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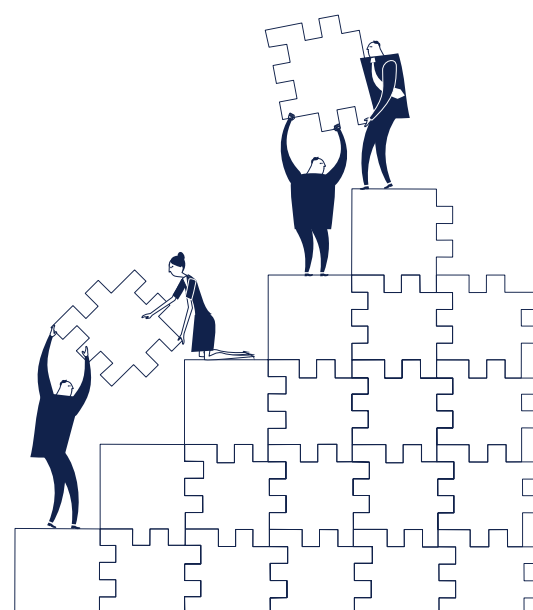
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WHEN POSTING ASPIRATIONAL PRODUCTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA LOWERS INTEREST IN LUXURY: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SELF-CONCEPT, SOCIAL SIGNALING, AND OWNERSHIP

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When Posting Aspirational Products in Social Media Lowers Interest in Luxury:

Relationships Between Self-Concept, Social Signaling, and Ownership

Consumers often use luxury products to signal their aspirational selves. In social media, consumers can publicly affiliate with such products and brands virtually without having to physically own them. This research demonstrates how social media can enable consumers to engage with aspirational products in ways that facilitate social signaling of ideal (as opposed to actual) self-concepts, and instill a sense of psychological ownership for the posted-about products. Ironically, as a consequence of this, consumers' interest in luxury goods, indicated by wanting to purchase them or to visit high-end retailers, decreases. The authors find this with correlational data and five experiments. Further, this reduction in interest in actually owning luxury goods after posting about aspirational products in social media is found to arise only when the social media-based product affiliation is public and posting instill a strong sense of psychological ownership for the products.

Keywords: Social media, Identity-Signaling, Luxury Products, Psychological Ownership

Social media use has become ubiquitous in today's society. By 2015, 74% of all U.S. adults who use the Internet were regularly using social media sites such as Facebook (Pew Research Center 2015). In addition to more people becoming active social media users, the amount of time people spend using social media is increasing. In 2010, approximately 23% of time spent online in the U.S. was on social media, and by early 2015, this had increased to 28%, which was more than double the amount of time spent on any other online activity (Nielsen Wire 2010; Pew Research Center 2015).

Despite the substantial amounts of time that many people spend using social media, relatively little is known about the *offline* consequences of various kinds of social media use (Lamberton and Stephen 2016; Stephen 2016; Wilcox and Stephen 2013). For consumers, one important but largely unexplored potential consequence of using social media is how publicly expressed affiliations with and behaviors toward brands and products on social media impact consumers' behaviors with the same or similar products and brands in offline settings. Consumers have traditionally utilized *purchased* products and brands to attain and showcase different aspects of themselves, such as their ideal, aspirational self (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2003). Today, many consumers engage with these various aspirational brands (e.g., luxury brands like Louis Vuitton) through social media sites. Doing so allows consumers to publicly signal that they affiliate with these types of brands in other to showcase one's ideal self. This type of social signaling in the past has typically required consumers to purchase and conspicuously consume such brands. The ability for consumers to publicly signal aspirational ideal self-identities through *virtual* brand affiliations in social media without the need to physically purchase such items could therefore conceivably influence consumers' offline

activities. Critically, does such a public affiliation help the brand (e.g., increase purchase intentions) or does it hurt the brand (e.g., lower purchase intentions)?

In this research we address this question by focusing on the ever-increasing phenomenon of consumers posting (e.g., "pinning" or "liking") products on popular social media platforms. Prior research suggests that people use social media for a number of reasons ranging from self-expression and self-presentation to showing affiliation with other people or groups (Back et al. 2010; Gosling, Gaddis, and Vazire 2007). Associating one's social media persona with brands or products is likely driven, at least in part, by these motives. While some research has looked into the psychological consequences that arise from using social media in general (e.g., Wilcox and Stephen 2013), extant research has not examined the consequences of this consumer-relevant form of social media use, particularly for offline consumption.

We propose that in situations where people are able to publicly show affiliations with products and brands in social media, circumstances exist under which this acts as a sufficiently strong proxy for actual consumption such that purchase intentions are reduced. Specifically, we show that when consumers represent their ideal selves (vs. actual selves) publicly in social media by associating with products and brands that typically align with ideal selves (i.e. aspirational or luxury items), they are subsequently less inclined to actually affiliate with—or purchase—similar products. We argue and show that this occurs because publicly posting products on social media enhances one's sense of psychological ownership for those products, and in the case of aspirational products, the social signaling-related goals typically achieved through purchases are instead achieved through online public affiliation in social media, which creates a sufficient amount of psychological ownership to make actual ownership less necessary.

This research makes a number of contributions to the growing literature on consumers and social media. While previous research has focused on the benefits consumers receive from affiliating with products and brands in an offline world (e.g., Berger and Ward 2010; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Nelissen and Meijers 2011), or considered certain psychological consequences of social media use such as self-esteem and self-control (Wilcox and Stephen 2013), the current research shows one way that social media can act as a substitute for actual consumption activities. Additionally, we consider a particular type of social media use: sharing or posting brands and products on one's public social media accounts for others to see. Further, we answer recent calls for more consumer behavior research on social media that considers user behaviors other than word of mouth (e.g., Lamberton and Stephen 2016; Stephen 2016). While posting a picture of a product on social media is, broadly defined, a form of word of mouth, such an action is in stark contrast to online word of mouth typically considered in the marketing literature (e.g., ratings, referrals, reviews). Finally, our results suggest that managers of high-end, aspirational brands may be better served by reducing the ability for certain aspirational consumer segments (e.g., younger, up-and-coming markets) to publicly affiliate with their brands on social media, as these consumers' desire to purchase these products offline may be reduced.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Prior research has shown that products and brands can enhance consumers' ability to construct their sense of self, as a signal to themselves and others around them. People seek to express their self-concepts and prefer to be perceived by others as they wish to be seen; both goals can be facilitated by brand consumption (Berger and Heath 2007; Malär et al 2011;

Wernerfelt 1990). Consequently, consumers actively construct selves by using brand associations that arise through reference group usage (Belk 1988; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). For example, as Escalas and Bettman (2003) demonstrate, the way reference groups choose and showcase brands provides a source of brand associations, which then become linked to consumers' self-concepts. Reference groups also essential in creating brand preferences, because people aspire to belong to those groups. If aspirational group members use a particular brand, other consumers form positive associations about the qualities that belong to the brand, which they may attempt to transfer to themselves by also consuming the brand.

Brands have long provided a means for consumers to construct both actual and aspirational senses of themselves (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Higgins 1987; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Wylie 1979). A person's ideal self is what the person hopes and aspires to become (Markus and Nurius 1986; Wylie 1979). On the other hand, a person's actual self instead reflects the person's existing self-perception (Sirgy 1982). When consumers seek to attain an ideal self, they often rely on aspirational goods, such as luxury brands, that are endowed with traits valued by society, such as wealth, status, or exclusivity to facilitate this self-perception and affiliation with desired reference groups (Berger and Ward 2010; Bourdieu 1984; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Drèze and Nunes, 2009; Nelissen and Meijers 2011). In sum, extensive prior work linking consumers' self-concepts to brand choice and, in particular, ideal selves to luxury consumption, shows that consumers may select aspirational brands because they expect to derive multiple psychological and social benefits.

Traditionally, aspirational affiliations have required obtaining and physically using the product offline (e.g., buying and carrying a Louis Vuitton handbag). However, these forms of actual possession might be less necessary in the case of online contexts, particularly social

media. Social media sites enable consumers to *virtually* affiliate with nearly anything, including aspirational brands and luxury products. While physical possession is important in offline contexts so that others can see the held brand affiliations, within the realm of social media sites, public networks of "friends" and "followers" create a form of public space which allows users to represent themselves. Publicly displaying a virtual link to aspirational brands may produce status-related benefits, simply from representing an ideal self to others in social media, such that actual possession or ownership becomes less necessary.

Our theory thus predicts a counterintuitive effect, such that greater online affiliation with aspirational products leads to lowered offline interest. If a consumer posts publicly on social media about an aspirational product (e.g., a TAG Heuer watch), conventional wisdom might suggest she or he is expressing *higher* offline purchase intentions for this product and products similar to it. But we propose instead that the act of publicly representing one's ideal self to others on social media, by affiliating with an aspirational product, could lead to *lower* purchase intentions. This could occur for several reasons.

First, publicly affiliating on social media with an aspirational product, associated with the person's ideal self-concept, might enable the consumer to fulfill the goal of boosting his or her ideal self. Building on research that suggests people use social media and online social networks to fulfill various self-presentational and expressive needs (Back et al. 2010; Gosling, Gaddis, and Vazire 2007; Toubia and Stephen 2013; Wilcox and Stephen 2013), we propose that once consumers have connected with aspirational items through social media, they may have signaled their self-brand affiliation strongly enough to fulfill these needs, decreasing offline desire.

