

## Status Pivoting

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## **Abstract**

Prior research has established that status threat leads consumers to display status-related products such as luxury brands. While compensatory consumption within the domain of the status threat (e.g., products associated with financial and professional success) is the most straightforward way to cope with comparisons to high-status individuals, we examine when, why, and how consumers cope with status threat by choosing to “pivot” and display success and achievements in alternative domains. Using a mixed-method approach combining field and lab experiments, incentive-compatible designs, netnographic analysis, observational study, and qualitative interviews, we show that consumers cope with status threat by signaling their status and success in alternative domains. We conceptualize this behavior as “status pivoting” and show that it occurs because experiencing status threat motivates consumers to adopt beliefs about trade-offs across domains; that is, to believe that status acquisition requires trade-offs and hence others’ success in one domain comes at the cost of success in another domain. We compare the prevalence and appeal of status pivoting to restoring status within the domain of the threat. We further examine when consumers are likely to engage in status pivoting and show that this effect is attenuated when high status within the domain of the threat is attainable.

*Keywords:* status threat, status signaling, symbolic consumption, compensatory consumption, lay theories.

In today's interconnected world, upward comparisons to wealthier and more successful peers are inescapable, and consumers are increasingly preoccupied with gaining and signaling status (Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). While status has always been a powerful driver of individual behavior throughout history and across cultures (Bourdieu 1979, Veblen 1899), in the current information-rich environment dominated by social media, individualism, meritocracy, and income inequality, consumers' perpetual quest for status and one-upmanship is becoming a cultural phenomenon, contributing to an increasingly "status-obsessed society" (Griffin 2015; Putnam 2000; Prinstein 2017). Today, consumers no longer need to await a reunion or browse an alumni bulletin to learn about their former classmates' accomplishments or affluent lifestyle, as they are constantly bombarded with updates about their peers on online networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and alumni platforms.

How do consumers cope with the constant exposure and comparison to wealthier and more successful individuals? Consumer research suggests that consumers cope with status threat resulting from upward comparisons by engaging in compensatory consumption – purchasing and displaying status-related products and brands that signal success and affluence (Gal 2015; Lee and Shrum 2012; Mandel et al. 2017; Wang and Griskevicius 2014). Specifically, extant research demonstrates that consumers use luxury brands and products such as executive pens and conspicuous high-end clothing to restore and maintain their status (Gao et al. 2009; Kim and Gal 2014; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). While compensatory consumption in the domain of the status threat (e.g., products associated with financial and professional success) is the most straightforward way to cope with upward comparisons to high-status individuals (Gal 2015), we examine when and how

consumers instead cope with status threat by choosing to pivot and display success and achievements in alternative domains (i.e., other aspects of their lives).

We argue that when experiencing a status threat due to upward comparisons to a higher status person, consumers will be motivated to adopt beliefs about trade-offs across domains (i.e., to believe that others' success in one domain leads to sacrifice or failure in another domain). For example, they will be motivated to believe that financial and professional success comes at the cost of other dimensions such as close relationships and meaningful personal lives. We label these beliefs *motivated trade-off beliefs* because they are specifically motivated and exacerbated by consumers' need to restore their status and to identify a domain in which they are superior to the higher status person. We argue that these trade-off beliefs are motivated because they are more pronounced when status threat is salient.

We further argue that motivated trade-off beliefs fuel consumption and display of products in alternative domains which represent these trade-offs; that is, domains in which consumers can signal achievements and feel superior to the higher status person. Thus, rather than focus on the domain of the status threat and trying to "keep up with the Joneses," we argue that an effective way in which consumers typically offset comparisons to higher status and wealthier individuals is by identifying an alternative domain in which they believe they fare more favorably than the higher status person and by displaying success and achievement in these domains. We conceptualize this consumption behavior as *status pivoting* and demonstrate it in a variety of product categories and consumer populations.

We use a mixed-method approach, including field and lab studies, incentive-compatible designs, qualitative interviews, observational study, and netnographic analysis of social media discussions, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the status pivoting phenomenon, explain

when, why, and how it occurs, and examine its prevalence and appeal in real-world settings. Contrary to prior research, in our studies, consumers are given the opportunity to cope with status threat by either displaying a product associated with the domain of the threat or a product associated with achievement in an alternative domain to the threat. This allows us to test when people are likely to favor status pivoting to an alternative domain over status restoration within the threat domain. We employ qualitative and quantitative methods to study whether consumers spontaneously pivot to alternative domains and which alternative domains they identify and emphasize, and we show that these domains are associated with consumers' motivated trade-off beliefs. In addition to testing consumers' spontaneous coping strategies, we examine the impact of manipulating the salience of trade-offs across domains and find that, interestingly, mentioning that the source of the threat might perform poorly in a certain domain can impact what consumers choose to signal about themselves. Our studies document motivated trade-off beliefs and status pivoting in response to status threats stemming from upward comparisons in various contexts, including exposure to extreme wealth in Monaco, professionally successful peers at a high-school reunion, and owning a car that is inexpensive relative to others.

In addition to offering marketers and consumers a more nuanced view of status-signaling and a better understanding of how to thrive in a status-obsessed marketplace, our findings make several theoretical contributions. Our work advances the literature on status-signaling, symbolic and compensatory consumption (Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Berger and Ward 2010; Gao et al. 2009; Lee and Shrum 2012; Nunes, Drèze, and Han 2011; Wang and Griskevicius 2014; Ward and Dahl 2014) by enhancing the understanding of status pivoting and demonstrating it with real behavior in the marketplace. While prior work primarily focused on status restoration within the threat domain (Kim and Gal 2014, Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008;

Sundie et al. 2011), we show that consumers can also restore status by spontaneously pivoting to alternative domains. In this vein, complementing recent research that examines the consequences of within- versus across-domain consumption for self-control (Lisjak et al. 2015), we directly compare the appeal of status pivoting to status restoration within the threat domain, identify the specific domains consumers choose to pivot to, and examine conditions when consumers are more or less likely to pivot. By doing so, our work enhances the current understanding of how consumers utilize different strategies to cope with status threat as well as the under-studied mechanisms underlying these strategies (Mandel et al. 2017).

Our findings also contribute to prior work on lay theories about trade-offs and cost-benefit heuristics (Chernev and Gal 2010; Deval et al. 2013; Haws, Reczek, and Sample 2017; Haws, Winterich, and Naylor 2014; Luchs et al. 2010; Raghunathan, Naylor, and Hoyer 2006). Whereas past research in this domain demonstrates that consumers use lay theories and heuristics about trade-offs in order to understand and make predictions about the world (Brough et al. 2016; Cheng, Mukhopadhyay and Schrifft 2017; Kramer et al. 2012; Park and John 2012; Wang, Keh, and Bolton 2009), we demonstrate that consumers may also use such trade-off beliefs to cope with status threat and make themselves feel better. Furthermore, while recent research suggests that trade-off heuristics may vary as a function of individual differences such as green consumption values (Haws et al. 2014; Haws et al. 2017), our findings further demonstrate that trade-off beliefs can be impacted by external manipulations of status threat. Thereby, we show that trade-off beliefs can be situationally motivated and intensified by status threat.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***Using Products to Cope with Status Threat***

A growing amount of evidence highlights consumers' heightened concern for status (Bourdieu 2011; Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). In modern societies, status is commonly defined as individuals' relative wealth and professional success (Luttmer 2005; Putnam 2000). With the rise of the knowledge economy, in addition to financial success, status is also increasingly associated with professional achievement (Frank and Cook 1995; Keinan, Crener, and Bellezza 2016). Therefore, symbols of financial success such as large homes, expensive cars, and expensive clothing (Frank 1999), as well as symbols of professional success such as busyness (Bellezza et al. 2017; Keinan et al. 2018), are widely accepted signals of high status.

Because status has profound effects on how individuals feel and behave in the marketplace and upward comparisons to higher status individuals are unavoidable, consumers need to develop strategies to cope with the aversive impact of threat to their status. Consumer research demonstrates that individuals typically attempt to cope with status threat by purchasing and displaying status-enhancing items *within* the domain of the threat in order to symbolically compensate and restore their status (Gao et al. 2009, Kim and Gal 2014; Lee and Shrum 2012; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Sundie et al. 2011). Such compensatory consumption includes buying high-status luxury goods to compensate for relative lack of power and financial status (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Sharma and Alter 2009) or buying products that signal competence to compensate for threats to one's intelligence (Gao et al. 2009; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982).

Notably, since our society bestows status primarily based on wealth and financial success, the vast majority of existing studies has examined *within*-domain compensatory consumption in the context of luxury goods, such as luxury cars (Griskevicius et al. 2007), designer apparel and accessories (Berger and Ward 2010; Desmichel, Ordabayeva, and Kocher

2020; Dubois, Jung, and Ordabayeva 2021; Keinan, Crener, and Goor 2020; Keinan et al. 2016; Nunes and Dreze 2008; Wang and Griskevicius 2014; Ward and Dahl 2014), and high-end homes and home goods (Frank and Cook 1995; Solnick and Hemenway 1998). For example, participants who were threatened by their low relative hierarchical rank or power were willing to pay more for larger brand logos of products that signaled high status and power, such as a conspicuous luxury pen or luxury apparel (Lee and Shrum 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Similarly, MBA students experiencing status threat in the professional and financial domain due to fewer job offers relative to their more successful peers were more likely to display signals of professional and financial success such as luxury suits and watches (Rucker and Galinsky 2013; Wicklund and Golwitzer 1982).

However, since past literature has mostly focused on status restoration *within* the threat domain, little is known about when, how, and why consumers choose to pivot and display status in *alternative* domains. In the current research, we demonstrate that when experiencing a status threat, consumers may try to identify an alternative domain in which they fare more favorably in comparison with the higher status person and may react with consumption in that alternative domain. We label this phenomenon *status pivoting*, and we examine its prevalence, antecedents, and appeal, how consumers identify alternative domains to which they pivot, and how status pivoting compares to compensatory consumption within the domain of the threat. Furthermore, we hypothesize that status pivoting occurs because status threat elicits *motivated trade-off beliefs* (i.e., beliefs that others' success in one domain comes at the cost of success in another domain).

### ***Understanding Status Pivoting***

While most studies on status threat focus on restoration of status within the domain of the threat, recent research in marketing proposes multiple ways in which individuals may use

consumption to cope with self-discrepancies (Mandel et al. 2017). Emerging findings suggest that status threat may hurt self-regulation and support the idea that consumers may sometimes engage in across-domain compensation.

Specifically, Lisjak et al. (2015) study self-control following either within-domain or across-domain compensation and find that the former is more detrimental for self-control because it increases rumination. For example, coping with feelings of incompetence by affirming one's competence (e.g., through use of products such as a board game that shows off one's knowledge) depletes consumers' ability to exercise self-control more than affirming their sociability (e.g., through use of a board game that allows one to spend time with friends and family). Focusing exclusively on across-domain compensation, Salerno and colleagues (2019) link different types of envy to self-improvement in an unrelated-to-threat domain. Importantly, these existing studies do not present participants with a direct choice between within-domain and across-domain compensation, leaving open the question of what consumers spontaneously prefer. The authors subsequently call for more work to investigate how consumers choose between within- versus across-domain compensation. These findings are consistent with the psychology literature on threat derogation, which gives respondents an opportunity to self-affirm in domains unrelated to the threat (Greenberg et al. 1985; Vohs and Heatherton 2001). This literature demonstrates that individuals may attempt to cope with self-threat by devaluing the threat domain and inflating public descriptions of self in unrelated-to-threat domains.

