preferences for experiential (versus tangible) products that signal status (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvis 2015). However, these studies have focused only on economic capital (i.e., readily available resources such as income and accumulated wealth), likely not accounting for the broader psychological domain of consumers' social class. It is possible that a more predictive influence on consumer preferences can be identified beyond economic capital. Furthermore, since SES is rooted in people's perceptions of their hierarchical standing within society (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, and Ickovics, 2000), economic capital may only capture a small piece of that domain. Consumer's perceptions of their standing in society include their income, however, these perceptions also include knowledge of the behaviors society deems as valuable, in good taste, smart, or "cultured," and their ability to embody and signal these behaviors to others (Bourdieu 1984; Stephens and Townsend 2013). Thus, while

income may be an indicator of SES, cultural knowledge—skills and behaviors embodied by an individual over time—could have an even greater influence on consumption decisions.

In this research, we extend Bourdieu's (1987) theory of social class that suggests that internalized knowledge, skills and behaviors—cultural capital—may have important influences on people's perceptions of their social class. In line with this initial theorizing, we examine whether subjective cultural capital can influence the types of products consumers prefer, beyond objectively measured economic capital. Specifically, we investigate how consumers' SES predicts shifts in preferences for hedonic or utilitarian products as a function of their accumulated cultural capital, beyond their economic capital. In addition, we explore how these consumption patterns shift relative to varying social contexts. Given the social nature of cultural capital, where individuals are socialized to develop appropriate behavior for social relationships with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; 2003), we examine the shifting patterns of hedonic and utilitarian choices depending on whether high and low SES consumers are consuming alone or with others.

Social Class

Social class (or socioeconomic status—SES) is one's rank in society relative to others within a resource-based hierarchy (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009). A person's SES can be viewed in objective terms—i.e., measures of income, occupation, education, and dwelling area (Coleman 1983). SES can also be classified in subjective terms—a person's perception of their standing in society—by way of social comparison (Forehand, Deshpandé, and Reed 2002; Grier and Deshpandé 2001), such that consumers feeling relatively more (less) wealthy, knowledgeable, connected, and prestigious than salient others will classify themselves as

higher (lower) in SES. A measure of “the sense of one’s place” (Bourdieu 1987, p. 5), the subjective measure of SES is arguably more important to consumer behavior, as it reflects perceived place within a material and social (Kraus and Stephens 2012) resource-based hierarchy (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009). Subjective SES is often a more accurate predictor of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors than an objective measure (Adler et al. 2000; Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, and McKee 2017; Kraus and Stephens 2012; Stephens and Townsend 2013). The way people interpret their world is through the lens of their class, which is shaped by, but not contingent on objective factors.

While traditionally viewed by marketers as merely a segmentation variable describing potential consumers on a basis of their spending potential (Rich and Jain 1968), recent research has begun to examine psychological aspects of SES to better understand how people in different classes think and behave. For example, research indicates that SES has powerful effects on life satisfaction and societal wellbeing (Martin and Hill 2012; 2015), self-esteem and materialism (Chaplin, Hill, and Roedder John 2014), ethical decisions (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Piff et al. 2010), and how a person’s choices are judged by others (Olson et al. 2016). Hill et al. (2016) found that consumers raised in a low SES environment were more likely to overeat to store calories, even when not hungry. Additionally, Chen and Matthews (2003) argue that low SES people perceived greater threats from ambiguous social situations than did their higher-class counterparts. They also experienced greater overall stress in life and as a result suffer from more stress-related illness (Miller, Chen, and Cole 2009).

Low SES consumers have also been linked to a predisposition towards myopic behavior (Weinberger, Zavisca, and Silva 2017). Focusing on differences in consumer wealth, past

research has demonstrated that when faced with high stress and uncertainty, people raised in resource-scarce environments had a more difficult time focusing attention (Mittal et al. 2015), made more impulsive decisions (Mittal and Griskevicius 2014), accepted greater risks in pursuit of immediate gratification (Griskevicius et al. 2011b; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016), opted to sacrifice education and careers to have children at a younger age (Griskevicius et al. 2011a), and were less likely to save money (Griskevicius et al. 2013). These findings from the SES literature in the fields of sociology, psychology, and marketing emphasize negative outcomes related to low SES. However, we argue that the differences between low and high SES consumers can provide a richer understanding of consumer decision making relative to social class.

Forms of Social Class Capital

In his theory of social class, Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1987) described SES in terms of economic (i.e., financial) and cultural (i.e., informational) resources. *Economic capital* (EC) represents such resources as income, accumulated wealth, property, and occupational opportunities, which afford people the ability to exchange for products or other valued resources. Thus, EC dictates consumers' purchasing power. *Cultural capital* (CC) is an accumulation of knowledge, skills, and behaviors valued in society that allow people to demonstrate cultural competence, and thus status (Bourdieu 1986). CC represents the capabilities, ideas, practices, and perspectives that society collectively deems valuable, such as choices considered to be of good taste, smart, or "cultured" (Stephens and Townsend 2013). Üstüner and Holt (2010, 52) describe the construct of CC as centered on "the expression of sophisticated tastes, emphasizing aesthetics, abstraction, improvisation, eclecticism, cosmopolitanism, and authenticity." These resources allow people to signal their standing

relative to others and provide opportunities for status maintenance and upward social mobility by accumulating more resources (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013).

Unlike EC, CC cannot be immediately transferred from one person to another, but rather is a set of social nuances learned and embodied by individuals over time. Thus, this accumulated cultural understanding has a more pervasive influence over consumer preferences over time than wealth and income, which merely provide access to desired products and could potentially be fleeting. For example, both the Mercedes CLA sedan and the Chevy Silverado truck are priced around \$33,000, making them equally accessible to people with similar economic resources. However, as they acquire more CC, consumers learn that driving a Mercedes—the more elegant and sophisticated option—confers more status than the similarly priced Chevy truck, which is typically associated with the working classes.

Economic Capital and Consumer Choice

The influence of EC on consumption decisions has received considerable attention. Han, Nunes, and Drèze (2010) developed a taxonomy to explain how the wealthy “haves” with different individual needs for status use conspicuous consumption to dissociate from the “have-nots.” At the other end of the spectrum, Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvis (2015) found that feeling financially constrained leads to preference for material over experiential consumption. Hill et al. (2016) found that people with low subjectively less economic resources during childhood (regardless of their current EC) consume more calories, even when not hungry. Additionally, a body of research studying the effects of extreme levels of poverty has discussed how the homeless acquire possessions through nontraditional employment and scavenging (Hill and Stamey 1990) and has shown that a basic level of consumption necessities must be met before

the fulfillment of higher-order psychological needs has an influence on subjective wellbeing. In extremely impoverished societies, saving can help to improve SWB (Martin and Hill 2015), and such poverty affects consumers' self-esteem, increasing the likelihood of materialism (Chaplin, Hill, and John 2014). While important, these findings are centered around EC, and do not discuss the role played by CC.

Cultural Capital and Consumer Choice

Little research has examined how CC can influence product choice. This leaves a major gap in the understanding of SES in consumer behavior, as CC acquired through family upbringing, formative peer groups, and formal education are likely a more influential explanatory element of a person's SES (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). Yet, it remains untested whether CC, and not merely EC, is the primary driver of the effects of SES on product preference and choice. Our position is that a purely economic explanation falls short in explaining consumer preference and choice, because EC is more likely a form of constraint or access to desired products than a driver of preference. In other words, we suggest that the mere possession of economic resources does not drive preference, rather it allows consumers to acquire preferred products while lacking economic resources inhibits one's ability to acquire preferred products. Preference, we suggest, is a function of consumers' CC, not EC.

Qualitative studies have examined CC to broadly understand how it influences consumption practices, however the effects of CC on behaviors has typically been assumed rather than empirically tested (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Üstüner and Holt 2010). Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) suggested that consumers with high CC have more interaction with rich material goods and a variety of cultural settings. These have a wider range of exposure to

different products and experiences, and hence develop a diversity of tastes and greater desire for pleasure and excitement. Bourdieu (1984) noted that preference for pure aesthetics is rooted in consumer desire to appear to distance themselves from the necessities of life. On the other hand, Holt (1998) suggested that consumers with low CC, who struggle with more basic issues related to survival, learn to value practicality and functionality.

Hedonic and Utilitarian Consumption

Hedonic products are those that are more experiential, fun, pleasurable, exciting, and consumption of the product itself serves as the desired end state. Examples of these include designer clothes, sports cars, and luxury watches. *Utilitarian* products are primarily instrumental, functional, and serve as a means to attain a desired end state (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Microwaves, minivans, and personal computers are examples of utilitarian products.

Utilitarian purchases are typically more easily justified than hedonic ones (Okada 2005) and are considered more responsible than hedonic choices (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Goldsmith, Cho, and Dhar 2012; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). However, consumers are more likely to justify making hedonic choices when purchasing for others but anticipate that the indulgence would lead to feelings of guilt when spending on one's self, leading to more utilitarian choices when purchasing for the self (Lu, Liu, and Fang 2016). Furthermore, consumers are often willing to pay more for hedonic products (Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan 2007) because they are less price sensitive when purchasing for pleasure than for practical reasons (Wakefield and Inman 2003).

Research suggests that consumers lacking resources have greater motivation to signal status through conspicuous displays (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Mazzocco et al. 2012; Nunes, Drèze, and Han 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). These authors' findings might predict that low SES consumers (those lacking resources) would prefer to display hedonic choices to improve their relative social standing. However, their research focused on the effect of economic resources, which represent consumer purchasing power, but do not shape preferences. In contrast to this compensatory explanation, we suggest that low SES consumers learn to value more practical choices over time, as they lack experience with hedonic choices—valued socially and considered of good taste. Utilitarian choices are viewed as more practical (Gamlin et al. 2018; Khan and Dhar 2006) and are consistent with the less refined taste for practicality developed within a low CC environment typical among low SES households with little exposure to a variety of pleasurable leisurely consumption. Thus, we expect lower SES consumers with low CC to favor and engage in more utilitarian consumption.

Whereas lower SES consumers favor practicality, higher SES consumers are expected to prefer to express their individualism. Botti and McGill (2011) found that consumers were more satisfied when exercising personal control—abundant in higher classes (Kraus et al. 2009; Lachman and Weaver 1998)—to choose hedonic products. These choices allow consumers to display their sophisticated taste and style, which serve as symbols of higher status and have become the norm for those with elevated CC (Alba and Williams 2013; Hagtvedt and Patrick 2009).

Consumers' choices serve as a resource for making social class distinctions by displaying their levels of cultural capital (Arsel and Bean 2013; Henry 2005), and allowing social peers

evaluate the consumption choices as class-appropriate or not (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Holt 1998). Thus, consumers' preferences reflect their perceived CC and corresponding societal expectations, such that people with high CC avoid making choices congruent with low CC, and those with low CC avoid making choices congruent with high CC to avoid feeling out of place (Holt 1997). We anticipate that high SES consumers will prefer to pursue more hedonic goals and low SES consumers will pursue utilitarian goals, and that perceived CC underlies this effect. Specifically, consumers higher in SES have more accumulated CC, which generates exposure to more pleasurable consumption and is reflected in hedonic choices. Those lower in SES will lack CC, and thus seek more practical utilitarian choices. We suggest that, beyond economic capital, this effect of SES on product choice can be explained by cultural capital (see figure 1).

Social Consumption

Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2003) describe social class as an environment where individuals are socialized to develop self-concepts and the appropriate behavior for social relationships with others. In low SES environments, consumers lack resources making them more reliant on others for social connections and survival (Kraus, Tan, and Tannenbaum 2013). Thus, we expect low SES people to shift from utilitarian to hedonic choices when making consumption decisions in a social context (versus alone), because they prefer to spend more time socializing with others (Bianchi and Vohs 2016) and people generally prefer to experience hedonic consumption when in the presence of others (Lu et al. 2016; Ratner and Hamilton 2015). In high SES environments consumers have abundant resources and opportunity to focus on the self by making individual choices. Research has provided evidence that high SES leads

people to feel more independent, preferring freedom of choice, and expressions of individuality and uniqueness (Kraus et al. 2013). They have also been shown to behave more selfishly (Dubois et al. 2015; Piff et al. 2012), and thus we expect high SES consumers will shift from hedonic to utilitarian choices when making choices in a social context (versus alone) to avoid sharing pleasurable consumption experiences with others.

