

# FROM GUCCI TO GREEN BAGS: CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AS A SIGNAL FOR PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

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Conspicuous consumption usually implies the purchase of luxury goods with the purpose of signaling wealth and status. Previous literature also treats conspicuous pro-social behaviors, such as donating to pro-social causes or buying green products, as instruments for signaling wealth. This study separates conspicuous consumption of pro-social products from signaling wealth and provides evidence that it can be motivated by need for status as well as a pro-social self-concept. Two separate studies show that fear of negative evaluation and salience of pro-social self-concept were found to moderate the effects of need for status and pro-social self-concept on the consumption of pro-social products.

*“A man’s Self is the sum of all he can call his own. Not only his body and psychic powers but also his clothes, his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, his yacht and bank account.”* —William James (1890, p. 291)

It has been long recognized that consumers perceive their possessions to be a representation of their identity or self. Belk (1988) proposed that certain personal possessions can become an important enough part of our identities to be seen an “extended self” (p.140) in that individuals use those particular possessions to communicate things about themselves to others. Furthermore, possessions, attire, or actions, are often seen as representing an individual’s perceived or actual position in the society in which they exist. This position can be related to character traits, religious affiliations, professional associations or wealth and social standing.

Conspicuous displays, whether of wealth or other affiliations, are a way of signaling belonging to any social group (Ashforth and Mael 1989) or possessing certain individual qualities (Connelly et al. 2011). We are familiar with the sight of items of clothing, accessories, or vehicles with prominent brands being used as

representatives of the wealth of the owner. The desirability of these items stems not only from the utility they provide, but also from the public prestige they bestow upon the user (Han, Nunez, and Drez 2010). The economist Thorstein Veblen (1899) coined the term “conspicuous consumption” in late nineteenth century as a way to describe the intentional display of expensive goods by the nouveau-riche to indicate financial status to others. Since that time the concept has been inextricably linked with luxury goods.

However, the twenty-first century has also seen the rise of what can be referred to as “conspicuous compassion” which can consist of various behaviors such as public acts of mourning for a celebrity, participating in demonstrations, and displaying donation behavior such as wearing empathy ribbons (West 2004). Similar, but distinct, behavior includes the purchase of products which have some pro-social aspect to them such as “TOMS” shoes (for every pair sold, another is donated to someone in need), T-shirts bearing logos or slogans supporting a cause (e.g., breast cancer research), or even hybrid cars. All of these hint at the desirability of these products pertaining less to the utility they serve and more to the social prestige they bring to the owner. In this case the quality being signaled is not material wealth, but rather pro-socialness.

So while it would appear that consumers may be increasingly using the products they purchase as a way to signal something about their pro-socialness, to date little research has investigated this phenomenon. The primary purpose of this article is to make an initial effort to rectify this situation by providing an investigation into drivers of the purchase of pro-social products. Specifically, we propose that a consumer’s need for

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status and pro-social self-concept will predict the purchase of pro-social goods. As to the effect of need for status, research has shown that people with a high need for status (Han, Nunez, and Drez 2010) care more about the visibility of their possessions and their actions and how those are viewed by others. Therefore, just as consumers may signal their financial status by purchasing luxury goods, we believe that consumers signal their socially responsible behavior by purchasing goods sold by companies that engage in CSR. High need for status consumers may be motivated by a desire to be *seen* as responsible members of society and hope to command a degree of social respect because of it, thus leading to the purchase of pro-social goods.

The second antecedent to pro-social consumption in our model is pro-social self-concept. An individual's self-concept consists of multiple roles or role identities which exist hierarchically in varying degrees of salience. Just as we would expect a consumer for whom social standing is salient to engage in conspicuous consumption of luxury goods we would also expect someone for whom pro-socialness is important to engage in acts of charity or in the purchase of goods that are in some way pro-social. In other words, they would engage in conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods. In addition to investigating the two main effect relationships just described, we also propose that those relationships are likely to be accentuated by the salience of pro-social self-concept and the consumer's fear of negative evaluation by others.

We argue that our study offers two major contributions to marketing literature. The first contribution relates to cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility. Existing literature deals primarily with motivations for firms engaging in cause related marketing (CRM) activities. However, to date there has been little research explaining why consumers purchase pro-social products or services. What little research there is relative to the consumer has mostly focused on consumers' reactions to the use of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by a firm (e.g., Carringer 1994), customers' attitudes and purchase intentions toward CRM (Gupta and Pirsch 2008), and whether this support is driven by altruism, a desire for recognition, or both. This study will make a contribution by helping close the gap in our knowledge of consumers' motives behind purchasing conspicuous pro-social products. We explore the phenomenon of pro-social actions at

the consumer level and reveal the drivers of conspicuous pro-social behavior using social identity theory.

The second contribution is to extend the application of Veblen's (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption beyond the context of luxury products (or status based on *wealth*) into pro-social products. Specifically, we propose that just as consumers will purchase luxury items as a way to signal information about their social standing, they will be inclined to buy pro-social items to signal information about being pro-social members of society. While this has been explored in psychology, which has looked at conspicuous consumption in terms of visible donations to charities through signaling theory (Sundie et al. 2011), and economics (Glazer and Konrad 1996), in these studies the underlying motives are linked with the display of wealth. Recently, Griskevicius et al. (2010) argued that green behavior can be used to signal status, in part, because doing so signals that an individual has the resources (time, energy, and money) to do so without impacting their own situation negatively. Indeed, pro-social purchases can often be expensive and thus signal not only social consciousness but also wealth to others; examples of such luxury conspicuous pro-social behaviors include public major gifts to nonprofits, Tesla electric cars, or a solar paneled roof on a home. Our study seeks to reaffirm Griskevicius et al.'s (2010) finding that pro-social behavior is intended to seek status, and extend it by further explicating the motives for such behavior by removing the idea of resources or wealth from the equation. We argue that the purchase and display of conspicuously pro-social goods serves as an assertion of belonging to a socially desirable group, in the same way as the display of expensive possessions asserts belonging to the wealthy elite. Critically, we feel that pro-social goods themselves, regardless of their prices, will be seen as image-enhancing and therefore conspicuously consumed. Specifically, in order to extricate the phenomenon from the luxury domain, we focus in this study on pro-social goods that are conspicuous but low in cost, such as reusable grocery bags, rubber arm bands supporting a cause, low-priced TOMS brand shoes, and similar goods. We seek to add to the marketing literature by extending the work begun in psychology and ultimately serving to enrich the field's understanding of conspicuous consumption as a phenomenon that is not confined to the luxury market alone.

Our conceptual model hypothesizes that not just individuals with a pro-social self-concept but also those

with a high need for status are more likely to purchase conspicuous pro-social goods. Additionally, the salience of an individual's pro-social self-concept and their fear of negative evaluation by others are hypothesized to moderate these relationships. We test this conceptual model through a series of two studies. What follows are conceptual background, hypothesis development, studies one and two, and a discussion of results and theoretical and managerial implications.

## CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

### Theoretical Background

Social identity theory purports that people define themselves based on the groups within society to which they belong (Ashforth and Mael 1989). For example, a person may identify themselves with their gender, age cohort, race, religion, occupation, or any other group. Social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of people and stems from the perceived prestige and distinction of the group. In addition to association with a group which shares similar characteristics (in-group), there is the recognition of and emphasis on differences between the self and others with characteristics that are *different* (out-group) (Stets and Burke 2000). However, an individual has multiple role-identities which "vary in the degree to which they are a part of the self" (Callero 1985, p. 204). That is, the several identities which a person has differ in how important they are to the person (James 1890). This becomes an important boundary condition, since a person may identify themselves as pro-social, but the salience of this role among their other role-identities will influence the degree to which they engage in behavior supporting this identity.

When a person identifies with a certain social group, he or she will engage in activities and behaviors congruent with this identity in order to signal their association with that group (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Signaling theory explains the act of conveying information about oneself to another with the purpose of removing an information imbalance between two parties, which could be firms or individuals (Connelly et al. 2011). In the absence of any other information, individuals resort to visual cues, such as clothing or other aspects of appearance, as signals for both imparting and receiving information. Within the conspicuous consumption literature, signaling manifests itself as

purchasing behaviors in which consumers will buy costly products which can be publicly displayed in order to convey financial status (e.g., Han, Nunes, and Drez 2010). Similarly, we believe that consumers who are interested in portraying themselves as pro-social will make purchases of CRM products that they can display to signal their pro-social inclination to others. Such conspicuously pro-social products should serve to fortify their identification with their aspirational social group. In other words, we believe that a person who wears a pink ribbon bracelet does it for the same reasons that someone else wears a Rolex—that is to signal something about themselves to others. In the case of a Rolex it may be social standing whereas with a pink ribbon bracelet it is the consumer's beliefs about pro-social causes. Just as financial status confers positive social rewards to those who possess it, there is evidence that consumers who appear to be pro-social, specifically in relation to the environment, reap positive social rewards as well (Griskevicius 2008).

### Conspicuous Consumption

Individuals who commit themselves to an identity strive to engage in actions that strengthen that identity. Those new to an identity or unsure about the strength of their chosen identity are likely to attach symbolism to material objects that represent their chosen identity (Braun and Wicklund 1989). Attaching prestige to expensive objects because they serve to display the wealth of the owner is one such example. It was over a century ago that the economist Thorstein Veblen coined the term conspicuous consumption to refer to the behavior of publicly displaying expensive goods in order to assert social power and prestige (Veblen 1899). Current conceptualizations have not strayed from Veblen's combination of publicly displayed expensive goods and the seeking of social prestige. Bagwell and Bernheim (1996) use the term "Veblen effect" as being willing to pay a higher price for an object for the purpose of signaling wealth and or belonging to a higher status group. Han, Nunes, and Drez (2010) have developed a taxonomy that assigns consumers to one of four groups based on wealth and need for status and which predicts a consumer's proclivity for signaling wealth through consumption based on the group into which he or she falls.

The visibility of certain consumer products makes them a vehicle for communicating information about

the identity of the owner. Products carry an image which is based not just on their physical properties and the utility they serve but also on other features, such as packaging advertising, price, or the stereotype associated with the typical user (Sirgy 1982). Consumers buy products seeking to satisfy one or more of five values: functional, conditional, emotional, epistemic, and social (Sheth, Newman, and Gross 1991). Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) define social value as “the perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s association with one or more specific social groups.” According to the authors, choices made on the basis of social value usually involve highly visible products. It follows that conspicuous consumption provides social value by virtue of the stereotype associated with the products consumed.

Literature has also focused on drivers of conspicuous consumption and how different consumer goals can lead to this behavior. One such goal is a sense of belonging as evidenced by a study by Lee and Shrum (2012). The authors found that consumers who feel socially excluded have been shown to engage in conspicuous consumption when they are ignored but to engage in helping behaviors and charitable donations when the social exclusion they feel is because of rejection. According to Auty and Elliott (2001), consumers choose clothing and accessories not just for the purpose of identity construction but also for constructing social affiliations.

Additionally, work in the field of psychology has uncovered the usefulness of considering gender-specific goals, including sexual signaling in explaining conspicuous consumption behavior, such as findings that men who conspicuously consume were seen as more attractive short-term (but not long-term) partners by women (Sundie et al. 2011). Similarly, when romantic motives are involved, men engage in conspicuous purchases while women engage in public helping behavior (Griskevicius et al. 2007).

### Conspicuous Consumption of Pro-Social Products

Since we rely on the consumption practices of others in order to form our impressions of them, we also use our own consumption practices to communicate about ourselves, that is, as consumers we “encode” meaning into the consumption selections we make. We seek congruence between our self-image and the image of the

products we own (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). To that effect, just as consumers will use luxury goods to signal their social status, we believe that consumers may also engage in what can be termed “conspicuous pro-social consumption” to signal their alignment with certain pro-social beliefs. The concept is similar to the idea of “conspicuous donation behavior” (Grace and Griffin 2006, 2009), but is distinct in that it is not limited to donations or cause-related symbolic products. Pro-social products can be any products the purchase and consumption of which either reduces a negative impact (e.g., reusable grocery bags) or produces a positive impact on the environment or society in general (e.g., “Pink Ribbon” campaigns which support the Susan G. Komen for the Cure organization). Cause-related marketing efforts by firms, in addition to other pro-social activities, are the result of firms engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and have made it possible for consumers to purchase and consume pro-social products.

It has been argued that literature on the subject of CSR began, at least in the United States, in the early 1950s with the publication of the book *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* by Howard R. Bowen (1953). Bowen (1953) based his writings on the premise that large businesses were centers of power whose decision making impacted the citizenry and environment with which they were involved. Over the ensuing decades the conceptualization of CSR evolved from encompassing any business action which takes into account goals other than direct economic interests (Davis 1960) to explicitly including a firm’s cognizance of and reaction to society and social norms in their everyday business practices (Carroll 1999).

It was in the 1970s that the concept began to include more specific action. The idea of social responsibility went beyond the philanthropic aspect of firms merely conducting themselves in a manner consistent with social norms of good behavior. They were expected to seek involvement in social issues in order to improve communities actively and become part of the solution (Backman 1975; Eells and Walton 1974; Eilbirt and Parket 1973). This has led to CRM which is conceptualized as marketing activities in which a firm links itself to a designated cause to which they will contribute when consumers make a purchase or otherwise engage with the business (Varadarajan and Menon 1988).

Today, much of the literature links CSR activities and CRM with consumer attitudes. There is some support in the literature that personality factors and individual

differences can impact the way that consumers respond to firms' CSR efforts. Individuals who engage in pro-social behavior through the purchase of goods linked to corporate philanthropy may be driven by their values motivation, concern for appearances, or both (Basil and Weber 2006).

Attitudes toward and participation in pro-social behavior may also be a function of the generational cohort to which the consumer belongs. Research has shown that generation Y consumers are a highly socially conscious as a cohort (Meister and Willyerd, 2010). Generation Y consumers are usually characterized by their desire to become educated consumers and their concern for social causes and activism (Bucic, Harris and Arli 2012; Furlow and Knott 2009). Research has also revealed that members of this generational cohort engage in pro-social actions such as volunteer activities for purely altruistic reasons, and not motivated by any personal gain (e.g., résumé building). These consumers are more likely to form positive opinions about firms that prove to be socially and environmentally responsible and which actively contribute to the community (Hyllegard et al. 2010).