Second, the act of publicly posting products on social media might lead consumers to feel as if these products are "theirs," suggesting a heightened sense of psychological ownership. Prior

research notes the sense of realism in social media users' online personas (Back et al. 2010; Gonzales and Hancock 2011), so the nontrivial level of *psychological* ownership of a product posted through social media might provide psychological benefits similar to those attained through traditional, legal ownership (Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003). Especially when it comes to aspirational products, with their existing associations with ideal concepts (e.g., wealth, status, prestige), posts on social media might serve as signals to social others that portray the individuals in the most socially appealing way (Drèze and Nunes 2009; Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2007; Han, Joseph, and Drèze 2010; Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Thus, posting on social media could decrease the need to own aspirational products through this felt psychological ownership; though only if the posting behavior is public.

With these predictions, our study aligns with and extends growing literature on social media marketing. As Lamberton and Stephen (2016) and Stephen (2016) note, extant literature tends to have little to say about consumer-level phenomena in the context of online social interactions. Prior work has instead addressed firm-level aspects, such as how social media influence sales and customer acquisition (e.g., Stephen and Galak 2012; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009), often through related influences such as online word of mouth or product reviews (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2004, 2009). To describe the psychology of social media use, the emphasis has been primarily focused on the actions people engage in online. For instance, people tend to post more positive content about themselves (Gonzales and Hancock 2011) or present themselves in a way that makes them look good. The positive feedback people receive from such self-presentations may increase self-esteem and their sense of well-being (Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006), which in turn could have behavioral consequences, though prior research does not often consider these outcomes of social

media use. A notable exception is Wilcox and Stephen (2013), who examined how Facebook use enhances self-esteem but also decreases offline self-control. Building on that work, Zhang et al. (2015) also find a positive relationship between online social network use and shopping behavior, through the analysis of extensive Internet use and shopping data, presumably because exposures to friends' positively represented lives on social media often involves substantial consumption-related activity, priming a shopping mindset. Although these studies indicate that online consumer actions can have important offline repercussions, they do not examine how specific product-related social media actions might influence consumers' offline intentions.

To summarize, this research examines how representing oneself on social media using brands or products, particularly aspirational goods, can impact one's desire to actually purchase those products. Specifically, we hypothesize that this kind of common social media activity can negatively impact purchase intentions for aspirational luxury products. We argue that publicly representing oneself online can lead to a heightened sense of psychological ownership for such brands that can be sufficient for achieving status-related, ideal self signaling goals. Thus, certain types of product-related posting activities on social media could, ironically, obviate the need to actually own aspirational products. This is only expected, however, if the posting behavior is public. To the extent that ideal self-related goals are fulfilled through any kind of product consumption, such consumption (even if it is virtual) needs to be conspicuous (e.g., in public).

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We test our prediction that consumers who engage with their ideal selves (vs. actual selves) online will be less interested in engaging with ideal aspirational luxury goods offline

using a correlational pilot study and then five experiments. Our pilot study indicates that people, after posting about aspirational/ideal self products on social media, are significantly less likely to purchase similar goods compared to when they post everyday/actual self products online. Study 1 demonstrates how engaging with a consumer's ideal (vs. actual or control) self online decreases consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for aspirational luxury goods. Studies 2 and 3 build on this by showing that this negative effect of affiliating products with a consumer's ideal self arises only if consumers post *publicly* on social media to their entire social network. Studies 4 and 5 explore how, once online behavior is fully public, felt psychological ownership impacts desire for luxury. We find that publicly posting on social media about aspirational (ideal self) products leads to lower purchase intentions of similar goods because this representation of the ideal self enhances consumers' sense of psychological ownership of aspirational products. However, for those who have posted about everyday, actual self representative products, no change in feelings of ownership for aspirational products occurs, thus not impacting the desire to pay for and purchase these aspirational luxury products.

Overall, our results suggest that when people engage with their ideal selves through aspirational products on social media, they feel less desire to do the same offline. This runs counter to conventional wisdom, which would argue that consumers' social media actions should be in alignment with, and thus positive indicators of, their real-world offline preferences and behaviors. These findings have important implications for marketers. Typically, brand marketers and retailers encourage consumers to post about offerings on social media to spread awareness. But our findings suggest that the consumers actually doing the posting or sharing—who likely are engaged fans of the brands or retailers—ultimately may exhibit a lower likelihood of actually buying those focal products.

PILOT STUDY

The purpose of this pilot study is to provide some initial evidence in support of our theory. Participants provided data about their (real) Pinterest social media accounts and about "boards" on Pinterest they had already created. In general, Pinterest boards are where users "pin" (i.e., post) images of things of interest to the user, such as brands, products, objects, art, food, or locations that are organized by overarching themes. After giving us information about these boards, participants indicated their offline purchase behavior as it related to the board described and lastly ranked how representative the overall board was of their ideal or actual self.

Method

One hundred ninety six members of Amazon Mechanical Turk who declared themselves to be active Pinterest users participated in the study for a nominal payment (M_{age} = 31 years, 67% women). Participants were instructed to log into their personal Pinterest accounts, and to then view and describe up to five of their most important Pinterest boards. For each board, participants provided us with information about the board's category on Pinterest (e.g., product-based category or not), the name of the board, and the number of items pinned to the board. Afterwards, again for each board separately, participants indicated on a Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree") the extent to which they had or had not purchased products offline that are similar to products they had pinned to that board.

Lastly, participants indicated how representative they believed the board was of their ideal or actual self on a five-point scale (1 = "Completely ideal," 2 = "Somewhat ideal," 3 = "Neither ideal nor actual," 4 = "Somewhat actual," 5 = "Completely actual"). We used this item to categorize each described board as representative of ideal self (completely or somewhat ideal),

representative of actual self (completely or somewhat actual), or representative of neither self (neither ideal nor actual). Based on this, variables were created to represent boards focused on ideal self (ideal = 1, actual and control = -1) and boards focused on the actual self (actual = 1, ideal and control = -1). Of all the boards that participants described, 45% were categorized as ideal self, 33% as actual self, and 22% as neither (i.e., boards unrelated to products and self-presentation using products or brands).

Results

Across the 196 participants a total of 656 separate Pinterest boards were reported (M = 3.35 boards per participant). Our theory predicts that participants who described ideal self-related boards should indicate lower rates of purchase of products from those boards than those who were describing actual self-related or control boards. To test this we used a random-effects model to regress for each board the extent to which participants had purchased board-related items on the two variables indicating the type of board (ideal, actual, neither), with a random effect to control for multiple observations per participant.

The results were consistent with our prediction. The effect of ideal self on purchasing was negative (β = -.300, t = -3.20, p = .002), indicating that participants were less likely to have purchased products similar to those on a board when that board was categorized as representative of ideal self. As shown in Figure 1, the means for purchase behavior reflect this: the mean was lower for ideal self-boards (M = 2.95, SD = 1.84) than for the actual self-boards (M = 3.60, SD = 1.91) or the boards that were representative of neither ideal nor actual self (M = 3.50, SD = 1.49). In contrast, the effect of actual self on purchasing was not significant (p = .744).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

By observing consumers' real social media posting activities and inquiring about their subsequent purchase behaviors, this pilot study showed that peoples' social media posting behaviors are not necessarily representative of their real purchase behaviors. People who posted product-related content in Pinterest that was mostly aspirational in nature, appeared to be less likely to have purchased similar goods compared to those who posted items that were more representative of their actual selves. Counterintuitively, this suggests that greater online affiliation with aspirational products may lead to lowered real-world interest in the same, or similar, products. A limitation of this initial study is the correlational nature of the data. Thus, in Study 1 we experimentally manipulate how posted content online is represented (i.e., ideal vs. actual self vs. a control), and see, when the same content is associated with different self-concepts online, how willingness to pay (WTP) for luxury aspirational products differs.

STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 is to show that social media use can negatively influence WTP for luxury goods when consumers use with aspirational products to present their ideal selves, though not their actual selves, through social media posts. Participants interacted with their real Pinterest social media accounts, after being primed to focus on either their ideal selves, actual selves, or a control condition that had participants focus on others (i.e., not self). They then considered a luxury product and indicated their willingness to pay for it. We hypothesize that people focused on their ideal selves may express a lower WTP for the aspirational luxury product compared with those focused on their actual selves (or in the control condition).

Method

One hundred fifty members of Amazon Mechanical Turk who declared themselves to be active Pinterest users participated in the study for a nominal payment (M_{age} = 31 years, 69% women). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three self-concept conditions (ideal self, actual self, and control) in a between-subjects design.

The study contained two ostensibly unrelated parts. In the first part, participants were instructed to use their real personal Pinterest account by logging in and then creating a new board, where they would be asked to post some products. To help conceal the study's purpose and ensure their appropriateness for this study, participants answered general questions about their Pinterest use, such as the length of time they had actively used Pinterest, their frequency of use, the number of boards they had created, and the number of accounts they follow or have following them. All participants appeared to be active Pinterest users, and therefore no participants were dropped from the study.

In all three conditions, the pinning task participants completed involved a set of five gender-neutral, fashion-related goods (e.g., watch, bag, sweater) that were described using terms such as "authentic" and "vintage" to evoke a sense of luxury[1](see Web Appendix A for images of stimuli). Prices of these goods varied between approximately $40 and $300. Importantly, the set of five goods was the same in all three conditions. In all conditions participants were asked to create a board and to post (i.e., "pin") each of the five products to this new board.