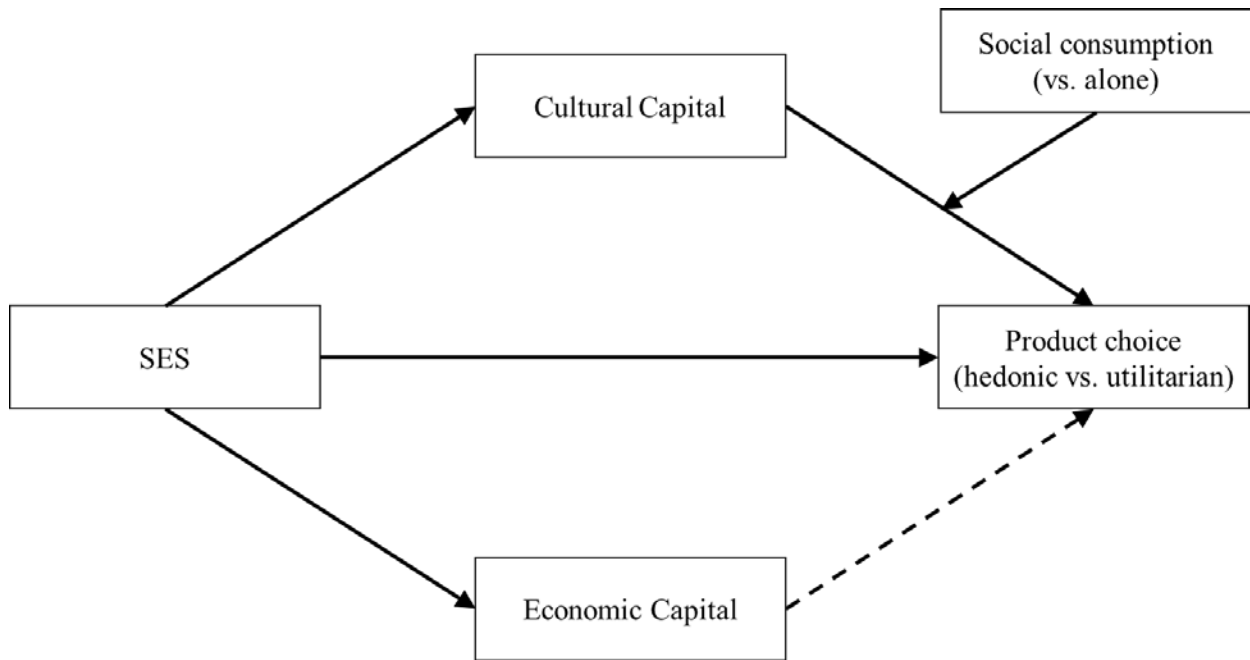


Figure 1: Theoretical model. Dashed line represents a non-significant relationship.

Plan of Studies

Five studies were conducted to examine the impact of SES on product choice. Study 1 examines whether low SES consumers prefer utilitarian options and high SES consumers prefer hedonic product options. Study 2 experimentally manipulates SES and product framing to provide robust causal support for the SES effect on choice. In study 3a, we provide evidence of CC as the process underlying these effects through an experimental manipulation. Study 3b replicates the findings of 3a and provides a more robust demonstration that EC can be ruled out

as an alternative explanation. Lastly, study 4 manipulates consumption context (social versus alone) to demonstrate an important relevant boundary condition. The alternative explanations of price and economic resources are ruled out through all five studies.

Study 1

Our objective in study 1 is to investigate whether lower subjective SES is associated with increased utilitarian over hedonic choices. We theorized that low subjective SES is likely to evoke goals to be responsible and practical, because of a perceived lack of CC. Practical choices may be seen as a way of garnering cultural capital by doing what is viewed as being prudent, because practical choices are more justifiable. High subjective SES is instead likely to license pleasure-seeking goals, because consumers will perceive they already have CC, and thus responsible choices are not necessary. Thus, we expect that consumers experiencing lower (vs. higher) subjective SES will be likely to make more utilitarian choices.

Method

Sample

Two hundred ninety-three undergraduate students (63.10% female, $M_{age} = 24.41$, $SD = 6.20$) were recruited from a large southern university for course credit. Participants were instructed that researchers were interested in understanding factors that influence the choices consumers make.

Procedure

The first task was designed to measure subjective SES—the perception among students of their status. Participants were asked to complete a short task allegedly designed to provide

experimenters better insights about the participants. After these instructions, participants were presented with the MacArthur scale comprised of a 10-rung ladder representing social hierarchy (Adler et al., 2000). This measure is a standard scale of subjective SES. Participants were instructed that this ladder represented social hierarchy and they should indicate where they fall in this social hierarchy when they consider their standing.

Participants were thanked for completing this task. They were instructed that in the next task, experimenters were interested in understanding their choices. Participants were asked to vividly imagine that they were looking for an apartment. They had narrowed their search to two apartments that were priced similarly and in similar neighborhoods with similar amenities. However, one apartment was close to work and therefore more functional (apartment A) and the other had a beautiful view and therefore was more hedonic (apartment B). Then, they provided household income, which is representative of their EC. This measure was collected as a control variable. Participants were then thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Of the 293 respondents who completed study 1, 130 (44.47%) chose the utilitarian apartment option ($M_{SES} = 5.68$, $SD = 2.12$) and 163 (55.63%) chose the hedonic option ($M_{SES} = 6.31$, $SD = 2.05$). An independent samples t-test revealed that those who selected the utilitarian option felt significantly lower in SES than those who selected the hedonic option ($t(291) = -2.54$, $p = .012$).

Subjective SES was correlated with EC (income, $r = .17$, $p = .003$). Thus, to demonstrate this difference beyond the effects of EC, a hierarchical logistic regression predicting apartment choice (1 = utilitarian, 0 = hedonic) from subjective SES, after controlling for EC was run. Results

revealed the predicted effect of subjective SES ($b = -.13$, $SE = .06$, Wald $\chi^2 = 4.76$, $p = .029$). As predicted, participants who felt subjectively lower (higher) in SES tended to make the utilitarian (hedonic) choice more often. These results held even after controlling for EC, as depicted by their income, which did not significantly influence utilitarian (vs. hedonic) choice ($b = -.10$, $SE = .06$, Wald $\chi^2 = 2.65$, $p = .104$).

A major strength of this study is its simple design, where we measured objective and subjective SES and preference for hedonic over utilitarian product features. We found important initial evidence that lower subjective SES increases preferences for utilitarian (vs. hedonic) options. A similar effect on choice was not observed for EC. These correlational data thus indicate real-world existence of our proposed phenomenon in absence of any manipulations. They are important because marketers often employ chronic individual differences to target different sets of consumers. However, as with any correlational study, a causal link between lower SES and preferences for utilitarian over hedonic features cannot be inferred. Notably, it is unclear why or how a reverse causality (i.e., preferences for utilitarian features increases perceptions of lower SES) could occur. Still, our objective in study 2 is to manipulate rather than measure subjective SES. To extend generalizability of this finding, we also employ a different target product.

Study 2

The purpose of study 2 was to further investigate the relationship between perceived SES and preferences for utilitarian versus hedonic products. An experimental design was employed to support our claims of causality of subjective SES in increasing choices of utilitarian products. We randomly assigned participants to experience higher or lower subjective SES. We

also employed a different target product (chocolate) from the one we used in study 1 (apartment choice). This allows for more generalizability, given that making a purchase decision for an apartment and chocolate represent vastly different price levels and consumer involvement. Moreover, in contrast to study 1, this study employed a between-subjects design and participants lower (vs. higher) in SES indicated behavioral intent toward chocolate that was framed more in utilitarian (vs. hedonic) terms. We expect that consumers who feel lower (higher) in SES will prefer the utilitarian (hedonic) framed product more.

Method: Sample and Procedure

We recruited 322 undergraduate students (45.34 percent female, $M_{age} = 22.73$, $SD = 3.79$) to participate in a 2 (subjective SES: high, low) \times 2 (frame: hedonic, utilitarian) between subjects experiment in which participants indicated behavioral intent toward a chocolate. Following procedures from Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky (2015), participants compared themselves to people higher (low SES condition) or lower in SES (high SES condition) than them, then indicated their own SES on the 10-rung ladder used to measure subjective SES in study 1. Next, they read a brief article that framed chocolate as either hedonic (e.g., having mood-altering properties associated with feeling pleasure) or utilitarian (e.g., healthy, beneficial—associated with improved cardiovascular health). Participants then indicated whether they viewed chocolate as primarily utilitarian (1 = “useful, practical, or functional”) or primarily hedonic (7 = “enjoyable, pleasant, or fun”). Next, they indicated their attitudes towards chocolate (1 = “Bad/ Unfavorable/ Negative/ Unsatisfactory,” 7 = “Good/ Favorable/ Positive/ Satisfactory,” $\alpha = .91$) and how believable, true, credible, and trustworthy they found the article

to be (1 = "Not at all," 7 = "Very much," $\alpha = .89$). Finally, participants provided household income.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Participants randomly assigned to the high SES condition reported feeling subjectively higher in SES ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.69$) than those in the low SES condition ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.66$; $t(320) = 2.09$, $p = .037$). Additionally, as expected, chocolate was viewed as more hedonic ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.42$) or utilitarian ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(320) = 6.39$, $p < .001$) according to the framing condition.

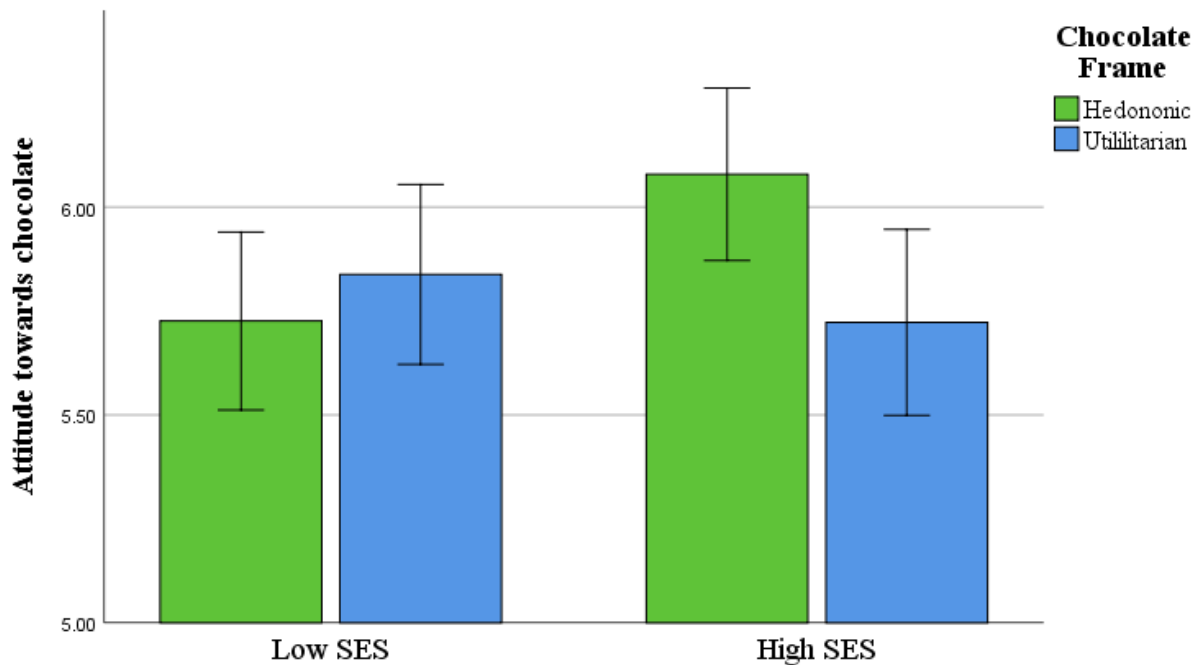
Main Analysis

Providing causal support for findings from study 1, a 2 (subjective SES) \times 2 (frame) ANCOVA on attitudes towards chocolate, with EC (income) and article believability as covariates. After controlling for EC ($F(1, 274) = 1.50$, $p = .222$) and believability ($F(1, 274) = 64.67$, $p < .001$), the analysis revealed no main effect of subjective SES ($F(1, 274) = 1.15$, $p = .284$) nor the framing of chocolate as hedonic or utilitarian ($F(1, 274) = 1.24$, $p = .266$), indicating neither SES nor framing per se impact attitudes towards chocolate differently. However, the 2-way interaction between subjective SES and frame were significant ($F(1, 274) = 4.63$, $p = .032$).