Altruistic behavior is expected only to benefit others. Researchers in the field of economics have attempted to explain why individuals behave in a manner that does not appear to benefit them in any way. In the context of donating to charities, they give two explanations. One is that donors derive an intrinsic benefit from making a donation, also referred to as a "warm glow." The act of donating makes them feel good about themselves, and that is the utility they derive from it. The second explanation is that most people give to charities in order to be able to signal their wealth to peers and other observers and hence gain social status and prestige (Glazer and Konrad 1996; Harbaugh 1996). Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh (2010) have also linked altruism with financial status. According to the authors, buying a "green" product which is of inferior quality and is also not luxurious implies that the buyer is financially able and willing to incur the cost of helping someone even in the absence of any direct benefit to themselves. Furthermore, people who identify themselves as environmentally conscious have been shown to reap positive social rewards as well by being perceived as more trustworthy and more desirable as a friend (Griskevicius 2008)—two traits which are distinct from any financial implications.

## HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

### Need for Status

Status is the position, rank, social honor, respect, or prestige awarded to an individual by others (Dawson and Cavell 1987; Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn 1999). Members of society evaluate the status of a person based on performances of social roles. However, in the absence of any information about individuals, we are forced to rely on visual cues in the form of visible possessions to convey status (Dawson and Cavell 1987). The status these visual cues pertain to may be actual or desired.

Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn (1999, p. 42) define consumption-related need for status as a motivational process whereby individuals choose to conspicuously consume products that they think will "confer and symbolize status for both the individual and surrounding significant others." A person's need for status has been shown to drive conspicuous consumption behaviors because it serves as a powerful motivation to appear prestigious to others. The nature of conspicuous products is that they are publicly displayed and, as conspicuous consumption literature within the luxury domain argues, serve to signal to others about the owner's position in society (Han, Nunes, and Drez 2010). Griskevicius, Tybur and Van den Bergh (2010) found that subjects were likely to choose green products over more luxurious products when status motives were activated, especially when the decision was to be made in public. However, status symbols change over time (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982) and can even differ by context. Consumption of a product can be expected to confer status only if it is interpreted as such by the particular subgroup an individual is striving to identify with (Braun and Wicklund 1989). Consumers who wish to earn status among a pro-social group of individuals will be similarly motivated to purchase goods that conspicuously convey pro-socialness.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Need for status will be positively related to the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods.*

### Pro-Social Self-Concept

Pro-social behavior comprises voluntary actions that are intended to benefit individuals or groups of individuals (Eisenberg and Mussen 1989). It can include actions such as helping, comforting, sharing, and

cooperation (Batson and Powell 2003, p. 463). Pro-social self-concept is the extent to which an individual identifies with the socially oriented values associated with pro-social behavior (Mayfield and Taber 2010).

Social identity theory tells us that once a person sees himself as a member of the socially conscious segment of society, he will engage in activities and behaviors that reinforce this self-concept. Consequently, if an individual sees himself as pro-social, he will be more receptive to CRM efforts of companies. Therefore, a pro-social self-concept should be related to the purchase of more pro-social goods of all types, including goods that are conspicuous in nature (such as bracelets, T-shirts, or tote bags).

Additionally, engaging in “costly” pro-social behaviors, behaviors that incur some financial cost (e.g., buying a product or donating money) is expected to strengthen pro-social self-concept more than engaging in “costless” pro-social behaviors. Costly pro-social behaviors serve as a visible signal of a pro-social identity, and individuals strive to strengthen this self-perception by subsequently repeating such behaviors. On the other hand, cost-less pro-social behaviors lack the element of signaling (Gneezy et al. 2012).

*H<sub>2</sub>: Pro-social self-concept will be positively related to the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods.*

### **Salience of Pro-Social Self-Concept**

Self-concept provides a bridge between the individual and the social structure he exists in. It then represents both an individual’s personal identity and his relationship with society. Since the self is affected by all the interactions an individual experiences, it takes on a structure of multiple roles or role identities relative to its social situations. In the words of William James (1890) “we have as many selves as distinct groups whose opinions we care about.” These role-identities need to be hierarchically structured in order to be able to exist within the same individual. Some role-identities become more salient for the representation of the self than others and, therefore, exist toward the top of the hierarchy. The salience of these role identities is manifested in the individual’s behavior (Callero 1985).

The salience of the pro-social self-concept in relation to other self-concepts within a consumer will be an important boundary condition impacting his need for status.

Positive self-esteem relies on successful engagement in salient role-identities (Callero 1985). Therefore, if a person is high in need for status, he will engage in behaviors that serve to bolster his image in the eyes of others. Critical to this, though, is understanding *which* image they are concerned with portraying. The building of a self-concept is not about portraying any identity, but one that helps command social respect as well as self-respect (Auty and Elliott 2001). Hence, when the pro-social self-concept is prominent, it will be likely for an individual to engage in visible behaviors that reinforce that image. Additionally, when pro-social self-concept salience is at low levels, the need for status is more likely to be important in determining conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods. If a person is buying pro-social goods because they have a high need for status, then their pro-social self-concept should be less important or impactful to this decision.

*H<sub>3</sub>: The salience of a person’s pro-social self-concept will moderate the relationship between his need for status and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods such that the more salient his pro-social self-concept, the weaker the relationship will be.*

Social identity theory maintains that a person has as many selves as groups to which he or she belongs. Therefore, an individual with pro-social self-identity will also have several other self-identities which compete against each other for salience. If the pro-social self ranks low in a person’s hierarchy of selves, then it may be overridden by other selves that are also serving to dictate the consumer’s behaviors. Subsequently, at the point when a purchasing decision regarding a pro-social or cause-related good is made, if the pro-social self is low on the hierarchy of salience, the purchase is less likely to be made. If a person sees his pro-social image as a very important aspect of himself, then the motivation to engage in behaviors reinforcing this image will be more salient.

*H<sub>4</sub>: The salience of a person’s pro-social self-concept will moderate the relationship between that self-concept and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods such that the more salient his pro-social self-concept, the more positive the relationship will be.*

### **Fear of Negative Evaluation**

Social identity is motivated by two processes, self-enhancement, and uncertainty removal (Hogg 2006). As

discussed earlier, a person who has a high need for status will engage in behaviors that serve to bolster his image in the eyes of others. Research has shown that the need to be liked by one's peers might be a stronger determinant of consumption behaviors than the need to express one's identity (Auty and Elliott 2001). These behaviors are motivated not only by a desire to receive positive evaluations but also by a desire to avoid negative evaluation by peers. Concern about unfavorable evaluation by others, also referred to as fear of negative evaluation, has been found to play a role in socio psychological phenomena including conformity, self-presentation, and pro-social behaviors (Leary 1983). A fear of negative evaluation, or the degree to which someone experiences negative feelings like apprehension at the possibility of being thought of negatively by others, should serve to magnify the impact of a person's need for status on the purchase of pro-social goods. An individual who believes that status can be demonstrated through conspicuously consuming pro-social goods will be reinforced in this behavior if he also believes that this consumption will avoid negative evaluations from others.