To manipulate self concept, the described nature of the board to which participants would pin the products was varied between conditions. We based this on the notion that distinct aspects of the self can become salient through different prompts, and the activation of a particular aspect of self concept or identity can make people more likely to behave consistently with that aspect

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[1] In a pretest of active Pinterest users (N = 100, M_{age} = 30 years, 74% women) we determined that all five products were seen as luxury and did not differ in liking ($p > .55$).

(Wheeler and Petty 2001). In the ideal self condition, the instructions asked participants to pin the products to a new board that they would use to represent their ideal self-image, titled "My Ideal Style", with a tagline that read, "How I wish I dressed everyday". In the actual self condition, participants were asked to pin the products to the new board that would represent their actual self-image, titled "My Style," with a tagline that read, "How I dress everyday." In the control condition, participants were asked to post the five products to a board entitled "Style," with the tagline, "How people dress" (i.e., without the possessive "My" and "I" as in the ideal and actual self conditions).

In both the ideal and actual self conditions, participants also read language that described the different selves, based on previously used definitions and stimuli (Shah, Higgins, and Friedman 1998; see Web Appendix A for details). For example, in the ideal self condition participants were instructed to create a board that could "showcase who you want to be, or aspire to be" whereas in the actual self condition, participants were told that their board should "embody who you are currently". Also, to reinforce the manipulation, next participants wrote about how these products represented their newly created Pinterest board. Because the items were the same across conditions, participants had to find ways that each item could be representative of their ideal self, actual self, or of another person's style.

Next, in the second, ostensibly unrelated, part of the study, participants were shown a luxury good (a unisex suitcase by Louis Vuitton; see image in Web Appendix B). This brand was selected because it is one of the most well-known and favored luxury brands (Wilcox, Kim, and Sen 2009). Respondents were asked to imagine that they were shopping for a suitcase and then indicated the price they were willing to pay for the suitcase, on a scale between $0 and $2,000.

Finally, we asked a series of additional questions, including basic demographic items such as gender, age, and household income.

Results

Willingness to pay. To test our prediction that the WTP for the Louis Vuitton suitcase would be lower in the ideal self condition than in either of the actual self or control conditions, we regressed WTP on two variables: ideal self (ideal = 1, actual and control = -1) and actual self (actual = 1, ideal and control = -1). Means are plotted in Figure 2. This analysis revealed a significant effect of the conditions on WTP ($F(2,147) = 3.627$, $p = .029$). Consistent with our theory, there was a significant effect of ideal self-concept on WTP ($\beta = -217.67$, $t = -2.53$, $p = .012$), such that the mean WTP for the luxury suitcase was lower in the ideal self condition (M = 353.96, SD = 277.38) than in the actual self condition (M = 571.64, SD = 502.12) or the control condition (M = 524.15, SD = 427.058). The effect of actual self on WTP was not significant ($\beta = 47.49$, $t = .529$, $p = .597$).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

The results suggest that when consumers use products for presenting their ideal selves (compared to their actual selves) on social media, they can have lower WTP for aspirational luxury products. Interestingly, the products used to represent consumers' self-image on Pinterest were distinct from the luxury suitcase that was the focus of the WTP measure. The pinned products and Louis Vuitton suitcase all were, however, aspirational luxury products. Thus, it appears that this effect operates at a higher level, and perhaps not necessarily at a lower (product) level. This is consistent with our theory and underscores the importance of this phenomenon because virtually associating with one type of aspirational product in social media can affect

purchasing (e.g., WTP) for other types of aspirational products even if they are not from the same brand or even category.

If this is the case, it implies that the observed effect could arise because consumers fulfill a status-signaling need when they post about an aspirational product on social media, and posting about any sufficiently aspirational product could satisfy this need. This suggests, however, that the effect will only occur when the posting of products in social media is public, i.e., viewable by other people, given that fulfillment of a status-signaling need, by definition, requires an audience. In this study all behavior was public in the sense that participants used their own *public* Pinterest accounts to engage in real posting behaviors that others (their followers) could potentially see. In Study 2 we test this boundary condition.

STUDY 2

Our theory predicts that a consumer will have weaker preferences for purchasing and consuming aspirational goods after posting about them in social media, provided that the posting activity is an attempt by the consumer to represent one's ideal self through affiliation with the product or brand. This was shown in Study 1, and is expected to occur only to the extent that the posting activity helps helps a consumer fulfill a status-related identity-signaling goal. This signaling goal is, by definition, social (i.e., with others in mind; Bodner and Prelec 2003). Thus, it follows that a boundary condition for our theory is that the social media posting activity must be public. In Study 2, we examine the impact of publicly (vs. privately) posting aspirational product-related content on the desire to shop at luxury stores in a brick-and-mortar shopping

mall. We also focus on a broader behavioral intention measure, shopping intentions, as opposed to the willingness to pay for a specific product that was used in Study 1.

Method

One hundred twenty-five undergraduates from a large northeastern U.S. university participated in this study as part of a series of unrelated studies conducted during a lab session, in exchange for course credit ($M_{age} = 20$ years, 33% women). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (self-concept: ideal vs. actual) × 2 (signaling: public vs. private) between-subjects design. No participants were dropped.

As in Study 1, this study was conducted in two seemingly unrelated parts. In part 1, participants read about a new Facebook feature called "Facebook Curations." With this (hypothetical) feature, users could keep track of products and brands that they like. In the private condition, the feature was "private, for the user's eyes only," so any products and brands placed in their "curation" would be invisible to everyone else. In the public condition, the feature was described as a way to showcase product preferences "publicly to their entire social network." Participants also saw an example of a Facebook Curation page, to help make the features and purpose more realistic and concrete (see Web Appendix C for details).

Participants were tasked in this first part of the study with developing a Facebook Curation. To do this, we asked participants to browse the Internet and find five clothing/accessory products that they could include in their Facebook Curation. In the ideal (actual) self condition, participants had to find five products that best represented their ideal (actual) self. As in Study 1, we explained these self-concepts to participants using language derived from previous work (Shah, Higgins, and Friedman 1998). Thus, the ideal self participants focused on finding clothing and accessories that were representative of who they

hope to be in the future, whereas the actual self participants searched for items that represent

who they are right now. Participants provided the URLs to each of the five products they

selected and wrote about why they were accurate representations of their ideal or actual selves

for their newly created Facebook Curation, to increase the connection of the products to their

ideal or actual self-concepts (Wheeler and Petty 2001).

Then in part 2, participants were asked to complete a seemingly unrelated shopping task.

They were shown a mocked-up floorplan of a regional U.S. shopping mall with 20 stores that are

typically found in such malls. Importantly, we designed the mall so that there was an equal mix

of luxury and non-luxury brands represented (i.e., 10 of each type of store).[2] We asked

participants to imagine they were going shopping at this mall (see Web Appendix B for image of

mall map) and to select the stores that they wanted to visit. Finally, participants completed

standard demographic questions and some manipulation check items.

Results

Manipulation checks. To check the public versus private manipulation, we asked

participants whether they agreed that the Facebook Curations feature could be used to express a

person's "identity and preferences publicly" (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 = "strongly agree").

Participants in the public condition more strongly agreed that they thought that the feature could

be used for public expression (M = 6.31), compared to those in the private condition (M = 3.11,

$\beta = -.714$, $t = -4.99$, $p < .001$), as intended. To check the ideal versus actual self manipulation,

participants indicated whether the types of products they found online and imagined posting to

their Facebook Curations represented their aspirational selves by indicating on a Likert scale the

extent to which they believed that the products they engaged with were aspirational (1 =

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[2] The pretest (N = 105, M_{age} = 31 years, 67% women) confirmed that half the stores were perceived as being "more luxury" than the rest ($p < .01$). None of the stores differed on trust or liking ($p > .45$).

"strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree"). Participants in the ideal self condition agreed more strongly that that they had engaged with more aspirational products (M = 6.62) than participants in the actual self condition (M = 4.79, β = .328, t = 2.70, p < .01).

Number of luxury stores chosen. Based on our theory, participants in the ideal self condition should have chosen fewer luxury stores from the mall floorplan than participants in the ideal self condition, but only when the Facebook Curation feature was a form of public self-expression. To test this, we estimated a zero-inflated Poisson regression of the number of luxury stores chosen on signaling (public = 1, private = -1), self-concept (ideal = 1, actual = -1), and their interaction. This type of model is more appropriate than a normal linear regression, because the dependent variable is a count of luxury stores chosen, and we needed to account for the possibility that respondents might not choose any luxury stores (i.e., excess zeroes, which are handled by the zero-inflated part of this model). Means are plotted in Figure 3. There was a significant interaction between signaling and self-concept in a direction consistent with our prediction (β = -.707, $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.10, p = .024). The simple effect of self-concept on number of luxury stores chosen was negative when signaling was public (β = -.634, $\chi^2(1)$ = 8.32, p = .004), such that in the public conditions, ideal self participants selected fewer luxury stores (M = 1.17, SD = 1.11) than actual self condition participants (M = 2.07, SD = 1.79). The simple effect of self-concept was not significant when signaling was private (β = .781, $\chi^2(1)$ = 2.46, p = .117; M_{actual} = 1.53, SD_{actual} = 1.19, M_{ideal} = 1.52, SD_{ideal} = 1.46).

