

Research article

Keeping up with the Joneses: Status projection as symbolic self-completion

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Abstract

We studied the incidence and correlates of status projection—use of material possessions to emphasize social status to others—among 100 adolescents in a historical context of rising affluence. Participants listed 10 possessions, rated each for its value as a status symbol, and chose five to discuss with another participant in a forthcoming interaction. Participants selected especially those of their possessions that they had rated higher in status value ($p < .001$). This effect was stronger among those reporting upward or downward change in their families' socioeconomic status ($p < .05$), greater actual-ideal self-discrepancies ($p < .05$), and stronger commitment to materialistic values ($p < .01$); moreover, the effect of changing status was stronger among higher materialists ($p < .05$). These results indicate that people self-complete through presenting their possessions selectively to others, and they help to clarify the precise role of identity commitment in symbolic self-completion. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

In late modern society, social class boundaries are increasingly permeable (Giddens, 1991), and social status is often inferred from material consumption (Dittmar, 2008). Thus, people have to choose whether or not to compete with their neighbors in attempting to live up to images of success that are constantly primed by the media. Some seem to relish in projecting an elevated image of their socioeconomic status (SES). Examples are individuals who appear to define themselves by the car they drive and proudly leave their branded car keys on show, or the couple who sends around an annual circular to friends about this year's cruise holiday, and their son's ever-increasing salary.

MATERIAL POSSESSIONS AS STATUS SYMBOLS

This paper focuses on the use of material possessions as symbolic markers of status. Research has shown that certain material possessions are understood fairly consensually as markers of particular identity categories, including SES (Dittmar, 1992), and that people often buy consumer goods to seek particular identities (Dittmar, 2005a). Yet, merely owning a possession may not be sufficient to warrant the identity it symbolizes. Research suggests that most identity claims only gain validity to the extent that they are recognized and accepted by others in one's immediate social context (see Reicher, 1995; Schlenker, 2003). Hence, material possessions may function more effectively as identity markers to the extent that they are seen and recognized as such by others.

According to Goffman (1951), status symbols function to divide the world into visible social categories. They identify

the social positions of individuals, as well as expressing the lifestyles, views, and values of different social groups. It is possible “that symbols may come to be employed in a ‘fraudulent’ way, that is, to signify a status, which the claimant does not in fact possess” (p. 296). However, social class boundaries are relatively hard to define objectively. Hence, “on the whole [...], class symbols serve not so much to represent or misrepresent one's position, but rather to influence in a desired direction other persons' judgment of it” (p. 297). According to Goffman (1959), such self-presentation processes typically involve the selective ‘over-communication’ of some facts and ‘under-communication’ of other facts (for a review, see Schlenker, 2003). Adopting this terminology, we use the phrase *status projection* to refer to the over-communication of SES, through selectively displaying to others those of one's material possessions that best serve as status symbols.

SYMBOLIC SELF-COMPLETION

The symbolic self-completion theory of Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) suggests a combination of social and psychological factors likely to be involved in status projection. They note that people often aim to define themselves in terms of particular valued identities. When the route to a desired identity is blocked, or when identity claims are in some way insecure, people experience their identities as “incomplete” and thus will be motivated to “complete themselves” using available identity markers. Although driven by intrapsychic concerns, social interaction is understood to play a key role in the process of symbolic self-completion: identity claims must

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be displayed to, and validated by, others to resolve feelings of incompleteness. Nevertheless, research has investigated only indirectly the role of symbolic self-completion in the presentation of material possessions to others.

Braun and Wicklund (1989) tested a symbolic self-completion theory account of “conspicuous consumption”. Across five studies, they found that law students believed they were more recognizable as lawyers from their external characteristics than did practicing attorneys; that first-year students reported owning more articles displaying their university’s logo than did fourth-year students; that tennis beginners with a relatively strong commitment to tennis showed greater brand orientation than did either expert tennis players or beginners with a weaker commitment to tennis; that committed business and economics students who found their studies relatively difficult perceived their hobbies, sports, and holiday destinations as more prestigious than did either those who found their studies easier or those who were less committed; and that committed business and economics students made to feel insecure about their study area perceived their holiday destinations as more fashionable for business students than did either those made to feel secure about their study area or those who were less committed. Although findings were weaker in a sixth study, the overall pattern was consistent: self-symbolizing was strongest among those with less secure identity status, especially if they were more committed to the identities in question.

