

3-17-2022

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Recommended Citation

Klucarova, S., & He, X. (2022). Status consumption and charitable donations: The power of empowerment. *Psychology & Marketing*, 39(6), 1116–1128. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21658>

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Status consumption and charitable donations: The power of empowerment

<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21658>

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Abstract

Status consumption, the act of consuming market offerings aimed at conferring status on the consumer, has often been portrayed as the opposite of charitable donation behavior. In a departure from prior works, this study examines the connection between these two seemingly contradictory behaviors. The results of seven studies (including one in the Supporting Information Appendix) demonstrate that status consumption, considered a self-centered behavior, leads to increased charitable donations, a prosocial outcome. This effect is driven by a process of empowerment (i.e., increase in the sense of power that consumers derive from status consumption). The underlying mechanism of empowerment is examined using both mediation and moderation methods. Alternative explanations based on objective and perceived wealth, affect, guilt, static and objective power, and self-presentation concerns are ruled out. Further investigation demonstrates that mere ownership of a status good is not sufficient; the consumption of the said product needs to take place for the effect to occur. Moreover, the predicted effect is attenuated for consumers who only desire but do not have status consumption and for those who believe in high power distance. Taken together, this study advances our understanding of status consumption by demonstrating how and when item powers consumers to donate.

KEYWORDS

donation, empowerment, prosocial behavior, status consumption

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumption of status products plays a pivotal role in the lives of many consumers and in today's economy. As a crucial component of status consumption, the personal luxury goods market is worth approximately \$220 billion on a global scale (Statista,2022). Given that individuals engage in the consumption of status products to draw attention to themselves (Griskevicius et al.,2007), status consumption has come to be known as an egocentric behavior (Veblen,1899/1994). Think about the former Spice Girl Victoria Beckham, one of the most avid consumers of the Hermès Birkin bag which has made history as “the ultimate status symbol” (Idacavage,2016). Media outlets often

describe Mrs. Beckham holding the iconic handbag in her hand as a self-absorbed, cold-hearted ice queen (Sassoon,2017).

Self-centered behaviors such as status consumption are often pitched against prosocial behaviors, such as charitable donations (J. Lee & Shrum,2012). These two types of behaviors stem from different fundamental human needs. While status consumption results from needs such as control, donation behavior is driven by needs such as belonging (Williams,2007). When consumers are in pursuit of a sense of control or attempt to restore their perceived control, they often resort to symbolic actions, such as status consumption, that signal their superiority (Baumeister et al.,1996).On the other hand, those in need of belonging tend to engage in prosocial acts, such as donating to a charitable cause, as a result of becoming more attuned to social cues (Pickett et al.,2004).

In contrast, we investigate the link between these two types of seemingly contradictory behaviors and suggest that a self-centered behavior such as status consumption could lead to a socially positive outcome. Specifically, we argue that status consumption empowers consumers, which in turn increases their charitable donations. Empowerment refers to a dynamic process of gaining or increasing the sense of power (Bowen & Lawler,1992; Conger & Kanungo,1988; Spreitzer,1995; Thomas & Velthouse,1990). In contrast to the objective state of power, which originates from an individual's formal hierarchical position (van Dijke et al.,2018), feelings of empowerment are intrinsic and subjective. Importantly, empowerment is a motivational construct that is instrumental in creating conditions for accomplishing specific tasks (Conger & Kanungo,1988). We argue that this motivational aspect of empowerment enhances status consumers' charitable donation behavior. In this study, we examine the underlying process of empowerment using both mediation and moderation methods. We rule out alternative explanations including self-presentation concerns, affect, guilt, objective and subjective wealth effects, and static power state. Furthermore, we explore several boundary conditions and show that the predicted effect is moderated by consumption status (consumption vs. non-consumption),nature of status consumption (having vs. wanting), and power distance belief (Eastman et al.,1999; Hofstede,2001).

2|THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1|Status consumption and charitable donations

Status consumption refers to the act of consuming products or services that will bring status or prestige to the consumer (Eastman et al.,1999; Veblen,1899/1994). Researchers from various fields have conceptualized status consumption as a self-centered behavior. For instance, sociologists describe status consumption as wasteful behavior geared toward showing off one's social status (Veblen,1899/1994). Similarly, evolutionary psychologists liken such consumption to peacocks showing off their colorful tails to attract companions (Griskevicius et al.,2007; Sundie et al.,2011). For example, Sundie et al. (2011) demonstrated that males primed with photographs of

attractive females allocated a greater portion of a \$2000 budget toward status products. This effect was especially strong for males interested in short-term mating, a strategy pursued by egocentric peacocks. As a result of its self-centered nature, status consumption often leads to decreased warmth inferences (Cannon & Rucker, 2019).

Prior research has contrasted status consumption with charitable donation behavior, treating the two as opposing ends (J. Lee & Shrum, 2012). Status consumption and donation behavior stem from different fundamental human needs. While status consumption results from efficacy needs that focus on the capability and superiority of the self (Baumeister et al., 1996), donation behavior is driven by relational needs that connect the self with others and highlight the sense of belonging (Pickett et al., 2004). Given such distinctions between status consumption and charitable donations, J. Lee and Shrum (2012) demonstrated that being ignored threatens individuals' efficacy needs, as a result of which those who feel ignored tend to engage in publicly visible status consumption. On the other hand, being rejected threatens people's relational needs, prompting them to engage in increased helping and donation behavior. In a similar vein, the consumption of luxury products is considered to be reflective of self-enhancement values, which are self-centered in nature. Such consumption is incompatible with prosocial behavior that reflects self-transcendence values, which are other-focused in nature (Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, from the lens of costly signaling, ostentatious consumption of luxury products has been compared with publicly visible helping behavior, with the former being indicative of one's "selfishness and narcissism" and the latter serving as a signal for one's "kindness, sympathy, and helpfulness" (Griskevicius et al., 2007, p. 87).

A common feature in the above studies is that status consumption is explicitly or implicitly contrasted with prosocial behaviors. But what is the connection between the two? Can status consumption increase charitable donations? We attempt to answer these questions in the present research.