*H<sub>5</sub>: A person's fear of negative evaluation will moderate the relationship between his need for status and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods such that the higher his fear of negative evaluation, the more positive the relationship will be.*

Pro-social behaviors are usually intended to have positive consequences for others. However, they may also be performed for other reasons such as gaining the approval of surrounding individuals (Eisenberg and Mussen 1989). People who see pro-socialness as part of their self-concept will have increased motivation to show this conspicuously. However, when pro-social self-concept is low for an individual, fear of negative evaluation of others is more likely to be important in determining conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods than for individuals for whom pro-social self-concept is high. Further, since individuals with a pro-social self-concept perceive it to be a positive quality, they may project this attitude onto others and believe that not being visibly pro-social might incur negative evaluations from people surrounding them. In this regard, fear of negative evaluation should interact with pro-social self-concept such that it can compensate at low levels of pro-socialness to influence the consumption of pro-social goods.

*H<sub>6</sub>: A person's fear of negative evaluation will moderate the relationship between his pro-social self-concept and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods such that the higher his fear of negative evaluation, the weaker the relationship will be.*

Figure 1 represents the relationships proposed in Hypotheses 1 through 6.

## METHODS

### Measurement

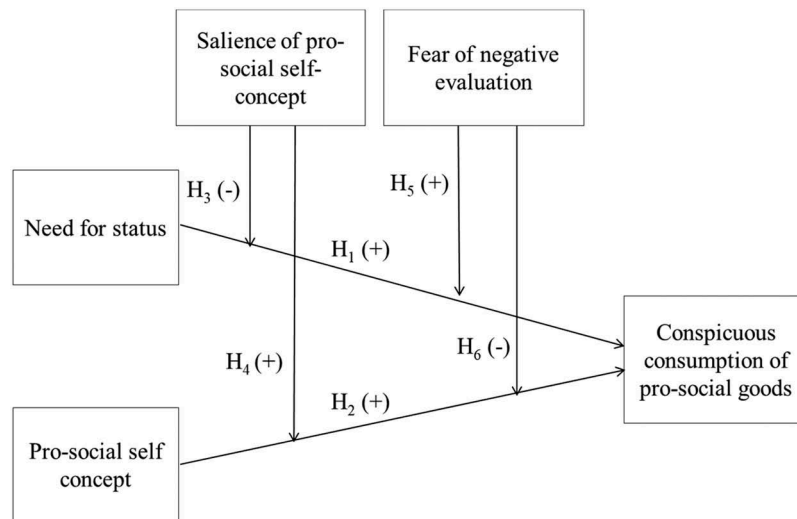
Existing, validated scales were used to measure all constructs. All items were measured using seven-point Likert scales anchored by 1= Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree. Need for status was measured using Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn's (1999) 5-item status consumption scale. Pro-social self-concept was measured using the 4-item Webb, Green and Brashear's (2000) attitude toward helping others scale. Items for measuring salience of pro-social self-concept were adapted from Callero's (1985) 5-item blood donor salience scale. Fear of negative evaluation was measured using Leary's 12-item Brief FNE scale (1983). Conspicuous consumption of pro-social products was measured using Mano and Oliver's 3-item purchase intention scale (1993).

In order to provide a uniform frame of reference across all respondents regarding pro-social products, we first conducted a small pilot study with 100 students in which we provided a list of products generally considered to be pro-social and asked the respondents to indicate which ones they owned. Respondents were also asked to name any additional products. The results from that were used in the following prompt which preceded the purchase intention items.

*"A pro-social product offering is defined as a product where the purchase and/or consumption of it lowers the negative impact or has a positive impact on the environment and society in general. Pro-social product offerings can include environment friendly products and cause-related products.*

*Some examples of pro-social products are TOMS shoes, reusable grocery bags, articles of clothing, accessories or other products supporting a cause such as pink ribbon bracelets, or cups, etc. Other examples might include rubber bracelets, bumper stickers, or badges that show support for a cause. Examples of pro-social products are not limited to the ones mentioned here.*

**Figure 1**  
**Conceptual Model**



*Now please read the following questions and answer them as accurately as possible.”*

The inherent visibility of all products mentioned in the introduction makes them suitable examples of conspicuously consumed pro-social products. In the pilot study leading to the formulation of the prompt, we discussed with respondents what pro-social goods and conspicuous goods were and then discussed products that they would consider conspicuous pro-social goods. The examples given in the prompt (TOMS shoes, reusable grocery bags, clothing or jewelry supporting a cause, bumper stickers, and other examples) were products that were named in the pilot study as pro-social conspicuous products. We used these examples in our measurement to be able to avoid using the word “conspicuous” in the scale in order to prevent response bias. Furthermore, the products in the prompt were products that were named in the pilot study discussions as pro-social conspicuous products that were not expensive. Pretest respondents indicated that these products did *not* indicate wealth to them, pointing out the prices of the items listed were comparatively low (e.g., reusable grocery bags are generally \$1, rubber bracelets are usually under \$2, cause-related T-shirts are often acquired for free at events or under \$15). We used

these examples in our measurement in order to give respondents a reference point of items that do not demonstrate wealth and avoided talking about price factors intentionally, again, to preempt biasing responses. The survey was prepared using Qualtrics brand software. We then conducted two studies in order to test the proposed hypotheses. Data for the first study were collected from undergraduate level marketing students at a prominent southeastern university. In order to test the generalizability and increase the scope of our results, we then collected data from a nonstudent population for the second study.

## STUDY 1

### Data collection and sample

Data for Study 1 were gathered from students enrolled in undergraduate marketing courses at a prominent southeastern university. A link to the Qualtrics survey was emailed to the students and they completed the survey in exchange for class credit. The data collection resulted in 349 usable responses. The sample was composed of 44.7 percent females and 55 percent males. Mean age of the respondents was 21.03 years which is consistent with the level of classes used to collect the data.



## Measure Purification

Before testing our hypotheses, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the scales using AMOS and maximum likelihood estimation. The resulting measurement model had an SRMR value of 0.053, IFI of 0.95, and RMSEA value of 0.053, and a  $X^2/df$  ratio of 1.99, indicating that the model fit the data (Hu and Bentler 1999). Composite reliabilities for all scales ranged between 0.73 and 0.93.

## Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Constructs in a measurement model display convergent validity when all items load significantly on the construct they are assigned to assess (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). All item loadings were significant at  $p < 0.001$ . In addition, all loadings were above 0.50. Overall, we have evidence of convergent validity.

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for each variable and also gives the correlations between pairs of variables. In order to assess the discriminant validity of the scales used we followed the procedure recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). We calculated the square root of the average variance explained by each construct. These values are presented on the diagonal in Table 1. In order to demonstrate discriminant validity, each of these values should exceed the corresponding variable correlations in the same row and column. If this is the case, we have evidence that the average variance explained by the items in each scale is greater than the shared variance between any two constructs. Since the square roots of AVEs exceed the corresponding correlations for all pairs of variables, we have evidence of discriminant validity.