This analysis considered the number of luxury stores chosen, but did not account for the total number of stores chosen or the fact that there is a finite upper limit to the number of stores that can potentially be selected. An alternative model that accounts for these aspects is a binomial regression, which models the probability of selecting a luxury store; i.e., the number of

luxury stores chosen out of the total number of stores chosen. We estimated this model as a robustness check and the results were consistent with the zero-inflated Poisson regression. Specifically, the interaction of signaling and self-concept was significant, in a direction consistent with our prediction (β = -.823, $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.23, p = .022). The simple effect of self-concept on the proportion of luxury stores chosen was significant in the public signaling condition (β = -.446, $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.37, p = .036), but not in the private signaling condition (β = 1.20, $\chi^2(1)$ = 3.17, p = .08). As a further robustness check, we estimated a normal linear regression and the results were directionally consistent with these other, more appropriate models (interaction: β = -.171, t = -1.72, p = .088; simple effect of self-concept public signaling: β = -.897, t = -2.29, p = .024; simple effect of self-concept for private signaling: β = .869, t = .980, p = .331).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

Consistent with our theory, Study 2 shows that when consumers present their ideal selves (as compared to actual selves) on social media using products and brands traditionally applied to signal identity to others (e.g., clothing, accessories), they choose to shop at a smaller number and proportion of luxury stores compared to mass market stores. This occurs, however, only when that signaling is public, which is expected under our theory because public displays of affiliation with aspirational products or brands are needed in order to fulfil a one's need for status-related social signaling. The findings in this study are also in line with Study 1, and combined, these two studies suggests that when consumers use aspirational products to *publicly* signal their ideal selves to others on social media they will have less interest in actually purchasing those types of products.

One aspect not considered in this study, however, is to whom the social signals are sent (i.e., one's audience on social media). Arguably, if consumers use aspirational products such as luxury goods for status-enhancing self-signaling purposes, then the audience should matter. This is because different types of audiences, such as whether the audience is just close friends or a broader set of people (i.e., strong vs. weak ties), should affect the importance of the status-related need that consumers attempt to fulfill through ideal-self identity signaling by posting aspirational products on social media. We examine this in the next study.

STUDY 3

Study 3 demonstrates that the previously established effect only holds when self-presentations on social media deliver *status-enhancing* social signaling benefits. In other words, an important boundary condition for the effect found previously, in addition to social media posts being public as opposed to private, is that there is an expected social benefit (or status-related utility) from publicly affiliating oneself with aspirational goods. To show this, we consider with whom products are being publicly shared on social media in terms of social tie strength between a posting consumer and their audience. Prior research shows that consumers typically use luxury products to signal their ideal or aspirational selves when they interact with valued reference groups and aspirational others (Berger and Ward 2010; Bourdieu 1984; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). Social media platforms such as Facebook allow consumers to designate other members as "close friends", "family," or "acquaintances", such that each user's network can be segmented into "close others" (strong ties) and "distant others" (weak ties). The close others, such as friends and family, presumably already know the consumer well and are unlikely

to provide additional status benefits when the focal user signals an ideal self with an online product association. Instead, an association with an aspirational product or brand might signal the person's ideal identity to more distant others who are part of aspirational reference groups. Social signaling to a desired reference group of weak ties or distant others could then potentially provide status-enhancing social benefits such as strengthened social ties or group acceptance in the future. In Study 3 we predict that the effect of ideal self-concept representations in social media decreasing luxury purchase intentions and WTP occurs only if the post is public to a wider network of distant others (as opposed to private or public only to close friends/family).

Method

Three hundred thirty participants who were active Facebook users on Amazon Mechanical Turk participated in exchange for a nominal payment (M_{age} = 31 years, 52% women). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (self-concept: ideal vs. actual) × 3 (signaling: distant public vs. close public vs. private) between-subjects design. No participants were dropped from the study.

First, participants read about the hypothetical new Facebook feature, "Facebook Curations," as described in Study 2. In the private condition, the feature again was "private for the user's eyes only", whereas in the distant public condition, the feature was described as a way for to showcase product preferences "publicly to their entire social network." A third condition, the close public condition, described the feature as a way to showcase product preferences to designated "close friends and family only," labeled as such in Facebook's classification system (detailed in Web Appendix C). Participants then engaged in the same product curation task as in Study 2, finding five products that represented their ideal (actual) self and writing about how they related to their ideal (actual) self. Afterwards, in an ostensibly separate study, participants

indicated their WTP for the luxury Louis Vuitton suitcase from Study 1. Finally, we collected

their responses to the basic demographics and manipulation check questions.

Results

 Manipulation checks. Participants indicated whether they agreed that the Facebook

Curations feature could be used to express a person's "identity and preferences publicly" (1 =

"strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). As intended, participants in the distant public

condition thought that feature could be used for public expression significantly more than

participants in the private condition ($M_{distant-public} = 5.95$, $M_{private} = 3.85$, $\beta = .71$, $t = 6.29$, $p <$

.001) and close public condition ($M_{close-public} = 4.29$, $\beta = .28$, $t = 2.27$, $p < .01$). Additionally, the

close public condition was considered significantly more public than the private condition ($\beta =$

.67, $t = 3.04$, $p < .001$). To check the ideal versus actual self manipulation, participants noted the

types of products they found online and imagined posting on a seven point Likert scale (1 =

"strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). As intended, participants in the ideal self condition

found products that were more aspirational (M = 6.46) than those in the actual self condition (M

= 3.85, $\beta = .37$, $t = 4.15$, $p < .001$).

 Willingness to pay. We predicted that WTP would be lower in the ideal self condition

than in the actual self condition, but only when the social media audience was distant public. To

test this, we regressed WTP on the self-concept condition (actual = -1, ideal = 1), a variable that

represented the private sharing condition (private = 1, both public conditions = -1), a variable

that represented the distant public sharing condition (distant public = 1, close public and private

= -1), and the two-way interactions of self-concept with each of the sharing variables.

 Means are plotted in Figure 4 and are as expected. The overall model of the interaction

effect of self-concept and signaling type on WTP for the luxury suitcase was significant

(F(5,324) = 2.756, p = .019; figure 4). Importantly, the interaction between self-concept and the distant public sharing variable was significant such that when the audience was composed of the distant public, participants in the ideal self condition had a lower WTP (M = 148.57, SD = 134.44) than those in the actual self condition (M = 324.01, SD = 326.35, β = -47.66, t = -2.701, p = .007). There were no significant WTP differences between the ideal (M = 262.22, SD = 162.88) and actual (M = 200.44, SD = 130.15) self-concept conditions when sharing was private (β = 24.31, t = 1.21, p = .227) or when sharing was only to close ties (M_{actual} = 314.62, SD_{actual} = 279.44, M_{ideal} = 236.41, SD_{ideal} = 255.91).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

When it comes to the status signaling power of social media posts, audience composition matters. Merely posting about products and brands in conjunction with the ideal self was not enough to reduce participants' desire and WTP for luxury. Even when some public signaling existed (i.e., close others condition), no significant differences arose in WTP for luxury between self-concepts, because this condition did not allow signaling to help participants build their social presence or feel like they might derive some status-related benefits from posting.

This finding is interesting and counterintuitive because, traditionally, to achieve identity signaling goals through affiliation with luxury goods, purchase and conspicuous consumption was required (e.g., Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007; Holt 1998). However, as we show, social media can, in some cases, act as a partial substitute for this. In this context, virtual "ownership" of certain types of goods might be enough to satisfy consumers' desires for signaling identities. Virtual ownership may therefore be obviating the need for physical ownership, thus impacting actual purchase intentions or WTP. We examine this mechanism in the next two studies, which

are based on the premise that affiliating oneself publicly on social media with aspirational products that signal one's ideal self generates a sense of psychological ownership that mitigates the need for actual ownership.

STUDY 4

A feeling of possession can affect valuations of products and goods. For example, a good that becomes a part of someone increases in value once it is owned (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler, 1990; Thaler 1980). The way that ownership impacts consumers' feelings towards products is through the sense of objects being perceived as "mine" (Belk 1988; Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003). Once a product is perceived as affiliated with the self, consumers can gain personal and social advantages from it. For example, research shows that people purchase products and brands to affirm and showcase identity-relevant information (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Reed 2004). Thus, consumers should feel a greater connection between their sense of self and products they own, which in turn increases the signaling benefits that these products provide.

We propose that posting products on social media can encourage a novel form of *psychological* ownership that does not require actual purchase or consumption. Psychological ownership is distinct from legal or actual ownership, yet it still provides a feeling of being "mine" (Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003). Social media encourages consumers to post, share, and curate content online to share with others; regardless of its type, this content gets affiliated with consumers' sense of self and may promote a feeling of being "mine." To the extent that consumers believe posted content is theirs, their felt ownership should enhance the signaling

benefits of aspirational content, as well as the psychological benefits that accompany aspirational goods. Studies 4 and 5 therefore examine the moderating role of psychological ownership.

Method

Forty-six female undergraduates from a Northeastern U.S. university who were active Pinterest users participated in the study, as part of a series of studies conducted during a lab session (M_{age} = 20 years).[3] Participants were randomly assigned to one of two self-concept conditions (ideal self or actual self) in a between-subjects design.

The design was similar to Study 1 and had two ostensibly unrelated parts. In part 1, participants were instructed that they would use their personal Pinterest account to engage with a currently existing, publicly shared board, where they would be asked some questions about the contents and products. Before engaging with these boards, to help conceal the study's purpose and ensure their appropriateness for the study, participants were asked some general questions about Pinterest use, similar to those in Study 1 (procedure detailed in Web Appendix D).

In the ideal (actual) self condition, participants were asked to choose one of their existing Pinterest boards that they felt featured products and brands that best represented their ideal (actual) self. We again explained the concepts using language derived from previous work (Shah, Higgins, and Friedman 1998). Participants provided the titles of the boards and indicated their category on Pinterest (e.g., woman's fashion), which we used to ensure that the task included only product- and brand-focused boards. Next, participants indicated the extent to which they felt ownership of the products pinned to their boards (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). This item was adapted from a three-item psychological ownership scale (Shu and Peck 2011).