We build on and extend this literature by addressing the following open questions: how consumers choose between within- and across-domain compensation, which alternative domains they spontaneously pivot to and why, when consumers favor one compensation strategy over the

other, how different strategies compare in terms frequency of usage and perceived effectiveness, and how these compensatory behaviors manifest in natural real-world consumption settings.

To address these questions, our studies, contrary to prior research, give consumers the opportunity to consume both products that are associated with the domain of the threat as well as products associated with achievement in an alternative domain to the threat. We are thereby able to directly compare the appeal of status pivoting to status restoration within the threat domain. More specifically, we propose that under a status threat, if given the opportunity, consumers will prefer to display products that are associated with an alternative domain in which they fare more favorably compared with the source of the threat (i.e., consumers will engage in status pivoting). Importantly, we argue that motivated trade-off beliefs may help consumers identify alternative domains in which they may fare more favorably. Accordingly, we examine which motivated trade-offs consumers spontaneously focus on and which domains they spontaneously pivot to.

### ***Motivated Trade-Off Beliefs in Response to Status Threat***

Prior research demonstrates that consumers hold lay theories (i.e., naïve beliefs) about trade-offs that impact their judgment and behavior in a number of domains (e.g., Wyer 2004). For example, consumers believe in trade-offs between the taste and effectiveness of pharmaceutical products such as cough medicine (Kramer et al. 2012), and they more generally believe that there is no benefit (gain) without costs (pain) (Cheng et al. 2017). Trade-off beliefs can help consumers make sense of the world and make predictions. For instance, the belief that there is a trade-off between healthiness and tastiness leads people to choose less healthy foods (Raghunathan et al. 2006). Related literature on zero-sum heuristics (Chernev 2007) suggests that people use compensatory reasoning when comparing attributes of similarly-priced products. Notably, studies suggest that lay theories may be malleable. Haws, Winterich, and Naylor (2014)

show that consumers with strong green consumption values are less likely to subscribe to the belief about trade-offs between products' sustainability and effectiveness.

We argue that beyond using trade-off beliefs to make predictions and to justify purchases and preferences, such beliefs could be used as a coping mechanism to restore a positive self-view and boost status in response to status threat. People may generally hold beliefs that certain characteristics of individuals might be negatively correlated (e.g. warmth and competence; Fiske et al. 1999). However, we propose that consumers may be motivated to believe that one's success in one domain (financial and professional) must come at the expense of their failure in other domains (e.g., personal and social), particularly when that individual is a source of status threat. Therefore, adding to evidence about the malleability of trade-off beliefs, we propose that these beliefs may vary as a function of external manipulations of status threat. These motivated trade-off beliefs may help consumers identify an alternative domain in which they fare more favorably compared to the source of the threat; that is, while the source of the threat may be superior in one domain, consumers may feel superior to this source of the threat in an alternative domain. Furthermore, since these trade-off beliefs are motivated by specific threats caused by upward comparison to higher status individuals, we expect these beliefs to specifically focus on the source of the threat, rather than on how the world works more generally. This is consistent with prior work (Haws et al. 2014) that showed that motivated trade-offs are specific to the domain and subject in question (e.g., trade-offs between products' green attributes and strength).

To explore real-world manifestations of motivated trade-off beliefs in response to status threats (i.e., beliefs that high status in the financial and professional domain comes at the cost of success in alternative domains such as personal life and relationships), we interviewed consumers in Monaco, known as the home of some of the world's most affluent people. In this

unique location, most consumers, even high-status and wealthy individuals, experience status threats, as they notice the often visible, luxurious lifestyles of the very affluent consumers around them. Interviewees ( $N = 34$ ; 44% female; 38% Monte Carlo residents) were asked whether they compare themselves with the wealthy people living in Monaco and were asked to explain why. The majority of respondents (73.5%) spontaneously generated a direct trade-off between being affluent and lacking in other important life domains. The trade-offs they mentioned were specific to costs, sacrifices, and shortcomings associated with high financial status and wealth. The domain most frequently identified and emphasized was that status and wealth are associated with sacrifices and trade-offs in social life and personal relationships, arguing that very wealthy people tend to be lonelier and are less likely to enjoy time with family and close friends. Other highly common domains were mental and physical health, values and moral behavior, and personality traits and characteristics. For example, a local woman argued, “[Wealthy people] don’t have happy and faithful relationships.” One man (Sweden) said, “Rich people cannot trust people, not even their friends,” and another man (Italy) noted, “[They are] depressed and lonely, no sense of community.” Interviewees also referred to affluent people’s deficiencies in values and character. For example, a woman from France asserted, “Rich people are unethical and less helpful to others, and being helpful is what makes you happy. They are selfish [...] and cannot enjoy the important things anymore [...] They are more likely to be disappointed.”

We found similar insights in additional populations and contexts. U.S. undergraduates spontaneously generated trade-off beliefs to cope with upward comparison with a more successful classmate, by suggesting that the successful classmate might be lacking in other life domains such as personal life, popularity, and physical fitness. For example, “I am far more personable than she is. I have had a boyfriend for about a year, while she has not had much luck

in the dating world,” and “I am running the Boston Marathon in April so I have the ability to run farther and have this rare experience.” Similarly, online respondents spontaneously mentioned trade-off beliefs. For example, “He might earn more than me, but I feel like I’ve lived life to the fullest and have had diverse experiences that I prefer over money.” These qualitative insights provide initial evidence that trade-off beliefs may be generated spontaneously, and they inspired the motivated trade-off beliefs scale examined in the main studies.

Integrating these arguments and insights, we propose that consumers’ motivated focus on trade-offs that may exist between others’ success in financial and professional domains and their failure in alternative domains will lead consumers to display status in these alternative domains. Specifically, consumers will display products associated with these alternative domains.

***H<sub>1</sub>**: Experiencing status threat can lead consumers to engage in status pivoting (i.e., restore status through consumption that highlights success and accomplishment in an alternative domain rather than the threat domain).*

***H<sub>2</sub>**: Motivated trade-off beliefs (i.e., that others’ success in one domain comes at the cost of sacrifice or failure in another domain) can determine which domains consumers pivot to and mediate the effect of status threat on status pivoting.*

Contributing to past work on coping strategies, we examine the relative prevalence and appeal of within-domain status restoration and status pivoting. We propose that, when both strategies are available, status pivoting can be more appealing than trying to restore status within the threat domain. This is because while status restoration within the threat domain may be challenging to achieve, status pivoting may be more appealing since it allows consumers to leverage their relative strength. This notion is consistent with prior findings that within-domain compensation may not be so effective and lead to self-control failures as it prompts consumers to ruminate on their lower status (Lisjak et al. 2015). Furthermore, status restoration within the

threat domain might have psychological costs and make consumers feel like impostors when they display a high-status product that they do not feel entitled to have (Goor et al. 2020).

*H<sub>3</sub>: Consumers experiencing status threat will prefer status pivoting to an alternative domain over status restoration within the threat domain.*

### ***Boundary Conditions***

We explore the role of attainability of high status in the threat domain. Prior studies suggest that attainability of goals impacts motivation: attainable goals generate higher likelihood of goal pursuit than unattainable goals (Kivetz et al 2006). Comparison targets that are perceived to be achievable boost assimilation to the target and motivation to pursue the target's success, whereas targets that are deemed unachievable produce contrast from the target (Lockwood and Kunda 1997; Mandel et al. 2006). Thus, in the context of professional and financial success, when the success of the higher status individual is attainable, consumers may be motivated to pursue status in a similar way, but when it is impossible to keep up with the Joneses, consumers may prefer alternative routes to restore their status. Notably, perceptions of attainability of high status are not always objective (e.g., based on individuals' earning potential and income), but are often subjective and vary as a function of personality characteristics and context (Goor et al. 2020; Kristofferson, Lamberton, and Dahl 2018; Paharia et al. 2011). We examine the role of objective and subjective attainability of high status within the threat domain and predict that when high-status is attainable, consumers are less likely to engage in status pivoting.

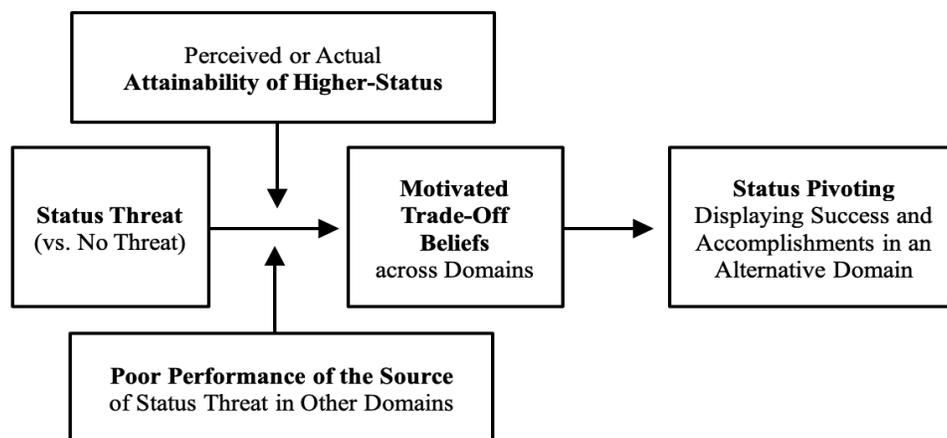
*H<sub>4</sub>: High (vs. low) attainability of status in the threat domain attenuates the effect of status threat on preference for status pivoting.*

To further support our psychological mechanism and to rule out alternative accounts, we examine the impact of explicitly highlighting the existence of trade-offs across domains. While we propose that people spontaneously generate trade-off beliefs in response to status threat, we

expect that observing poor performance of the source of the threat in an alternative domain may further validate these beliefs and boost consumers' tendency to engage in status pivoting. Thus, interestingly, mentioning that somebody else might perform poorly in a certain domain can impact what consumers choose to signal about themselves. In sum,

*H<sub>5</sub>: When experiencing status threat, learning about the poor performance of the source of the status threat in an alternative domain strengthens preference for status pivoting.*

**FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL**



### ***Summary of Studies***

Ten studies combining field and lab experiments, observational methods, incentive-compatible designs, qualitative interviews, and an analysis of social media posts explore the status pivoting phenomenon across different participant populations and status threat contexts. Study 1 examines motivated trade-off beliefs posted on social media in response to status threat. Using a netnographic analysis, we document which alternative domains are more frequently mentioned and show that trade-off beliefs are not only frequently recommended as a coping strategy but are also more appealing than within-domain status restoration. Studies 2A-2C demonstrate the status pivoting phenomenon in field settings and the mediating role of motivated trade-off beliefs. Study 3 uses an incentive-compatible choice paradigm and demonstrates that status pivoting is preferred to within-domain status restoration. Studies 4A-4B test the

moderating role of perceived and actual attainability of higher status. Studies 5A-5B examine the role of externally highlighting others' poor performance in the alternative domain as well as rule out alternative explanations. We conclude with Study 6, which demonstrates that status pivoting enables more effective coping with status threat than within-domain status restoration.

**TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

<i>Study</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>IV / Status Threat</i>	<i>DVs</i>	<i>Mediation, Moderation</i>
Study 1 Netnography	Analysis of posts and “likes” on social media	H <sub>1</sub> , H <sub>3</sub>	Comparison to a more successful peer	Prevalence and appeal of restoring status in the threat domain vs. boosting status in an alternative domain	
Study 2A Field	Cars of golfers in Switzerland	H <sub>1</sub>	Ownership of an expensive vs. an inexpensive car	Display of car bumper stickers signaling status within threat domain vs. in alternative domains	
Study 2B Field	Boston Marathon runners	H <sub>1</sub>	Comparison to an owner of an expensive car	Intentions to display a car bumper sticker indicating completion of the Boston Marathon (“26.2”)	
Study 2C	Online respondents	H <sub>1</sub> , H <sub>2</sub>	Comparison to a winner of a major vs. minor monetary prize	Intentions to display car bumper stickers emphasizing alternative domains	Mediator: Motivated trade-off beliefs
Study 3	Online respondents	H <sub>1</sub> , H <sub>3</sub>	Comparison to a former classmate who is more vs. less professionally and financially successful	Choice of a mug (incentive-compatible) that highlights either: - Career (threat domain) - Friendships (alternative domain)	
Study 4A	Online respondents	H <sub>1</sub> , H <sub>3</sub> , H <sub>4</sub>	Comparison to a former classmate who is more vs. less professionally successful and makes more vs. less money	Choice of coffee tagline that highlights either: - Professional life (threat domain) - Friendships (alternative domain)	Moderator: Subjective attainability of high status in threat domain (manipulated)
Study 4B	Qualtrics panel of consumers with diverse income levels	H <sub>1</sub> , H <sub>3</sub> , H <sub>4</sub>	Comparison to a former classmate who does vs. does not have a very high income	1. Choice of photo for reunion website: - Professional LinkedIn picture - Social Facebook picture 2. Choice of a keychain (incentive-compatible) that highlights either: - Professional success (threat domain) - Friendships (alternative domain)	Moderator: Objective attainability of high status in threat domain (income)
Study 5A	Online respondents	H <sub>1</sub> , H <sub>3</sub> , H <sub>5</sub>	Giftng to a friend who is experiencing a status threat in academic performance	Giftng charms highlighting: - Professional life (threat domain) - Family and social life (alternative domain) - Neutral (control domain)	Moderator: Poor performance of the source of status threat in an alternative domain
Study 5B	Online respondents	H <sub>1</sub> , H <sub>2</sub> , H <sub>5</sub>	Status threat in academic performance	Interest in charms highlighting athletics (alternative domain)	- Mediator: Motivated trade-off beliefs - Moderator: Poor performance of the source of status threat in an alternative domain
Study 6	Qualtrics panel of working parents		Comparison (vs. no comparison) to successful former classmate	Perceived effectiveness of using iPhone covers highlighting: - Professional life (threat domain) - Parenthood (alternative domain)	

## **STUDY 1: EXPLORATORY NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF PIVOTING TO ALTERNATIVE DOMAINS**

This study examined posts on social media. We analyzed individuals' comments on a Quora.com discussion forum about how one should cope with status threat. We assessed whether in this natural environment individuals spontaneously mentioned motivated trade-off beliefs and recommended status pivoting to alternative domains that were associated with trade-offs. This unique real-world setting allowed us to assess the prevalence of the phenomenon, and since each Quora comment is ranked and rated by readers, we were able to assess the appeal of status pivoting to an alternative domain versus restoring status within the threat domain.

### ***Method***

We recorded and coded the comments posted in an online discussion on Quora.com, a popular user-generated platform that collects individuals' questions and answers about various topics. The examined discussion about how to cope with status threat was started by a Quora user, who asked: "How can you overcome your envy of people who are your age but are far more successful?" (retrieved on September 9, 2016). We focused on this specific Quora discussion thread because it examined a common status threat experienced by many people and therefore attracted numerous responses that allowed us to conduct a quantitative analysis and comparison of the responses. This question had a large number of responses compared to other queries (217 responses). Then, a research assistant, blind to the hypotheses, coded each post and recorded whether the post recommended coping with status threat by focusing on restoring status via: (1) the threat domain (professional and financial status), or (2) an alternative domain.

We included two additional measures that served as objective proxies of the appeal of these two coping strategies based on Quora's "views" and "upvotes" features. Users on the

platform can post responses, view other people's responses, and upvote ("like") responses. For each comment, a view is recorded if a user has viewed a feed for a period of time or clicked to expand it. Thus, the number of views represents the popularity and usefulness of the answer and measures users' revealed preferences, as it records actual viewing behavior and time spent on reading each post. Moreover, we recorded the number of upvotes (i.e., users' "likes") for each comment, which represents a more explicit endorsement of the post and its content. In addition, we coded the number of words in each post to control for the length of the posts.

## ***Results***

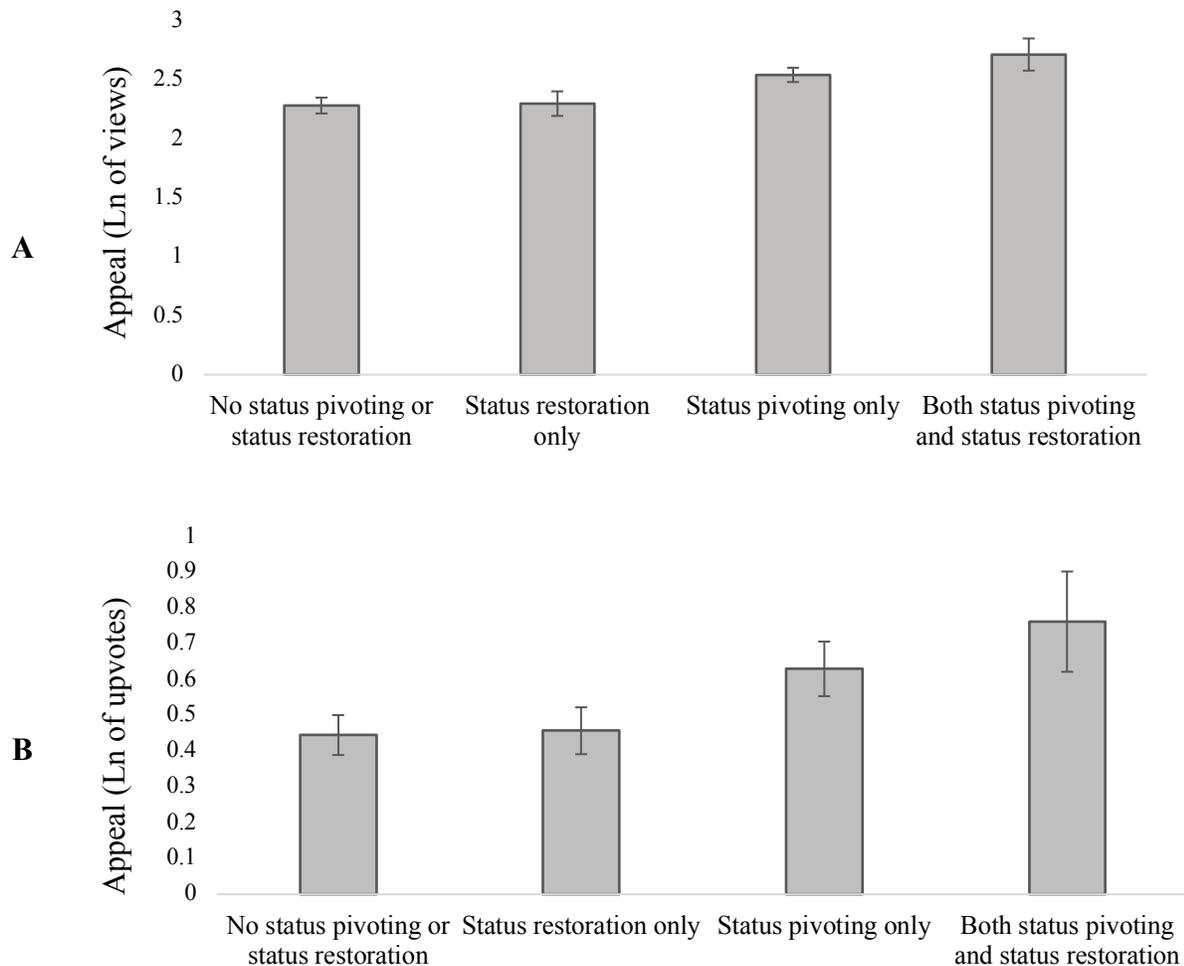
*Frequency of coping strategies.* 25.3% of the responses (55 responses) discussed coping by restoring status within the domain of the status threat (i.e., professional or financial status) and 48.8% (106 responses) discussed coping by pivoting to an alternative domain. These two groups included a small number of responses (8.8%, 19 responses) that mentioned both. The remaining responses (34.6%, 75 responses) were not related to either the domain of the threat or an alternative domain. A chi-square test confirmed that pivoting to an alternative domain was mentioned more frequently than restoring status within the threat domain ( $\chi^2 = 6.03, p = .014$ ).

*Appeal of coping strategies.* To account for skewed distributions of the views and upvotes data ( $M_{\text{views}} = 1,819.71, Med_{\text{views}} = 234; M_{\text{upvotes}} = 38.18, Med_{\text{upvotes}} = 2$ ), we log-transformed both variables for the analysis. First, a two-way ANOVA on post views with authors' recommendation to focus on alternative domains (yes vs. no) and recommendation to focus on the status threat domain (yes vs. no) as fixed factors revealed a significant effect of focusing on an alternative domain ( $F(1, 213) = 12.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .056$ ). The appeal of the strategy increased if posts recommended highlighting status in alternative domains ( $M = 2.57, SD = .57$ ) than if they did not ( $M = 2.29, SD = .59, d = .490$ ). The effects of advising the status

threat domain ( $F(1, 213) = .99, p = .320, \eta_p^2 = .005$ ) and of the interaction between mentions of alternative domains and the threat domain were not significant ( $F(1, 213) = .68, p = .409, \eta_p^2 = .003$ ). Importantly, the effect of advising alternative domains on the post's appeal was significant and positive both when restoration of status within the threat domain was mentioned ( $F(1, 53) = 5.70, p = .021, \eta_p^2 = .097$ ) and when it was not ( $F(1, 160) = 8.27, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .049$ ). In contrast, the effect of restoring status within the threat domain on the post's appeal was not significant when alternative domains were mentioned ( $F(1, 104) = 1.43, p = .234, \eta_p^2 = .014$ ) and when they were not ( $F(1, 109) = .02, p = .895, \eta_p^2 < .001$ ). These results held when controlling for authors' gender, length of post, sharing personal experience, and use of videos or images.

Second, a two-way ANOVA on users' upvotes with authors' recommendation to focus on alternative domains (yes vs. no) and recommendations to focus on the status threat domain (yes vs. no) as fixed factors revealed a significant effect of focusing on alternative domains ( $F(1, 213) = 7.66, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .035$ ): the appeal of the coping strategy increased when posts recommended restoring status in alternative domains ( $M = .65, SD = .61$ ) than when they did not ( $M = .45, SD = .47, d = .375$ ). The effect of restoring status within the threat domain on appeal was not significant ( $F(1, 213) = .66, p = .417, \eta_p^2 = .003$ ), and neither was the effect of the interaction ( $F(1, 213) = .46, p = .499, \eta_p^2 = .002$ ). The effect of recommending alternative domains on appeal was significant and positive when restoration of status within the threat domain was mentioned ( $F(1, 53) = 4.36, p = .042, \eta_p^2 = .076$ ) and when it was not ( $F(1, 160) = 4.47, p = .036, \eta_p^2 = .027$ ). The effect of focusing on the threat domain on appeal was not significant when alternative domains were mentioned ( $F(1, 104) = .73, p = .396, \eta_p^2 = .007$ ) and when they were not ( $F(1, 109) = .02, p = .901, \eta_p^2 < .001$ ). These results held when controlling for authors' gender, length of post, sharing personal experience, and use of videos or images.

