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The Bright Side to Cuing Consumerism: Consumer Cues Make Individuals With Low Childhood Socioeconomic Status More Prosocial

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Counter to extant research that finds consumer cues make people more proself, we present four experiments that demonstrate that consumer cues can actually increase prosociality—at least amongst people who grew up with significant economic constraints (i.e., people with low childhood socioeconomic status).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is no shortage of research detailing the dark side of cuing consumerism. Advertisements for and images of luxury consumer goods, descriptions of people shopping, and consumer terminology have all been shown to activate a prosocial orientation that ultimately undermines personal and social wellbeing. For example, after being exposed to consumer primes, people become more competitive, more solitary, more selfish, more likely to give up on difficult tasks, more dissatisfied with their appearance, and less interested in social relationships—including getting married and having children (Ashikali and Dittmar 2012; Bauer et al. 2012; Ku, Dittmar, and Banerjee 2014; Li et al. 2015).

Importantly, this literature assumes that consumer cues mean the same thing to everyone and consequently, affect everyone the same way. Here, we question this assumption. We draw on a growing body of research that demonstrates people's childhood social and economic environment can shape cognition in important and persistent ways and hypothesize that childhood socioeconomic status (SES) influences how people respond to consumer primes (e.g., Laran and Salerno 2013; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014). Specifically, because consumers with low childhood SES grow up with economic and social constraints that limit personal choice and instead, require mutual acts of interdependence (e.g., relying on, paying attention to, and trusting other people; Adams, Bruckmüller, and Decker 2012; Snibbe and Markus 2005; Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2011; Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007), we predict that individuals with low childhood SES will become more prosocial in response to consumer primes. Through testing this hypothesis, we offer a more nuanced understanding of the effects of consumer primes and provide one way to reconcile the budding controversy surrounding the replicability of these findings—particularly those of Bauer and colleagues (2012) (Francis 2014; Klein et al. 2016).

Four experiments provide support for our hypothesis.

Experiment 1 provides initial support for our premise by demonstrating that MTurk participants ($N = 79$) become less trusting and more competitive (as indicated by increased jealousy) after being exposed to brand logos. While we suspect this effect was driven by the lower childhood SES of our MTurk sample (an assumption that is confirmed by a post-test with 200 MTurk workers), we do not measure or test for the role of childhood SES. The remaining studies address this limitation

In **experiment 2**, American participants recruited from Prolific Academic ($N = 108$) were randomly assigned to a consumer or a control condition in a between-subjects main-effect design, wherein they either viewed advertisements (consumer) or shapes (control). Then, all participants completed the same jealousy task used in study 1, a five-item measure of competitive orientation (Roux, Goldsmith, and Bonezzi 2015; Ryckman et al. 1990), and a three-item measure of childhood SES (Griskevicius et al. 2011, 2013). Analyses revealed a main effect of condition, such that participants in the consumer condition were less competitive and less jealous. Importantly, these effects were moderated by childhood SES. When childhood SES was low (-1 SD) or at the mean, being exposed to the consumer prime made participants more prosocial. When childhood SES was high ($+1$ SD), the effect was not significant.

Mediation analysis also revealed that a decrease in competitive orientation fully mediated the effect of the consumer prime \times childhood SES on jealousy, thus providing initial evidence for our proposed mechanism—the activation of a prosocial orientation.

In **experiment 3**, American MTurk workers ($N = 136$) were randomly assigned to a consumer or a control condition in a between-subjects main-effect design, wherein they either viewed images of brand logos (consumer) or vegetables (control). Participants then completed the Triple-Dominance Measure, designed to assess whether people are prosocial or prosocial (Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997). Analyses revealed a main effect of condition, such that participants in the consumer condition were more likely to be prosocial (vs. prosocial). Furthermore, this effect was moderated by childhood SES. When childhood SES was low (-1 SD) or at the mean, being exposed to the consumer prime made participants more prosocial. When childhood SES was high ($+1$ SD), the effect was not significant.

In **experiment 4**, undergraduate business students ($N = 94$) were randomly assigned to a consumer or a control condition in a between-subjects main-effect design. The procedure, manipulation, and dependent measures were the same as those of experiment 2, with the exception of our measure of childhood SES. Instead of asking participants to report their perceived childhood SES, we asked participants to indicate their household family income when they were growing up (Griskevicius et al. 2013; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014). Analysis revealed a significant interaction of condition and childhood family income on jealousy and competitive orientation. When childhood family income was low, participants in the consumer condition were less jealous and less competitive than those in the control condition. When childhood family income was high, participants in the consumer condition were more competitive and more jealous than those in the control condition. Mediation analysis also revealed that competitive orientation fully mediated the effect of the consumer prime \times childhood SES on jealousy.

DISCUSSION

Although prior work has consistently shown that consumer primes result in more prosocial and less prosocial outcomes, the results of four experiments suggest these effects may be limited to individuals who grew up relatively wealthy. In particular, consistent with prior work demonstrating that childhood SES can shape cognition in important ways, our findings suggest that low childhood SES consumers may have different models of responding to consumer primes. Rather than becoming more prosocial after being exposed to consumer primes, in four experiments we find that low childhood SES individuals become more prosocial.

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