## Hypothesis Testing

*Linear Effects.* To test the first two hypotheses we ran a linear effects model using AMOS with the two independent variables (need for status and pro-social self-concept), the two moderators (salience of pro-social self-concept and fear of negative evaluation) and the dependent variable (conspicuous consumption of pro-social products). The resulting structural model had an SRMR value of 0.053, IFI of 0.95 and RMSEA value of 0.053, and a  $X^2/df$  ratio of 1.99, indicating that the model fit the data. The parameter estimate for the relationship between need for status and purchase intentions was 0.152 ( $p < 0.05$ ) thus providing support for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 proposed that pro-social self-concept would positively impact purchase intention and support was found as evidenced by the positive and significant parameter estimate for that relationship (0.171,  $p < 0.05$ ). Table 3 contains results of the linear effects model.

*Moderation Tests.* Hypotheses 3–6 proposed that salience of pro-social self-concept and fear of negative evaluation would moderate the paths suggested in Hypotheses 1 and 2. In order to test for these moderation effects, we conducted moderation analysis using PROCESS (Hayes 2012) in SPSS 23.0. The effect of each moderator on the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable was tested one at a time. The analysis was conducted separately for each proposed moderating hypothesis. Each of the four models estimated included both independent variables with the one not included as part of the moderation test being included as a covariate (e.g., to test the moderating effect of salience of pro-social self-concept on the relationship between need for status and purchase intention, pro-social self-concept was included as a covariate). According to Hayes (2013), this

**Table 1**  
Study 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	1	2	3	4	5
1. Need for Status	4.36	1.12	0.70				
2. Pro-social Self-concept	5.45	1.11	0.12*	0.80			
3. Salience of Pro-social Self-concept	4.16	1.22	0.18***	0.37***	0.69		
4. Fear of Negative Evaluation	4.59	1.09	0.21***	0.06	0.12*	0.73	
5. Conspicuous Consumption of Pro-social Products	4.53	1.43	0.21***	0.35***	0.46***	-0.03	0.90

*Notes:*

1) N= 349

2) \*( $p < 0.05$ ); \*\*( $p < 0.01$ ); \*\*\*( $p < 0.001$ )

3) Values on the diagonal represent square roots of AVEs for each construct.

**Table 2**  
**Study 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	1	2	3	4	5
1. Need for Status	3.12	1.53	0.84				
2. Pro-social Self-concept	5.37	1.11	-0.12	0.84			
3. Salience of Pro-social Self-concept	4.51	1.32	-0.05	0.59***	0.77		
4. Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.64	1.44	0.27***	-0.03	-0.07	0.80	
5. Conspicuous Consumption of Pro-social Products	4.77	1.51	0.17**	0.52***	-0.3	0.59***	0.92

*Notes:*

1) N = 323

2) \*(p <.05); \*\*(p <.01); \*\*\*(p <.001)

3) Values on the diagonal represent square roots of AVEs for each construct.

approach yields results similar to using all independent variables simultaneously in a model.

Results of the moderation analysis are presented in Table 4. Two significant moderating effects were identified. Salience of pro-social self-concept had a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between pro-social self-concept and conspicuous consumption, supporting H4 (coefficient 0.101,  $p < 0.05$ ). Figure 2 gives a visual depiction of this interaction. The moderating effect of role salience was not significant on the relationship between need for status and conspicuous consumption, thus H3 was not supported. One explanation for this could be that individuals who have a high need for status will want conspicuous products regardless of how salient being pro-social is to them.

The moderating effect of fear of negative evaluation was significant on the relationship between need for status and conspicuous consumption, supporting H5

(coefficient 0.090,  $p = 0.056$ ). Figure 3 gives a visual representation of the relationship. The moderating effect of fear of negative evaluation was not significant on the relationship between pro-social self-concept and conspicuous consumption, thus H6 was not supported. One explanation for this could be that pro-social self-concept is internally directed (how individuals see themselves) while fear of negative evaluation is external (what others think about the individual).

## Study 2

Respondents for the second data collection were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online panel. Respondents were required to be over 19 years of age and residents of the United States in order to rule out influences of culture on the responses. An online link to the survey was provided to potential respondents. Multiple attention filters were interspersed within the survey in order to assure the quality of responses gathered. The data collection resulted in 323 usable responses. The sample was composed of 46.5 percent females and 53.5 percent males. Ages of the respondents ranged from a minimum of 19 years to a maximum of 70 years with a mean age of 36.26 years. Respondents were also requested to provide information on their annual income and highest level of education achieved. The largest percentage (33.9%) reported an annual income of \$25,000 to \$50,000. Education levels of the respondents ranged from some high school to a medical or doctoral degree. The largest percentage (38.1%) reported having earned a bachelor's degree.

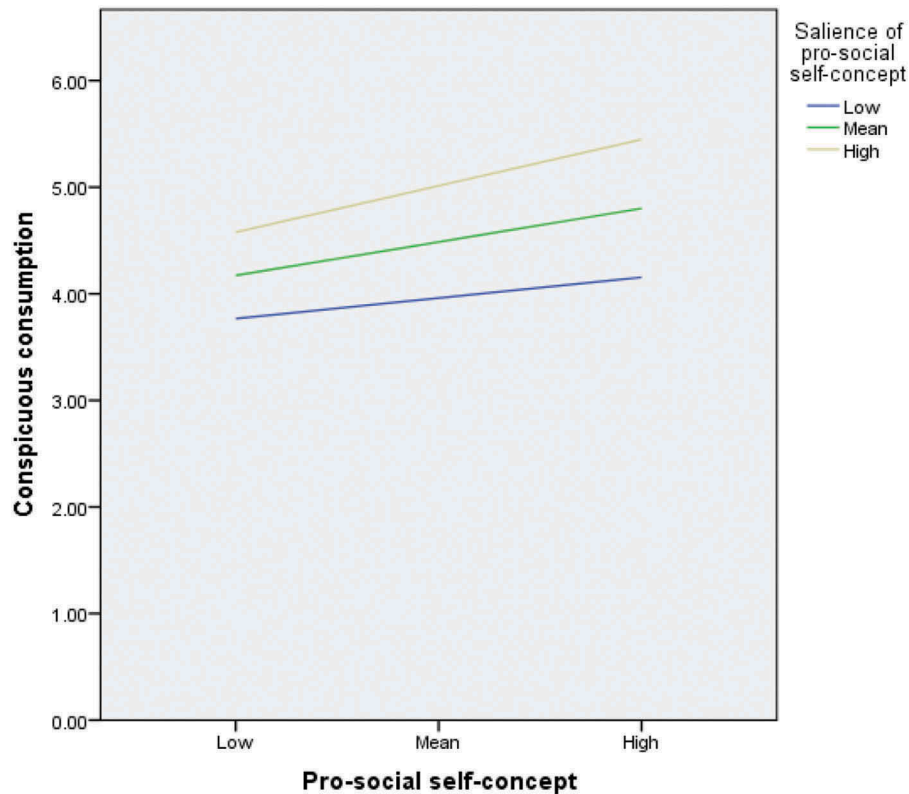
**Table 3**  
**Effect of Independent Variables on Conspicuous Consumption of Pro-Social Products**

Independent Variables	Study 1	Study 2
	Standardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient
Need for status	0.152**	0.27***
Pro-social self-concept	0.171**	0.272***
Salience of pro-social self-concept	0.447***	0.47***
Fear of negative evaluation	-0.149**	-0.077

*Notes:*

\* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*= $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

**Figure 2**  
**Study 1: Interaction between Pro-social Self-concept and Salience of Pro-social Self-concept**



Note: Figure 2 visually depicts the moderation of salience of pro-social self-concept on the relationship between pro-social self-concept and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods. The interaction effect is such that pro-social self-concept has a more dramatic effect when there are high levels of self-concept salience than when there are low levels of salience.