**FIGURE 2**  
**STUDY 1: APPEAL OF STATUS PIVOTING TO ALTERNATIVE DOMAIN AND STATUS RESTORATION WITHIN THREAT DOMAIN (A: VIEWS; B: UPVOTES)**



*Domains of coping strategies.* To further assess the common alternative domains used for status pivoting, we coded which alternative domains were mentioned in the posts. The most common domain for status pivoting was personal relationships, popularity, and social life (32 posts, i.e., 30.2% mentioned these alternative domains for coping with status threat). For example, one user wrote, “The chairman of a company for which I once worked recalled that his early and large success alienated him from family and childhood friends.” Other domains for status pivoting included physical health (mentioned in 16 posts; i.e., 15.1% of posts) and mental wellness and lack of happiness (mentioned in 25 posts; i.e., 23.6%). For example, one user

wrote, “Celebrities and other wealthy also have heartbreak, divorce, abuse, even suicide. Life can be harder for them believe it or not because when you hit the heights & are still not happy, there’s no options,” and “the more successful guy has more stuff you don’t want like an illness or something else u don’t want.” Twenty-two posts (20.8%) mentioned personal character and moral values. For example, one user wrote, “Your successful peer may be more inauthentic than you, more willing to say things s/he doesn’t believe, more willing to hurt others [...] Your successful peer may be harder working or more clearly focused than you, more willing to give up other interests, other pleasures.” Some posts explicitly mentioned trade-offs, but could not be categorized in a specific life domain; for example, “If you know them well enough you would likely see that they are either failing miserably in certain portions of their life or they have had some awful events in the past you would rather avoid.”

### ***Discussion***

Study 1 provided evidence for status pivoting in a real-world natural setting. It showed that focusing on alternative domains in response to threat is not only common, but that it is also appealing. Additionally, Study 1 identified social life and physical and mental well-being as common alternative domains that people pivot to when threatened by upward comparisons to more successful peers.

Studies 2A-2C use a multi-method approach to examine how car bumper stickers can be used as a form of status pivoting. Specifically, we examine whether consumers who experience status threat resulting from upward comparisons to wealthy individuals may use car bumper stickers to display success and accomplishments in alternative domains (e.g., the “26.2” stickers that signal successfully completing a marathon run).

Study 2A is an observational study conducted in the field examining actual use of bumper stickers on cars. Study 2B is a field study with marathon runners. Study 2C is a controlled experiment manipulating upward comparison to a wealthy individual and demonstrating the mediating role of motivated trade-off beliefs.

### **STUDY 2A: STATUS PIVOTING AMONG GOLFERS IN SWITZERLAND**

The goal of this observational field study was to examine the use of car bumper stickers in status pivoting. Bumper stickers allow car owners to display a variety of achievement, values, interests, identities, and affiliations. For example, marathon runners often display the iconic “26.2” sticker on their car to signal that they have successfully completed a 26.2-mile marathon.

While owners of luxury cars are able to display their status by driving a conspicuously expensive car, owners of non-luxury cars may need to find alternative ways to display status, and may use car bumper stickers as a form of status pivoting—highlighting alternative life domains. Based on our pilot studies and Study 1, the alternative domains individuals pivot to (when experiencing status threat) often include personal relationships, activities, and values (such as emphasis on family, morality, and spirituality). Additionally, research on collectible experiences (Keinan and Kivetz 2011) suggests that accumulating memorable and unique non-vocational experiences (completing a race, engaging in extreme sports, visiting exotic travel destinations), may be an alternative way to enhance self-worth. We predicted that owners of non-luxury cars would be more likely to display car bumper stickers in alternative domains (i.e., highlighting relationships, values, and collectable experiences vs. wealth and financial status).

#### ***Method***

The study was conducted in Crans-Montana, one of Switzerland’s largest and most luxurious resort towns. Crans is described by the *New York Times* as “glamorous,” “swank and

stylish,” full of luxury boutiques and jewelry stores (Weinberger 1999). On the streets of Crans, it is very common to see expensive luxury cars such as Jaguars, Porsches, and Ferraris. Crans also has a long golfing tradition and is home of the 18-hole Severiano Ballesteros golf course.

The study examined cars that were parked in the visitor parking lots around the golf club. We analyzed 97 cars that had at least one bumper sticker, resulting in a total of 113 stickers. We coded the car brand and the content of the stickers. Car brands were coded as more expensive (i.e., luxury or premium brands: Audi, BMW, Jaguar, Land Rover, Lexus, Mercedes, Mini Cooper, Porsche, Volvo) or less expensive (i.e., mainstream brands: Chevrolet, Citroën, Corsa, Dacia, Ford, Fiat, Honda, Hyundai, Kia, Lancia, Masda, Mitsubishi, Peugeot, Renault, Smart, Subaru, Suzuki, Toyota, Volkswagen).

### ***Results and Discussion***

An analysis of sticker categories revealed three common categories: stickers related to golf which is traditionally linked to luxury and financial status, stickers related to collectable experiences (travel destinations, extreme sports, etc.), and stickers related to family, social causes, and spirituality. The collectable experiences stickers included travel destinations (e.g., Ireland, Cuba, Hawaii, Miami, St. Moritz, and Zermatt), extreme sports and other activities and events (e.g., diving, Swiss sliding, paragliding, wrestling, skiing, and snowboarding), and famous sport and music events (e.g., FIFA World Cup, music festivals, car racing, and Olympics). The family, social causes, and spirituality stickers included names of children, social causes, as well as religious symbols. See Figure 3 for examples of stickers in each of the three domains and Figure 4 for the proportion of stickers displayed on luxury and non-luxury cars that were classified in each of these three categories.

### **FIGURE 3: STUDY 2A – EXAMPLES OF CAR BUMPER STICKERS DISPLAYED ON CARS IN AFFLUENT GOLF RESORT TOWN OF CRANS-MONTANA**

### Within-Domain Status Signaling: Golf

**Jaguar**



**Mini Cooper**



**BMW**



### Across-Domain Status Signaling: Collectable Experiences

**Subaru**  
*Extreme sports*



**Volvo**  
*Music festival*



**Honda**  
*Travel destination*



### Across-Domain Status Signaling: Family, Social Causes, and Spirituality

**Ford**  
*Family*



**Suzuki**  
*Social causes*



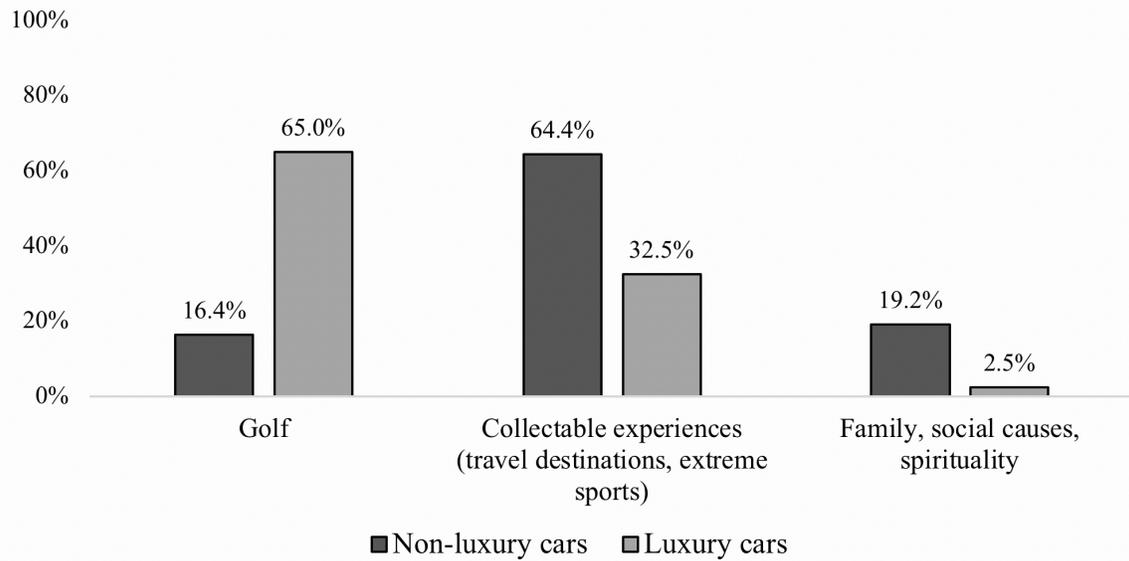
**Mitsubishi**  
*Spirituality*



As predicted, luxury car owners were less likely to signal their status in alternative domains. Stickers associated with alternative domains (collectable experiences as well as family, social causes, and spirituality) were more likely to be displayed on non-luxury rather than luxury cars, and stickers signaling status in the threat domain (golf associated with financial status) were more likely to be displayed on luxury rather than non-luxury cars. Specifically, stickers associated with alternative (vs. threat) domains were more likely to be displayed by owners of

non-luxury cars (alternative domains: 83.6% vs. threat domain: 16.4%) than by owners of luxury cars (alternative domains: 35.0% vs. threat domain: 65.0%;  $\chi^2(1) = 27.30, p < .001$ ).

**FIGURE 4: STUDY 2A – USING CAR BUMPER STICKERS TO SIGNAL STATUS IN ALTERNATIVE DOMAINS**



Consistent with our theorizing, Study 2A demonstrated that owners of less expensive cars are more likely to use and publicly display car bumper stickers that signal status in alternative domains to wealth. The study also suggested that bumper stickers are commonly used to conspicuously display achievement in alternative domains. This study thus provided correlational evidence for status pivoting. To demonstrate a causal relationship, in the next study we manipulate status threat and examine its impact on displaying status via car bumper stickers.

### **STUDY 2B: STATUS PIVOTING AMONG MARATHON RUNNERS**

In Study 2B, we sought to experimentally manipulate status threat (vs. control) and demonstrate its effect on status pivoting. Specifically, we examined whether consumers who experience status threat resulting from upward comparisons with wealthy individuals might use car bumper stickers to display success and accomplishments in alternative domains. The exploratory interviews that we conducted with undergraduate students mentioned in the

Theoretical section showed that people highlight races they participated in or will participate in to signal status, which, together with the results of Study 1, inspired us to further explore marathons and physical wellness as an alternative domain of status pivoting. Furthermore, the field setting of a marathon run allowed us to examine a population of consumers who have a salient relative strength in an alternative (non-wealth) domain. Thus, Study 2B examined Boston Marathon runners' intentions to use a real product ("26.2" sticker, which signals successfully completing the marathon) that they received as a reward for participation.

### ***Method***

We surveyed 74 marathon runners (40.6% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 45.1$ ) during the Boston Marathon pre-race exposition. Participants completed a survey while waiting in line to collect their marathon bib number to pin on their shirts. To manipulate status threat, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: status threat vs. control. In the status threat condition, runners were asked to think of someone they knew who had a very expensive car and to describe that car. In the control condition, they were not given any prompt and were not asked to make that upward comparison. The dependent variable was the intention to use and display a "26.2 Boston Marathon" sticker that respondents received for participation. A three-item scale measured interest in displaying the sticker (display sticker on the car, laptop, at work from 1 = "not interested at all" to 7 = "very interested";  $\alpha = .56$ ,  $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ).

### ***Results and Discussion***

Consistent with  $H_1$  and the notion of status pivoting, status threat increased participants' interest in displaying the marathon sticker; that is, signaling status in an alternative domain ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) compared to the control condition ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ,  $d = .474$ ;  $F(1,72) = 4.16$ ,  $p = .045$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .055$ ).