Our research is different from the work by J. Lee et al. (2015), who examined the connection between the brand logo of the clothes worn by donation solicitors and the amount of contribution these solicitors received. Instead of donation solicitation (which concerns the perspective of the recipient), we study how an individual's engagement in status consumption influences his or her own charitable giving. Our research also differs from prior works investigating prosocial tendencies from a signaling perspective. For example, public green consumption could serve as a signal to others (Griskevicius et al., 2010). In this study, we rule out the influence of signaling using anonymous donations. This is an important distinction because signaling is about impression management and is self-centered rather than focused on helping others (Sundie et al., 2011).

We suggest that there is a seemingly unlikely relationship between self-centered and prosocial behaviors, such that status consumption could increase rather than decrease charitable donations. We argue that this effect might occur through a process

of empowerment, which motivates consumers of status products to engage in greater donation behavior.

2.2|Empowerment

We define empowerment as the process of gaining or increasing the sense of power (Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995). As opposed to the sense of power, which is a static state (Galinsky et al., 2015), empowerment is a process and is dynamic in nature (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empowerment is motivational because it is an enabling agent that creates conditions for accomplishing specific tasks. It motivates individuals to both initiate and persist in pursuing those tasks (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). For example, Ryan and Grolnick (1986) demonstrated that children who felt empowered at school exhibited greater intrinsic motivation to learn. In a similar vein, Redmond et al. (1993) showed that empowered subordinates displayed stronger motivation that enhanced their creative performance. Such a motivational aspect of the empowerment process underpins our theoretical argument.

We focus on the process of empowerment rather than the objective power state. This is because objective power is static and stems from hierarchy, authority, or wealth that is already obtained (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; van Dijke et al., 2018), which in and by itself may not be motivational. For example, individuals with rich inheritance may not necessarily feel more motivated than those coming from a humble background. Instead of focusing on acquired position or wealth, our theorizing is centered on the process of obtaining the sense of power, and we argue it is through this motivational process that status consumption influences donation behavior.

First, consumption of certain products or services can elevate one's social status—an essential argument underlying status consumption. Eastman et al. (1999) suggest that consumption of a status product can elevate the consumer's place in the social hierarchy for the consumer him/herself and in the eyes of surrounding others. Likewise, Wang et al. (2021) showed that consumption of luxury items increases one's perceived social status. Such an increase in social status may, in turn, empower consumers (Anderson et al., 2012). Taking clothing as an example, dressing up was shown to elevate one's feelings of self-empowerment (Slepian et al., 2015).

Second, empowerment is motivational and can lead to positive outcomes, including prosocial behavior (Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006; Charmaraman, 2013; Geller et al., 1996; Jeung & Yoon, 2018; Y.-K. Lee et al., 2006). In the organizational literature, workplace empowerment was shown to increase inherent task motivation (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Ackfeldt and Wong (2006) showed that employees who felt empowered at work went beyond their formal job requirements to voluntarily assist customers and ensure their satisfaction. In a similar vein, empowered hotel staff members were more likely to go out of their way to serve customers beyond their formal duties (Y.-K. Lee et al., 2006). In another form of prosocial behavior, empowered employees were shown to actively care for their coworkers' safety (Geller et al., 1996) and were also more likely to

offer constructive suggestions and express prosocial voice in their organization (Jeung & Yoon, 2018). Beyond organizational settings, evidence suggests that empowerment may lead to positive social change that benefits society at large. For example, Charmaraman (2013) demonstrated that empowered teenagers developed a strong sense of community and responsible citizenship. Furthermore, empowered citizens often make a difference in their communities by participating in voluntary community organizations, such as neighborhood associations (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). Therefore, we expect that empowerment through status consumption will spur additional prosocial actions. In this study, we examine such prosocial activities in the form of charitable donations.

In summary, we argue that through the consumption of status products, consumers will experience an increase in their sense of power. We further argue that this empowerment process will motivate consumers to engage in greater prosocial behavior manifested in charitable donations. Taken together, we posit the following hypotheses:

H1: Consumers who engage in status consumption exhibit greater donation behavior than do consumers who engage in non-status consumption.

H2: Empowerment mediates the effect of status consumption on charitable donations.

2.3|Boundary conditions

The predicted effect of status consumption on charitable donations might be subject to certain boundary conditions. In this study, we examine three such conditions: consumption status, nature of status consumption, and power distance belief.

2.3.1|Consumption status

Our theorizing suggests that the consumption of status products empowers consumers, which in turn increases their donations. Would ownership of a status product have the same effect in the absence of consumption? We predict that simply owning a status product—without consuming it—will not empower consumers. This is consistent with the conceptualization that social status is gained through the consumption of certain goods (Eastman et al., 1999). Consumption plays a central role in the creation of customer experience (Chen, 2009). The absence of consumption deprives consumers of experiential and social components of the status product (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), without which the empowerment process would not occur. As such, we argue that the effect of status products on charitable donations will be attenuated in the absence of consumption. Therefore:

H3: Consumption status moderates the effect of status products on donation behavior. While consumption of a status product increases donation behavior, the effect is attenuated for consumers who own but do not consume the status product.

2.3.2|Nature of status consumption

To further examine the consumption aspect, we explore the distinction between having and wanting status consumption. While these two concepts are related, they are conceptually distinct. Having status consumption is about using status products, whereas wanting status consumption is about status motives, that is, the intention to acquire status items (Griskevicius et al.,2010). A key difference between having and wanting status consumption lies in the differential impact of these two concepts on the empowerment process because achieving status—and not just desiring status—empowers consumers (Anderson et al.,2012). This is consistent with our earlier argument that the consumption of the status product gives rise to empowerment. As such, engaging in (i.e., having) status consumption should increase charitable donations, replicating our prior findings. Conversely, wanting status consumption itself will not bring consumers empowerment. The fact that consumers desire status products would suggest that they may not be satisfied with their current status. Without realizing such a desire, consumers will not experience empowerment but may in fact perceive themselves in a relatively low power state. As such, merely wanting status consumption should not lead to increased charitable donations. As the empowerment process drives consumers' donation behavior, we argue that the facilitating effect on charitable donations is unique to having rather than wanting status consumption. To put it formally:

H4: The nature of status consumption influences donation behavior, such that status consumption increases donation behavior for consumers who have status consumption but not for those who only want status consumption.