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[3] Although males were in this lab's participant pool, at the time of this study there were no male participants who had Pinterest accounts. Out of participants with a Pinterest account; no one was dropped from this study.

In part 2, participants completed a seemingly unrelated task, which was the shopping mall task used in Study 2. Again, we asked participants to imagine they were going shopping at the mall and had to select the stores that they would shop in, if given the opportunity for a short visit. Finally, participants were invited to guess the purpose of the study and provided some basic demographic information. Note that no participants guessed the study purpose or drew connections between the Pinterest and shopping mall parts of the study.

Results

Number of luxury stores chosen. We estimated a Poisson regression of the number of luxury stores chosen on self-concept (ideal = 1, actual = -1). We used this type of model instead of a regular linear regression, because, as in Study 2, the dependent variable was the count of luxury stores chosen. We did not run a zero-inflated model as we did in Study 2 because in this study we only observed one zero value for the dependent variable (nevertheless, the results were unchanged when a zero-inflated Poisson regression was run). The effect of self-concept was significant, consistent with our prediction (β = -.46, $\chi^2(1)$ = 6.14, p = .013). Participants in the ideal self condition chose significantly fewer luxury stores (M = 2.00, SD = 1.56) compared with the number chosen by participants in the actual self condition (M = 3.18, SD = 1.86).

As in Study 2, we ran a robustness check using a binomial regression to model the probability of selecting a luxury store and the results were consistent with the Poisson regression results. The effect of self-concept was significant and in a direction consistent with our prediction (β = -.82, $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.23, p = .022). Finally, as another robustness check we estimated a normal linear regression. This showed that the expected effect of self-concept still held (β = -1.18, t = -2.34, p = .024).

Moderating role of psychological ownership. We then tested whether measured psychological ownership moderated the effect of self-concept. In the Poisson regression, we added the psychological ownership measure and its interaction with the self-concept variable. The interaction was significant (β = -.48, $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.18, p = .023). Using spotlight analysis, we found that at higher levels of psychological ownership (+1 SD) there was a significant difference between ideal and actual self-concepts, such that participants in the ideal self condition chose fewer luxury stores (M = 1.73, SD = 1.43) than those in the actual self condition (M = 3.63, SD = 1.89; β = -1.98, $\chi^2(1)$ = 2.92, p = .01). However, at lower levels of psychological ownership (-1 SD) there was no significant difference between self-concept conditions with respect to the number of luxury stores chosen (M_{ideal} = 2.44, SD_{ideal} = 1.74 vs. M_{actual} = 2.00, SD_{actual} = 1.26; β = .83, $\chi^2(1)$ = 1.16, p = .28; see figure 5).

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

This study utilized participants' actual Pinterest accounts and real boards to measure their shopping intentions of aspirational luxury goods. By looking at how people really behave on social media in regards to brand affiliations and ideal (vs. actual) self representations, we found the expected reduction in desire to shop in luxury brand stores among consumers who engage with their ideal (vs. actual) self. However, we found this only occurred for participants who really felt as though the aspirational products they affiliated with publicly were "theirs," that is, when they felt a sense of psychological ownership for those products.

This sense of ownership over posted content varies; people are able to discuss products and brands on social media without those products and brands necessarily being related to the self. Several motivations cause people to post content to social media that have nothing to do

with signaling their identity, such that they should not affect purchase considerations (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2004, 2009; Toubia and Stephen 2013). However, when consumers have publicly shared online content to signal their aspirational product affiliations, when they also feel ownership over the products, they ultimately express less desire to own those luxury items.

In our fifth and final study, we examine how elements of the social media interface might influence consumers' feelings of ownership. Noting the ever-changing variety of social media platforms, interfaces, and social structures, we propose that certain aspects of the social media interface may enhance feelings of psychological ownership toward posted content.

STUDY 5

In this study we manipulated feelings of psychological ownership by changing the manner in which consumers affiliate (i.e., "pin" versus "like") with products and brands. This allows us to more deeply explore the ways social media sites can encourage or discourage psychological ownership of content, specifically through the ways they enable people to curate and engage with branded content. Previous research has shown that various antecedents can strengthen feelings of psychological ownership, such as a perceived ability to control the object, knowing the object intimately, or investing the self in the object (Pierce, Kostava, and Dirks 2003). Touch and imagery can also increase psychological ownership (Peck and Shu 2009; Schlosser 2003). In the social media environment, consumer actions that allow a person to "claim" products and have a feeling of control over this content, versus actions that merely make a statement about an attitude, may lead to increased feelings of psychological ownership.

To examine the effect of social media actions on psychological ownership and willingness to pay for luxury, active Pinterest users engaged with their real Pinterest accounts in one of three ways. Those with the most control over the content were allowed to pin their ideal (actual) self content to real Pinterest boards. Thus, they were able to customize and engage with the content, by sharing it with others through boards that best fit their affiliations with these products. On the other hand, for lower levels of psychological ownership, in another condition participants could only "like" products on Pinterest. They thus signaled their affiliation with the products in a weak manner, and without using specific boards or any form of content customization. In this condition, therefore, participants had less control over their posted content. Finally, in the control condition, participants could not post any content to their accounts.

Method

Two hundred eighty-six members of Amazon Mechanical Turk who declared themselves to be active Pinterest users participated for a nominal payment (M_{age} = 32 years, 71% women). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (self-concept: ideal vs. actual) × 3 (ownership: pinning, liking, and control) between-subjects design. No participants were dropped.

The study contained two seemingly unrelated parts. In part 1, participants were instructed that they would use their real personal Pinterest accounts to find different products that would be actually posted on the accounts. To help conceal the study's purpose, participants were asked some general questions about Pinterest use, as in earlier studies.

Participants were told that they needed to find five items on Pinterest itself (i.e., not by searching other websites). As in Studies 2 and 3, participants were asked to find five items of clothing or accessories that represented either their ideal self or their actual self. The language

used to describe the different selves came from previously used definitions and stimuli (Shah, Higgins, and Friedman 1998). All of the participants entered their five products into the online survey by providing URLs to the products they found, and then they wrote about how these products provided accurate representations of their ideal or actual selves.

The way that participants interacted with these products on their real Pinterest accounts differed across ownership conditions. All participants entered the products into the online survey. This was all that participants in the control condition were asked to do. In the liking condition, participants were asked to "like" the products on Pinterest. In the pinning condition participants were asked to "pin" the five products to either an ideal self or actual self board on their own account, similar to previous studies. See Web Appendix E for details. Afterwards, in a seemingly separate study, participants indicated their WTP for the luxury Louis Vuitton suitcase used in Studies 1 and 3. Finally, participants answered standard demographic questions and completed manipulation check items.

Results

Manipulation checks. Using Likert Scales (1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree"), participants rated how representative of their ideal or actual selves the uploaded products were, and how much ownership they felt over these items. Participants in the ideal self condition uploaded products that were more aspirational (M = 6.17) than those in the actual self condition (M = 3.24; β = .943, t = 2.70, $p < .01$). Across the three ownership conditions, we found significant differences in feelings of psychological ownership ($F(2,280) = 25.24$, $p < .001$). The variable for "pinning" (i.e., stronger sense of psychological ownership) showed that participants in this condition perceived significantly greater ownership (M = 6.36) than did those in the other conditions ($M_{liking} = 5.00$, $M_{control} = 1.95$, β = 2.52, t = 5.80, $p < .001$). The variable representing

the liking condition, relative to the control condition, also revealed a stronger sense of psychological ownership (β = .747, t = 2.16, p = .03), though still significantly less than in the pinning condition ($p < .001$).

Willingness to pay. We predicted that WTP would be lower in the ideal self condition than in the actual self condition, but only when sense of psychological ownership was strong (i.e. pinning condition). To test this, we regressed WTP on the self-concept condition (actual = -1, ideal = 1), a variable that represented the liking condition (liking = 1, other conditions = -1), a variable that represented the pinning condition (pinning = 1, other conditions = -1), and the two-way interactions of self-concept with each of the ownership variables.

Means are plotted in Figure 6. The overall model between self-concept and ownership type on WTP for the luxury suitcase was significant ($F(5,280) = 2.975$, $p = .014$). As expected, the interaction between self-concept and pinning was significant, such that those in the ideal self condition were willing to pay significantly less for the luxury suitcase (M = 248.29, SD = 194.51) compared with those in the actual self condition (M = 573.33, SD = 498.99; β= -76.51, t = -2.50, p = .013). We found no significant differences in WTP for luxury between ideal (M = 484.67, SD = 432.98) and actual (M = 464.87, SD = 466.76) self-concept conditions when ownership was weaker due to liking (β = 26.74, t = .827, p = .409) or when participants felt no psychological ownership in the control condition (M_{ideal} = 385.04, SD_{ideal} = 313.48; M_{actual} = 491.87, SD_{actual} = 432.41).