Study 2B demonstrated the status pivoting phenomenon in the field with a real product. In Study 2C, we further examine the effect of status threat on status pivoting and we test the mediating role of motivated beliefs about trade-offs across domains — specifically, the belief that greater wealth is negatively associated with success and performance in other life domains.

### **STUDY 2C: PROCESS BEHIND PIVOTING WITH CAR BUMPER STICKERS**

Study 2C had two goals. First, the study tested in a controlled setting how status threat arising from upward comparison to wealthy individuals impacts status pivoting, i.e., the display of products associated with alternative domains. Second, the study examined the mediating role of motivated trade-off beliefs.

#### ***Method***

We recruited 179 car owners (48.3% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.9$ ) on Amazon Mechanical Turk for a small payment. Participants were randomly assigned to a status threat (vs. no threat) condition. In the status threat condition, participants imagined that one of their coworkers had won a large amount of money (\$100,000) in a lottery. In the no threat condition, the coworker won a smaller amount of money (\$1,000). To measure motivated trade-off beliefs, after reading the scenario, participants indicated how likely wealth was to lead to problems in different life domains using a 5-item scale that captured the alternative domains mentioned by respondents in Study 1 (relationships with family, character and values, trusting people, spirituality, being nice and sincere; 1 = “extremely unlikely” to 7 = “extremely likely”; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .93$ ,  $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ). To measure status pivoting, participants indicated their interest in displaying bumper stickers on their cars (1 = “not at all” to 7 = “very much”;  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ). The domains of bumper stickers were based on Study 2A findings (“a race or a walk you participated in,” “favorite charity,” “spirituality or religion,” “social values”).

## **Results**

*Alternative status signaling: Bumper stickers.* An ANOVA on intention to display bumper stickers (averaged across the four stickers) with status threat (vs. no threat) as a fixed factor revealed a significant effect ( $F(1, 177) = 4.77, p = .030, \eta_p^2 = .026$ ). As expected (H<sub>1</sub>), participants were more interested in putting stickers that display alternative domains in the status threat ( $M = 2.98, SD = 1.77$ ) than in the control condition ( $M = 2.42, SD = 1.64, d = .33$ ).

*Process.* An ANOVA on motivated trade-off beliefs with status threat (vs. no threat) as a fixed factor revealed a significant effect ( $F(1, 177) = 65.25, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .269$ ). As expected (H<sub>2</sub>), participants in the status threat condition were more motivated to believe in trade-offs between wealth and other life domains ( $M = 4.03, SD = 1.15$ ) than participants in the no threat condition ( $M = 2.43, SD = 1.48, d = 1.21$ ). A mediation analysis (Model 4 in Process with 10,000 Bootstrap samples; Hayes 2013) revealed that motivated trade-off beliefs mediated the interest in displaying status in alternative domains ( $a \times b = .8421, SE = .1815, 95\% CI = [.4974 \text{ to } 1.2048]$ ).

## **Discussion**

Taken together, combining an observational study, a field study, and an experiment in a controlled setting, Studies 2A-2C supported H<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> by showing that status threat leads consumers to engage in status pivoting through displays of achievement in alternative domains and by showing the psychological process behind this effect (i.e., motivated trade-off beliefs).

Next, we examine how status threat impacts consumers' choice between status pivoting to an alternative domain and status restoration within the threat domain.

## **STUDY 3: INCENTIVE-COMPATIBLE CHOICE BETWEEN STATUS RESTORATION WITHIN THREAT DOMAIN AND STATUS PIVOTING TO ALTERNATIVE DOMAIN**

In Study 3, we explored how consumers cope with upward comparisons to peers who are professionally more successful than they are. Importantly, we measured the effect of status threat on preference for a product associated with one of two different domains: a product that emphasized the domain of the threat (professional success) and a product that emphasized an alternative domain (close relationships with family and friends). Consistent with H<sub>3</sub>, we predicted that status pivoting could be perceived as more appealing compared to status restoration within the threat domain.

### ***Method***

We recruited 203 participants (40.9% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.9$ ) on Amazon Mechanical Turk for a small payment. Participants imagined that they planned to attend their class reunion. In preparation for the reunion, they were looking through the latest news bulletin of their class. They were then randomly assigned to a status threat or a no threat condition. In the status threat condition, participants imagined that a former classmate whom they knew well during school was now more professionally successful than they were and made more money. In the no threat condition, they imagined that they were more professionally successful than a former classmate and made more money. Participants were asked to briefly describe this scenario.

Participants then entered a raffle to win a mug. They saw pictures of two mugs in counterbalanced order and were asked to choose the mug they would like to receive if they won the raffle. Specifically, participants chose between a mug with the slogan “Keep Calm and Back to Work” (highlighting the threat domain; 36.5%) and a mug with the slogan “Keep Calm and Be a Friend” (highlighting an alternative domain; 63.5%) (see Web Appendix A).

After data collection was completed, three participants were randomly selected to whom their preferred mug was shipped.

## ***Results***

A chi-square test revealed that the choice of a mug with a slogan associated with an alternative (vs. threat) domain was higher in the status threat (70.1%) than in the no threat condition (54.7%;  $\chi^2(1) = 5.10, p = .024$ ).

## ***Discussion***

Study 3 supported H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>3</sub>, demonstrating that status threat leads consumers to engage in status pivoting. Furthermore, if given the opportunity, consumers prefer to emphasize status in an alternative domain rather than the threat domain.

Studies 4A and 4B examine when consumers are more likely to react to status threat by displaying success and accomplishments in alternative domains. Specifically, they test the moderating role of attainability of high status in the domain of the status threat.

### **STUDY 4A: MODERATING ROLE OF SUBJECTIVE ATTAINABILITY OF HIGH STATUS IN THREAT DOMAIN**

In Studies 4A and 4B, we sought to examine the moderating role of attainability of higher status in the domain of the status threat. We predicted that when success and higher status in the domain of the status threat is perceived to be unachievable, consumers would be more likely to demonstrate their success in an alternative domain (i.e., to engage in status pivoting; H<sub>4</sub>). However, when success and high status within the threat domain is perceived to be within reach, consumers may be less likely to engage in status pivoting.

Study 4A examines the moderating effect of subjective attainability of high status in the threat domain. We manipulated the extent to which consumers perceived success in the domain of the status threat to be attainable or unattainable. We predicted that boosting perceptions of status attainability in the domain of the status threat would decrease status pivoting (H<sub>4</sub>).

## ***Method***

We recruited 355 participants (36.2% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.7$ ) on Amazon Mechanical Turk for a small payment. Similar to Study 3, participants imagined that they planned to attend their class reunion. In preparation for the reunion, they were looking through the latest news bulletin about their class. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In the no threat condition, participants did not compare themselves to a former classmate. In the status threat condition, participants imagined that a former classmate whom they had known well during high school was now more professionally successful than they were and made more money. The status unattainability (vs. attainability) conditions additionally stated that the participant would never be able to achieve (vs. with hard work would be able to achieve) what that classmate had accomplished. Participants were asked to briefly describe the meeting with the classmate.

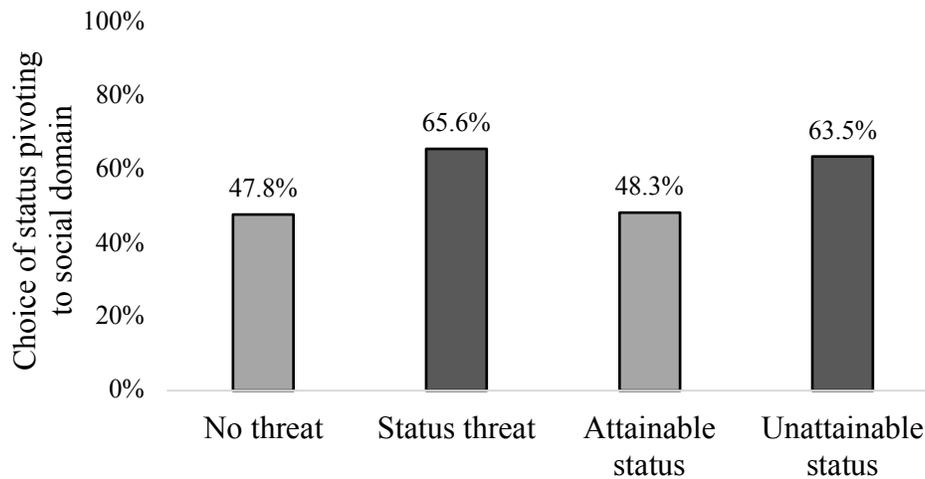
Afterward, participants moved to an unrelated task, in which they were asked to help a new coffee brand called “Original Coffee” choose a tagline that would increase sales. The brand was described as slightly more expensive than the average coffee brand. Specifically, participants were asked to choose between two taglines for the brand’s ads: “Original Coffee. The smell of success” (highlighting the domain of the status threat;  $M = 43.7\%$ ) and “Original Coffee. Brings people together” (highlighting an alternative domain;  $M = 56.3\%$ ).

## ***Results***

First, a chi-square test comparing the choice of a tagline that highlighted status pivoting (vs. restoration within the threat domain) across the four conditions revealed a significant effect of the condition ( $\chi^2(3) = 10.00, p = .019$ ). Participants were more likely to choose the pivoting tagline in the status threat (65.6%) than in the control condition (47.8%,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.92, p = .015$ ), and more likely to choose the pivoting tagline when high status in the domain of the threat was

unattainable (63.5%) than when it was attainable (48.3%,  $\chi^2 (1) = 4.06, p = .044$ ). As predicted and shown in Figure 5, the choice share of the pivoting tagline was not significantly different between the status threat and unattainable conditions ( $\chi^2 (1) = .08, p = .774$ ), or between the control and attainable conditions ( $\chi^2 (1) = .004, p = .947$ ).

**FIGURE 5**  
**STUDY 4A: MODERATING ROLE OF MANIPULATED STATUS ATTAINABILITY**



To further test the impact of the status threat manipulation and the mitigating impact of perceived status attainability, we conducted a binary logistic regression with tagline choice (coded as 1 when the tagline highlighted status pivoting vs. 0 when it highlighted within-domain status restoration) as the dependent variable. To test our theoretical predictions, we created three dummy variables that served as predictors (dummy1 coded as .5 for the status threat and unattainable threat conditions, which we expected to not differ from each other, vs. -.5 for the control and attainable threat conditions, which we expected to not differ from each other; dummy2 coded as .5 for the status threat condition vs. -.5 for the unattainable threat condition with the remaining two conditions coded as 0; dummy3 coded as .5 for the control condition vs. -.5 for the attainable threat condition with the remaining two conditions coded as 0).

The results revealed a significant effect of dummy1 ( $b = .68$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $Wald = 9.76$ ,  $p = .002$ ; 64.6% chose the pivoting tagline across the status threat and unattainable threat conditions vs. 48.0% chose it across the control and attainable threat conditions). There were no significant effects of dummy2 ( $b = .09$ ,  $SE = .31$ ,  $Wald = .08$ ,  $p = .774$ , indicating no difference between the status threat and unattainable threat conditions) and dummy3 ( $b = -.02$ ,  $SE = .30$ ,  $Wald = .004$ ,  $p = .947$ , indicating no difference between the control and attainable threat conditions; Figure 5).

### ***Discussion***

Study 4A corroborated the results of our previous studies demonstrating the effect of status threat (vs. no threat) on status pivoting (vs. status restoration within the threat domain) ( $H_1$ ,  $H_3$ ). Importantly, it further investigated the conditions under which status pivoting is likely to occur. Specifically, perceiving the success of the higher status person within the domain of the threat as attainable can attenuate the effect of status threat on status pivoting and lead consumers to signal status where they believe they can potentially shine – in the domain of the status threat. In contrast, perceiving the success of the higher status person within the domain of the threat as unattainable can increase status pivoting, leading consumers to signal status in alternative domains where they believe they can shine more brightly ( $H_4$ ).