These studies provide initial support for the use of material possessions in symbolic self-completion, but they included no behavioral measure of the extent to which participants displayed their identity-relevant possessions and activities to others, despite the theoretical importance of self-presentation in the self-completion process (for behavioral outcomes of self-completion in other domains, see Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, & Harmon-Jones, 2009, on academics, and Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982, on German winemakers). Moreover, the identities examined were restricted to occupational and sporting memberships. Yet, symbolic self-completion theory has an obvious affinity with Goffman’s (1951) theoretical account of status symbols. One might predict that people whose SES is insecure in some way, would be especially motivated to verify their SES through status projection; the effect would be stronger among those with more commitment to SES as a valued identity domain.

TWO FORMS OF IDENTITY INCOMPLETENESS

Reflecting Braun and Wicklund’s (1989) operational definition of insecurity in terms of being a “newcomer” to a given identity, symbolic self-completion theory predicts that members of newly affluent families will engage more actively in attempts to promote an image of wealth, compared with members of families that have been wealthy for many generations. Consistent with this hypothesis, sociologists have proposed the existence of a *nouveau riche* class, whose members are especially invested in using status symbols owing to their recent—and hence, insecure—rise in SES (Goffman, 1951; see also Smith, 2003); however, we are aware of no existing quantitative test of this phenomenon.

Notably, there is no reason to suppose that such effects necessarily would be restricted to the upwardly mobile. Unlike the occupational memberships typically studied within symbolic self-completion theory, social status carries a more tangible possibility of downward as well as upward mobility. Presumably, people experiencing downward mobility will be at least as insecure about their status as the upwardly mobile. Hence, one might predict a curvilinear relationship between SES change and status projection: effects would be strongest among members of upwardly or downwardly mobile families, and weakest among members of families with relatively stable SES.

Braun and Wicklund (1989) argue that symbolic self-completion should occur only in response to insecurity in specific, relevant identities, suggesting that status projection should be provoked only by insecure SES, not by insecurity on other identity dimensions (see also Ledgerwood, Liviatan & Carnevale, 2007). In contrast, studies into self-affirmation and self-esteem maintenance suggest that individuals often cope with identity threat in one domain by affirming or enhancing identity in unrelated domains (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Tesser, 2000). Gollwitzer and Wicklund (1985, Study 1) showed that self-symbolizing as a “female professional” was not provoked when female students committed to this identity were made to feel insecure about their potential capabilities as a mother—an irrelevant identity. However, they had selected participants with high career orientation and low family orientation; hence, the lack of response to this threat may simply have reflected a lack of commitment to the potential mothering role—and hence, no experience of “incompleteness”—rather than the impossibility of using self-completion in one domain of identity to cope with incompleteness in another domain. In contrast, Dittmar (2005a) found that compulsive buying tendencies were predicted by a general measure of actual-ideal self-discrepancies. Seemingly, individuals were attempting to compensate for feelings of incompleteness by acquiring new material possessions, irrespective of the specific domains in which they felt incomplete. Yet, to our knowledge, no previous study has evaluated effects of both specific and general forms of identity incompleteness together.

THE ROLE OF MATERIALISTIC VALUES

Symbolic self-completion theory emphasizes that self-completion strategies occur as an interactive function of identity incompleteness and commitment to the identity in question. We reasoned that commitment to SES as a valued dimension of identity would be greatest among people with strongly materialistic beliefs and values (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004). Hence, a traditional reading of the theory predicts an interaction effect of status change and materialistic values as predictors of status projection: SES change will lead to “incompleteness” and thus predict status projection only to the extent that the individual holds materialistic values; conversely, materialistic values will predict status projection only to the extent that SES is somehow insecure.