2.3.3|Power distance belief

Power distance belief refers to one's level of receptivity to unequal power distribution in society (Hofstede,2001). Consumers who subscribe to high power distance belief accept social hierarchy, while those who believe in low power distance consider social equality to be of importance. Paharia and Swaminathan (2019) suggest that low power distance belief facilitates empowerment. Consumers are more likely to experience empowerment when they have low power distance belief because of their conviction that they can change their power state and make a difference through their own actions, which is one of the key tenets of empowerment (Conger & Kanungo,1988; Spreitzer,1995; Thomas & Velthouse,1990). As such, we expect that only consumers low in power distance belief will experience empowerment through status consumption and increase their donation behavior as a result. Conversely, consumers high in power distance belief might not experience empowerment even if they consumed status products because these consumers are less likely to believe in the changeability of their power state (Winterich &Zhang,2014). Consequently, the effect of status consumption on donations might be attenuated among consumers with high power distance belief. Formally:

H5: Power distance belief influences the effect of status consumption on donation behavior, such that status consumption increases donation behavior among consumers with low but not high power distance belief.

Through the moderating effect of power distance belief, we further distinguish between the concepts of empowerment and power. Whereas low power distance belief facilitates the empowerment process in status consumption, which is predicted to increase charitable donations, Han et al. (2017) demonstrated that high static power combined with low power distance belief decreased charitable giving. This highlights a key difference between empowerment and power. Whereas the dynamic empowerment process is motivational and tends to result in prosocial outcomes (Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006; Charamaraman, 2013; Geller et al., 1996), static power, once achieved, often corrupts an individual (Rucker et al., 2011) and reduces donations when the power distance belief is low (Han et al., 2017).

3 | OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We examine our theorizing in seven studies (including one study in the Supporting Information Appendix). Study 1 demonstrates the core effect of status consumption on charitable donations. Study 2 establishes empowerment as the underlying mechanism and rules out alternative explanations based on affect, guilt, wealth, and power using an incentive-compatible design involving actual donations. Study 3 and the supplemental study reported in the Supporting Information Appendix further examine the underlying mechanism by manipulating empowerment. The last three studies establish boundary conditions. Specifically, Study 4 demonstrates that consuming rather than simply owning status products influences consumers' donation decisions. This study also teases out the influence of costly signaling through anonymous donations. Study 5 finds that having as opposed to just wanting status consumption is what affects charitable donations. Finally, Study 6 demonstrates the moderating role of power distance belief in the effect of status consumption on donations. We visually illustrate our conceptual framework and summarize the seven studies in Figure 1.

4 | STUDY 1: STATUS CONSUMPTION AND CHARITABLE DONATIONS

4.1 | Method

One hundred fifty-two undergraduate students (72 females, $M_{age}=21.30$) took part in this study.¹ There were no data exclusions in this and all subsequent studies. To manipulate consumption type, we adapted a scenario from Wang and Griskevicius (2014), in which participants imagined that they attended a party in one of the bars

¹ We used G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to perform a power analysis, assuming an α level of 0.05, a power level of 80%, and a medium effect size (J. Cohen, 1988). The analysis revealed a minimum required sample size of 128.

downtown and they arrived at the party either in a limousine, wearing designer outfit and accessories (status consumption) or in a compact car, wearing non-designer outfit and accessories (non status consumption).² They were instructed to close their eyes and picture the described scenario in their mind for 1 min. Participants were then told that a fundraiser benefiting the Wounded Warrior Project, a nonprofit organization serving wounded veterans, was being held at the party. Participants reported their donation intention (1 =veryunlikely,7=very likely; Zemack-Rugar & Klucarova-Travani,2018) and their intended donation amount (\$0–\$50; Jang & Irwin,2021). They indicated their demographic information at the conclusion of the study.

4.2|Results

We subjected both donation intention and donation amount to an analysis of variance (ANOVA). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants in the status consumption condition expressed significantly greater intention to contribute to the Wounded Warrior Project and donated more than did those in the non-status consumption condition; intention: $M_{\text{status}} = 5.18$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 4.37$; $F(1, 150) = 7.92, p = 0.006$; amount: $M_{\text{status}} = 24.36$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 12.25$; $F(1, 150) = 28.30, p < 0.001$.

Prior research suggests that older people and females have a tendency to be more altruistic (Brunel & Nelson,2000; Y.-K. Lee & Chang, 2007). To examine whether age and gender might have confounded the results, we added them to the above analyses as covariates. With respect to donation intention, both age and gender were nonsignificant ($F_s < 1$), whereas the effect of consumption type remained significant; $F(1, 148) = 8.36, p = 0.004$. Regarding donation amount, gender was nonsignificant ($F < 1$), while age was significant, with older participants indicating a greater donation amount; $F(1,148) = 6.08, p = 0.015$. Controlling for both gender and age, the main effect of consumption type on donation amount remained unabated; $F(1, 148) = 30.42, p < 0.001$.

Furthermore, the costly signaling literature suggests that gender might play an interactive role in predicting prosocial outcomes (Griskevicius et al.,2007). To examine this possibility, we conducted another ANOVA using consumption type, gender, and their interaction to predict donation intention and donation amount. While the main effect of consumption type was significant in predicting donation intention; $F(1, 148) = 8.54, p = 0.004$ and donation amount; $F(1, 148) = 28.94, p < 0.001$, neither the main effect of gender nor the consumption type by gender interaction was significant in either model ($F_s < 1$).

² We conducted a pretest with 139 undergraduate students, and participants ascribed higher status to products used in the status consumption scenario as opposed to those used in the non-status consumption scenario.

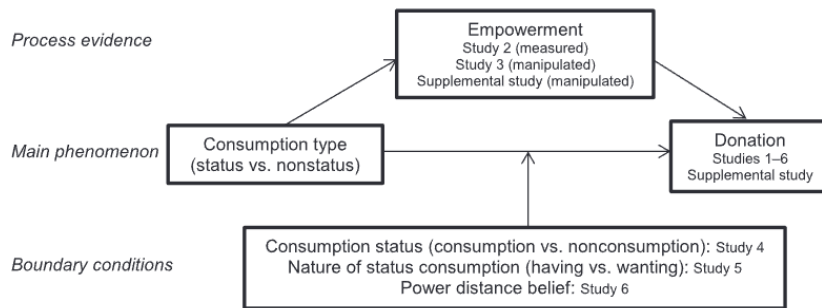


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework and summary of the studies

4.3|Discussion

The above results supported our thesis that status consumption could result in prosocial outcomes. Why does this effect occur? The next study tackles this question by examining the underlying mechanism of empowerment. Importantly, this study involves actual monetary donations (Gu & Chen,2021) to enhance external validity.