### Measure Purification

We performed confirmatory factor analysis on Study 2 data. The resulting measurement model had an SRMR value of .053, IFI of .93 and RMSEA value of .068, and a  $X^2/df$  ratio of 2.5, indicating that the model fit the data. Composite reliabilities for all scales exceeded 0.70.

### Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Results of the CFA reveal that all item loadings are significant at  $p < 0.001$ . In addition, all loadings are above 0.50 with the exception of item 4 in the Fear of Negative Evaluation scale which loaded at 0.49. Overall, we have evidence of convergent validity.

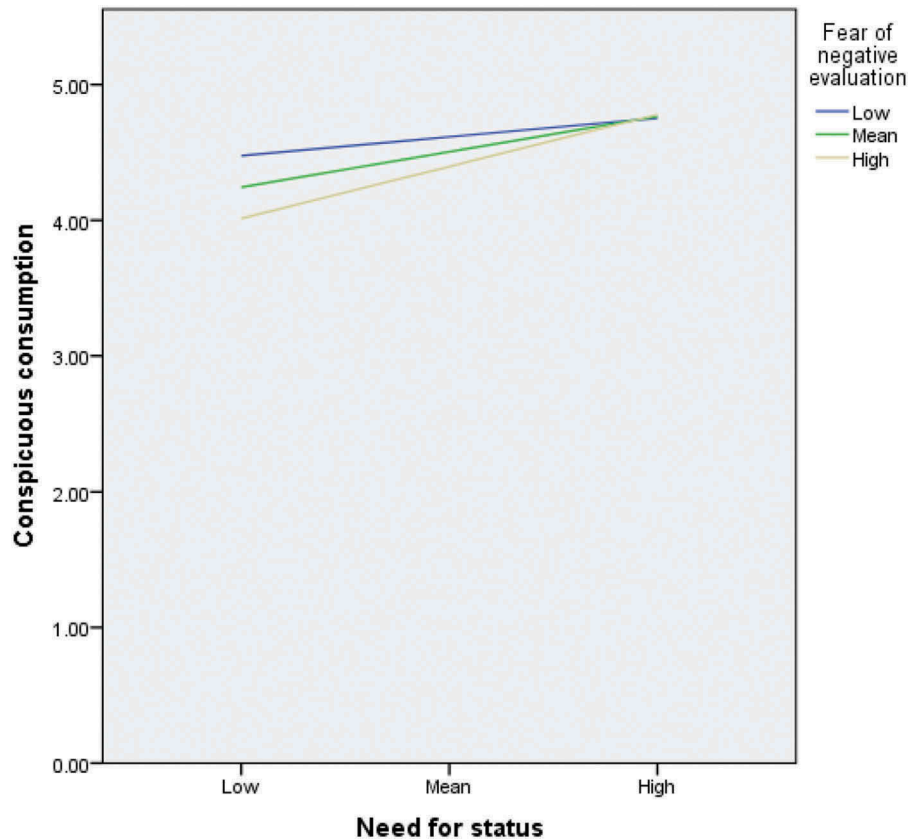
Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics for each variable and also gives the correlations between pairs of variables for Study 2 data. As with Study 1, the

square root of the average variance explained by each construct are presented on the diagonal in Table 2. Since the square roots of AVEs exceeded the corresponding correlations for all pairs of variables, we have evidence of discriminant validity.

### Hypothesis Testing

*Linear Effects.* To test the linear effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable, we used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS. The model included the two independent variables (need for status and pro-social self-concept), the two moderators (fear of negative evaluation and salience of pro-social self-concept) and the dependent variable (conspicuous consumption of pro-social products). Statistics for the resulting structural model (SRMR = .053, IFI =

**Figure 3**  
**Study 1: Interaction Between Need for Status and Fear of Negative Evaluation**



*Note:* Figure 3 visually depicts the moderation of salience of fear of negative evaluation on the relationship between need for status and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods. The interaction effect is such that need for status has a more dramatic effect when there are high levels of fear of negative evaluation than when there are low levels of fear of negative evaluation.

.93, RMSEA = .068, and  $X^2/df$  ratio = 2.5) indicated acceptable model fit.

The parameter estimate for the relationship between need for status and purchase intentions was 0.27 ( $p < .001$ ), thus providing support for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 proposed that pro-social self-concept would positively impact purchase intention and support was found as evidenced by the positive and significant parameter estimate for that relationship (0.27,  $p < .001$ ). Results of the analysis are represented in Table 3.

**Moderation Tests.** We repeated the procedure used in Study 1 to test for Hypotheses 3 to 6. Results of the moderation analysis are included in Table 4. Two significant moderating effects were identified. Salience of pro-social self-concept had a significant negative moderating

effect on the relationship between need for status and conspicuous consumption, supporting H3 (coefficient = 0.065,  $p < .05$ ). Figure 4 gives a visual depiction of this interaction. The moderating effect of salience of pro-social self-concept was not significant on the relationship between pro-social self-concept and conspicuous consumption, thus H4 was not supported for Study 2.

The moderating effect of fear of negative evaluation was not significant on the relationship between need for status and conspicuous consumption, thus H5 was not supported for Study 2. One explanation for this could be that the drive for status is strong enough itself that fear of negative evaluations from others only lends incremental, nonsignificant, contributions to conspicuous consumption behavior. The moderating effect of fear of negative evaluation was significant on the

**Table 4**  
**Results of Moderation Analysis**

	Study 1		Study 2	
Constant	2.486*	3.110***	-1.194*	-1.935***
NS	0.16**	-0.138	0.526***	0.264***
PS	-0.167	0.435***	0.417***	1.140***
SP	-0.061		0.661***	
FNE		-0.481*		0.556*
SP x NS (H3)			-0.065*	
SP x PS (H4)	0.101*			
FNE x NS (H5)		0.090*		
FNE x PS (H6)				-0.116**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.275	0.167	0.458	0.355
F statistic	32.736	17.289	67.148	43.761
Δ R <sup>2</sup> due to interaction	0.012	0.009	0.009	0.016
F statistic	5.503	3.661	5.345	8.11

Notes:  
\* = p < 0.05, \*\*=p < 0.01, \*\*\* = p < .001  
NS = Need for status  
PS = Pro-social self-concept  
SP = Salience of pro-social self-concept  
FNE = Fear of negative evaluation.

relationship between pro-social self-concept and conspicuous consumption, supporting H6. The coefficient for the interaction term was -0.116 ( $p = 0.005$ ). Figure 5 gives a visual representation of the relationship.

## DISCUSSION

### Theoretical Implications

Results of both studies show that a pro-social self-concept and need for status are both positively related to the conspicuous consumption of pro-social products. Support for Hypothesis 1 in both studies substantiates this article's position that the psychological mechanisms and motives behind conspicuous consumption may be applicable outside of the luxury goods domain to which it is traditionally relegated. It demonstrates that consumers with a high need for status see pro-social products as a means for demonstrating status.