### **STUDY 4B: MODERATING ROLE OF ACTUAL ATTAINABILITY OF HIGH STATUS IN THREAT DOMAIN (INCOME)**

The goal of Study 4B was to further investigate  $H_4$  by testing the moderating role of objective (measured) attainability of high status in the threat domain. Specifically, consumers' perceptions of attainability of high status within the financial domain may be shaped by their actual income. Therefore, Study 4B examined how consumers' income level may shape how

they choose to signal status. To test the moderating role of income meaningfully, we surveyed a panel of US consumers with wide-ranging incomes.

### ***Method***

We recruited 236 Qualtrics Panelists ( $M_{\text{age}} = 48.6$ ) in exchange for a small payment. Since the product stimulus (beer bottle opener) featured in this study was targeted at men, we recruited only male participants. Importantly, participants were specifically recruited to represent variations in annual income levels (i.e., to be proportionately distributed across income brackets spanning from “under \$20,000” to “over \$150,000”;  $M = \$86,229$ ,  $SD = \$51,274$ ).

Similar to Studies 3 and 4A, participants imagined that they were planning to attend their class reunion. In preparation for the reunion, they were looking through the reunion website and saw a former classmate whom they recognized from high school. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the status threat condition, participants imagined that this former classmate had a successful career and a very high income. In the no threat condition, they imagined that this former classmate had a steady job and a stable income. Participants were asked to briefly describe this scenario.

Participants were then asked to indicate their product preferences in two categories. First, they read that the reunion organizers were asking attendees to provide a profile picture for the reunion website, and participants were asked to choose between two options for their online profile picture: “a picture with friends (the kind of picture you would put on Facebook)” (highlighting an alternative domain; 59.3%) versus “a professional picture (the kind of picture you would put on LinkedIn)” (highlighting the domain of the status threat; 40.7%). The order of options was counterbalanced (order did not impact the results and is therefore not discussed further). Second, participants were informed that they would be entered in a raffle to win a

keychain featuring a beer bottle opener. Participants chose between two engravings that would be displayed on the keychain if they were to win the raffle: “Cheers! To good times with friends” (highlighting an alternative domain; 64.4%) versus “Cheers! To success” (highlighting the domain of the threat; 35.6%) (See Web Appendix A). The order of options was counterbalanced (order did not impact the results and is therefore not discussed further). After data collection was completed, one participant was randomly chosen to whom their preferred keychain was shipped.

At the end of the study, participants indicated their income (from 1 = “under \$20,000” to 15 = “over \$150,000”).

## **Results**

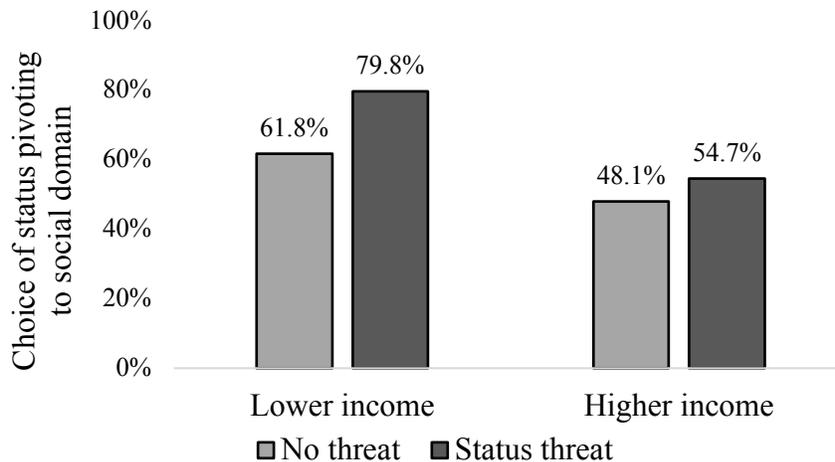
To analyze the impact of the status threat manipulation and income on product choice across the two categories (profile picture and keychain), we collapsed the data across the two choices and created an index for product category. This allowed us to analyze the impact of product category in addition to the effects of the status threat manipulation and income measure. We additionally report the results for each product.

We conducted a binary logistic regression on product choice (coded as 1 for status pivoting and 0 for within-domain status restoration) with status threat (coded as -.5 for no threat and .5 for threat), income (mean-centered), category index (coded as -.5 for profile picture and .5 for keychain), and all interactions as predictors. The choice of status pivoting (i.e., choice of a product that highlights an alternative domain vs. the threat domain) was significantly higher in the status threat ( $M = 68.3\%$ ,  $SD = 46.6\%$ ) than in the no threat condition ( $55.8\%$ ,  $SD = 49.8\%$ ,  $b = .64$ ,  $Wald = 9.66$ ,  $p = .002$ ; picture:  $67.0\%$  vs.  $52.1\%$ ,  $b = .71$ ,  $p = .012$ ; keychain:  $69.6\%$  vs.  $59.5\%$ ,  $b = .57$ ,  $p = .058$ ). The effect of income was significant and negative ( $b = -.10$ ,  $Wald = 24.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ; picture:  $b = -.08$ ,  $p = .005$ ; keychain:  $b = -.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicating that

consumers with lower (vs. higher) income (for whom high status in the threat domain is less attainable) were more likely to engage in status pivoting.

The coefficient of the status threat  $\times$  income interaction was negative ( $b = -.11$ ,  $Wald = 7.20$ ,  $p = .007$ ; picture:  $b = -.13$ ,  $p = .019$ ; keychain:  $b = -.09$ ,  $p = .137$ ). Consistent with  $H_4$ , the floodlight (Johnson-Neyman) analysis (Spiller et al. 2013) revealed that status threat increased status pivoting over no threat at annual income levels below \$107,768 ( $b_{jn} = .4057$ ,  $SE = .2070$ ,  $t = 1.96$ ,  $p = .05$ ; picture: \$98,650,  $b_{jn} = .5510$ ,  $p = .05$ ; keychain: \$82,823,  $b_{jn} = .5960$ ,  $p = .05$ ), but it did not impact preference for status pivoting among wealthier individuals with annual incomes above \$107,768. The effects of product category were not significant ( $b$ 's  $< |.25|$ ,  $Wald$ 's  $< |1.43|$ ,  $p$ 's  $> .232$ ) indicating that the effect of status threat on pivoting did not differ across products (though it was stronger for the first DV that participants completed – choice of profile picture). Figure 6 illustrates the results for consumers in lower-income (below \$100,000) and higher-income (\$100,000 or higher) brackets (Hoffower 2020).

**FIGURE 6**  
**STUDY 4B: MODERATING ROLE OF OBJECTIVE STATUS ATTAINABILITY**



### **Discussion**

Study 4B corroborated  $H_1$  and  $H_3$  using different products that signal status in person as well as online, by showing that status threat boosts consumers' preference for status pivoting

over status restoration within the threat domain. Importantly, Study 4B supported H<sub>4</sub> by demonstrating that consumers' actual ability to attain high status within the threat domain attenuates the effect: when high status within the domain of the threat is harder to attain, consumers are more likely to engage in status pivoting by demonstrating their success and accomplishments in alternative domains. Studies 5A and 5B examine the role of externally highlighting others' poor performance in the alternative domain.

### **STUDY 5A: HIGHLIGHTING TRADE-OFFS AND RULING OUT ALTERNATIVE**

In Studies 5A-B, to further examine the role of motivated trade-off beliefs in driving status pivoting and test this process through moderation, we experimentally manipulated the salience of trade-off beliefs. We predicted that highlighting trade-offs between the domain of the status threat and an alternative domain would boost consumers' likelihood to demonstrate accomplishments in the alternative domain (H<sub>5</sub>).

In Studies 5A-B, we tested this prediction by examining consumers' choice of Pandora bracelet charms associated with different life domains. The Pandora jewelry brand offers a wide variety of charms symbolizing different aspects of life, including professional accomplishments charms, social relationships charms, and athletics and sports charms (<https://us.pandora.net/>) which people tend to identify as alternative domains. In Study 5A, we examined if experiencing status threat in the professional domain would lead individuals to choose charms associated with the alternative domain of social relationships. In Study 5B, we further examined whether status threat would lead individuals to choose charms associated with athletics.

To rule out an alternative explanation of escapism (i.e., individuals' attempt to merely distract themselves from thinking about status threat), Study 5A also gave participants an opportunity to choose neutral charms that were not associated with either the professional or the

social domain. We predicted that social relationship charms would be more appealing for coping with status threat than both professional charms and neutral charms, because relationship charms allow consumers to emphasize and display success in an alternative domain that is commonly traded off against the threat domain. Examining this additional neutral domain was therefore important, as it would allow us to test whether status pivoting is appealing because it emphasizes and displays one's superiority in an alternative domain as we predicted, or merely because it allows consumers to escape the status threat.

Finally, to generalize the phenomenon to other consumption contexts, Study 5A tested our conceptualization in a gift-giving scenario. Consumers may use status pivoting not only in personal lives but also to help others cope with status threat that they experience.

### ***Method***

We recruited 180 women ( $M_{age} = 35$ ) on Amazon Mechanical Turk for a small payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: no threat, status threat, and status threat with manipulated trade-off beliefs. All participants imagined that they had a friend who had recently enrolled in a professional course. In the no threat condition, participants read that their friend was doing very well. In the two status threat conditions, participants read that their friend "feels disadvantaged compared to her classmates because they seem more competent and accomplished than her." In the status threat with the manipulated trade-off beliefs condition, participants additionally read: "Most of her classmates do not have any personal obligations, and do not seem to have a rewarding family or social life."

After reading the scenario, participants reviewed a list of nine bracelet charms and indicated how likely they would be to choose each of the charms as a gift for their friend. The list included three charms associated with the alternative domain of social relationships ("best

friends,” “heart of the family,” and “friendship;” from 1 = “extremely unlikely” to 7 = “extremely likely”;  $\alpha = .69$ ,  $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ), three charms associated with the threat domain (i.e., competence and class accomplishments: “graduation hat,” “A+ student,” and “curious cat;”  $\alpha = .51$ ,  $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ), and three neutral charms to test the alternative escapism explanation (“sunburst,” “layers of lace,” and “water drops;”  $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ). The charms’ pictures and names were adopted from Pandora’s website and presented to participants in counterbalanced order. Order did not impact the results.

## **Results**

*Status pivoting (gifting in an alternative domain associated with motivated trade-offs).* A UNIANOVA on the relationship charms with status threat (no threat vs. status threat vs. status threat plus manipulated trade-off beliefs) as a fixed factor revealed a significant effect ( $F(2,177) = 12.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .125$ ). Status threat increased purchase interest for the relationship charms ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) over the no threat condition ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ;  $p = .028$ ;  $d = .397$ ). Moreover, highlighting poor performance of the high-status person in an alternative domain increased purchase interest for the relationship charms ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) compared to the no threat condition ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .912$ ) and the status threat condition ( $p = .011$ ,  $d = .484$ ).