Simple effects designed to explore the two way interaction showed, as we expected, that when chocolate was described as hedonic, the higher SES group had more favorable attitudes towards it than the lower SES group ($F(1, 316) = 3.40$, $p = .066$), however a similar

difference was not observed for the utilitarian framed chocolate ($F(1, 316) = .31, p = .580$).

While a within-subjects choice between a utilitarian and hedonic product in study 1 resulted in a relative preference for the utilitarian product among participants experiencing subjectively lower SES and preference for the hedonic product among those subjectively higher in SES, a between-subjects measure in study 2 further illuminated a boost in preferences for hedonic products among people who felt higher in SES. Further probing simple effects indicated that this increased attitude towards hedonic products is prominent among participants in the higher SES group ($F(1, 316) = 3.69, p = .056$), though the difference did not emerge among participants in the lower SES group ($F(1, 316) = .24, p = .627$).



Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values:
income = 2.70, Believability of chocolate article = 4.85

Error bars: 95% CI

Figure 2: Behavioral intentions towards chocolate as a function of subjective SES and framing of chocolate as hedonic or utilitarian.

Study 3

Our objective in Study 3 is to provide process evidence implicating a role of cultural capital in the observed effect of lower SES on utilitarian preferences through moderation. In particular, we found in Study 2 that consumers with a subjectively higher SES make fewer utilitarian choices, favoring hedonic more than consumers with a subjectively lower SES. We proposed the reason for the fewer utilitarian choices among consumers with a higher SES, in contrast to consumers with a lower SES, is that they perceive they have enough cultural capital and thus do not need to make prudent choices to garner capital. Thus, if a perception of having cultural capital reduces utilitarian choices among those with a higher subjective SES, then lowering their cultural capital situationally should make their choices more similar to choices made by those with a lower subjective SES who may experience a chronic lack of cultural capital. Thus, in study 3, we measured subjective SES as we did in study 1, then randomly assigned participants to a baseline or a lack of cultural capital condition before asking them for their choices among utilitarian (vs. hedonic) products. We expected in the baseline cultural capital condition to replicate our findings from studies 1-2 that consumers with a higher subjective SES will make fewer utilitarian choices but if we situationally lower their cultural capital their choices of utilitarian products will increase and become no different from choices made by consumers with lower SES who are likely to experience chronic low cultural capital.

Method: Sample and Procedure

Two hundred forty-one Mturkers (61.40% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.35$, $SD = 12.04$) participated in a continuous (subjective SES (high vs. low) \times (perceived cultural capital: high vs. low) between-subjects study in which choices between utilitarian and hedonic products served as

the dependent variable of interest. After indicating their subjective SES as in study 1, participants were assigned randomly to a baseline or a lowered cultural capital condition. In the baseline cultural capital condition participants were shown an image of the Mona Lisa which we expected everyone to easily recognize (baseline CC) whereas in the lowered cultural capital condition participants were shown a similar, but unknown renaissance-style portrait (lowered CC). Participants were asked to identify the title and painter of the portrait—a simple task for those who saw the Mona Lisa, and thus not particularly indicative of having cultural capital because everyone should be able to identify the portrait, but difficult for those viewing the unknown painting and thus a signal that one might not have the cultural capital one believed to have. To ensure our manipulation was successful, we then asked participants to respond to a manipulation check measure of perceived CC. Specifically, participants were asked: “I am knowledgeable about culture in general,” “I have accumulated a great deal of cultural knowledge,” “I have a wealth of cultural experience,” and “I have more cultural experience than others” (1 = “Strongly disagree,” 7 = “Strongly agree;” $\alpha = .94$).

Next, participants were asked to complete a product choice task adapted from Lu et al. (2016), in which they made 5 choices between two similar product options—one described as utilitarian and the other as hedonic (e.g., a warm versus fashionable coat, a car with high fuel economy versus a fast car). The product categories represented a mix of items at different price points that typically entail varying levels of purchase involvement. Importantly, within each product category the hedonic and utilitarian product options were described as equally priced. Responses were coded 0 for hedonic and 1 for utilitarian choices, then the mean was taken to

make a utilitarian (over hedonic) choice index. Finally, participants provided household income as a measure of EC.

Results and Discussion

Hypothesis Tests

Regression analyses predicting utilitarian choice index from subjective SES, manipulated cultural capital (0 = baseline, 1 = lowered), and their interaction, while controlling for EC ($b = .01$, $SE = .01$, $t(236) = 1.55$, $p = .124$), revealed a main effect of SES ($b = -.04$, $SE = .01$, $t(236) = -4.79$, $p < .001$), indicating that lower subjective SES is associated with more utilitarian choices. The main effect of cultural capital was also significant ($b = -.09$, $SE = .07$, $t(236) = -1.31$, $p = .192$), indicating that lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices (though this effect failed to reach conventional levels of significance). Importantly, as we expected, these main effects were qualified by an interaction between SES and cultural capital ($b = .03$, $SE = .01$, $t(236) = 2.29$, $p = .023$). Unpacking this interaction revealed that lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices of high SES consumers (stats), making their choices of utilitarian products similar to those of consumers low in SES who experience chronic low cultural capital (stats). Expectedly, the lowering of cultural capital manipulation did not further increase utilitarian choices among low SES consumers who already have chronically lower cultural capital (stats). Furthermore, a floodlight analysis provided a Johnson Neyman point at 4.81 on subjective SES, indicating that participants above 4.81 made significantly more utilitarian choices after we situationally lowered their cultural capital figure 3).

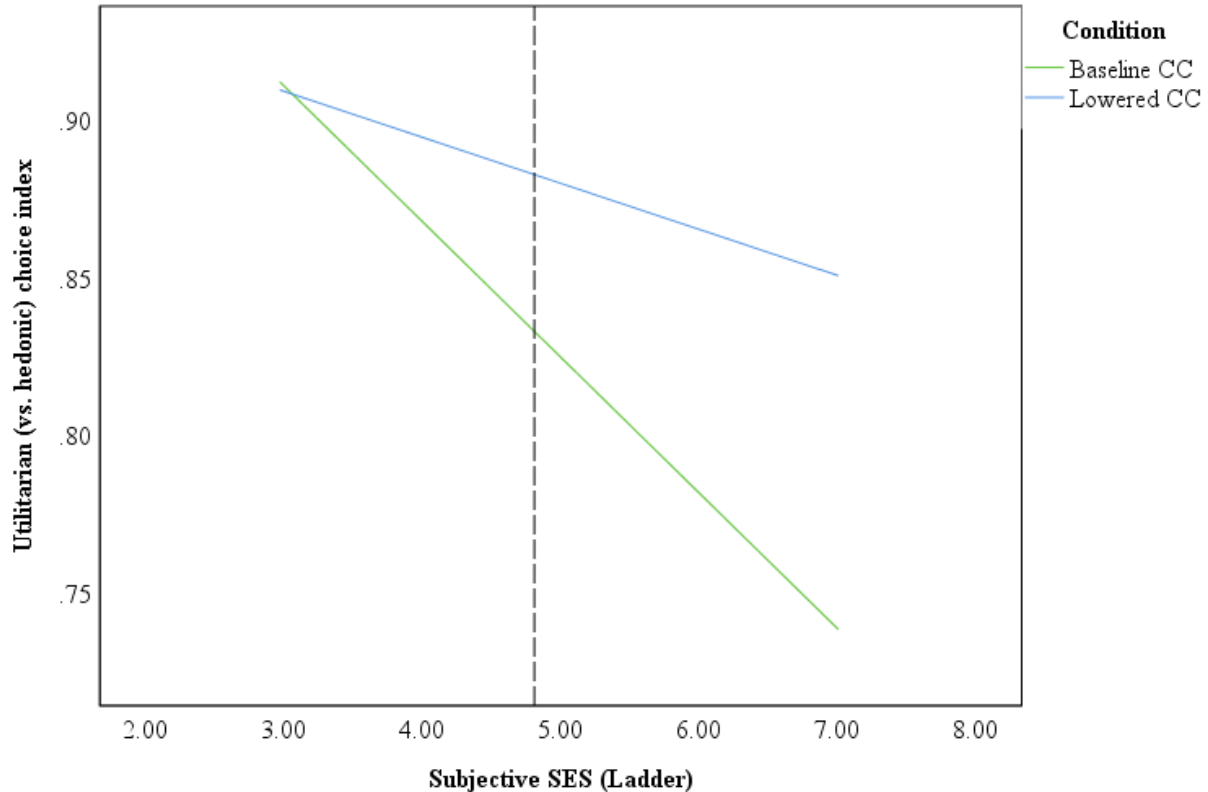


Figure 3: Utilitarian choice as a function of subjective SES and cultural capital. Dotted line indicates the JN point at 4.81 on the x-axis. The high and low CC groups are significantly different at all values of subjective SES higher than this point.

One aspect to note in this study is that consumers generally made more utilitarian than hedonic choices, and this finding is consistent with prior research (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Khan and Dhar 2006; Okada 2005), which argues that utilitarian choices are more easily justified than hedonic ones. Thus, utilitarian options are generally more likely to be selected when presented concurrently with a similar hedonic option, as was also the case in this study.

In summary, we found that (a) lower SES corresponded with lower self-reports of cultural capital, (b) reducing cultural capital through a situational prime reduced perceived cultural capital of consumers high in SES but not of consumers low in SES who may have chronic low levels of cultural capital, (c) consumers with lower SES tended to make more utilitarian choices than consumers with higher SES, and (d) this difference in preferences for utilitarian

products was attenuated when cultural capital among high SES consumers was lowered, increasing their preferences for utilitarian choices to similar levels among the low SES. These effects were observed over a mix of items at different price points that typically entail varying levels of purchase involvement. By showing that situationally lowering cultural capital of the high SES results in their choices becoming similar to those made by the low SES who have chronically low cultural capital, we thus provided evidence through moderation of the role a perceived lack of cultural capital plays in heightening preferences for utilitarian products. Furthermore, this study showed that economic capital (income) does not similarly result in these effects on increased utilitarian preferences.

Study 4

The purpose of study 4 was two-fold. The first objective was to directly replicate our finding that lowering cultural capital increases utilitarian in favor of hedonic choice. The second objective was to show this effect of lowering cultural capital on increased utilitarian choice is invariant to economic capital. In particular, we theorized that consumers who are low in SES experience low economic capital and low cultural capital. It is the lower cultural capital that drives them to prefer utilitarian products because such products are prudent and thus may be perceived as garnering cultural capital. Conversely, consumers who are high in SES experience high economic capital and high cultural capital, and their preference for hedonic choices allows them to display their elevated cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Stephens and Townsend 2013). An alternative explanation for our results could be that the lower economic capital of the low SES consumers drives them to make more utilitarian choices because such choices are less wasteful, more durable, and more functional, and therefore can be seen as a better use of

limited resources by the low SES consumers. Notably, we found our effects in studies 1-3 after controlling for economic capital (income a more objective measure representative of SES) and in those studies the effects of objective SES or economic capital were not similar to those of subjective SES or cultural capital. That is, consumers with lowered SES preferred utilitarian products but these effects were observed only with subjective SES that corresponds with lower cultural capital, and not with objective SES that corresponds with lower economic capital. Furthermore, we found that lowering cultural capital among consumers with a higher subjective SES resulted in increased choices of utilitarian products; similar effects were not observed when measures of economic capital (objective SES) were used. Still, in study 4 we manipulate both cultural capital and economic capital orthogonally.