Moderation analysis in both studies revealed some interesting results. Findings of Study 1 showed that salience of a person's pro-social self-concept strengthened the positive relationship between pro-social self-concept and conspicuous consumption of pro-social products. Similarly, fear of negative evaluation was

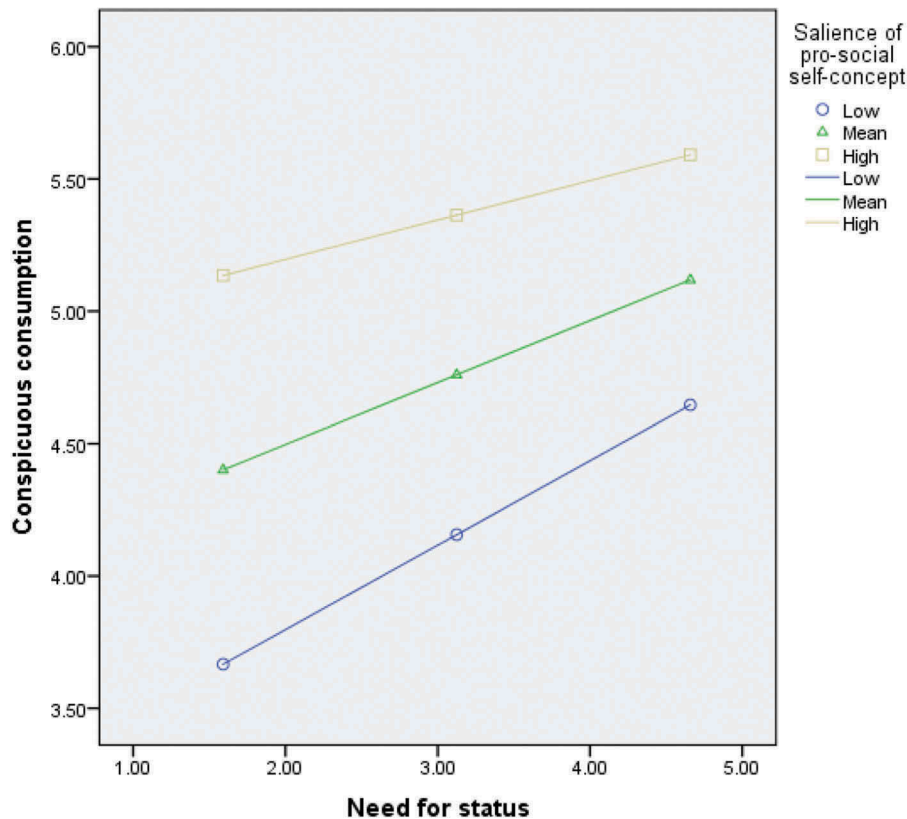
found to strengthen the positive relationship between need for status and conspicuous consumption of pro-social products. These results support Hypotheses 4 and 5, respectively, while Hypotheses 3 and 6 were not supported. These results support the idea that the desire to avoid negative evaluation would be an important consideration when need for status is high. Status, by definition, is *given* by others (Dawson and Cavell 1987; Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn 1999). It then becomes a function of how an individual is evaluated by people surrounding him. Similarly, while individuals engage in behaviors that strengthen their self-concept, they are not reliant on opinions of others for strengthening this self-concept. People use goods as symbols and utilize their consumption practices to enhance their self-concepts (Sirgy 1982). It follows that the positive relationship between pro-social self-concept and conspicuous consumption of pro-social products is moderated by salience of the pro-social self-concept.

However, we did not find support for H4 and H5 in Study 2. Results of Study 2 showed support for H3 and H6. The effect of need for status on the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods was found to be negatively moderated by the salience of pro-social self-concept, indicating that need for status is more impactful in instances of low pro-social self-concept salience. This demonstrates that the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods are motivated by status and pro-social self-concept and that high levels of each may serve to compensate for a low level of the other.

Results also found that not only is a person's pro-social self-concept positively related to the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods, the relationship is also negatively moderated by the fear of negative evaluation. This result demonstrates that pro-social self-concept is more impactful on whether the person will consume goods that are visibly congruent with this self-concept at low levels of fear of negative evaluation than it is at high levels of fear of negative evaluation.

Study 1 employed a student sample while data for Study 2 were collected from a nonstudent population. The obvious conclusion was that the difference in the respondents had a correlation with the different moderation results found from both studies. A comparison of means of variables from both studies, using a t-test, revealed that the means for need for status and fear of negative evaluation were significantly higher in Study 1 (need for status  $t = -13.98$ ,

**Figure 4**  
**Study 2: Interaction Between Need for Status and Salience of Pro-social Self-concept**



*Note:* Figure 4 visually depicts the moderation of salience of pro-social self-concept on the relationship between need for status and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods. The interaction effect is such that need for status has a more dramatic effect when there are low levels of self-concept salience than when there are high levels of salience.

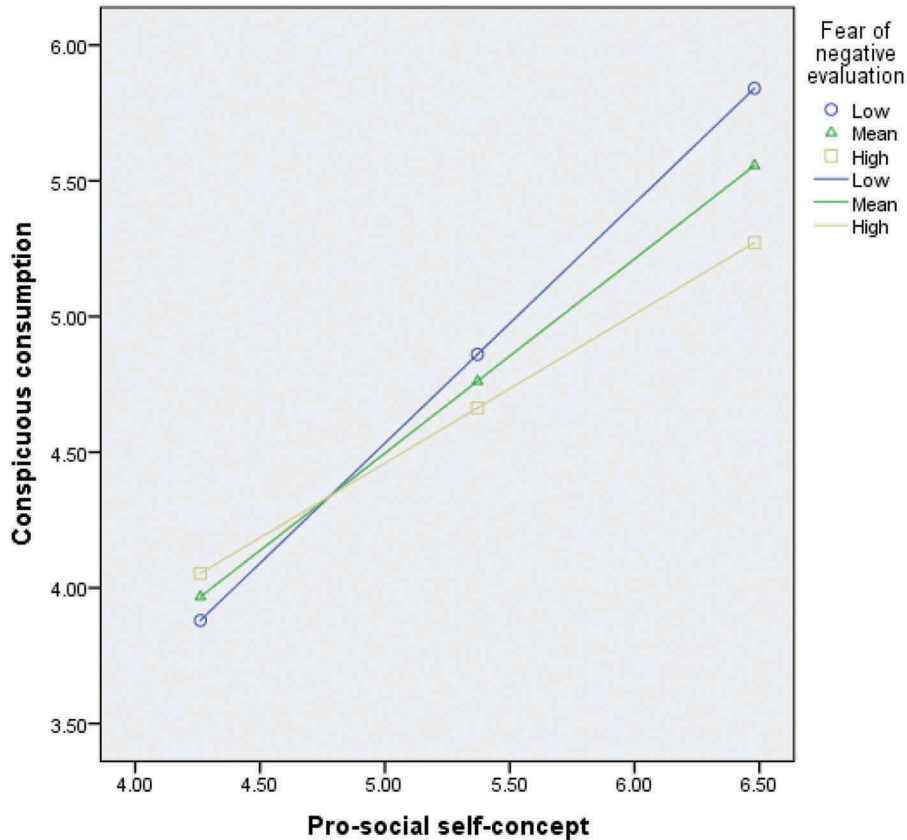
fear of negative evaluation  $t = -6.16$ ). A second dichotomy was the difference between the average ages of the respondents. While age was not found to be significantly correlated to the DV in either sample, it had a significant negative correlation with both need for status and fear of negative evaluation in the Study 2 sample ( $-0.315$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $-0.195$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , respectively), implying that the older a person, the less need for status and fear of negative evaluation they display. The same correlation was not seen in Study 1 data, possibly due to very little variation in the ages of respondents (the standard deviation for age was 1.99 in Study 1 and 11.28 for study 2).