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

The results of Study 5 demonstrate that feeling a sense of psychological ownership is necessary for social media-based aspirational product affiliations to reduce consumers' purchase

intentions for luxury goods. Differences in WTP only arose between the ideal and actual self-concept conditions when participants interacted with products and brands on their public Pinterest accounts in a way that engendered a greater sense of psychological ownership (i.e., pinning). We contend that this is because people were allowed full control and customization (both of which encourage psychological ownership; Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks, 2003) in the pinning condition.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Past research has shown that consumers use products and brands to maintain and signal their ideal self-concepts (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). People also have social needs centered on maintaining and gaining social acceptance (Berger and Ward 2010; Bourdieu 1984; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Drèze and Nunes 2009). As social media continues its rise in popularity as a mainstream channel for people to share information and connect with others, how people use social media can affect people's feelings of self-worth (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006). Given that social media now accounts for over a quarter of all online activity (Pew Research Center 2015), understanding the implications of consumers' social media activities is important. Across five studies, we showed that when consumers use social media to affiliate themselves with aspirational products and brands (e.g., luxury goods) by posting those products on social media platforms such as Facebook and Pinterest, their desire to purchase and thus physically possess those types of products can be diminished. This occurs when posting such products allows consumers to publicly signal their ideal selves to others, and when doing this delivers some

status-related benefits. Moreover, the mechanism underlying this phenomenon is related to psychological ownership, which, when increased by certain kinds of social media posting activity, makes physical or legal ownership of luxury goods less desirable.

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Our main novel contribution is showing how certain brand- or product-related posting actions taken by consumers in social media can negatively impact actual purchase or shopping intentions for aspirational, luxury goods. Moreover, we show that this occurs when the social media actions are public (i.e., related to social signaling and status-enhancement motives) and instill a sense of psychological ownership of the brands or products posted about in social media. These findings are important because they indicate that *virtually* (as opposed to physically) engaging with aspirational brands or products in social media can substitute for *actual* ownership or possession of the same types of products (e.g., luxury goods). To the extent that (conspicuously) consuming luxury goods allows consumers to socially signal ideal self-concepts, our findings indicate that this can sometimes instead be achieved merely through posting about aspirational products in social media. Critically, this can be done without actually purchasing aspirational, luxury products and, specifically, the desire to buy such items is decreased.

This is theoretically novel because it means that there is a link between certain types of brand-or product-related actions taken by consumers in social media and consumers' "offline" behaviors. Prior research has examined how actual consumption or purchasing of aspirational products and luxury goods can be used for social signaling or status enhancement (e.g., Berger and Ward 2010; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Nelissen and Meijers 2011), as well as how social media use can be used by people for status-signaling or self-presentation purposes (e.g., Back et al. 2010; Gosling, Gaddis, and Vazire 2007). Linking these, however, has not been considered

until the current research. Thus, our findings contribute to the consumer psychology literatures on social signaling and social media. We also contribute to the literature on psychological ownership (e.g., Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003; Shu and Peck 2011) by showing how merely affiliating oneself with a product in social media (i.e., virtually) can instill a sense of psychological ownership without accompanying physical or legal ownership.

Our findings also suggest a number of important practical implications, particularly with respect to how brands and retailers utilize social media. The most important implication for marketers from the current research is that consumers posting a brand's or a retailer's products on social media could, ironically, be disadvantageous for that brand or retailer. Conventional wisdom suggests that having consumers post images of one's products on social media is advantageous because this spreads word of mouth or generates buzz that raises awareness and, hopefully, lifts sales. Indeed, prior work has shown positive links between social media posting and outcomes such as customer acquisition and sales (e.g., Stephen and Galak 2012; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009). However, previous studies look at posting activity aggregated across consumers and not at how an individual's social media posting actions affects their own purchase intentions or interest in owning products or brands that they post about. Unfortunately for marketers, our findings suggest that consumers posting about aspirational, luxury brands, products, or retailers in social media could make those consumers less likely to actually want to purchase those products or shop in those stores. While it might seem sensible for a luxury brand, for example, to encourage customers to post about its products on social media to enhance awareness, this can backfire when considered at the individual level.

A related implication is that some consumer segments may be more prone to this effect than others. As we showed, we find these effects when products are used for ideal-self

representation in social media. In practice, this implies that aspirational consumers, perhaps younger "up and comers," may be more likely to substitute a desire to actually own higher-end status-related product with virtual "ownership" through posts in social media. On the other hand, luxury consumers who see these products not as aspirational but rather as representative of their actual selves (e.g., higher-income individuals) may not experience a decline in their desire to purchase luxury goods after posting about those brands or products on social media. Accordingly, when encouraging consumers to post about their products in social media, marketers should target the types of consumers who are less likely to be prone to this effect. Or, if aspirational consumers are to be targeted, having them focus on aspirational products that are *attainable* (e.g., entry-level luxury items or "affordable luxury") may be better because these products may feel closer to consumers' actual selves than to their ideal selves. Or, directly following from the results of Study 5, marketers could encourage consumers to engage with products on social media in ways that do not engender strong feelings of psychological ownership but still help spread awareness (e.g., merely "liking" instead of "pinning").

Directions for Future Research

Future research should explore mechanisms through which engagement with aspirational products and brands in social media could *increase* feelings of desire for actually purchasing and physically owning aspirational products or luxury goods (i.e., the opposite of our findings). In our studies, participants who engaged with more everyday, actual self products and brands had higher desire for luxury than those who engaged with products related to their ideal selves. Perhaps these kinds of brands should only make certain product lines (e.g., more mass market) easily available to affiliate with and psychologically own online. This may be one way to counteract the negative offline consequences that arise from social media affiliation and

ownership. Thus, an interesting avenue for future research would be to explore how the effects change depending on whether a luxury product is more or less accessible or attainable to consumers. Another direction for future research is to explore the dynamics of the effects found in our studies. The nature of our experiments was such that longer-duration effects could not be seen, though it would be interesting to know the extent to which the suppressed desire to actually purchase aspirational products persists over time. Potentially it may be that while in the short term desire for similarly aspirational goods decreases, in the long term there might be conditions under which this desire rebounds or is enhanced. This would be interesting to examine in order to better understand the longer-term implications of the phenomenon documented in this paper.

Conclusion

In summary, our results demonstrate that social media is providing consumers with a new outlet of expression and ownership when consumers can engage with their aspirational selves through products and brands. As social media continues to grow and change, customers and businesses alike must gain a better understanding of how it affects consumers, especially in terms of how social media might influence offline consumer behavior. Consumers appear to be using social media as an outlet for their social identity signaling. Traditionally, consumers had to purchase products or be seen wearing or affiliating with products and brands to obtain these benefits (e.g., affiliation, status). The pervasiveness of social media and the ease with which consumers can virtually "own" products and brands online suggests numerous important outcomes and implications. For aspirational products traditionally purchased for their social benefits, social media could be a radically different landscape for ideal self product signaling. We hope that this research encourages more studies into various consumer-psychological impacts of social media activity.