Study 4 thus used a 2 (economic capital: high vs. low) × 2 (cultural capital: baseline vs. low) between subjects design in which participants made choices between hedonic and utilitarian products. We employed the exact manipulation of study 3 for lowering cultural capital, and we target two different populations to correspond with high versus low economic capital. Specifically we draw targeted subsamples from a subject pool with participants having annual combined household incomes greater than \$80,000 (high EC group) or lower than \$40,000 (low EC group). These income levels are well over or under the 2017 median household income of \$61,372 in the US respectively (Fontenot, Semega, and Kolla 2018). We predict only a main effect of lowering cultural capital on increasing utilitarian choices. This prediction is in line with the findings from studies 1-2 that showed that subjective but not objective SES corresponds with increased utilitarian choices. It also is in line with study 3 that showed that lowering cultural capital increases utilitarian choices among those with high subjective SES

making their choices similar to those made by low SES consumers who chronically lack cultural capital and these effects do not follow with measured objective SES (income, i.e. economic capital). Thus, we do not expect a main effect of economic capital, nor do we expect an interaction.

Method: Sample and Procedure

Two-hundred forty-one participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to complete a short online study (63.5 percent female, $M_{age} = 42.15$, $SD = 13.81$). Two sets of participants were recruited to participate based on their self-reported household incomes: a high income group (high economic capital) with income ranging from \$75,001 – \$100,000 and a low income group (low economic capital) with income ranging from \$25,001 – \$35,000. Workers were recruited using a premium filter in Amazon Mturk, which allows researcher to specifically target participants who have previously responded to a set of screener questions, one of which pertained to household income. Workers whose incomes did not fall within these pre-selected ranges did not qualify for the study and were not able to view the recruitment ad posted.

Participants who were qualified for the study completed a cultural capital manipulation identical to the one we employed in study 3. Participants also completed the exact same manipulation checks, which confirmed we successfully lowered cultural capital ($M_{Baseline} = 4.51$, $SD = 1.37$; $M_{LowCC} = 3.79$, $SD = 1.48$; $t(239) = 3.94$, $p < .0001$). Finally, participants completed the exact same choices as in study 3, and we created a utilitarian (over hedonic) choice index as we did in study 3 for each participant.

Results and Discussion

A 2 (economic capital) \times 2 (cultural capital) ANOVA revealed, as we expected, that economic capital did not have a significant effect on increasing utilitarian choice ($F(1, 237) = .21, p = .644$), nor did an interaction emerge between economic and cultural capital ($F(1, 237) = .01, p = .922$). Only the expected main effect of cultural capital emerged ($F(1, 237) = 9.22, p = .003$), indicating that a perceived lack of cultural capital increased choice of utilitarian over hedonic products. Within the low economic capital, lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices ($M_{Baseline} = .84, SD = .21; M_{LowCC} = .91, SD = .16; F(1, 237) = 4.54, p = .034$). A similar pattern of results was found in the high economic capital group ($M_{Baseline} = .84, SD = .20; M_{LowCC} = .92, SD = .15; F(1, 237) = 4.65, p = .032$; see figure 4). Thus, regardless of their economic capital, we found that lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices. These results replicate our findings from study 3 and additionally support our position that it is not a consumer's economic capital, but rather their cultural capital that increases their preferences for utilitarian over hedonic choices.

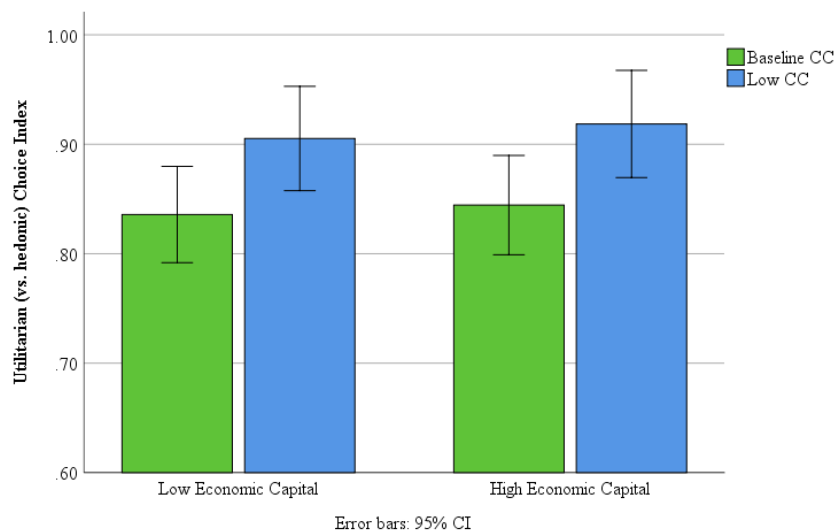


Figure 4: Utilitarian choice as a function of economic capital and cultural capital.

Cultural capital refers to a social resource of a person that facilitate social mobility. It includes a person's education knowledge, and intellectual skills. But for consumers making choices, there can be two sources of cultural capital—the choices people make per se, and the people they make their choices with. To the extent that utilitarian products reflect a more responsible and prudent choice, making such choices could signal to a person that he or she is garnering social capital by making more respectable choices and improving social standing by learning to behave more in line with those having a higher status. However, choices consumers make are only one means to garner cultural capital. A second means to garnering cultural capital is to form relationships with others. Networks and relations with others can boost cultural capital acquisition and social mobility. When a consumer makes choices alone, then making a utilitarian choice can boost the self-perception of being responsible and garnering cultural capital. But when choices are social rather than alone, then social relationships and networks are likely to be a stronger means for garnering cultural capital. Indeed, Ratner and Hamilton (2015) demonstrated that, in general, when people consume alone they prefer utilitarian products and experiences, because such choices are easier to justify and thus may signal to a consumer that he or she is a responsible person. But when they consume socially, or are accompanied by others, consumers feel less inhibition towards making hedonic choices and overestimate enjoyment from hedonic consumption. One reason they overestimate enjoyment from hedonic consumption socially could be that hedonic choices with others could be perceived as enhancing cultural capital. Notably, in social situations, hedonic choices encourage social relationships and networks. Thus, in social consumption, hedonic choices are more likely to be a means to garnering cultural capital. Our objective in study 5 is to further test our

process model—that consumers increase utilitarian choices because through such choices they can garner cultural capital—by showing that when choices are social, then hedonic choices rather than utilitarian ones are a source of cultural capital. Therefore, consumers lacking cultural capital are likely to increase utilitarian choices when alone but increase hedonic choices socially.

Study 5

The purpose of study 5 is to provide evidence for our proposed boundary condition—consuming in a social context versus alone. We posit that when alone, utilitarian choices signal a responsible choice and increase a perception of garnering cultural capital. However, when social, then hedonic choices can facilitate social networking and thus garnering of cultural capital. Considering that lower SES consumers are more reliant on others to obtain social resources (Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007), we expect that when alone, lower SES consumers will be likely to increase utilitarian choices, but in social situations, they will be more likely to increase hedonic choices. Thus, we employed a continuous SES \times 2 (choice: utilitarian vs. hedonic) \times 2 (consumption context: alone vs. social) between-subjects design.

Method: Sample and Procedure

One hundred ninety-eight Mturkers (55.6% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.76$, $SD = 9.78$) participated in a continuous SES \times 2 (product framing: utilitarian vs. hedonic) \times 2 (consumption context: social vs. alone) between-subjects study in which choice was the dependent variable of interest. We also measured cultural capital as mediator.

Participants first indicated their subjective SES, using the 10-rung ladder measure used in studies 1-3 (factor), household income to assess economic capital from studies 1-3 (control), followed by the measure of perceived cultural capital from studies 3 and 4 (mediator). Next, following a procedure adapted from Ratner and Hamilton (2015), participants were asked to imagine that they were going to go bowling. To manipulate product framing, participants were either asked to imagine going bowling for practice in the utilitarian condition, or for fun in the hedonic condition. In the social context condition, participants were told they would go bowling with two or more friends, whereas in the alone condition they would be going alone (e.g., “Imagine you are going bowling to practice [for fun] with two or more friends [alone]”). To ensure that the product framing manipulations were effective in altering participants perception of bowling, they were asked how they would describe their visit to the bowling alley (1 = “To accomplish something,” 7 = “To enjoy myself”). The framing condition resulted in bowling being viewed as more hedonic when imagined for fun ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.17$) versus for practice ($M = 5.40$, $SE = 1.91$; $t(196) = -3.19$, $p = .002$).

As the dependent measure adopted from Ratner and Hamilton (2015), participants reported how likely they would be to go bowling (1 = “Not at all likely,” 7 = “Very likely”). Then participants were thanked for completing the study.

Results

To test our hypothesis that consumption context (social vs. alone) would change the nature of the relationship between SES and utilitarian preferences, through perceived CC, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (model 18, Hayes 2013). This model tests whether lower subjective SES corresponds with a higher bowling likelihood because consumers who are

subjectively lower in SES also perceive lower cultural capital, but this relationship holds only as long as bowling is framed as utilitarian and for practice (utilitarian = 1, hedonic = 0), and the choice context is alone and not social (alone = 1, social = 0). The model thus tests the direct effect of subjective SES on bowling likelihood that is framed as utilitarian and is performed alone and whether this preference is mediated by lowered cultural capital. Finally, as in prior studies, income (economic capital) was included as a control variable. As we expected, after controlling for economic capital ($b = -.002$, $SE = .06$, $t(195) = -.04$, $p = .971$), subjective SES was positively related to cultural capital ($b = .09$, $SE = .04$, $t(195) = 2.42$, $p = .017$) in the first path of the mediation model. In the second path, after controlling again for economic capital ($b = -.20$, $SE = .10$, $t(188) = -2.06$, $p = .041$) and subjective SES ($b = .15$, $SE = .06$, $t(188) = 2.63$, $p = .009$), cultural capital had a significant direct effect on interest in bowling ($b = -2.18$, $SE = 1.04$, $t(188) = -2.08$, $p = .039$). The product framing ($b = -8.61$, $SE = 3.53$, $t(188) = -2.44$, $p = .016$) and consumption context ($b = -10.79$, $SE = 3.53$, $t(188) = -3.06$, $p = .003$) conditions also both had significant main effects, as did the interaction of product framing and consumption context ($b = 6.27$, $SE = 2.26$, $t(188) = 2.77$, $p = .006$), interaction of CC and product framing ($b = 1.39$, $SE = .67$, $t(188) = 2.07$, $p = .040$), and the interaction of CC and consumption context ($b = 1.75$, $SE = .69$, $t(188) = 2.55$, $p = .012$).

More importantly, the three-way interaction of CC, product framing, and consumption context ($b = -1.06$, $SE = .44$, $t(188) = -2.41$, $p = .017$) had a significant effect on interest in bowling. Additionally, the significant index of moderated mediation ($effect = -.09$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [-.233, -.016]) indicates that SES had an indirect effect on interest in bowling through CC, and

that this relationship was moderated by both the product framing (hedonic vs. utilitarian) and consumption context (social vs. alone).

Finally, a floodlight analysis provided a Johnson Neyman point of 4.36 in the alone condition, indicating that at all values of CC up to this point, interest in bowling was significantly higher when framed as utilitarian (vs. hedonic). This result is consistent with those of prior studies, such that consumers with lower SES, and hence lower CC, prefer utilitarian over hedonic products when alone. However, in the social condition, the Johnson Neyman point of 5.11 indicates that interest in bowling was significantly higher when framed as hedonic (vs. utilitarian) at all values of CC up to this point. Thus, in a social context, consumers with lower SES and correspondingly low CC prefer hedonic over utilitarian products (see figure 5).