We use the consumption practices of people surrounding us to gain information and form opinions about their identities. Consequently, we use our

consumption practices not only as representations of our identities but also as instruments for building and affirming desired identities and self-concepts. Young adulthood is an important stage in developing one's identity. It is possible that both need for status and fear of negative evaluation are stronger at this age and act in conjunction toward the conspicuous consumption of socially desirable products, including pro-social products. On the other hand, with age, one gains more confidence in one's identity. It is possible that at an older age the two motivations (status or pro-social self-concept) to purchase pro-social products have a compensatory nature such that low levels of one may be offset by high levels of the other.

With this study, we set out to explore the psychological mechanics behind the conspicuous consumption of pro-social products. Specifically, we proposed that

**Figure 5**  
**Study 2: Interaction between Pro-social Self-concept and Fear of Negative Evaluation**



Note: Figure 5 visually depicts the moderation of salience of fear of negative evaluation on the relationship between pro-social self-concept and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods. The interaction effect is such that pro-social self-concept has a more dramatic effect when there are low levels of fear of negative evaluation than when there are high levels of fear. Additionally, at low levels of pro-social self-concept, an individual with high fear of negative evaluation is more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods whereas at high levels of pro-social self-concept, it is individuals with low fear of negative evaluation that are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods.

people consume pro-social products not just for altruistic reasons but also in pursuit of achieving social status and prestige. Our results show that both pro-social self-concept and need for status have a positive relationship with the purchase of conspicuous pro-social products and these relationships are moderated by salience of the pro-social self-concept and fear of negative evaluation.

We have added to the marketing literature by exploring a theme that had previously been studied primarily in the fields of psychology and economics. We have taken the concept of conspicuous consumption and applied it outside of the realm of luxury goods. Previous examinations of the conspicuous displays of pro-social behaviors such as

monetary donations (Glazer and Konrad 1996; Harbaugh 1996) or buying green products (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010) have still studied it as an instrument for signaling wealth. By excluding the financial aspect of pro-social purchases, we prove that individuals will engage in conspicuous pro-social behavior in a desire to achieve status within any desirable social group, regardless of any associations with wealth.

**Managerial Implications**

The findings of this study are relevant to managers in several contexts. Nonprofit firms may encourage donations or other engagement from community members if

they offer people the opportunity to receive conspicuous goods (such as T-shirts, mugs, tote bags, etc.) in return for volunteering or donating. Firms should also seek to activate the pro-social identities of customers to encourage the purchase of conspicuously pro-social goods. This could be achieved through advertising or packaging that reminds consumers that helping other people or social causes is intrinsically rewarding. Further, nonprofits, as well as corporate firms offering pro-social goods, should appeal in advertising and other marketing messages not only to a sense of altruism in potential customers, but also appeal to those for whom social standing is important, thereby reminding consumers that there could also be extrinsic, social rewards attached to pro-social behavior.

One-third of the population of the United States is comprised of millennials, making them the largest population segment in the United States. Annual spending of over \$200 billion on consumer products (Hyllegard et al. 2010) makes them a lucrative consumer segment. Research shows that millennials are more likely to buy a product or service when the purchase also supports a cause and find it easier to contribute to the causes they support through a company's programs than on their own (Fromm 2014; Hyllegard et al. 2010). This generation of consumers not only cares about firms acting responsibly toward society and the environment, it demands this behavior. Firms that are actively engaged in pro-social pursuits, make it possible for their consumers to engage as well, and are also able to give visible signals of these behaviors by way of pro-social products that stand to gain both socially and economically. While millennial consumers are well known to be socially conscious, firms should not ignore consumers from other generational cohorts. Not only should they develop opportunities for conspicuous products that appeal to older consumers, but they should take care to avoid alienating older consumers with advertising that focuses on millennials alone. Older consumers are also interested in conspicuously pro-social products not only for their philanthropic purposes, but also because they present an opportunity to signal personal characteristics to others.

### Future Research and Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it captured intent to purchase pro-social products. Future research would benefit from exploring this topic using field data from the actual purchase of such products. Further, this study focused explicitly on psychological motives for making

conspicuous pro-social purchases. Future research could expand our understanding of the phenomenon by including the financial aspect of the decision to buy pro-social products. For example, some key questions regarding the effect of the price of the product on the decision to buy it would be if consumers would be willing to pay more for a product when it supports a cause, or is otherwise pro-social in nature. On the other hand, would consumers be more likely to engage in pro-social consumption if it does not incur any additional financial cost. The outcome might depend on whether the primary motivation is the manifestation of a pro-social self-concept or the desire to achieve social status and recognition.

While we have explored some of the psychological antecedents to conspicuous consumption of pro-social products, the investigation is by no means exhaustive. It would be interesting to see how the inclusion of measures of self-esteem or other personality traits affect the relationships already studied. Given that results only supported one moderating hypothesis for each main effect in our study, it would also be interesting to explore additional boundary conditions that may moderate the relationship between need for status and conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods and the relationship between pro-social self-concept and conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods. Further, the interaction plot and p-value for H5 indicate that it is not a strong interaction. Future research should seek to provide more empirical tests of whether fear of negative evaluation moderates the relationship between need for status and the conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods.

Given that we have shown that pro-social self-concept does, indeed, lead to the purchase of conspicuous pro-social goods, future research should explore strategies for engendering such a self-concept in consumers. Specifically, future research should endeavor to test whether firms can manipulate pro-social self-concept and if so, how. This might be best tested with an experimental design wherein consumers' baseline pro-social self-concept is compared to their pro-social self-concepts after an intervention intended to temporarily strengthen the self-concept or its salience.

Additionally, this particular study was set in a very specific cultural context. We may not find similar results across different cultural contexts. In some cultures actions such as recycling or driving a fuel-efficient car may not be seen as pro-social (and hence confer status), only as economical. We would expect a different relationship between need for status and conspicuous consumption of



pro-social products in such situations. It would also be interesting to study the relationship between personal involvement with a cause and attitude toward consumption of pro-social products including response to CRM efforts. Additionally, our results regarding pro-social self-concept and purchasing in congruence with this may be applicable to other contexts as well. For example, it would be interesting to explore whether this effect occurs in individuals who find it important to be athletic and therefore consume athletic products to signal status. That is, need for status and self-concept may increase one's need to signal his or her status on any dimension that is important to him or her. Future research should test whether the theory used here can be expanded to include other self-concepts product category purchases beyond pro-social goods.

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