Interaction effects have also been predicted in studies using general rather than specific measures of identity incompleteness

(Dittmar, 2005a, 2008). This requires a somewhat different theoretical rationale from the original conceptualization of symbolic self-completion. There is no theoretical reason to suppose that materialistic values would increase the pressure for self-completion arising from unrelated self-discrepancies. However, it seems plausible that holding such values might enhance the appeal of materialistic self-completion strategies, such as compulsive buying or status projection, given sufficient feelings of incompleteness arising from some other domain.

Empirical support for this second form of interaction has been somewhat elusive (H. E. Dittmar, personal communication). However, there could be a methodological explanation for this lack of support. Since materialistic values are closely associated with various measures of poor psychological adjustment (e.g., Dittmar, 2005a; Kasser et al., 2004), this suggests that materialistic values and generalized identity insecurity may often be somewhat confounded, making it relatively difficult statistically to detect a positive interaction between the two factors.

CONTEXT, AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

The conditions described earlier for the emergence of status projection may be especially prevalent in contemporary, post-industrial societies. Although social stratification is less marked than in preceding historical periods, the blurring of class boundaries and increasing social mobility raises the likelihood of uncertainty about one's social and economic standing. Moreover, accompanying the rapid growth of borrowed money, the focus on an idealized, prosperous self is repeatedly primed by the media and in everyday discourse (Dittmar, 2008). Yet, surprisingly, no previous study known to us has tested the role of strategic presentation of status symbols to others in symbolic self-completion.

The current study was designed both to document the phenomenon of status projection, and to examine socioeconomic and psychological predictors of the magnitude of this behavior, among adolescents who had grown up during a period of economic growth. Data were collected early in 2006, following 13 years of sustained growth in the UK economy (International Monetary Fund, 2010). Participants were from two neighboring towns in the county of Surrey, an affluent and desirable region of South East England. As an indicator of this, average house prices in Surrey had grown slightly above the national trend during the years preceding the study, rising from 155% of the average for England and Wales in January 1995 to 162% in January 2006 (Land Registry, 2010).

Adolescents in the UK typically are already active participants in consumer culture, with levels of disposable income comparable with those of most adults and showing somewhat higher endorsement of materialistic values than do adult samples (Dittmar, 2005b). Yet, most are still in full-time education and not yet participating fully in the labor market. Adolescents' SES may be inferred from that of their families—indexed by markers such as the occupational status, income, and educational level of their parents (Liberatos, Link, & Kelsey, 1988). Yet, the adolescents' own position on the same markers remain uncertain—their *personal* SES is quite literally

“incomplete”—and so, claims to a particular status may need symbolic reinforcement through strategic self-presentation.

Braun and Wicklund's (1989) studies of conspicuous consumption focused on self-reports of possessions owned, of the perceived prestige of one's consumer choices, and of how one might appear to others. In contrast, we wanted to develop a measure that reflected more precisely our theoretical definition of status projection as a communicative strategy of selectively presenting to others those of one's material possessions that best serve as status symbols. We asked participants to list a number of material possessions that they owned, and to rate each for its value as a status symbol. Yet, owning status-relevant possessions does not necessarily mean that these possessions are emphasized in self-presentation. Hence, we led our participants to believe that they would be discussing a subset of their material possessions with another participant in a subsequent social interaction task, and we recorded their choices of which possessions to discuss with the other participant. Reflecting our theoretical definition of status projection, we predicted (H1) that participants would tend to choose especially those of their possessions that they perceived to have greater status value.

Based on our discussion of symbolic self-completion processes, we tested the role of several potential socioeconomic and social psychological moderators of the magnitude of the status projection effect. We measured participants' family SES as well as their perceptions of SES change, testing for linear and curvilinear effects of both variables; in particular, we predicted (H2) a curvilinear effect of perceived SES change—such that status projection would be greater among those reporting less stable SES—whether upwardly or downwardly mobile. As an index of identity incompleteness not specific to SES, we included a measure of the size and subjective importance of participants' self-discrepancies, predicting (H3) that status projection would be greater among those with greater self-discrepancies. Additionally, we measured participants' internalization of materialistic values, predicting (H4) that status projection would be greater among those with stronger materialistic values.