*Status restoration (gifting in the domain of the status threat).* A UNIANOVA on the professional charms with status threat (no threat vs. status threat vs. status threat plus manipulated trade-off beliefs) as a fixed factor revealed a non-significant effect ( $F(2,177) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .267$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .015$ ). Specifically, the effect of status threat on purchase interest for the professional charms ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) was not significant compared to the no threat condition ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ;  $p = .362$ ;  $d = .171$ ). The effect of highlighting motivated trade-

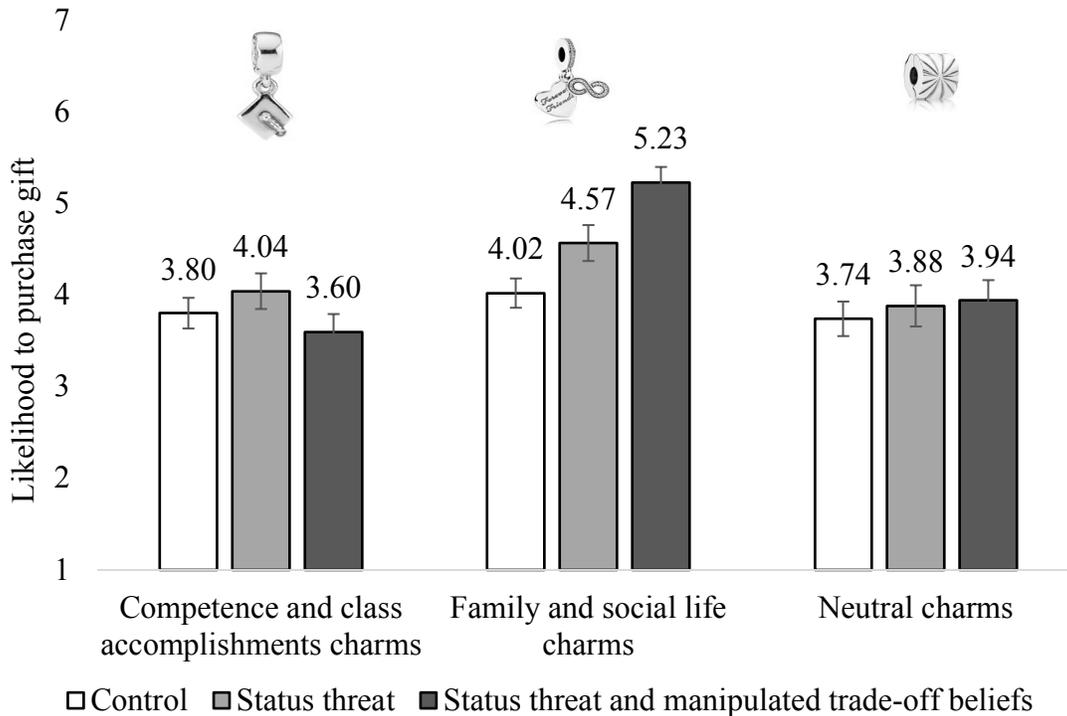
off beliefs ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) was not significant compared to the no threat condition ( $p = .418$ ,  $d = .142$ ) or the status threat condition ( $p = .105$ ,  $d = .308$ ).

*Escapism (gifting in a neutral domain).* A UNIANOVA on the neutral charms with status threat (no threat vs. status threat vs. status threat plus manipulated trade-off beliefs) as a fixed factor revealed a non-significant effect ( $F(2,177) = .26$ ,  $p = .774$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ ). The effect of status threat on purchase interest for the neutral charms ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) was not significant compared to the no threat condition ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ;  $p = .635$ ;  $d = .089$ ). The effect of highlighting motivated trade-off beliefs ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) was not significant compared to the no threat condition ( $p = .491$ ,  $d = .122$ ) or the status threat condition ( $p = .853$ ,  $d = .035$ ).

*Status restoration vs. escapism vs. status pivoting.* To compare the effect of status threat on consumption in the threat, alternative, and neutral domains, we conducted a mixed-design analysis, using the status threat manipulation as a between-subjects factor and charm type as a within-subjects factor. The analysis revealed a non-significant main effect of the threat manipulation ( $F(2,177) = 2.32$ ,  $p = .101$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .026$ ), a significant main effect of charm type ( $F(1,177) = 36.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .172$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(2,177) = 5.90$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .063$ ). Planned contrasts demonstrated that purchase interest for the relationship charms was greater than purchase interest for the professional charms both in the status threat condition ( $F(1, 177) = 5.27$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .077$ ) and in the manipulated trade-off beliefs condition ( $F(1, 177) = 56.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .492$ ), but the difference was not significant in the no threat condition ( $F(1, 177) = 1.23$ ,  $p = .269$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .031$ ), indicating that status threat increased status signaling in the alternative domain compared to status signaling within the threat domain. Similarly, purchase interest for the relationships charms was greater than purchase interest for the neutral charms both in the status threat condition ( $F(1, 177) = 8.97$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .145$ ) and

in the manipulated trade-off beliefs condition ( $F(1, 177) = 35.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .370$ ), but this difference was not significant in the no threat condition ( $F(1, 177) = 2.03, p = .156, \eta_p^2 = .031$ ), indicating that consumers purchase charms that are associated with an alternative domain because they want to signal status in an alternative way, and not because they want to simply avoid the domain of the threat. The difference between purchase interest for the professional and neutral charms was not significant in any condition ( $F$ 's  $< 2.53, p$ 's  $> .113$ ). Figure 7 shows the results.

**FIGURE 7**  
**STUDY 5A: EFFECT OF STATUS THREAT (VS. NO THREAT AND HIGHLIGHTING TRADE-OFFS) ON STATUS PIVOTING, STATUS RESTORATION, AND ESCAPISM**



### ***Discussion***

This study examined status pivoting in the context of helping others cope with status threat. It demonstrated that when consumers want to help someone who is experiencing status threat in professional life, they are more likely to buy this person a gift associated with success in

an alternative domain (i.e., social life) so as to enable this person to emphasize and display their superiority in the alternative domain.

This study also demonstrated that this effect goes beyond escapism or a desire to distract oneself from the threat. The opportunity to engage in consumption in another domain unrelated to the threat, which is also unrelated to motivated trade-off beliefs, may allow consumers to escape the domain of the threat (professional success), but it does not necessarily give them the opportunity to restore their self-worth by signaling status in an alternative domain. This study shows that consumers prefer to emphasize success in an alternative domain in which the individual fares favorably compared to the source of the threat, rather than escape the threat, because they are motivated to believe that successful people are likely to be lacking in this domain. Furthermore, this motivated belief about trade-offs that successful people endure across domains drives consumption choices. The context of gifting highlights the important goal behind status pivoting: boosting status through consumption of products associated with domains in which the individual fares more favorably.

Study 5B examines the moderating effect of experimentally highlighting trade-offs in the context of choosing products associated with alternative domains for self, rather than others (gifting). Study 5B also tests the process behind this moderating effect through mediation.

#### **STUDY 5B: PROCESS BEHIND EFFECT OF HIGHLIGHTING TRADE-OFFS**

In Study 5B, we further tested the psychological process in two ways. First, we examined the role of trade-off beliefs in mediating the effect of status threat on status pivoting. Second, we examined the impact of experimentally highlighting trade-offs. To do so, we tested whether highlighting the poor performance of the higher status person in the athletic domain would lead consumers to choose Pandora charms associated with athletics and sports (which our Study 1 and

Pilot showed carries a trade-off with the professional domain). We predicted that athletics charms would be more appealing when experiencing status threat ( $H_1$ ), and even more so when the higher status person's poor athletics performance was highlighted ( $H_5$ ). This would be explained by motivated trade-off beliefs ( $H_2$ ).

### ***Method***

We recruited 479 women ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.6$ ) on Amazon Mechanical Turk for a small payment. In a similar scenario to Study 5A, participants imagined that they had recently enrolled in a professional course. They then were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: no threat, status threat, and status threat with manipulated trade-off beliefs. In the no threat condition, participants read that they were doing very well. In the two status threat conditions, participants read that they “feel disadvantaged compared to classmates because they seem more competent and accomplished than you.” In the status threat with the manipulated trade-off beliefs condition, participants additionally read: “Most of your classmates do not lead a healthy lifestyle and do not seem to be in good physical shape.”

After reading the scenario, participants imagined they owned a bracelet to which they wanted to add charms. They indicated how interested they would be in three charms associated with the alternative domain of physical fitness (“yoga master,” “freestyle skater,” and “sports fan”);  $\alpha = .59$ ,  $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). The charms' pictures and names were adopted from Pandora's website and presented to participants in counterbalanced order. Once again, order did not impact the results and is not discussed further.

To measure the mediating role of motivated trade-off beliefs, participants evaluated how likely professional and financial success would be to lead to problems in other life domains, using a 5-item scale from Study 1C adapted to fitness for the scenario (relationships with family

and friends, character and values, being nice and sincere, spirituality, and physical health and wellness – listed in counterbalanced order;  $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ).

## **Results**

*Status pivoting (interest in charms associated with an alternative domain).* A UNIANOVA on the athletic charms with status threat (no threat vs. status threat vs. status threat plus manipulated trade-off beliefs) as a fixed factor revealed a significant effect ( $F(2,476) = 8.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .036$ ). As expected, status threat increased purchase interest for the athletics charms ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) over the no threat condition ( $M = 1.62$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ;  $p = .052$ ;  $d = .246$ ). Moreover, highlighting poor performance of the high-status person in an alternative domain increased purchase interest for the athletics charms ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) compared to the no threat condition ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .457$ ) and the status threat condition ( $p = .019$ ,  $d = .244$ ).

*Motivated trade-off beliefs.* An ANOVA on the motivated trade-off beliefs scale with the status threat manipulation as a fixed factor revealed a significant effect ( $F(2,476) = 14.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .059$ ), indicating that status threat motivated people to believe in trade-offs between the domain of the threat and an alternative domain ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) compared to the no threat condition ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .315$ ). Moreover, highlighting poor performance of the high-status person in the alternative domain further strengthened motivated trade-off beliefs ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) compared to the no threat condition ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = .618$ ) and the status threat condition ( $p = .008$ ,  $d = .305$ ).

We conducted two mediation analyses (Model 4 in Process with 10,000 Bootstrap samples; Hayes 2013). The first analysis confirmed that consumers' motivated trade-off beliefs mediated the effect of status threat (coded as .5 for threat vs. -.5 for no threat) on their purchase interest for charms associated with an alternative domain ( $a \times b = .0530$ ,  $SE = .0295$ , 95%  $CI =$

[.0078 to .1209]). The second analysis confirmed that measured motivated trade-off beliefs also mediated the effect of highlighting trade-offs (coded as .5 when trade-off was highlighted following threat vs. -.5 when trade-off was not highlighted following threat) on purchase interest in an alternative domain ( $a \times b = .0633$ ,  $SE = .0358$ , 95%  $CI = [.0083$  to  $.1449]$ ).

### ***Discussion***

Studies 5A-B further confirmed that when consumers can choose among different routes and domains to signal status, they prefer to demonstrate their accomplishment and success in an alternative domain to the domain of the threat (Study 5A: H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>3</sub>), because it strengthens their belief that status and success in one domain comes at the cost of alternative domains (Study 5B: H<sub>2</sub>). Furthermore, when poor performance of the higher status individual in an alternative domain is highlighted, consumers' motivation to believe in trade-offs between the domain of the threat and alternative domains and their tendency to engage in status pivoting is further strengthened (both studies: H<sub>5</sub>).