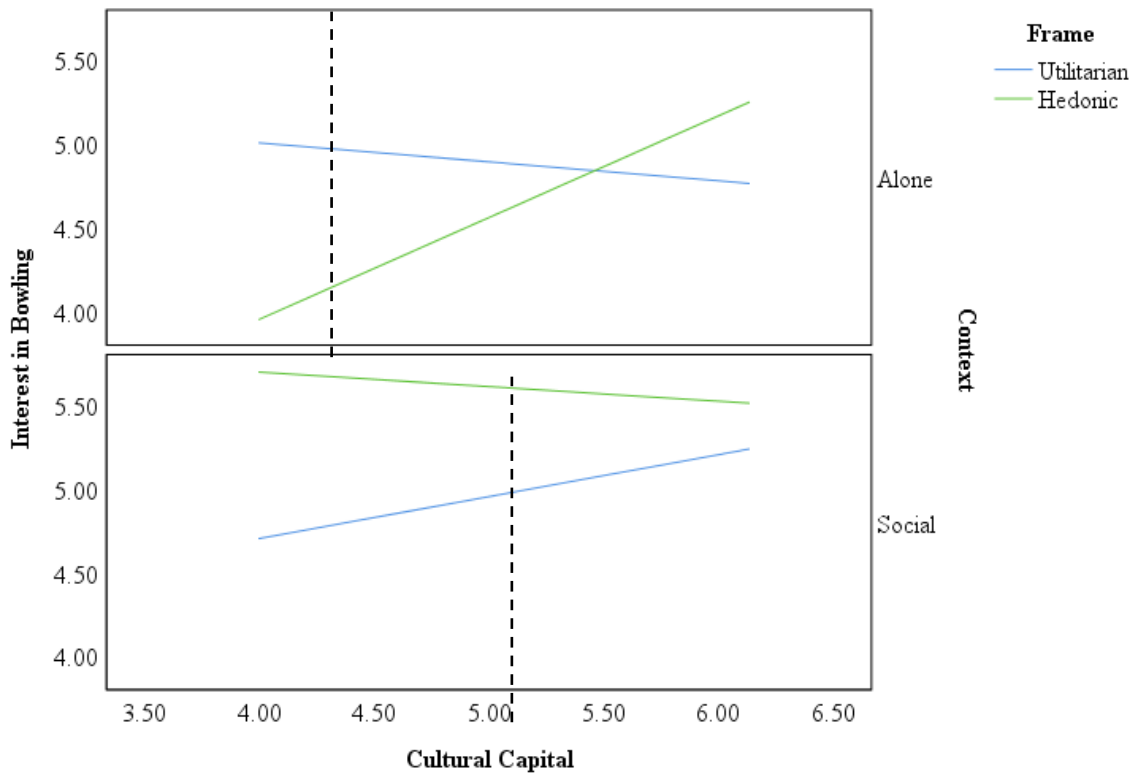


Figure 5: Expected enjoyment of bowling. Dotted lines indicate the JN points at 4.36 in the alone condition, and 5.11 in the social condition, along the x-axis. The hedonic and utilitarian groups are significantly different at all values of cultural capital below these points.

Discussion

Results from study 5 support findings of the prior three studies, which demonstrate that SES influences consumers' preferences and behaviors because of perceptions of CC, not EC. Specifically, higher SES consumers prefer hedonic and lower SES consumers prefer utilitarian products. Study 5 adds to the understanding of the SES effect by demonstrating that while these effects hold when consuming alone, when consuming socially these results are reversed for lower SES people, leading to a shift in preference for hedonic consumption. Additionally, the effect of SES on consumption preference is attenuated for higher SES people in a social context.

General Discussion

Across multiple product categories representing different price points, five studies demonstrate the effects of SES on hedonic versus utilitarian goals. Beyond the influence of price and EC, study 1 establishes this effect, study 2 demonstrates causality, and study 3a supports the position that CC is the underlying process. Study 3b provides further support for ruling out EC as an alternative explanation. Finally, study 4 provides a boundary condition for this effect: consuming in a social context, versus alone. Taken together, this research provides robust evidence that higher SES consumers generally prefer hedonic options and lower SES consumers prefer utilitarian options. This effect can be explained by differences in perceived CC. Whereas higher SES people develop a preference for excitement through their exposure to a variety of material goods and experiences, a lack of exposure leads lower SES people to develop a preference for more functional consumption.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of the reported studies contribute to theory by disentangling the impact that different forms of resources have on consumer choice. This research provides a deeper understanding of how SES influences consumers' preferences and behaviors, above and beyond the purchasing power that comes along with greater economic resources. We argue that a resource-based view of SES is insufficient to provide a complete understanding consumer behavior. Rather, this research suggests that an understanding of the cultural knowledge and competence that results from a person's level within a hierarchical societal structure allows for greater insight into consumer choice.

Managerial, Societal, and Policy Implications

Findings shed light on the type of consumer managers may choose to target for different products. Those that are inherently hedonic may be more suited for high SES consumers, while utilitarian products are more suited for low SES consumers. Additionally, products targeting higher SES consumers would benefit more from more hedonic positioning—more pleasurable, stylish, and fun. Firms targeting lower SES consumers would benefit more from going beyond positioning their products as value brands, but rather describing them in utilitarian terms—practical, useful, and efficient.

This research also brings attention to such persuasive tactics that could potentially be used to exploit vulnerable populations, such as low SES consumers. Predatory lending practices that position themselves as a means for consumers to meet their utilitarian goals may be exploiting the persuasive power of messaging framed as utilitarian has on low SES people. We advise marketers and policy makers charged with protecting consumers to be wary of such firm

actions that may unjustly and unnecessarily appeal to low SES consumers preferences for utilitarian products. Making consumers aware of their susceptibility to such messaging might enhance their ability to reject persuasive appeals related to product offerings that are not in their best interests. Likewise, making high SES consumers aware of their susceptibility to messaging framed in hedonic terms may reduce unnecessary hedonic purchases, helping to reduce overconsumption and waste.

Limitations and Future Research

We have posited that, relative to cultural capital, economic capital falls short in its ability to explain consumer choice. Social capital—a person’s connections and group memberships that they may rely on as a resource—is yet another form of capital that results from SES (Bourdieu 1986), and its role within the context of SES and decision-making is not yet understood. One possible extension of this research is an exploration of the explanatory power of social capital on choice. For example, research might seek to understand how interactions with others from the same versus other levels of SES lead to different choices. An interaction with a salesperson who is of higher (lower) class may cause upward (downward) social comparisons, leading the consumer to feel significantly lower in SES and shift choice to be more consistent with low SES preferences.

In conclusion, consumption differences between high and low SES consumers have gone without profound understanding. Marketers have generally written these differences off as an issue of accessibility due to financial resources (i.e., economic capital). The present research provides a rich explanation of the influence of consumer SES on their goals to pursue pleasure or practicality, and the purchase decisions that result from these goals. We argue that while

income and accumulated wealth play an important role in dictating what consumers can afford to buy, it is a person's cultural capital that more strongly influences their preferences in products. This suggests that even if a consumer's financial situation were to change in the short term, their preference in the long term will not change if cultural capital does not change as well.

IN SEARCH OF STATUS: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY ON PRODUCT ACQUISITION CHOICES

Socioeconomic status (SES) represents the objective material resources an individual possesses, and their subjectively perceived rank relative to others within a social hierarchy (Adler et al. 2000; Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2011). Given the perpetual lack of material resources and status associated with their societal rank, low SES consumers experience chronic scarcity (Hill, Martin, and Chaplin 2012)—the discrepancy between their needs and available resources (Cannon, Goldsmith, and Roux 2018; Hamilton et al. 2018). The decline of the middle class in recent decades (Pew Research Center 2015) and the upsurge in consumers living paycheck-to-paycheck (CareerBuilder 2017) highlight the importance of understanding low SES consumers' decision-making.

One important behavior relevant to low SES consumers is the pursuit of *status*—respect and admiration in the eyes of others (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Obtaining status is a fundamental motivation in human behavior (Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980; Argyle 1994) that serves to achieve basic psychological needs for belongingness and competence (Deci and Ryan 1985; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Kraus and Stephens 2012). Attaining status offers low SES consumers upward movement in the social hierarchy (Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011).

Prior research exploring social hierarchy has established that people with a higher societal rank exhibit greater drive towards the pursuit of rewards, whereas lower rank leads to more inhibited social behavior (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003). High SES consumers, with elevated social rank, are generally more motivated than low SES consumers to signal status through consumption (Gao, Winterich, and Zhang

2016). However, research further indicates that those lower in social rank who perceive their hierarchical position as unjust are motivated to achieve goals that help restore this imbalance (Lammers et al. 2008).

Research on the psychology of political ideology has demonstrated that that social hierarchy and justice are fundamental values underlying ideological worldviews (Jost et al. 2003; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). Social hierarchy is valued by conservatives, as it provides social order that clarifies the rank and roles of individuals within society. In contrast, social justice is valued by liberals, as it provides fair and just relations between individuals within society (Jost et al. 2003, 2009). Given these orientations, one might expect that low SES liberals would be motivated to seek status since they perceive their hierarchical position as unjust and illegitimate (Jost et al. 2003; Jost, Banaji, Nosek 2004). However, the findings of Cutright et al. (2011) suggest that liberals address psychological threats of low status indirectly, making consumption choices that do not explicitly signal status because they have low confidence in the legitimacy of social hierarchy. On the other hand, we expect low SES conservatives will seek consumption choices with higher signaling potential because they have a greater need for status (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Kim, Park, and Dubois 2018; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018) and their trust that social hierarchy is just makes them more likely to address their low status directly (Cutright et al. 2011) with explicit status signals (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010).

We propose that one such consumption choice with status-signaling properties is *access-based consumption*—market mediated transactions in which no transfer of ownership takes place (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Because access-based consumption has the benefit of

providing consumers elevated status by granting access to valued resources, it can be viewed as a form of compensatory consumption used to directly address threats related to resource scarcity inherent among low SES consumers. This allows consumers to display a heightened position in society with status-signaling goods, without necessitating the wealth required to purchase the goods. We expect low SES conservatives will be motivated to make consumption choices of this nature because of their status-signaling properties.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We first present a brief review of research on SES, political ideology, and status-signaling. We draw from this work to suggest that low SES conservatives will be motivated to choose access-based consumption to signal and attain social status. Next, we test these predictions with four studies using objective measures of SES, as well as lower subjective SES resulting from upward social comparisons. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications of our findings, and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Background

Low Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a person's relative place within a social hierarchy, based on their access to social and economic resources (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009). Social resources are intangible things that provide elevated status within the social hierarchy, including education, occupational prestige, social connections, and valued cultural knowledge—acquired customs and knowledge that display competence and refinement (Bourdieu 1986, 1987; Holt 1998; Kraus and Stephens 2012). Economic resources include accumulated wealth, income, and material possessions (Bourdieu 1986, 1987).

Low SES represents a state of chronic scarcity across multiple domains. Most commonly associated with low SES is the dearth of financial resources needed to acquire products such as food, clothing, and transportation (Hill and Stamey 1990; Martin and Hill 2012; Hill et al. 2012). This also makes low SES consumers more vulnerable to macro-level scarcity. For example, when global petroleum supplies are threatened, consumers experience spikes in gasoline prices, making access to transportation even more difficult for people with acutely limited financial resources. Scarcity of financial resources and tangible goods further perpetuates scarcity by limiting access to non-material social resources relevant to goal attainment, such as social networks that facilitate acceptance into prestigious universities or job opportunities (Bourdieu 1986, 1987).