Finally, we tested two possible accounts of the moderating role of materialistic values. Reflecting the original formulation of symbolic self-completion theory, we predicted (H5) that the effect of perceived SES change would be stronger among participants endorsing more materialistic values—on the basis that instability in this domain would only be problematic for individuals who were committed to SES as a valued identity domain. Following subsequent theorizing (e.g., Dittmar, 2008), we predicted (H6) that the effect of general self-discrepancies also would be stronger among those with greater commitment to materialistic values—reasoning that materialistic values would make status projection a more appealing self-completion strategy for those experiencing identity incompleteness, irrespective of the original domain of the incompleteness.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 100 students (55 girls, 45 boys; mean age = 16.9 years, $SD = 0.8$), recruited from sixth-form colleges

(US equivalent: final 2 years of high school) in the county of Surrey. Students were approached during classes and asked to give 15 to 20 minutes to complete a questionnaire. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw, and that data would be kept strictly confidential and anonymous except where indicated,¹ and they signed to indicate their consent. On completion, participants were debriefed and questions were invited. After revealing the deception, participants were given an opportunity to withdraw their data; however, none did so.

Measures

Self-discrepancies were measured using an idiographic-nomothetic approach validated by Halliwell and Dittmar (2006). Participants were asked to consider things about themselves that they would like to change, and then completed the sentence "I am..., but I would like ..." up to seven times (e.g., "I am overweight but I would like to be thin", "I am single but I would like to have a boyfriend"). They then rated each statement for how *different* they were from their ideal (magnitude), and how *concerned* they were about this gap (importance), from 1 (a little) to 6 (extremely). A self-discrepancy index was calculated from the summed products of the magnitude and importance ratings for each statement, divided by the number of statements reported. Scores ranged from 0 to 36, with higher scores indicating larger and more psychologically important self-discrepancies.²

Materialistic values were measured using the short-form material values scale (Richins, 2004), which includes 15 items (6 reverse-coded; $\alpha = .83$) reflecting three facets of materialism: acquisition centrality (e.g., "I like a lot of luxury in my life."), acquisition in the pursuit of happiness (e.g., "I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.") and possessions as definitions of success (e.g., "The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life."). Items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and scores ranged from 2.20 to 6.27.

Socioeconomic status was measured using two commonly used indicators: occupational status of the main wage-earner in the household, and educational attainment of the highest achieving parent or guardian (see Liberatos et al., 1988). We did not ask about household income as we doubted that participants would be able to report this accurately. Occupational status was measured using the self-coded version of the standard classification of occupations used in British national statistics, yielding five classes ranging from 1 (managerial and professional occupations) to 5 (semi-routine and routine occupations) (Office of National Statistics, 2002). Scores were recoded, so that higher numbers indicated higher status. Categories of educational attainment were derived from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) standard classification of educational qualifications (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1999), ranging from 1 (no formal qualifications) to 9

(doctorate/PhD). These two indices were moderately correlated ($r = .40$). Since we were not interested in differentiating between occupational and educational aspects of SES, we used the mean of the standardized scores on these two measures for our analyses. Scores ranged from -2.50 to $+1.15$, with higher values indicating higher SES.

Perceived SES change was measured using two newly-written items. We asked participants to compare their parents' or guardians' social and economic circumstances with those of their grandparents, and to compare their parents' or guardians' current social and economic circumstances with their past circumstances, using a scale of 1 (much better off) to 5 (much worse off), with 3 representing stability. Scores were subsequently reversed so that higher scores indicated more upward mobility. The two ratings were moderately correlated ($r = .30$). Since both ratings showed a similar pattern of linear and curvilinear associations with the other study variables, we measured perceived SES change as the mean of the two ratings. Scores ranged from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating upward mobility, lower scores indicating downward mobility, and intermediate scores reflecting relative stability. Since we were interested in curvilinear as well as linear effects of this variable, scores were centered before analysis to reduce the multicollinearity between linear and quadratic terms (Pedhazur, 1982).