Furthermore, we seek to rule out several alternative explanations (Viglia et al.,2021). Specifically, we examine whether donation behavior could be driven by a sense of guilt arising from indulging in status consumption (Hagtvedt & Patrick,2016). We also investigate whether our results could be explained by affect in general because prior literature linked both positive and negative arousal to helping behavior (Genevsky & Knutson,2015; Small & Verrochi,2009). In addition, we investigate whether subjective feelings of (static) power or the objective power state (i.e., education or position in the workforce) could influence the results. Another factor that may be confounded with the role of status consumption is one's objective or subjective wealth because engagement in status consumption might be correlated with an individual's financial means.

5|STUDY 2: EMPOWERMENT

5.1|Method

We recruited 189 workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk (M Turk; 89females, $M_{age} = 33.02$). To manipulate consumption type, participants in the status (nonstatus) consumption condition read a scenario, in which they attended an important business meeting and were wearing designer (non-designer) outfit and designer (nondesigner) watch for this occasion. During the meeting, they were taking notes using an executive (a ballpoint) pen (adapted from Rucker & Galinsky,2008). To augment the manipulation, participants provided a description of their imagined outfit, watch, and pen in a short essay consisting of at least 200 characters.³ Next, participants were informed that 20

³ We conducted two separate pretests with MTurk workers to validate this manipulation. In the first pretest (N= 109), participants ascribed higher status to products used in the status (vs. nonstatus) consumption scenario. In the second pretest (N= 100), participants in the status (vs. nonstatus) consumption condition felt like they had significantly greater social status. Similar pretests were conducted to validate the manipulation of consumption type in all subsequent studies.

respondents would be randomly selected to receive a bonus of \$5 upon completion of the study and have an opportunity to donate any portion of this bonus to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Participants were then asked to indicate their intended donation amount should they be selected to receive the bonus. At the conclusion of this study, we forwarded donations made by 20 randomly selected participants (totaling \$63.15) to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. We adapted this incentive-compatible study design from Bruine de Bruin and Ulqinaku (2021).

To capture the underlying mechanism, participants completed the 12-item empowerment scale adapted from Spreitzer (1995; $\alpha = 0.90$). We also measured several alternative explanations. To assess their affective states, participants completed the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; $\alpha_{\text{positive}} = 0.89$, $\alpha_{\text{negative}} = 0.96$; Watson et al., 1988). To capture their feelings of guilt more specifically, participants completed the Five-Item Guilt Proneness Scale (GP-5; $\alpha = 0.82$; T. R. Cohen et al., 2014). Participants indicated their subjective feelings of being wealthy (resulting from the scenario) on three bipolar scales anchored by poor/rich, destitute/affluent, and impoverished/wealthy ($\alpha = 0.69$). We employed two established measures to assess participants' subjective sense of (static) power. First, participants specified to what degree the scenario made them feel powerful and respected ($r = 0.61$; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Second, they completed the eight-item Sense of Power Scale ($\alpha = 0.86$; Anderson et al., 2012). All these measures employed 7-point scales. Participants also indicated their level of education (six options ranging from "8th grade or less" to "more than 4-year college degree") and current position in the workforce (1 = unemployed, 2 = staff/non-management, 3 = low-level supervisor, 4 = middle management, 5 = upper management or business owner; inspired by Begley et al., 2006), which served as proxies for objective level of power. Finally, participants indicated their gender, age, and annual household income (eight brackets ranging from "less than \$25,000" to "\$150,000 or more") which served as a proxy for objective wealth.

5.2 | Results

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, consumption type had a significant effect on donation amount; $M_{\text{status}} = 3.40$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 2.92$; $F(1, 187) = 5.98$, $p = 0.015$. Moreover, participants experienced stronger feelings of empowerment in the status as opposed to the nonstatus consumption condition; $M_{\text{status}} = 5.67$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 5.23$; $F(1, 187) = 11.16$, $p = 0.001$. To test the underlying mechanism, we entered empowerment and all alternative explanations into PROCESS model 4 by Hayes (2018). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, only the indirect effect through empowerment was significant (indirect effect = 0.24, 95% CI [0.06, 0.44]; 10,000 boot strap samples), while the indirect effects through positive affect (95% CI [-0.27, 0.10]), negative affect (95% CI [-0.05, 0.08]), guilt (95% CI [-0.06, 0.03]), subjective wealth (95% CI [-0.32, 0.08]), subjective power (powerful and respected: 95% CI [-0.06, 0.21]; Sense of Power Scale: 95% CI [-0.05, 0.04]), objective power (education: 95% CI [-0.09, 0.03]; position in the workforce: 95%

CI [-0.05, 0.09]), and objective wealth (95% CI [-0.05, 0.08]) were nonsignificant (see Figure 2). Thus, our results are unlikely to be explained by these alternative accounts.

5.3|Discussion

The above results provided support for the process of empowerment while ruling out alternative accounts of positive affect, negative affect, guilt, subjective and objective wealth, and subjective and objective power. Next, in Study 3, we examine the empowerment mechanism via the moderation-of-process method (Spencer et al., 2005). If empowerment truly played the mediating role, we should be able to influence the effect of status consumption on charitable donations by manipulating empowerment. Specifically, when participants are experimentally primed to feel empowered, we would expect such an induced empowerment process to motivate them to increase their charitable donations regardless of the type of consumption; that is, by manipulating empowerment, we should be able to equalize the empowerment process between status and nonstatus consumption, thereby mitigating the effect of consumption type on donation. In the absence of empowerment prime, we should be able to replicate the effect of consumption type in the control condition, such that the empowerment stemming from status consumption should result in greater donation behavior. Together, this pattern of results should manifest itself in a consumption type by empowerment interaction.

6|STUDY 3: MANIPULATION OF EMPOWERMENT

6.1|Method

We recruited 371 MTurk workers (186 females, $M_{age} = 41.73$) through Cloud Research (previously known as TurkPrime; Litman et al., 2017), and they participated in a 2 (consumption type: status vs. nonstatus) \times 2 (empowerment: primed vs. control) between-subjects study. Participants imagined for the duration of 1 min a meeting scenario, in which they worked for a company and attended an important business meeting taking place today. As in Study 2, participants were either wearing a designer outfit and watch and using an executive pen (status consumption), or wearing non-designer outfit and watch and using a ballpoint pen (nonstatus consumption) during this meeting. In the empowerment condition, participants found out during the meeting that the company had significantly increased their level of autonomy at work, thereby making them feel empowered. This is consistent with the conceptualization of autonomy as an essential component of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). In the control condition, the information about the increased level of autonomy at work was absent. A fundraiser benefiting the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence was held at the end of the meeting, and participants were asked to make a charitable donation. They indicated their desired donation amount on a scale from \$0 to \$50.