Recent research has unveiled some psychological and behavioral effects of low SES. Consumers who experience low SES in childhood are more likely to overeat, even when not hungry (Hill et al. 2016). Low SES has also been linked to higher incidences of stress-related illness (Miller, Chen, and Cole 2009), lower life satisfaction (Martin and Hill 2012, 2015), lower self-esteem and higher materialism (Chaplin, Hill, and Roedder John 2014). Low SES people are also more threatened by uncertainty (Chen and Matthews 2003). When faced with the high stress of uncertainty, they often make more impulsive decisions (Mittal and Griskevicius 2014), favor immediate gratification over risk aversion (Griskevicius et al. 2011; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016), and are less likely to save money (Griskevicius et al. 2013). However, even when experiencing financial scarcity, consumers often continue to use consumption behavior for status-signaling (Nunes, Drèze, and Han 2011). Next, we provide a brief overview of literature

on political ideology research exploring the importance of status-signaling among conservatives.

Political Ideology

Viewed as a stable personal orientation, political ideology—described as liberal or conservative—is a belief about the proper order of society and how to achieve it (Jost et al. 2009). One of the key differences between conservatives and liberals is their belief regarding the legitimacy of social hierarchy (Graham et al. 2009). Conservatives are concerned with preserving the status quo, social order, and maintaining a hierarchical social structure, whereas liberals view hierarchical order in society as unjust (Jost et al. 2003, 2004).

Hierarchical structures can have important societal benefits. Promotion of hierarchy facilitates collective decision making and promotes social cohesion for collective success (Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). This social cohesion reduces uncertainty and social chaos—an underlying motive of conservatism and status quo maintenance (Jost et al. 2003).

Recent research in marketing has demonstrated that conservatives' concern for hierarchical social structure are reflected in consumption choices. Ordabayeva and Fernandes (2018) found that, when faced with product options that display superiority versus uniqueness, conservatives preferred those that allow them to differentiate from others by signaling superiority. Additionally, Kim et al. (2018) demonstrated that conservatives generally viewed status maintenance as more important than liberals and desired status-signaling products more when primed with status maintenance goals. Thus, we expect low SES conservatives to rely on overt signals of status to improve their position in the social hierarchy they value and consider just (Cutright et al. 2011).

Status-Signaling

Social hierarchy is a social structure that arranges individuals in ranked order based on material or immaterial dimensions that signal status (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Anderson and Brown 2010). Status-signaling refers to the possession, display, and use of items, behaviors, or attributes associated with elevated positions in social hierarchy (Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). Status offers social benefits, such as preferential treatment and acceptance (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012), and consumers differ in their individual motivation to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of status-signaling products (Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn 1999; Goldsmith and Clark 2012). The need to signal status influences product choices (Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011). For example, Rucker and Galinsky (2008) found that people feeling low in power and status compensate by displaying a higher willingness to pay for status-signaling products.

Status-signaling is most frequently observed within the context of luxury consumption (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006), because excess and wastefulness are symbols of status (Veblen 1899). For example, Han et al. (2010) explore the interaction of wealth and the desire to signal status, and find that consumers lacking resources but high in need for status use loud signals in an effort to mimic and associate with those who have resources while dissociating from others who lack resources (like themselves). However, consumers frequently use other forms of consumption that do not rely on luxury to serve as indicators of social status. Dubois et al. (2012) found that the size of the product could be used to status signal. Other research has posited that there are multiple routes to attaining status, including displaying more competence than others (Kraus and Stephens 2012). For example, Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2014)

demonstrated that competent authoritative figures can achieve status by not conforming to social norms. Similarly, a lack of leisure time can signal status for highly competent people (Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan 2017).

Consumers who are knowledgeable about identity-relevant domains may rely on subtle signals of status, allowing them to dissociate from those who lack the relevant social resource of insider knowledge and are unable to perceive the subtlety (Berger and Ward 2010).

However, scarce economic resources are often a hindrance to consumers' ability to display social resources. This research explores the possession of material goods as a display of status.

Access-Based Consumption

One way status-signaling can be achievable for low SES consumers lacking economic resources needed to pay for costly signals is to acquire goods through access-based consumption. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) define *access-based consumption* as “transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place. The consumer is acquiring consumption time with the item [...]” (881). Veblen (1899) posited that the display of wasteful behavior—not necessarily the accumulation of wealth—is necessary for status-signaling. This is because people make inferences about others based on their consumption choices (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Richins 1994a, b; Olson et al. 2016), however wealth would go unnoticed without conspicuous displays of leisure consumption. Access-based consumption allows consumers to possess products that serve as conspicuous symbols of status without the expenditure of resources needed to purchase and own the products. Thus, it may be less expensive to acquire products, allowing consumers to attain status by displaying material resources they do not own and perhaps could not otherwise afford.

Marketers often position access-based consumption as an affordable way for consumers to reap the status benefits resulting from the possession, display, and use of products associated with status. For example, leasing a car provides the utility of the vehicle and allows consumers to stay up to date with latest models, while avoiding high upfront costs of purchasing and mitigating risks associated with vehicle depreciation. Leasing an apartment or home provides a housing alternative at lower upfront costs than purchasing, with lower maintenance expenses and greater flexibility for transient consumers. Possessing, displaying, and using a vehicle and housing can increase status, as lower up-front costs of leasing reduce entry barriers for consumers seeking higher end status-signaling options (i.e., luxury cars). Marketers often push access-based consumption options for these reasons and, while traditionally most common among cars and housing, a wide variety of products can be possessed without ever transferring ownership to the consumer (e.g., cellular phones and consumer electronics, furniture, household appliances, textbooks, etc.). Furthermore, with the proliferation of the sharing economy in recent years, consumers have grown comfortable with access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012, 2017), giving rise to rental options for products such as apparel, sports equipment, even caskets for funerals.

Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvs (2015) found that consumers experiencing financial constraints are concerned with long-lasting utility of products. This increases preference for material goods over experiential consumption. These findings suggest that low SES consumers would be more likely to choose ownership over access-based consumption. However, research on the psychology of political ideology provides a unique individual difference that influences how consumers view and act on preferences for social hierarchy. We propose that low SES

conservatives will be motivated to use explicit signals of status to improve their position in the social hierarchy that they value (Cutright et al. 2011). Specifically, low SES consumers interest in access-based consumption will be greater the more conservative they are, because access-based consumption serves to signal status in the short run, allowing access without necessitating resources required for ownership.

Plan of Studies

Four studies were run to support the hypothesis that low SES conservatives desire access-based consumption because of its status-signaling potential. Study 1 establishes the interaction effect of low SES and conservatism on preference for access-based consumption. Next, study 2 provides causal support for this hypothesis by experimentally manipulating participants to feel low in SES relative to a control group. Study 3 extends these findings by testing status-signaling motives as the mechanism underlying low SES conservatives desire for access-based consumption. Finally, study 4 provides robust causal support for our theory by experimentally manipulating SES and status-signaling motives, with a moderation-of-process design (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong (2005). Multiple operationalizations of SES were used across studies for greater generalizability of results. These included objective resources (e.g., education and income) and subjective socioeconomic status (Adler et al., 2000; Griskevicius et al. 2011; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016).

Study 1

The purpose of study 1 is to provide initial evidence of our hypothesized effect using objective measures of SES. Specifically, we seek to demonstrate that when faced with multiple

options of product acquisition, lower SES conservatives will prefer access-based (vs. ownership). Within the context of car acquisition, leasing represents access-based consumption, whereas purchasing represents ownership.

Sample and Procedure

Three hundred ninety-six undergraduate students (56.8% female, $M_{age} = 21.92$, $SD = 4.17$) participated in an online study for partial course credit. First, they responded to a 9-item measure of ideology adapted from Nail et al. (2009). The measure included participants' agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with social issues generally associated with conservative (e.g., capital punishment and increased military spending) and liberal ideologies (e.g., pro-choice and gun control—reverse scored). Items were combined and averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = .80$), where lower values represent a liberal ideology and higher values represent a conservative ideology. Participants also indicated their political ideology on a 100-point scale (1 = liberal; 100 = conservative). These two measures of political ideology were highly correlated ($r = .76$, $p = .001$).

Next, participants were asked to imagine they were planning to get a new car and had the option to choose between purchasing or leasing. They were asked to assume they would keep the car for the same amount of time and the cost would be the same over that time period regardless of their choice. Then, they indicated their preference on a 9-point scale (1 = purchase, 9 = lease).

Finally, participants responded to demographic questions, including a measure of dwelling area (1 = slum area, 7 = affluent area), household income (from 1 = Less than \$10,000, to 12 = More than \$150,000), and the head of the household's occupation (1 = Unemployed, 2 =

Blue collar or service, 3 = Clerical/self-employed, 4 = Professional or managerial, 5 = Executive or business owner) and education (1 = Less than high school, 2 = High school graduate, 3 = Some college, 4 = 2 year degree, 5 = 4 year degree, 6 = Master's or professional degree, 7 = Doctorate). These items were standardized and combined to create an SES composite ($M = .00, SD = .58$), following a procedure adapted from Kraus et al. (2009).

Results and Discussion

To test our hypothesis that low SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption over ownership, we used SPSS PROCESS Macro model 1 (Hayes 2013). This analysis tests the interaction of SES and political ideology on preference for buying or leasing a car. The effects of SES ($p = .208$) and political ideology were not significant ($p = .211$). However, as expected, the interaction was significant ($b = -.02, SE = .01, t(392) = -1.97, p = .050$).

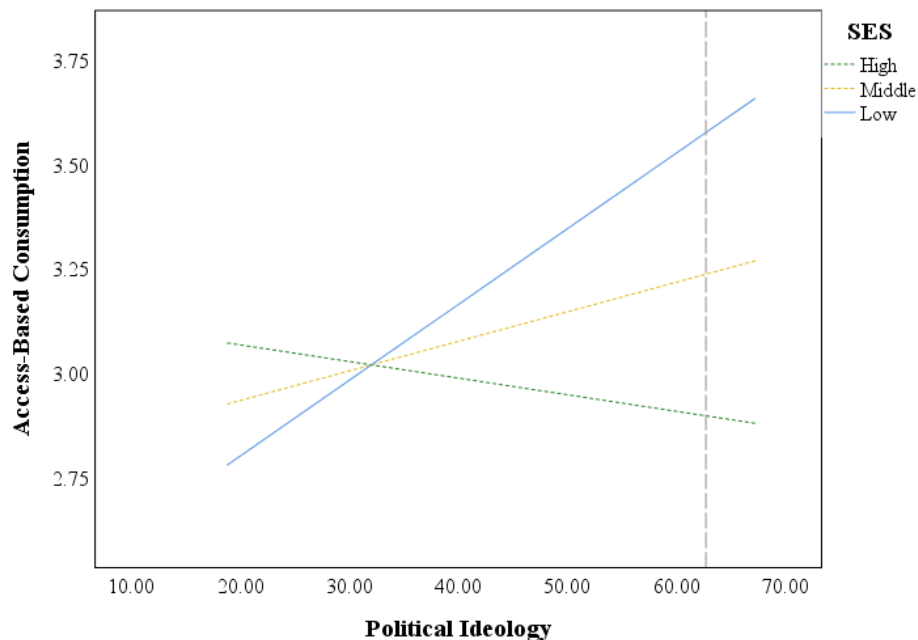


Figure 6: Interaction of SES and political ideology on preference for access-based consumption. The dependent variable is preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) a car. Dotted lines represent non-significant slopes for middle and high SES. The vertical grey dashed line represents the JN point at 62.72 along the 100-point measure of political ideology.

Further probing the interaction, the effects of SES were evaluated at three points: low ($M_{-1SD} = -.58$; $effect = .02$, $SE = .01$, $t(392) = 2.17$, $p = .031$), middle ($M = .00$; $p = .211$), and high levels of SES ($M_{+1SD} = .58$; $p = .598$). Additionally, a floodlight analysis provided a Johnson Neyman point of 62.72 along measure of political ideology, indicating that preference for leasing was higher among low versus high SES participants at all values above this point (see figure 6). These results showing only a significant effect at low levels of SES and conservative levels of political ideology support the hypothesis that preference for access-based consumption is higher among low SES people who espouse a conservative ideology.