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FIGURE 1

IDEAL SELF PRODUCTS ARE PURCHASED LESS THAN OTHER PRODUCT TYPES

(PILOT STUDY)
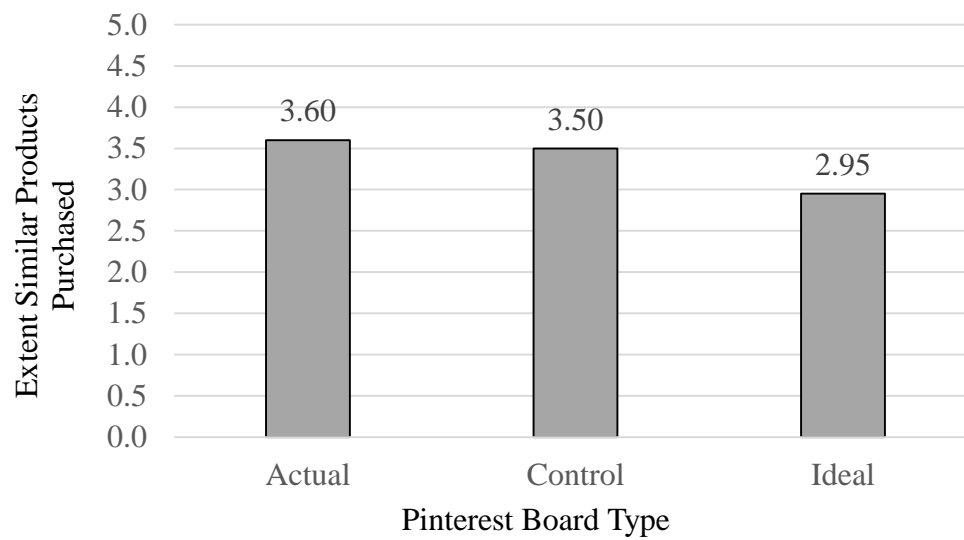
FIGURE 2

IDEAL SELF DECREASES WTP FOR LUXURY

(STUDY 1)
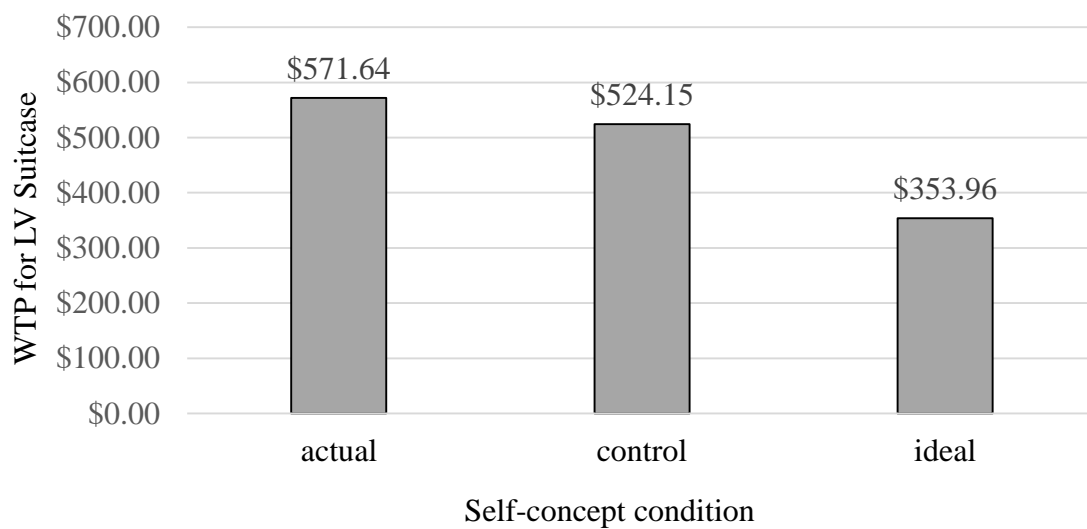
FIGURE 3

IDEAL SELF DECREASES DESIRE FOR LUXURY STORES WHEN SHARING IS PUBLIC

(STUDY 2)
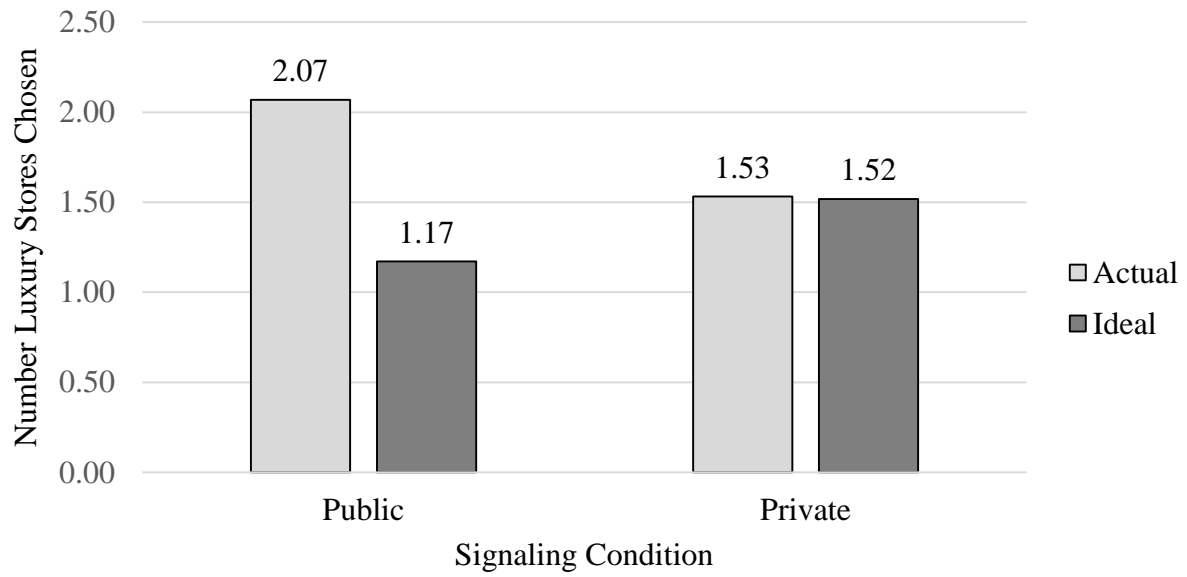
FIGURE 4

IDEAL SELF DECREASES WTP FOR LUXURY WHEN SHARING IS FULLY PUBLIC

(STUDY 3)
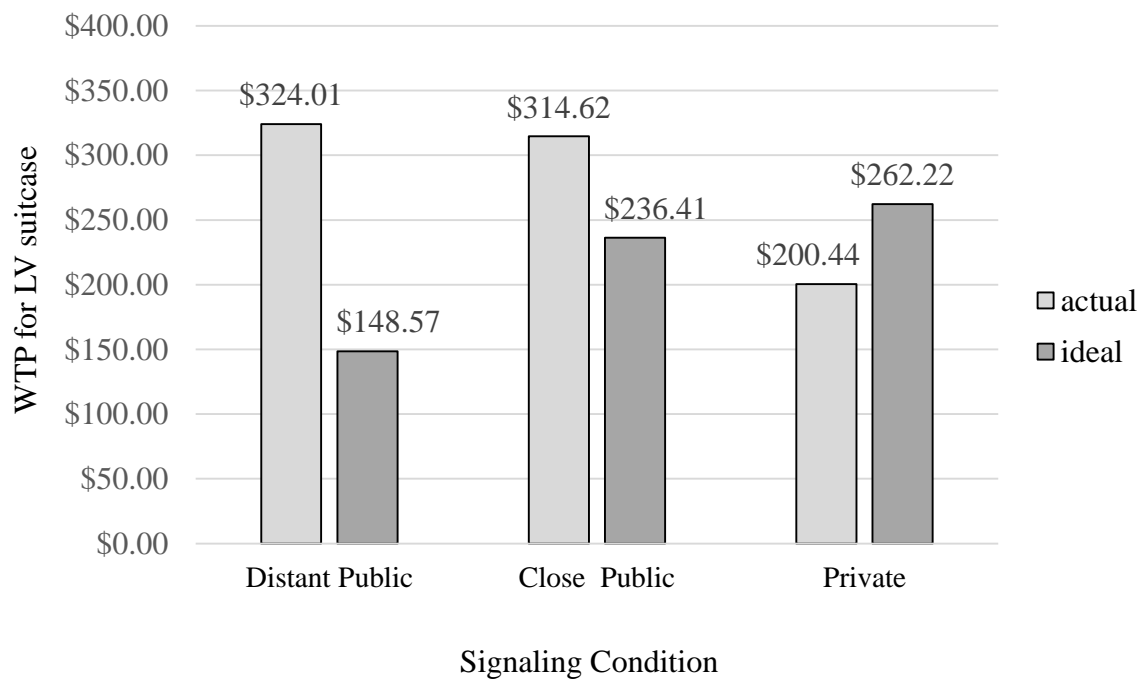
FIGURE 5

IDEAL SELF DECREASES DESIRE TO SHOP FOR LUXURY WHEN MEASURED
PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP IS HIGH

(STUDY 4)
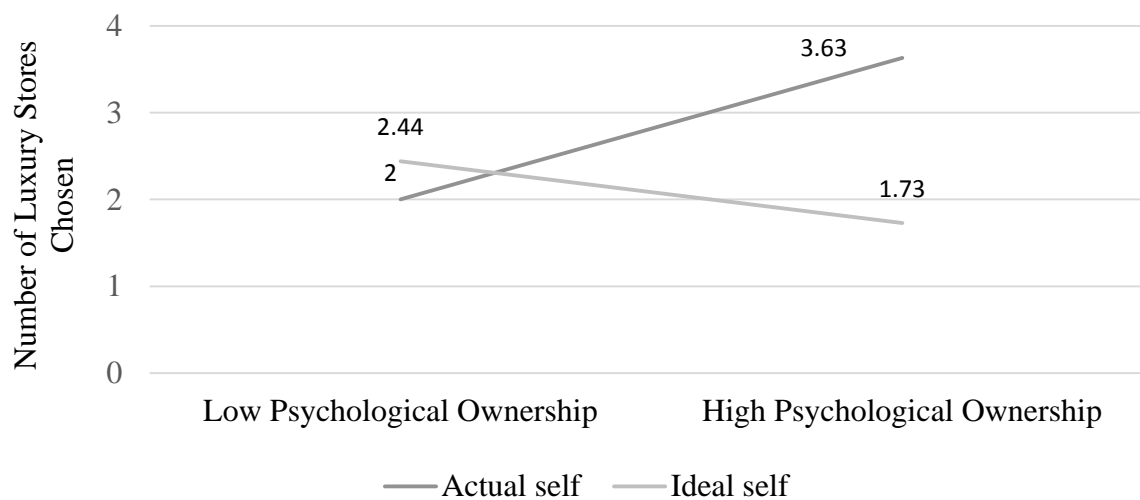
FIGURE 6

IDEAL SELF DECREASES WTP FOR LUXURY WHEN PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP
IS HIGH

(STUDY 5)
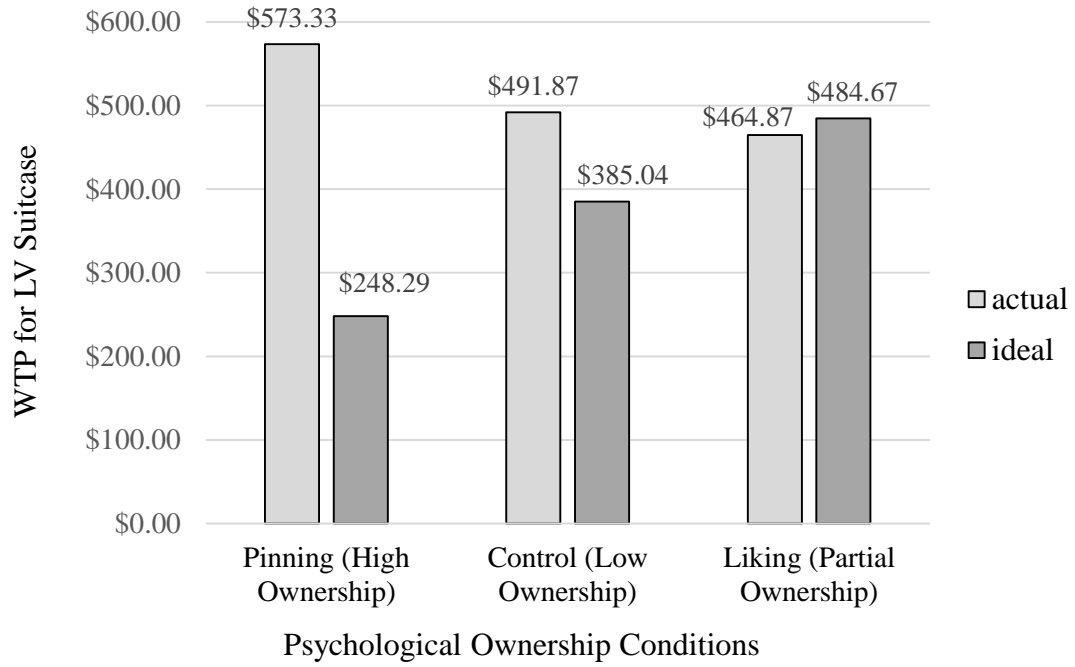
WEB APPENDIX

A. "LUXURY" PRODUCTS AND PROCEDURE USED IN STUDY 1

Text Instructions Participants saw for Ideal or Actual Self (Studies 1, 4, 5)

Please create a Pinterest board that describes your IDEAL [ACTUAL] self. This would be a board that really showcases who you want to be [embodies who you are currently], describes activities or behaviors that you hope to pursue [as they currently are], represents what you hope to own or wish you could have [what you currently own], and represents your ideal [actual] life situation.