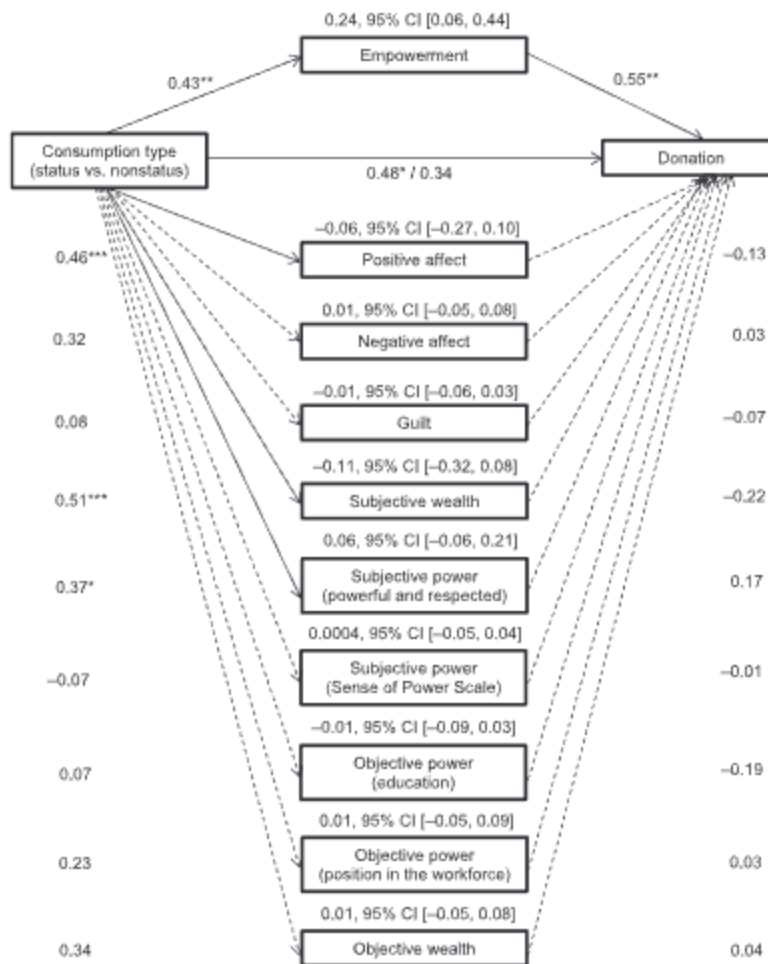


FIGURE 2 The mediating role of empowerment (Study 2). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

To verify the manipulation of empowerment, we captured the extent to which participants felt empowered and experienced an increase in power ($r = 0.77$). Participants also completed the eight-item Sense of Power Scale ($\alpha = 0.81$; Anderson et al., 2012), which measured their sense of static power. To check the manipulation of consumption type, participants indicated the level of status associated with outfit, watch, and pen ($\alpha = 0.94$) featured in the scenario. Since we manipulated empowerment through autonomy, we also asked participants about the extent to which their level of autonomy at work had been increased (two items; $r = 0.96$). All these measures used 7-point scales. The study also included demographic questions as well as two attention checks adapted from Oppenheimer et al. (2009).

6.2|Results

All 371 participants passed both attention checks, indicating good quality of the sample. We ran four 2 (consumption type) \times 2 (empowerment) ANOVAs to determine the effectiveness of our manipulation. With respect to the perceived status, the main

effect of consumption type was the only significant effect in the model; $F(1,367) = 737.62, p < 0.001$, with participants ascribing higher status to products used in the status (vs. nonstatus) consumption condition ($M_{\text{status}} = 6.10$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 3.05$). Both the main effect of empowerment; $F(1, 367) = 1.93, p = 0.165$ and the interaction ($F < 1$) were nonsignificant. With respect to the measure of autonomy, only the main effect of empowerment was significant; $F(1, 367) = 1051.53, p < 0.001$, with participants indicating a higher level of work autonomy in the empowerment (vs. control) condition ($M_{\text{empowerment}} = 6.58$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.05$). Neither the main effect of consumption type nor the consumption type by empowerment interaction was significant ($F_s < 1$). With respect to the measure of empowerment, we observed significant main effects of both consumption type; $M_{\text{status}} = 5.57$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 4.59$; $F(1, 367) = 49.35, p < 0.001$ and the empowerment manipulation; $M_{\text{empowerment}} = 5.78$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 4.38$; $F(1, 367) = 101.33, p < 0.001$, as well as a significant interaction; $F(1,367) = 21.99, p < 0.001$. These results support our theorizing that both status consumption and the empowerment manipulation increase individuals' feelings of empowerment. In contrast, neither consumption type nor the empowerment manipulation affected participants' sense of static power ($F_s < 1$). The interaction effect was also nonsignificant; $F(1, 367) = 1.52, p = 0.218$. Together, the above analyses showed that our manipulations of consumption type and empowerment were successful and were not confounded by power.

Next, we submitted the donation amount to a 2 (consumption type) \times 2 (empowerment) ANOVA. Both consumption type and empowerment produced significant main effects, with participants willing to donate more in the status (vs. nonstatus) consumption condition; $M_{\text{status}} = 27.81$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 20.78$; $F(1, 367) = 17.14, p < 0.001$ and in the empowerment (vs. control) condition; $M_{\text{empowerment}} = 26.37$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 22.22$; $F(1, 367) = 6.01, p = 0.015$. Furthermore, there was a significant consumption type by empowerment interaction; $F(1, 367) = 4.13, p = 0.043$. Consistent with Hypothesis 1 and replicating our prior results, status consumption increased donation in the control condition; $M_{\text{status}} = 27.45$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 16.98$; $F(1,367) = 19.20, p < 0.001$. However, when empowerment was manipulated, the effect of consumption type was no longer significant; $M_{\text{status}} = 28.16$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 24.59$; $F(1, 367) = 2.21, p = 0.138$ (see Figure 3).