Study 2

The purpose of the second study is twofold. First, we employ an experimental design to replicate findings from study 1, adding causal support. Second, we operationalize SES differently with a subjective measure, as well as a broader set of products for the measure of access-based consumption for greater generalizability. Specifically, we use an experimental manipulation of SES using upward social comparison to lower participants subjective SES compared to a control group to provide causal evidence that lower SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption (vs. ownership).

Sample and Procedure

We recruited 184 US participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to complete an online study (59.2% female, $M_{age} = 38.46$, $SD = 12.69$). The study used a 2 (low SES, control) between subjects experimental design.

First, participants responded to the demographic questions from study 1, including objective SES items ($M = .00$, $SD = .65$). Next, participants in the low SES group received false feedback regarding their household income that read: “Based on your responses to these demographic questions, we estimate that your household income is lower than 80% of previous respondents to this survey.” No feedback was given in the control condition. To ensure the manipulation worked as expected, participants indicated subjective SES on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; e.g., “I have enough money to buy things I want.” “I feel relatively wealthy these days.”; see Griskevicius et al. 2011; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016). Participants randomly assigned to the low SES condition ($M_{lowSES} = 3.20$, $SD = 1.71$) felt significantly lower in SES than those in the control condition ($M_{control} = 3.69$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(182) = 2.06$, $p = .041$).

After the SES manipulation, participants indicated their preference for access-based consumption using different products than study 1. Specifically, they were asked to indicate their preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) formal attire and textbooks. Like a leased car, formal attire and books allow consumers to signal status through the possession, display, and use of these products associated with an elevated position in the social hierarchy without the expenditure needed to purchase. Formal attire signals wealth and sophistication (Bourdieu 1986, 1987; Holt 1998; Kraus and Stephens 2012), and textbooks signal education—considered a fundamental indicator of SES (Snibbe and Markus 2005; Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007). The two items were combined to form a measure of access-based consumption.

Finally, participants indicated their political ideology, using the 100-point from study 1. They were thanked, then compensated for their participation.

Results and Discussion

To test the interaction of SES (manipulated) and political ideology (measured) on preference for access-based consumption, we used SPSS PROCESS Macro model 1 (Hayes 2013). The effects of the SES manipulation ($b = 1.26$, $SE = .45$, $t(180) = 2.77$, $p = .006$) and political ideology were significant ($b = .01$, $SE = .01$, $t(180) = 2.29$, $p = .023$), as was the interaction ($b = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $t(180) = -2.84$, $p = .005$).

Further probing this interaction, the effects of political ideology on preference for access-based consumption was significant and positive within the low SES group ($effect = .01$, $SE = .01$, $t(180) = 2.29$, $p = .023$) and marginally significant and negative within the control group ($effect = -.01$, $SE = .01$, $t(180) = -1.72$, $p = .087$). Additionally, a floodlight analysis provided Johnson Neyman points at 25.30 and 91.15 along the measure of political ideology, indicating that preference for access-based consumption differed between the two experimental groups at very liberal and conservative ideologies (see figure 7).

Study 2 replicates the pattern of results from study 1 with an experimental manipulation of SES. Those who felt low in SES and identified as conservative expressed higher levels of preference for leasing status-signaling products. Thus, we find further support for the hypothesis that low SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption compared to their liberal counterparts.

Results showing that low and control groups were significantly different among liberals also suggest that—though the slope of the control group was not quite significant—conservatives generally prefer ownership over access, unless they feel lower in SES. This finding supports prior research that posits maintenance of the status quo as one of the primary

motives underlying the conservative ideology (Jost et al. 2003, 2004), suggesting that conservatives are likely motivated to retain their possessions longer.

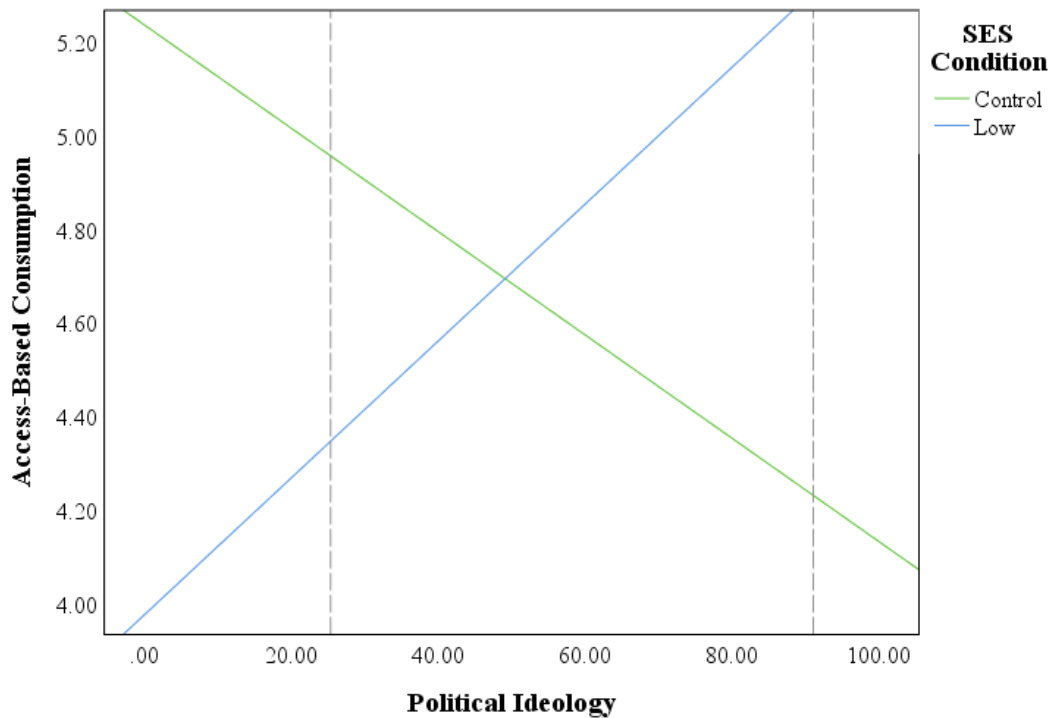


Figure 7: Interaction of SES and political ideology on preference for access-based consumption. The dependent variable is preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) formal attire and textbooks. Vertical grey dashed lines represent JN points at 25.30 and 91.15 along the 100-point measure of political ideology.

Study 3

Having provided causal support for the hypothesis that low SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption compared to low SES liberals, study 3 seeks to provide evidence of status-signaling as the process underlying this effect. Because low SES consumers lack status and conservatives are motivated to attain and preserve elevated status within social hierarchies (Kim et al. 2018; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018), we expect low SES conservatives will be more motivated to make status-signaling consumption choices than low SES liberals who consider social hierarchy unjust (Graham et al. 2009). We posit that access-based consumption

serves a status-signaling function by allowing consumers to possess, display, and use products associated with status without the resource expenditure and risk associated with ownership. Thus, we expect status-signaling motives to mediate the relationship between the interaction of SES and conservatism, and access-based consumption.

Sample and Procedure

One hundred nineteen US participants were recruited on MTurk to complete a short online study (61.3% female, $M_{age} = 41.65$, $SD = 13.36$). Access-based consumption was measured first to avoid order effects. This ensures that measures of SES and political ideology do not prime participants to make either construct salient as they respond to the dependent measure. The measure of access-based consumption was similar to that of previous studies, using preferences a car and house or apartment combined as the dependent measure.

Following the dependent measure, participants responded to a status consumption scale developed by Eastman et al. (1999). Items were intended to measure motivation to use consumption for status-signaling (e.g., "I would buy a product just because it has status." 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Participants also responded to a measure of product retention tendency developed by Haws et al. (2012), measuring consumer predisposition to keep possessions for longer (e.g., "I tend to hold onto my possessions." 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).¹ These two scales were counterbalanced to avoid order effects.

¹ Given that maintenance of the status quo is a primary motive underlying the conservatism (Jost et al. 2003, 2004), conservatives are likely motivated to retain possessions longer, as evidenced through the pattern of results within the control condition in study 2. Additionally, Tully et al. (2015) found that resource scarcity increases consumer concern for longevity and the long-lasting utility of products. Taken together, this suggests that product retention tendency (Haws et al. 2012) is a potential alternative explanation for our findings. As such, in study 3 we seek to rule out product retention tendency while supporting status-signaling motives as the process underlying effects seen in prior studies.

Next, to use another operationalization for greater generalizability, participants completed the MacArthur Scale of Subjective SES by indicating their position on a 10-rung ladder relative to others in society (Adler et al., 2000). They also completed the measure of political ideology from studies 1 and 2. These two measures were also counterbalanced to avoid potential order effects.

Finally, participants responded to the demographic questions from prior studies, standardized to create an SES composite ($M = .00$, $SD = .63$). This objective SES composite was significantly correlated to the subjective SES measure ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 2.66$, $r = .53$, $p < .001$).

Results and Discussion

To test the interaction effect of SES and political ideology on preference for access-based consumption through status-signaling motives, we ran a moderated mediation using SPSS PROCESS Macro model 7 (Hayes 2013). First, we assessed the interactive effect of SES and political ideology on status-signaling motives. After controlling for product retention tendency ($p = .345$), SES had a significant effect on status-signaling motives ($b = .28$, $SE = .09$, $t(114) = 3.10$, $p = .002$), but political ideology did not ($p = .109$). However, the interaction effect of SES and ideology was significant ($b = -.004$, $SE = .002$, $t(114) = -2.02$, $p = .046$).

Next, we assess the effect of status-signaling motives on preference for access-based consumption. After controlling for the effects of product retention tendency ($p = .133$) and SES ($p = .380$), status-signaling motives have a significant effect on preference for access-based consumption ($b = .24$, $SE = .09$, $t(115) = 2.63$, $p = .010$). Finally, the Index of Moderated Mediation supports our position that the indirect interactive effect of SES and political ideology

is indeed mediated by status-signaling motives ($effect = -.001, SE = .001, 95\% CI [-.0025, -.0001]$).

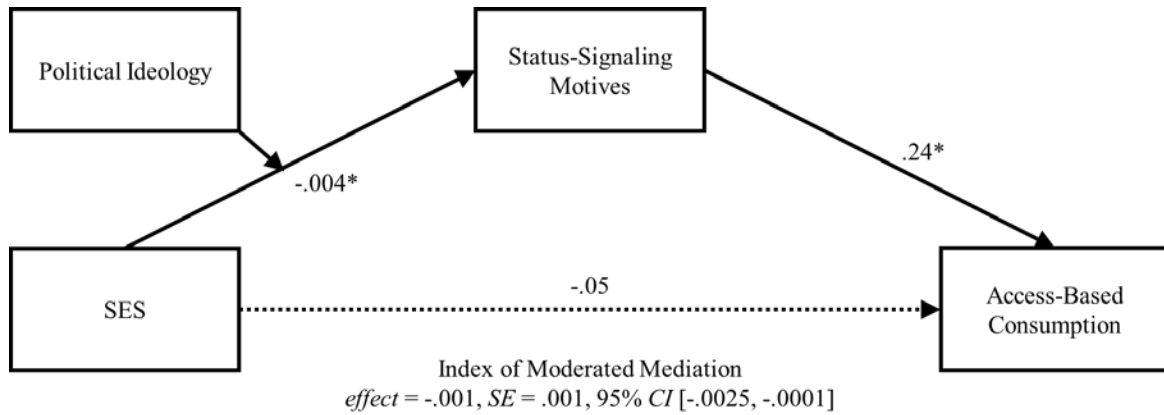


Figure 8: Interaction of SES and political ideology on preference for access-based consumption, mediated by status-signaling motives. The dependent variable is the preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) a car and house or apartment. The dotted line represents a non-significant path. Path coefficients represent non-standardized regression weights. * $p < .05$.