First off, you need to create a NEW public board, you cannot use a board you currently have. In this new board, you HAVE to give it the title "My Ideal Style" ['My Style"] with the tagline "How I wish I dressed everyday" ["How I dress everyday"].Then, you need to pin FIVE items to the board that we will list below. These five pins that we want you to pin to your board represent the average ideal [actual] self.

Text Instructions Participants saw for Control Condition (Study 1)

Please create a Pinterest board that includes the 5 pins below. First off, you need to create a NEW public board, you cannot use a board you currently have. In this new board, you HAVE to give it the title "Style" with the tagline "How people dress". Then, you need to pin FIVE items to the board that we will list below. These five pins that we want you to pin to your board represent the average person's style.

Vintage Unisex Sweater Cardigan Vest

Unisex scarf 100% cashmere

Authentic Coach Unisex Coated Canvas Black Zip Top

Jack Spade Tech Oxford Slim Laptop Briefcase

Broad Faced Antique Unisex Watch

B. IMAGES OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES USED THROUGHOUT STUDIES

Dependent Variable Used in Studies 1, 3, and 5 to Measure WTP for Luxury

 "Imagine you are trying to decide on a suitcase that you plan to use whenever you travel. A lot of people will see you with this suitcase, and finding the best suitcase is important to you.

This is a suitcase to showcase your style to all of those around you while providing you with everything you need for travel. With the classic Vuitton combination of style and function, this suitcase's silent rolling system and numerous compartments make it the ideal traveling companion."

Dependent Variable Used in Studies 2 and 4 to Measure Purchase Intentions of Luxury

"Imagine that you are going to this mall once the survey is completed. Please indicate below the stores that you believe you would most like to shop in if you visit this mall for a short visit."

C. DETAILED PROECDURE AND IMAGES FOR STUDIES 2 AND 3

Participants read about a new Facebook feature called "Facebook Curations." All participants,

regardless of condition, read the below text to learn about the Facebook Curations Feature:

> "Facebook has recently started developing a new feature for its site that is similar
> to Pinterest in that it allows people to store visual content on their Facebook
> pages.
>
> Facebook's newest feature is called **Facebook Curations**. Founded in 2004,
> Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more
> open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and
> family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what
> matters to them. Therefore, their newest venture is a feature that allows users to
> access and interact with the world's information through pictures and boards. It
> makes information universally accessible in a format everyone can connect with.
>
> The way Facebook currently displays information is on a person's timeline. On
> the side of a person's timeline is a number of permanent features that more
> visually represents information about the individual (such as favorite music,
> books, and television shows).
>
> With the new Facebook Curations feature, like with Pinterest, people will be able
> to store content about products in a visual manner that won't disappear as more
> content is added to your timeline. Unlike status updates, this is
> a permanent feature that can be accessed at any time by looking to the right hand
> side of your timeline.
>
> Below is an example of how this feature will appear on your timeline. As you can
> see, this is a way to visually represent who you are on your Facebook timeline in
> a way that allows you to keep track of products and brands you like, above and
> beyond just "liking" their pages. Now you can keep track of not just brand news,
> but curate your own board of favorite items for as long as you want."

Facebook Curation Example Shown to Women:

Facebook Curation Example Shown to Men:

People then read, based on their condition the visibility of their curated board:

> *Distant Public:* "This new feature, Facebook Curations, will be **public to your entire social network**. All of the products you post w**ill stay visible** on your Facebook page for **people to see.** This feature is a new way that Facebook will allow its users to **showcase** their product choices and preferences **to others**"

> *Close Public:* "This new feature, Facebook Curations, will be **public to a portion of your social network**. This feature will be **public only to people you designate as close friends or family on your social network.** All of the products you post w**ill stay visible** on your Facebook page for **for the people you have chosen to see it**. This feature is a new way that Facebook will allow its users to **showcase** their product choices and preferences **to close others**."

> *Private:* "This new feature, Facebook Curations, will be **private to your eyes only**. All of the products you post **stay invisible** on your Facebook page for **only you to see**. This feature is a new way that Facebook will allow its users to **keep track of** their product choices and preferences **for personal use**."

Then participants read about what their ideal [actual] self curation would entail. This description used the same terminology and descriptions from the ones detailed in Web Appendix A. They too, also wrote how the five items they found were representative of their ideal [actual] self, and then in study 2 they saw the mall map and in study 3 they saw the Louis Vuitton suitcase.

D. PROCEDURE FOR STUDY 4

Participants in this study were all active Pinterest users who gave us information about already existing boards, rather than newly created boards. Participants read instructions about what an ideal [actual] self oriented Pinterest board they already had created would entail, and were instructed to give us some basic information about an actual board that fit the description. The instructions participants read were:

> "Please choose a Pinterest board that you have created that describes your IDEAL [ACTUAL] self. This would be a board that really showcases who you want to be [embodies who you are currently], describes activities or behaviors that you hope to pursue [as they currently are], represents what you hope to own or wish you could have [what you currently own], and represents your ideal [actual] life situation.

> Please only choose boards that follow under Pinterest categories for Fashion or Products (i.e., the clothing and clothing accessory categories)."

After engaging with the Pinterest board and answering questions to ascertain that they indeed chose a board that fell under an acceptable category, participants were asked to answer on a 1 "strongly disagree"-7 "strongly agree" Likert scale the amount of ownership they felt over the contents (i.e. products pinned) of their boards. Afterwards, in an ostensibly separate task, participants chose which stores in the mall map that they would shop at if given the opportunity.

E. PROCEDURE FOR STUDY 5

Participants read text that described different Pinterest actions (i.e., pinning or liking) and were

then shown directions based on their self [ideal or actual] condition and their pinning, liking, or

control condition.

On Pinterest there are a couple of different ways that individuals can engage with content.

The first way is through **"pinning".** When people choose to pin products or pages on Pinterest, they are then **able to categorize where they want these pins to appear**. For example, if someone pins a suitcase, they can place it under their "Travel" board, or they could place it under a "Jet-set Style Board". These boards can be specialized and have different messages and themes depending on the way the person wants this suitcase to be incorporated into their online-self. Either way, **pinning items allows a person to curate content in a way that is representative of some aspect of their identity.**

The second way is through **"liking"**. When people choose to like products or pages on Pinterest, they are **NOT able to categorize where they want these pins to appear**. For example, if someone likes a suitcase, with liking, the suitcase is just saved to one place where all liked content is saved without categorization or separation. **Liking items allows a person to save content to go back to later without the content being affiliated with them in a more meaningful way.**

In this task, please look up **five products under the category of clothing or clothing accessories** (i.e. anything from shoes to jackets to bags to watches) that represent your **IDEAL [ACTUAL] self**. These would be **products** that really showcase who you want to be **[embody who you are currently]**, describes products **you hope to own or wish you could have [similar to those you currently own],** or represents the kind of person you **aspire to be [believe you are right now].**

For each product you believe represents your IDEAL [ACTUAL] self, copy the product URL, and paste it into the section on the next page. You will be doing this for **five different products** that are all representative of your actual self.

Please **only choose products that follow under the clothing and clothing accessory categories**. Do not post urls for pictures of quotes or other non-material objects. Do not post urls for products that are not clothing related (i.e. no technology, food, etc.). Each product should **add to your image of who your true ideal [actual] self** is when you think about your life as it stands now.

Text Instructions Participants saw for Pinning

As you will be finding these products by browsing Pinterest, **please "pin" these five items on Pinterest to a board you already have created or one you will create that represents your ideal [actual] self.**

Text Instructions Participants saw for Liking

As you will be finding these products by browsing Pinterest, **please "like" these five items on Pinterest.** For this task it is important that you **DO NOT PIN** these items to a board. It is essential that you **just "like" these products**.

Text Instructions Participants saw for Control

While you will be finding these products by browsing Pinterest, **do NOT "pin" or "like" any of these items on Pinterest. ONLY copy the product page's url into the survey form on the next page.**

After engaging with the task by finding 5 urls and posting them in the survey (and for

liking and pinning, in Pinterest as well), participants rated their WTP for the luxury

suitcase in an ostensibly separate task.