6.3|Discussion

Using the moderation-of-process method (Spencer et al.,2005), Study 3 provided further support for the empowerment mechanism and corroborated the mediation analysis conducted in Study 2. In the Supporting Information Appendix, we report a supplemental study that further supports the empowerment account using the moderation-of-process approach. Next, in Study 4, we explore the moderating role of consumption status in the effect of status consumption on donations. Furthermore, this study subjects the effect to a conservative test through anonymous donations, thereby ruling out any influence of costly signaling (Griskevicius et al.,2010).

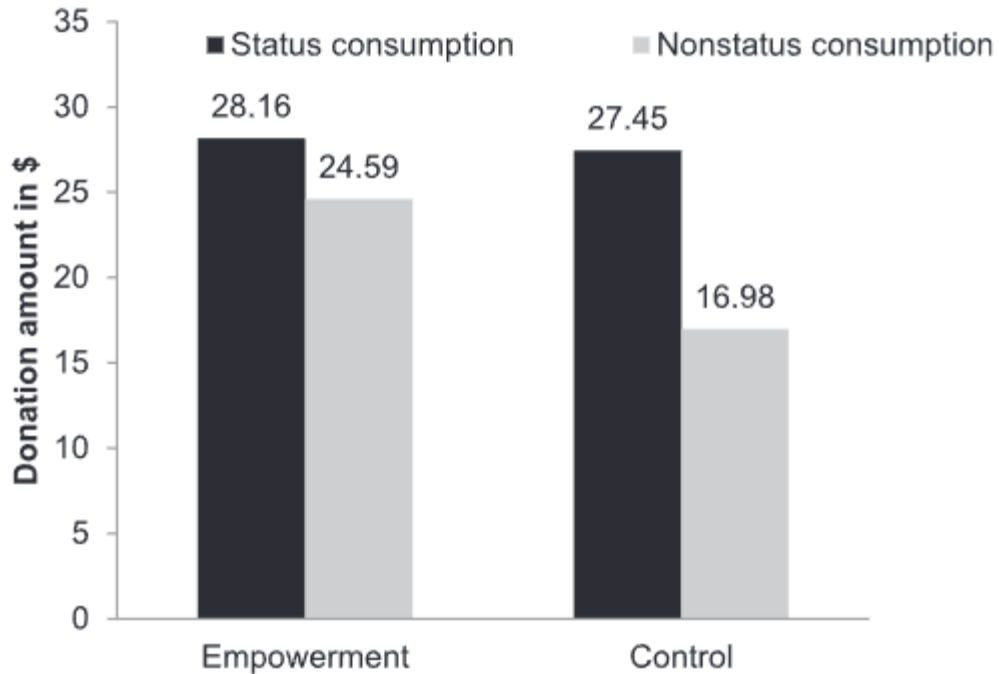


FIGURE 3 Manipulation of empowerment (Study 3)

7|STUDY 4: CONSUMPTION STATUS

7.1|Method

Four-hundred seventy-eight undergraduate students took part in a 2(product type: status vs. nonstatus) × 2 (consumption status: consumption vs. nonconsumption) between-subjects study. Participants were instructed to close their eyes for a minute and imagine attending a party at a student dormitory, a context very familiar to the student sample. To manipulate product type, participants imagined that they owned either a luxury car (status product) or a compact car (nonstatus product). To manipulate consumption status, participants either drove their car to the party hosted in another dormitory complex approximately 5 miles away (consumption condition) or left their car in the garage and made their way to the party in the same dormitory complex (nonconsumption condition). A fundraiser benefiting the Make-A-Wish Foundation was held at the party and participants were asked to make an anonymous donation. They reported their intended donation amount on a scale from \$0 to \$50.

7.2|Results

We ran a 2 (product type) × 2 (consumption status) ANOVA. Both product type and consumption status had significant main effects on donation, with higher donation amount in the status (vs. nonstatus) product condition; $M_{\text{status}} = 18.60$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 14.32$; $F(1,474) = 12.65$, $p < 0.001$ and in the consumption (vs. nonconsumption) condition; $M_{\text{consumption}} = 18.03$ vs. $M_{\text{nonconsumption}} = 14.90$; $F(1,474) = 6.82$, $p = 0.009$. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, there was a marginally significant product type by

consumption status interaction; $F(1, 474) = 3.64, p = 0.057$. Participants who owned and consumed the status product were willing to donate more than those who owned and consumed the nonstatus product; $M_{\text{status}} = 21.30$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 14.74$; $F(1, 474) = 15.06, p < 0.001$, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. However, the effect was mitigated when the product was owned but not consumed; $M_{\text{status}} = 15.88$ vs. $M_{\text{nonstatus}} = 13.90$; $F(1, 474) = 1.35, p = 0.246$ (see Figure 4).

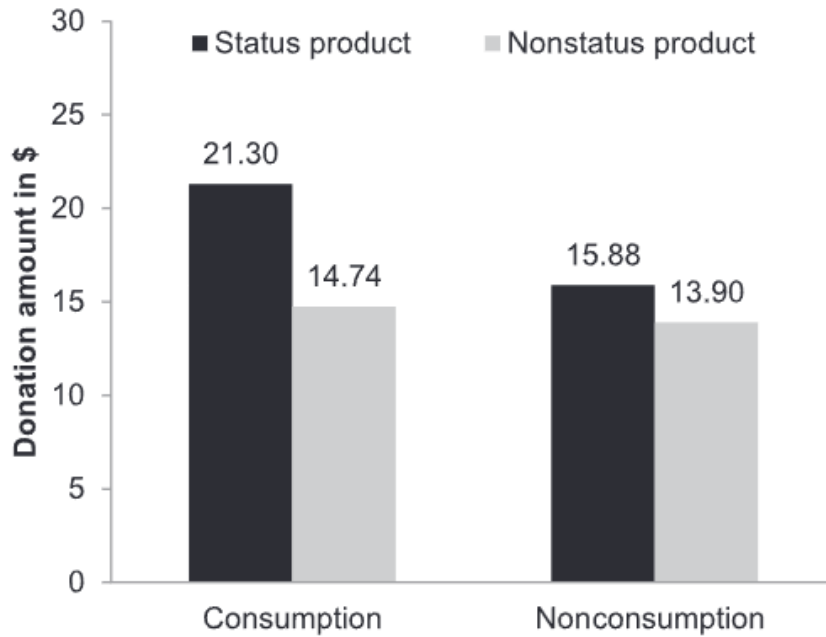


FIGURE 4 Consumption status (Study 4)