Study 4

Having provided initial evidence to support our hypothesis that low SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption because it serves as a status signal, we seek to replicate this finding with robust causal evidence, using a moderation-of-process design to further test this mechanism (Spencer et al. 2005). Here, we examine whether priming participants with negative opinions towards using consumption to signal status would reduce low SES conservatives' preference for access-based consumption. We use a 2 (SES: low SES, control) \times 2 (status-signaling prime: signaling is undesirable, neutral) between subjects design.

Sample and Procedure

We recruited 257 US participants on MTurk to complete an online study (58.4% female, $M_{age} = 37.70, SD = 13.14$). They were randomly assigned to the low SES or control group,

following the procedure from study 2. As a manipulation check, participants indicated their subjective social class on a 100-point scale (1 = low; 100 = high; $M_{lowSES} = 42.55$, $SD = 21.11$; $M_{control} = 48.02$, $SD = 19.53$; $t(252) = -2.14$, $p = .033$).

Next, participants completed a writing task to manipulate status-signaling motives, adapted from Piff et al. (2012). In the neutral prime, participants listed three things about their day. In the status-signaling is undesirable prime, participants listed three reasons people engage in status-signaling. This was intended to reduce status-signaling motives by priming thoughts of socially undesirable flaunting behaviors. Following the writing task, participants responded to the status consumption scale from study 3 ($M_{signaling} = 2.43$, $SD = 1.35$; $M_{neutral} = 2.89$, $SD = 1.59$; $t(245) = -2.48$, $p = .014$).

Next, participants completed the dependent measure. Access-based consumption was measured with items similar to those used in previous studies. Specifically, participants indicated their preference to lease or purchase formal attire and textbooks from study 2, as well as sports equipment, power tools, and a boat. Finally, the dependent measure was followed by the measure of political ideology from prior studies.

Results and Discussion

To test the three-way interaction of SES, political ideology, and the status-signaling prime on preference for access-based consumption, we used SPSS PROCESS Macro model 3 (Hayes 2013). The direct effects of political ideology ($p = .467$) and SES manipulation were non-significant ($p = .237$). However, the status-signaling prime was significant ($b = 1.27$, $SE = .57$, $t(233) = 2.25$, $p = .025$), indicating that those in the signaling is undesirable group expressed a lower preference for access-based consumption compared to the neutral group. Finally, the

three-way interaction of SES, political ideology, and the status-signaling prime on preference for access-based consumption was significant ($b = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $t(233) = -1.93$, $p = .055$).

These results provide causal support for our hypothesis that low SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption because it serves as a status signal. Additionally, by replicating findings of prior studies across different product contexts, we provide more generalizable results.

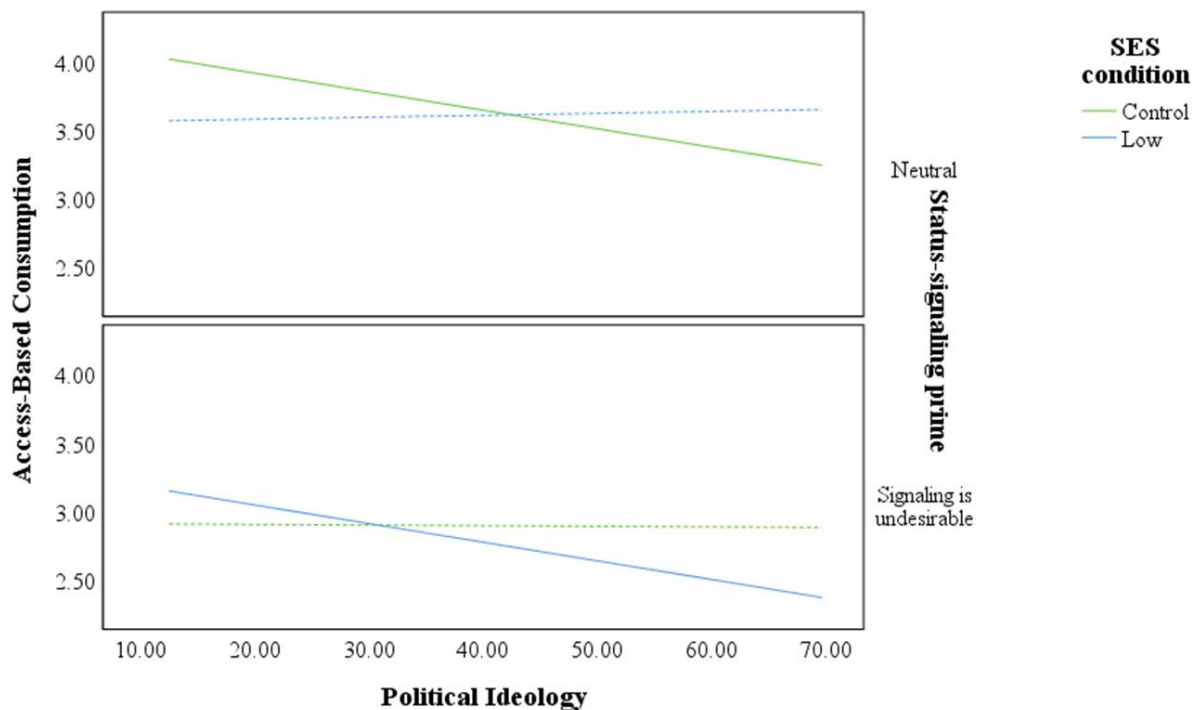


Figure 9: Three-way interaction of SES, political ideology, and status-signaling prime on preference for access-based consumption. The dependent variable is preference for leasing (vs. purchasing) formal attire, textbooks, sports equipment, power tools, and a boat. Dotted lines represent non-significant slopes.

General Discussion

Across student and Mturk samples, we provide convergent evidence that low SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption over ownership. We assert that this preference arises because access-based consumption allows consumers to possess, display, and use status-

signaling products. Multiple operationalizations of SES, including objective resources (e.g., education and income) and subjective socioeconomic status (Adler et al., 2000; Griskevicius et al. 2011; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016), provide more generalizable results. Additionally, these effects hold across multiple product categories representing different price points for greater generalizability (e.g., cars, homes, apparel, and textbooks). Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate the preference for access-based consumption among low SES conservatives, and studies 3 and 4 support the hypothesis that status-signaling motives underly this preference.

Taken together, the results of four studies provide greater insight into consumer reactions to chronic resource scarcity when they espouse conservative political views. Conservatives are more interested in attaining and preserving hierarchy (Jost et al. 2003, 2004). Access-based consumption serves as a form of compensatory consumption that addresses threats related to resource scarcity inherent in low SES. It allows consumers to possess, display, and use status-signaling goods without ever actually accumulating resources. Owning products, on the other hand, represents the actual accumulation of resources, but often requires an expenditure of scarce economic resources. Thus, low SES conservatives (vs. liberals) are motivated to choose access-based consumption (vs. ownership), because this is viewed as a higher-status choice.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings are twofold. First, we demonstrate that access-based consumption represents a form of product acquisition that consumers use as an implicit or subtle display of status (Berger and Ward 2010). Second, though consumers with already high status are typically motivated to retain and improve their position within the social hierarchy (Magee and

Galinsky 2008), we find that consumers who experience chronic resource scarcity, and are thus lower in status, are motivated to obtain status when they are hierarchically oriented, as is the case with politically conservative people.

We distinguish our findings from prior research showing that consumers with scarce resources generally seek to accumulate equity (Tully et al. 2015). Our findings show that conservative consumers with scarce resources are more concerned with improving their hierarchical position by building status than equity, though this could come at the cost of long-term financial wellbeing.

Our theorizing thus contributes to three streams of literature. First, we extend literature on the threat of low SES and chronic scarcity. We demonstrate that these threats play an important role in influencing consumer choice with potential negative downstream consequences. Second, we contribute to literature on political ideology by confirming the importance hierarchy among conservatives and showing the influence this has on consumption goals and product acquisition strategies. We find that politically conservative consumers threatened with low SES are motivated to make status-signaling consumption choices. Finally, our findings extend literature on status consumption by proposing access-based consumption as an explicit, yet subtle signal of status (Berger and Ward 2010; Bellezza et al. 2014, 2017).

Managerial, Societal, and Policy Implications

Our findings shed light on potential segmentation implications for marketing practitioners. Specifically, marketers seeking to position their products for lower SES consumers may consider including access-based acquisition options in markets characterized as more

politically conservative. Likewise, positioning products as status-signaling can serve as an efficient strategy to increase interest of low SES conservative consumers.

However, these implications also draw attention to the societal concern for financial well-being. Though access-based consumption is attractive because it is often more affordable in the short-run, it is a suboptimal choice for low SES consumers experiencing chronic scarcity. While access-based consumption provides access to valued products, this option fails to build long-term equity and keeps consumers in a perpetual state of debt. Financial advisors and research typically recommend ownership over access-based consumption, as building equity in a home is viewed as the most effective way to attain upward social mobility (Herbert, McCue, and Sanchez-Moyano 2016; Wainer and Zabel 2019).

The understanding that low SES conservatives are disproportionately concerned with status-signaling could be used for exploitative marketing practices that lead vulnerable populations to overwhelming debt, worsening their already grim financial situations. Hence, we recommend that policy makers take note of and discourage product offerings for access-based consumption that disproportionately target low SES consumers. Likewise, consumer education is needed to better equip low SES consumers to make financially sound decisions regarding product acquisition choices.

Limitations and Future Research

We demonstrate that the behavior resulting from measured and experimentally induced low SES is similar with regards to consumer motivation to use access-based consumption to display status. These findings suggest that the effects of chronic and short-term scarcity may have the same effect on consumer choice. While the present research does not directly

compare the effects of low SES in the long-term versus short-term, based on our findings, we predict the effects of low SES will be the same. Future research may consider the use of longitudinal studies to test this assertion.

Research on social hierarchy posits that decreased inequality (Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011) or inequality perceived as illegitimate (Lammers et al. 2008) motivate low status people to pursue status goals. This line of research suggests that low SES liberals would make status-signaling choices because they generally view social hierarchy as unjust (Jost et al. 2003, 2004). Future research might explore the moderating role of perceived social inequality on status-signaling behaviors in the context of SES.

Future research would also benefit from further exploration of other consumption choices that serve as subtle displays of status. Because obtaining status is such an important psychological need, it would be most advantageous to consumers, particularly those with scarce resources, to identify less costly signals they can use to display status.

In conclusion, we demonstrate that low SES conservatives are motivated to make status-signaling consumption choices. Access-based consumption is one such choice that allows consumers to possess, display, and use products associated with status without the resource expenditure and risk associated with ownership. The present research explains the influence of consumer SES on goals to signal status and the resulting product acquisition decisions. We argue that because conservatives seek to maintain elevated social standing, low SES conservatives prefer access-based consumption. While this may have some positive social benefits, these benefits are fleeting. Thus, making access-based consumption a potentially

maladaptive strategy with suboptimal financial outcomes in the long-run for low SES consumers who would derive more economic benefit from building equity.

CONCLUSION

Despite emerging research on how SES influences consumer behaviors, the underlying drivers are not well understood. This dissertation undertakes the task of expanding knowledge in the field of marketing on SES and consumer choice.

While consumption differences between high and low SES consumers have gone without profound understanding. Marketers have generally explained these differences as an issue of financial resources (i.e., economic capital) and product accessibility. The first essay provides an explanation of the influence SES has on consumer goals for pleasure or practicality, and the resulting product choices. We posit that though accumulated wealth and income dictate what consumers can afford to buy, their cultural capital is what influences their products preferences. This suggests that even if a consumer's short term financial situation were to change, their long term preference should remain the same.

In the second essay, we demonstrate that low SES conservatives are motivated to make status-signaling consumption choices to acquire a higher position within the social hierarchy they value. Access-based consumption is a viable status-signaling choice that allows consumers to possess, display, and use products associated with status without the risk and resource expense associated with product ownership. The second essay demonstrates that when low SES consumers espouse a conservative political ideology, they are motivated to signal status. We argue that this is due to conservatives' hierarchical social orientation, which makes access-based consumption an attractive product acquisition strategy.

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