Measurement of *status projection* involved three stages. First, each participant freely listed 10 possessions that they owned (e.g., "iPod", "ring", "teddy bear"). We gave no examples and provided no cues about the sorts of possessions that might be listed to avoid biasing or constraining responses.

Second, participants rated each of their possessions on nine dimensions. Among six filler questions, three items ($\alpha = .76$) referred to ways that the possessions might confer "status" within society or within the respondent's peer group: "To what extent do you think that other people would view each of these things as a 'status symbol?'"; "To what extent does each of these possessions project the image of a successful person?"; "If you were without each of these things, to what extent would you feel less advantaged amongst your peer group?", rated from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). These items were averaged to measure the perceived "status value" of each possession.

Third, participants were asked to participate in a (fictitious) short follow-up study which would involve discussing five of their ten listed possessions with another participant. We gave no further information about the nature or purpose of the interaction task, so as not to bias participants' choices of which possessions to present to the other participant. All but five participants agreed to take part, and listed their five chosen possessions in preparation. Although we did not probe systematically for suspicion, many participants expressed their surprise on being told afterwards that there would be no follow-up study. This provides some confidence that participants typically believed they were committing to discuss their chosen possessions in a genuine social interaction.

Status projection was measured as the extent to which possessions chosen for the interaction task had higher associations with social status than did those that were not chosen. As a rough-and-ready individual difference measure (see Table 1), we subtracted the mean perceived status value

¹This was inserted to support the deception in the status projection measure. In reality, participants had full anonymity.

²A few participants listed no self-discrepancies, claiming subsequently that they could think of no ways they would like to be different. Hence, we assigned them a score of zero on this measure. Analyses excluding these participants showed a similar pattern of results to those reported.

Table 1. Zero order correlations between level 2 variables ($n=93$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. SES	–						
2. SES squared	–.54***	–					
3. Perceived SES change	.12	.07	–				
4. Perceived SES change squared	.03	–.12	–.25*	–			
5. Self-discrepancy score	.16	–.00	–.04	.20 [†]	–		
6. Materialistic values	.00	–.03	.12	–.03	.29**	–	
7. Status projection ^a	.11	–.06	–.04	.22*	.31**	.31**	–

Note. SES, socioeconomic status.

SES and perceived SES change scores were centered on their respective grand means before quadratic terms were calculated.

^aThis variable was calculated as mean status value of possessions chosen for comparison minus mean status value of possessions not chosen for comparison. It is included here to aid interpretation, but was not used in analyses, given the greater precision achievable using multi-level analysis.

[†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

of those possessions that each participant had not chosen from the mean perceived status value of those that they had chosen. Scores ranged from –1.80 to 4.27, with a mean of 1.09 ($SD = 1.24$).

However, this measure ignores the variability in status ratings among possessions within each of the two categories (those that have been chosen and those that have not been chosen). A difference of one scale-point has a very different interpretation if possessions are closely clustered around the mean within each category, to its interpretation if possessions within each category are widely distributed: in the former case, it may be possible to predict perfectly which possessions a participant has chosen based on their perceived status value, in the latter case hardly at all. Thus, removing possession-level variance misrepresents the level of analysis of the status projection effect, which is likely to bias estimates of its magnitude and significance in unknown ways. To avoid this potential bias, we used multilevel regression for our main analyses (Hox, 2002), which allowed us to model simultaneously effects at the level of material possessions (level 1), effects at the individual level (level 2), and interactions between effects at the two levels (cross-level interactions). We modeled status projection as a level 1 (i.e., within-participant) main effect, which might be moderated by cross-level interactions with our level 2 (i.e., individual differences) measures.