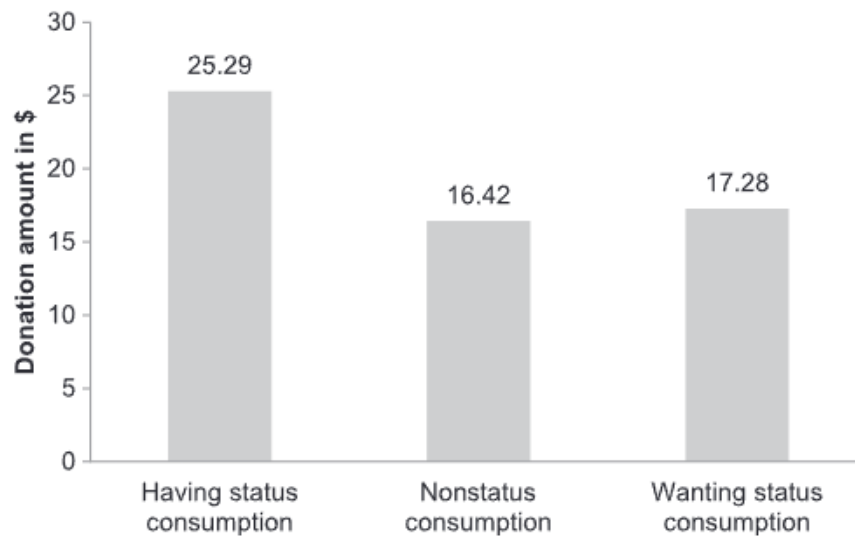


FIGURE 5 Having versus wanting status consumption (Study 5)

7.3|Discussion

The above results demonstrated the importance of consumption in status consumption; ownership alone would not be sufficient to increase donation behavior. Both status products and the consumption of such products are needed for the effect to occur. We observed the effect with anonymous donations, suggesting that our results are unlikely to be explained by costly signaling (Griskevicius et al.,2010) or self-presentation concerns (Yoganathan et al.,2021). The next study further explores the importance of the consumption aspect by distinguishing having status consumption from wanting status consumption.

8|STUDY 5: HAVING VERSUS WANTINGSTATUS CONSUMPTION

8.1|Method

Three hundred eleven undergraduate students (160 females, $M_{age}=21.88$) participated in this study, in which we manipulated consumption nature in three conditions: having status consumption, nonstatus consumption, and wanting status consumption. Participants were presented with the same scenario as in Study 1. They arrived at a party either in a limousine, wearing designer outfit and accessories (having status consumption) or in a compact car, wearing nondesigner outfit and accessories (nonstatus consumption). Participants in the wanting status consumption condition also arrived at the party in a compact car, wearing nondesigner outfit and accessories, but imagined that their real desire was to come in a limousine and have designer outfit and designer accessories. Participants were instructed to close their eyes for a minute to form a mental picture of the scenario. They then responded to a fundraiser for the Make-A-Wish Foundation held at the party and indicated the amount they intended to donate (\$0 to \$50). Last, participants' demographic information was recorded.

8.2|Results

We subjected the donation amount to one-way ANOVA, which unveiled a significant effect of consumption nature; $F(2, 308) = 10.40, p < 0.001$. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, participants donated significantly more when having status consumption ($M= 25.29$) as opposed to both nonstatus consumption; $M= 16.42; F(1,308) = 17.05, p < 0.001$ and wanting status consumption; $M= 17.28; F(1, 308) = 13.97, p < 0.001$ (see Figure5). The difference between nonstatus consumption and wanting status consumption was nonsignificant ($F < 1$).

8.3|Discussion

We went one step further into the nature of status consumption in Study 5 and examined the distinction between having and wanting status consumption. The results supported our prediction; it is engagement in—and not mere desire for—status consumption that drives up charitable donations. Next, in Study 6, we examine another boundary condition—power distance belief.

9|STUDY 6: POWER DISTANCE BELIEF

9.1|Method

We recruited 186 participants from MTurk (101 females, $M_{age}=35.23$, demographic information missing from four participants). Consumption type (status vs. nonstatus) was manipulated using the party scenario from Study 1, augmented by participants' description of their imagined car, outfit, and accessories in a short essay consisting of at least 200 characters. A fundraiser benefiting the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital was held at the party, and participants were asked to specify their intended donation amount (\$0–\$50). All donations were made anonymously. Participants then responded to the eight-item, 7-point measure of power distance belief ($\alpha=0.55$; Hofstede, 2001), with higher scores indicating greater belief in power distance. Finally, participants provided their demographic information.

9.2|Results

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the results of a one-way ANOVA showed a significantly greater donation amount in the status than in the nonstatus consumption condition; $M_{status}=28.57$ vs. $M_{nonstatus}=20.15$; $F(1, 184) = 13.15$, $p < 0.001$. Next, we regressed the donation amount on consumption type, power distance belief (continuous), and their interaction. We observed a significant positive coefficient of consumption type; $b=36.51$, $t(182) = 3.46$, $p=0.001$ and a nonsignificant coefficient of power distance belief; $b=0.66$, $t(182) = 0.34$, $p=0.736$. Importantly, a significant interaction effect emerged in the data; $b=-7.87$, $t(182) = -2.75$, $p=0.007$, supporting Hypothesis 5. We next performed a floodlight analysis to explicate this interaction (Spiller et al., 2013). Through the Johnson–Neyman procedure (Johnson & Neyman, 1936), we identified a region of significance below 4.00 on the power distance belief scale (see Figure 6). In other words, status consumption increased charitable donation for participants low in power distance belief. While we established power distance belief as a moderator, an alternative conceptualization is that power distance belief could instead mediate our results. To rule out this possibility, we ran PROCESS model 4 by Hayes (2018) and found that the indirect effect through power distance belief was nonsignificant (indirect effect = 0.23, 95% CI [-0.33, 1.43]).

9.3|Discussion

Study 6 supported the moderating role of power distance belief, such that status consumption increased donation behavior only among consumers low in power distance belief. We also ruled out the possibility of power distance belief mediating the focal effect of status consumption on donations.