### **STUDY 6: PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IN ALTERNATIVE DOMAIN**

Study 6 sought to test the perceived effectiveness of conspicuously displaying products associated with success and accomplishment within the threat domain versus in an alternative domain. We used family life as an alternative domain in this study because in our interviews (Pilots), we consistently found that when consumers experience status threat stemming from upward comparison to a more affluent and professionally successful individual, they are motivated to highlight a trade-off between these domains. Specifically, they are motivated to believe that achieving financial and professional success comes at the cost of making sacrifices in family life and relationships. While in previous studies we found status pivoting to be more

appealing than within-domain status restoration, in Study 6, we examined whether this strategy is also perceived to be more effective. Indeed, prior studies suggest that within-domain status restoration may not always be effective (Lisjak et al. 2015; Rustagi and Shrum 2019). Building on Goor et al. (2020), who showed that iPhone covers are commonly used to conspicuously display status and success in the financial domain, in Study 6 we explored whether it can also be effective in displaying success and accomplishments in alternative domains.

### ***Method***

We recruited 502 working parents (55.0% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 39.7$ ) on Prolific Academic for a small payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the no threat condition, participants read that they were planning to attend their high-school reunion and were looking through the latest news bulletin of their class. In the threat condition, participants also read that the bulletin featured one of their former classmates as the most successful professional of the year. Participants were asked to describe what it would be like to attend the reunion.

Afterwards, participants were presented with two iPhone covers each of which featured a slogan: one “BEST MOM EVER! SO LUCKY YOU’RE MY MOM!” for women and “BEST DAD EVER! SO LUCKY YOU’RE MY DAD” for men, highlighting an alternative to the status threat domain; the other slogan stated “BEST JOB EVER! CONGRATS ON YOUR SUCCESS!!” for all participants, highlighting the domain of the status threat (see Figure 8). For each phone cover, participants indicated whether displaying the cover at the reunion would make them feel better or worse about their life (from 1 = “worse about my life” to 7 = “better about my life”; parent cover:  $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ; job cover:  $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ).

**FIGURE 8: STUDY 6 – IPHONE COVERS HIGHLIGHTING ALTERNATIVE DOMAIN (A: PARENTHOOD) VS. THREAT DOMAIN (B: PROFESSIONAL LIFE)**

**(A)**

**(B)**

Female stimuli



Male stimuli



## Results

We conducted a mixed-factorial analysis on coping effectiveness with product (cover slogan) as a within-subjects factor and threat and gender as between-subjects factors. The results revealed a significant main effect of product ( $F(1,498) = 275.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .356$ ), indicating that on average a cover associated with an alternative domain overall had a more positive impact on coping effectiveness ( $M = 5.53, SD = 1.36$ ) compared to a cover associated with the threat domain ( $M = 4.35, SD = 1.34$ ). There was also a significant main effect of the threat manipulation ( $F(1, 498) = 9.46, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .019$ ).

Importantly, the product  $\times$  status threat interaction was significant ( $F(1,498) = 5.13, p = .024, \eta_p^2 = .010$ ) demonstrating that the effect of status threat on coping effectiveness differed across the domain of the threat versus the alternative domain. More specifically, the status threat

( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) significantly decreased perceived coping effectiveness over no threat ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) when consumers used the cover associated with the threat domain (job cover:  $F(1, 498) = 11.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .029$ ). However, status threat did not lower perceived coping effectiveness ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) over no threat ( $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), when consumers used the cover associated with the alternative domain (parenting cover:  $F(1, 498) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .238$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ ). This indicates that focusing on the status threat domain to signal status may have negative consequences for consumers' well-being. However, focusing on an alternative to the threat domain to signal status may help consumers maintain positive levels of well-being, similar to well-being levels when they are not threatened.

Notably, the mixed-factorial analysis revealed a significant product  $\times$  gender interaction ( $F(1, 498) = 8.49$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .017$ ), suggesting that the appeal of the two types of phone covers and domains differed across men and women. The parenting domain was significantly more satisfying to women ( $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) than men ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ;  $F(1, 498) = 6.27$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .015$ ), whereas the professional domain was equally satisfying to men ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) and women ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ;  $F(1, 498) = .27$ ,  $p = .606$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ ). Importantly, the three-way product  $\times$  status threat  $\times$  gender interaction was non-significant ( $F(1, 498) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .316$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ ). This indicated that men and women consistently perceived status pivoting to parenting to be more effective in helping them cope with status threat than status restoration within the professional domain.

## ***Discussion***

Study 6 demonstrated that status pivoting is a valuable strategy to signal status because it minimizes the negative impact of status threat on consumer well-being. Thus, status pivoting

allows consumers to efficiently boost their status in a domain in which they may fare more favorably and consequently helps them feel less impacted by the initial threat to their status.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Whereas most prior consumer research on status threats and status consumption focuses on the consumption of luxuries and high-status products to compensate in the domain of the threat, our research addresses a recent call for research on how consumers cope with threat, different coping mechanisms, their unexplored drivers and impact on consumption (Campbell et al. 2020; Lisjak et al. 2015; Mandel et al. 2017; Salerno et al. 2019; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011). We examine the appeal of boosting status in an alternative domain (i.e., status pivoting) rather than restoring status within the threat domain. We show that when consumers experience a status threat, they are motivated to believe in trade-offs across domains (i.e., that the higher status person's success in one domain comes at the cost of failure in another domain) and prefer to display products associated with success and accomplishments in these alternative domains. Further, we find that consumers' subjective and objective ability to attain high status within the threat domain attenuates status pivoting. Finally, consumers perceive status pivoting to be more effective than within-domain status restoration in coping with status threat.

We provide support for the status pivoting phenomenon using a mixed-method approach that combines field and lab experiments, incentive-compatible choice designs, netnographic analysis, qualitative interviews, as well as an analysis of posts on social media. The results are robust across consumption contexts, product categories, and participant populations such as Boston Marathon runners, consumers in Monaco, and members of an online discussion forum. Combining different techniques, including standard and non-standard methods, allows us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the status pivoting phenomenon (Inman et al. 2018).

### ***Theoretical Implications and Directions for Future Research***

Our findings contribute to two streams of research: (1) the literature on status threats and symbolic consumption and (2) the literature on lay theories and cost-benefit heuristics.

First, our research contributes to emerging work on various strategies to cope with status threat (Mandel et al. 2017) by directly comparing the appeal of two important strategies – status restoration within the threat domain (symbolic self-completion according to Mandel et al. 2017) and status pivoting to an alternative domain (fluid consumption). Future research should further compare and contrast the appeal of additional coping strategies (e.g., acceptance of inferiority, self-compassion). It would also be interesting to explore the social legitimacy and observer perceptions of different coping mechanisms. For example, additional exploration of the netnographic data collected for Study 1 suggests that social media users were more likely to focus on poor performance of the source of the threat in alternative life domains when these users had an anonymous profile as opposed to when they were identified by a photo or a name. This suggests that while such coping strategies may be appealing and effective, they may be less socially acceptable and legitimate. The potential lower social legitimacy of this coping strategy may explain why it may have been understudied in prior research. For that reason, employing innovative methodologies such as exploring anonymous social media posts and their views by other social media members may prove fruitful in investigating different coping strategies. More importantly, the analysis of the views and likes of posts about coping strategies can be useful for future work that examines the prevalence and effectiveness of different coping strategies.

Notably, in our studies, we find that consumers generally prefer status pivoting over status restoration within the domain of threat. However, the relative appeal of different coping strategies in general, and status pivoting in particular, could depend on – and even reverse – as a

function of certain characteristics of the situation as well as characteristics of consumers, such as self-esteem (Kristofferson et al. 2018; Vohs and Heatherton 2001), self-compassion (Neff 2003), self-complexity (Linville 1987), just-world beliefs (Rubin and Peplau 1975), political ideology (Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018), and need for uniqueness (Tian 2001). For example, consumers who have a strong need to feel that the world is fair and just (Kay and Jost 2003) may be more interested in status pivoting as it may restore their sense of justice more effectively than status restoration within the threat domain. Furthermore, while in our studies we observe status pivoting across genders, it will be interesting to examine how social identities and gender roles impact the domains that men and women spontaneously pivot to and how conspicuously they choose to emphasize these domains. More generally, it will be useful for future studies to manipulate the characteristics of the product and the context (e.g., public vs. private, conspicuous vs. inconspicuous, type of audience: male vs. female, high- vs. low-status; Berger and Ward 2010; Wang and Griskevicius 2014). It will also be interesting to examine the long-term downstream consequences of status pivoting and other coping strategies. For example, if status threat is incidental, then it may have a short-lived impact on status pivoting. However, if exposure to the source of the threat is more persistent (e.g., sibling, roommate, spouse), then it may have a more enduring impact on status pivoting and its consequences for motivation, effort, and how individuals feel about themselves.

Second, our research contributes to the literature on lay theories and trade-off heuristics (Chernev and Gal 2010; Haws, Reczek, and Sample 2017; Luchs et al. 2010; Raghunathan et al. 2006) by suggesting that such heuristics not only help consumers understand and make sense of the world, but that they can also be prompted by external status threats and help consumers cope with such threats. We thereby add to prior studies examining the malleability of trade-off beliefs

which show that these beliefs are not as stable as previously assumed (Deval et al. 2013; Haws et al. 2014), as well as to emerging work on the origins of cost-benefit heuristics (Cheng et al. 2017). It would be interesting to explore how cultural narratives manifested through movies and the popular press, as well as cultural differences that reinforce traditional boundaries between the social and professional domains and roles, further impact these trade-off beliefs and consumers' tendencies to engage in status pivoting. Furthermore, it will be interesting to examine how trade-off beliefs depend on self versus other perceptions and attributions. Consumers might believe that they personally can "have it all" and be successful across multiple domains, but that other people have to make sacrifices.

### ***Practical Implications***

Advancing insights into how consumers use different coping strategies to deal with status threat have useful practical implications. Understanding how consumers tend to cope with status threat is particularly timely given consumers' heightened concern about status, which is exacerbated by their extended exposure to social media.

Realizing that consumers may use alternative ways to signal status, and understanding which domains they choose to pivot to, can help marketers design optimal product portfolios and messages. For example, Study 4A findings suggest that consumers may prefer marketing slogans that emphasize alternative domains to slogans that emphasize the domain of status threat. Thus, marketers can adjust their marketing messages to appeal to various life domains that may suit consumers' preferences in different situations.

Similarly, marketers can design marketing product portfolios to appeal to various life domains. For example, while luxury brands have traditionally focused on signaling an affluent lifestyle, they have recently started expanding to additional categories that may help consumers

signal status in alternative life domains, such as athleisure lines that signal accomplishments and superior performance in health and wellness domains. Our studies identify an important domain that has been garnering a growing amount of attention in consumers' status signaling – social life, relationships, popularity, and “conspicuous human interaction” (Bowles 2019). Our findings may thereby direct marketing efforts toward the most accessible and appealing domains of status pivoting, which are not the domains that brands have traditionally associated with status.

Furthermore, online engagement campaigns, such as specialized brand forums and communities, can help consumers emphasize their accomplishments in alternative domains and help companies expand their brand associations beyond traditional status domains. Such initiatives may be more feasible and effective in today's fragmented social media landscape, which can make it easier for consumers to identify domains in which they can excel and shine compared to others.

More importantly, our research has implications for consumers about how to thrive in today's status-obsessed society. Our findings underscore that there is more than one way to feel successful, and they suggest that there are alternative ways to fulfill one's need for status. In fact, pursuing status in an alternative domain might be more reassuring and effective in reducing feelings of inferiority than displaying products associated with the status threat domain. This insight may offer consumers ideas about how they can spend their time and money more effectively since the quest for status is a never-ending endeavor as inevitably there will always be someone more successful and affluent than you. Beyond making choices for oneself, our findings offer consumers preferable ways to help others cope with status threats through their advice and gift-giving. Our hope is that our findings will spark additional research on the drivers, boundaries, and consequences of status pivoting and its manifestations in the marketplace.

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