Table 2. Estimated parameters of models 0 to 2

Parameter	Null model			Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Level 1 main effects</i>									
Grand intercept	4.70	.21	–	4.15	.21	–	4.15	.21	–
Possession choice	–	–	–	1.10	.13	<.001	1.10	.13	<.001
<i>Residual variance</i>									
Level 1 residual variance (σ^2)	3.28	.16	–	2.95	.14	–	2.84	.15	–
Level 2 residual variance ($\tau^2_{\text{intercept}}$)	3.90	.62	–	3.93	.62	–	3.34	.58	–
Level 2 random slope variance (τ^2_{slope})	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.38	.23	–
<i>Deviance</i>	3957.26			3868.08			3857.31		

RESULTS

Table 1 shows zero-order correlations among individual-level variables. Our rough-and-ready individual differences measure of status projection was moderately associated with the squared value of perceived SES change (suggesting greater status projection among upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals than among those perceiving their SES as relatively stable), self-discrepancies (suggesting greater status projection among individuals with greater self-discrepancies), and materialistic values (suggesting greater status projection among individuals with stronger materialistic values). For multilevel regression analyses, we used HLM 5.04 (Scientific Software International, Inc., Lincolnwood, IL, USA) to conduct full maximum likelihood estimation with convergence criterion of 0.000001. Significance of fixed effects was tested using robust standard errors (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong & Congdon, 2001). Tables 2 and 3 show the models tested.

Occurrence of Status Projection

To test for a general tendency towards status projection among our participants (H1), we estimated the difference in perceived status value between those possessions chosen for the interaction task and those that were not chosen. To do this, we regressed ratings of possession status on a dummy variable distinguishing possessions chosen for the interaction task (coded 1) from those that were not chosen (coded 0) (Model 1). The fixed slope was estimated at 1.10 ($SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$). This indicates an average difference in perceived status value of just over one scale-point between the chosen and non-chosen possessions. Based on comparison with a null model omitting this slope (Model 0), this model accounted for an estimated 10.2% of within-participants variance on the status measure.

We now tested for individual variability in the size of this effect, by estimating a random slope rather than a fixed slope for possession choice (Model 2). This provided a significant improvement in fit compared with model 1, $\chi^2(2) = 10.77$, $p < .01$, indicating significant heterogeneity in the size of the status projection effect: individuals in our sample differed significantly in the extent to which their chosen and non-chosen possessions could be differentiated based on status. Subsequent analyses were designed to identify individual-level predictors that might account for this variability. The

Table 3. Estimated parameters of models 3 to 5

Parameter	Model 3				Model 4				Model 5			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>
<i>Level 1 main effects</i>												
Grand intercept	3.88	.25	—	—	3.82	.30	—	—	4.01	.29	—	—
Possession choice	1.09	.18	.30	<.001	.88	.19	.24	<.001	.78	.19	.22	<.001
<i>Level 2 main effects</i>												
SES	.09	.30	.04	.77	.07	.29	.03	.80	.08	.29	.03	.78
SES ²	.40	.22	.20	.06	.42	.21	.21	<.05	.42	.22	.21	.05
Perceived SES change	—	—	—	—	.06	.21	.03	.76	.11	.20	.05	.60
Perceived SES change ²	—	—	—	—	.05	.22	.03	.84	-.15	.19	-.09	.42
Self-discrepancy index	—	—	—	—	.01	.02	.04	.66	.01	.02	.04	.66
Materialistic values	—	—	—	—	.98	.26	.41	<.001	1.37	.33	.57	<.001
Perceived SES change \times materialistic values	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.00	.22	.00	.99
Perceived SES change ² \times materialistic values	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.35	.15	-.29	<.05
Self-discrepancy index \times materialistic values	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.01	.02	-.03	.66
<i>Cross-level interactions with possession choice</i>												
SES	.16	.17	.21	.35	.12	.16	.16	.48	.12	.16	.17	.44
SES ²	.01	.11	.02	.90	.04	.10	.07	.69	.05	.10	.08	.61
Perceived SES change	—	—	—	—	-.02	.13	-.03	.88	-.05	.12	-.08	.67
Perceived SES change ²	—	—	—	—	.21	.10	.41	<.05	.30	.13	.61	<.05
Self-discrepancy index	—	—	—	—	.03	.01	.38	<.05	.02	.01	.39	<.05
Materialistic values	—	—	—	—	.40	.15	.54	<.01	.15	.19	.20	.45
Perceived SES change \times materialistic values	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.12	.15	.17	.42
Perceived SES change ² \times materialistic values	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.23	.11	.62	<.05
Self-discrepancy index \times materialistic values	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.00	.01	.00	.99
<i>Residual variance</i>												
Level 1 residual variance (σ^2)	2.84	.15	—	—	2.84	.15	—	—	2.84	.15	—	—
Level 2 residual variance ($\tau^2_{\text{intercept}}$)	3.22	.56	—	—	2.50	.45	—	—	2.32	.42	—	—
Level 2 random slope variance (τ^2_{slope})	0.37	.23	—	—	0.09	.19	—	—	0.04	.18	—	—
<i>Deviance</i>	3853.28				3810.60				3801.49			