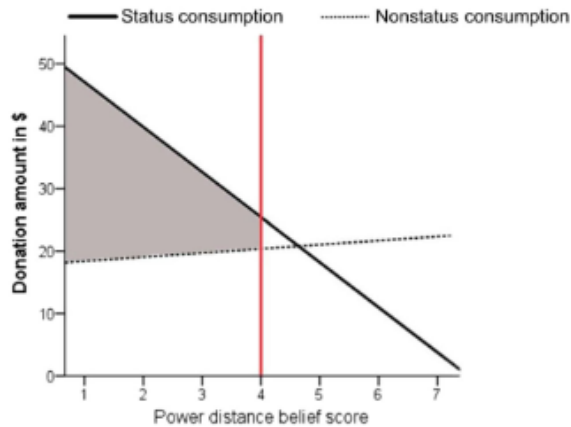


FIGURE 6 Power distance belief (Study 6). Vertical line indicates the Johnson–Neyman point. Shaded area represents the region of significance

10|GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study examines the connection between status consumption and charitable donations, suggesting that consuming status products increases charitable contributions as a result of the empowerment process. In the first three studies, we demonstrate the effect of status consumption on charitable donations, establish the empowerment mechanism using both the traditional mediation method and the moderation-of-process approach, and rule out an array of alternative explanations. In the last three studies, we explore several boundary conditions. The results show that rather than owning status products or wanting status consumption, the consumption of status products is what influences donations. Moreover, the effect of status consumption on charitable donations only applies to consumers who possess low power distance belief. We also report a supplemental study in the Supporting Information Appendix. Together, these seven studies offer substantial support for the effect of status consumption on charitable donations across a variety of donation contexts, a testament to the robustness of this effect (Chapman et al.,2020). We synthesized the findings in a single-paper meta-analysis (McShane & Böckenholt,2017) reported in the Supporting Information Appendix.

10.1|Contributions and implications

Our research advances the literature from several perspectives. Status consumption and charitable donations are traditionally pitched against each other (J. Lee & Shrum,2012), with status consumption characterized as a form of self-centered behavior and charitable donation as a form of prosocial behavior. Since preoccupation with one's self often leads to lower willingness to help others (Gibbons & Wicklund, 1982), one might expect that status consumption will reduce charitable donations. Contrary to this common belief, we demonstrate that status consumption has a positive influence on donations, such that consuming status products increases rather than decreases charitable contributions. In the wider context, our research accentuates a

seemingly unlikely relationship between a self-centered behavior and a prosocial outcome.

We introduce empowerment as a mechanism underlying the effect of status consumption on donations. Importantly, we disentangle—both theoretically and empirically—the constructs of empowerment and power. While empowerment is a dynamic, motivational process (Conger&Kanungo,1988; Thomas & Velthouse,1990), power is a static state that is already achieved (Galinsky et al.,2015; van Dijke et al.,2018). Empirically, we contrast empowerment with power in Study 2demonstrating that empowerment is what drives the effect of status consumption on charitable donations. The distinction between empowerment and power is further illustrated in Study 6, which suggests that empowerment and power may interact differently with power distance belief in influencing charitable donations (cf. Han et al.,2017).

The present research offers practical implications for both organizations and consumers. First, our findings generate new insights for charities on how to improve the effectiveness of their donation drives. This study connects the two seemingly contradictory behaviors and highlights the potential of a productive partnership between status brands and charitable causes. For example, it might be beneficial for donation booths to be strategically positioned in the proximity of status consumers, such as near high-end restaurants or boutique stores. It might also be advantageous for charitable organizations to team up with firms specializing in luxury products to jointly promote prosocial causes in a co-branding effort.

Second, our research into the empowerment mechanism offers insights on how to improve the psychological well-being of consumers and donors alike. In a departure from prior works on the negative consequences of status consumption (Cannon &Rucker,2019; Goor et al.,2020), we suggest that status consumption can empower consumers, which could be positive not only for the recipients of their donations but also for consumers themselves as donors. Because charitable donation serves as an outlet to channel consumers' heightened feelings of empowerment, it may increase their own psychological well-being. This might result in a win–win situation in which the empowerment stemming from status consumption may deliver mutual benefit to consumers, charitable organizations, and society at large.

10.2|Future research

While we have demonstrated the robustness of the effect of status consumption on charitable donations, additional work is needed to advance our knowledge of this phenomenon. We have taken an initial step in mapping out the complexity of this effect, which is moderated by consumption status (consumption vs. nonconsumption), nature of status consumption (having vs. wanting), and power distance belief. A fruitful future direction is to investigate additional moderators that may influence the empowerment process. One potential limitation is that we tested the empowerment mechanism and the boundary conditions in separate studies. Future work could instead examine both

the underlying mechanism and the potential moderators simultaneously to fully outline theoretical boundaries for the effect of status consumption on donations.

Through both the mediation method and the moderation approach, we have shown converging evidence in support of the underlying empowerment mechanism while ruling out a number of alternative accounts. However, we are mindful that the issue is complex and—as most consumer phenomena—is unlikely to be singularly determined (Kirmani,2015). Future research should examine the possibility that multiple mechanisms might be at play. While we have demonstrated the empowerment mechanism behind having status consumption, prior research has identified self-presentation concerns as a driver underlying wanting status consumption (Griskevicius et al.,2010). One avenue for future studies is to identify conditions under which either of these two mechanisms gets activated.

Our work has focused exclusively on charitable donations, although the effect of status consumption could be extended to other forms of prosocial behaviors. For example, status consumption may have the potential to encourage volunteering behaviors and promote recycling. Beyond the prosocial domain, status consumption may exert influence on a broader range of behaviors that might provide consumers with an opportunity to exercise their sense of empowerment. For example, status consumption may prompt consumers to take initiatives in the workplace or to assume a leadership role in an organization. Future research should expand the scope of the investigation to other decision contexts where empowerment plays a significant role.

Now back to our earlier example of Mrs. Beckham and the criticism that she is a cold-hearted ice queen (Sassoon,2017). In fact, the first impression can be rather deceiving. As our research has demonstrated, a self-centered behavior such as status consumption can indeed lead to a prosocial outcome. After all, Mrs. Beckham, a seemingly self-absorbed status consumer, was honored with the Order of the British Empire for her extensive charitable work (Morrison,2017).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Yael Zemack-Rugar, Lin Boldt, David Luna, Yinlong Zhang, Jonathan Hasford, Jennifer F. Taylor, and the Inaugural State of Florida Marketing Research Camp participants for their valuable feedback. The funding information is not available.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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