Note. SES, socioeconomic status.

To aid interpretation of effect sizes, we have estimated values of β by multiplying unstandardized parameters by the *SD* of the predictor and dividing by the *SD* of the outcome (Hox, 2002). For main effects, outcome *SD*s were derived from levels 1 and 2 variance components of the status ratings estimated in the null model. For cross-level effects, we treated the slope for possession choice as the “outcome” hence, we used the level 2 *SD* estimated for this slope in model 2 as our outcome *SD*.

residual variance estimate for the possession choice slope, τ^2_{slope} , provides an estimate of unexplained variability in the magnitude of the status projection effect. Hence, reductions in τ^2_{slope} in subsequent models could be used to derive estimates of modeled variance in status projection.

Controlling for Socioeconomic Status

Our next model was designed to control for linear and curvilinear effects of SES. In this and subsequent models, effects on status projection were estimated as cross-level interaction effects, where individual-level variables were introduced as level 2 predictors of variability in the level 1 slope for possession choice. Following standard procedure for testing interaction effects in multiple regression (Aiken & West, 1991), we included the underlying main effects in our models alongside the theoretically important interaction effects. Hence, we included both linear and quadratic terms for SES as main effects on the status ratings and as cross-level interactions predicting variation in the status projection effect (Model 3). Model 3 provided a non-significant improvement in model fit, $\chi^2(4) = 4.02$, $p = .40$, and accounted for only an estimated 3.3% of individual variability in status projection. None of the added parameters reached significance, although the quadratic main effect of SES approached significance, suggesting a marginal tendency among those of highest and lowest SES to make

higher status ratings in general, compared with those of average SES. We retained these parameters in subsequent models to control for SES while testing our theoretical predictions.

Testing Moderation Effects of Socioeconomic Status Change, Self-discrepancies and Materialistic Values

To test H2 to H4, we now introduced perceived SES change (linear and quadratic terms), self-discrepancies, and materialistic values as main effects on the status ratings and as cross-level interactions predicting individual differences in the magnitude of the status projection effect (Model 4). All predictors were centered on their grand means. Model 4 showed a highly significant improvement in fit compared with the preceding model, $\chi^2(8) = 42.69$, $p < .001$, and accounted for an estimated 77.0% of individual variability in the status projection slope. A significant main effect of materialistic values ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) indicated that participants with more materialistic values tended to rate their possessions in general as higher in status value than did those with less materialistic values. However, our main hypothesis tests were in the cross-level interaction effects. Supporting H2, this model showed a significant interaction of possession choice with the quadratic term for perceived SES change ($\beta = .41$, $p < .05$). Figure 1 shows variation in the status projection effect as a function of the reported direction of change. As predicted, the effect was

strongest among those reporting upward or downward mobility, compared with those reporting relatively stable SES. H3 was supported by a significant interaction of possession choice with self-discrepancies ($\beta = .38, p < .05$); as shown in Figure 2, status projection was significantly greater among those with greater self-discrepancies. H4 was supported by a significant interaction of possession choice with materialistic values ($\beta = .54, p < .01$); as shown in Figure 3, participants with more materialistic values showed significantly greater status projection than did those with less materialistic values.

Incompleteness by Commitment Interactions

Finally, we tested the predicted interactions between materialistic values and our two indices of incompleteness: SES change and self-discrepancies (H5 and H6). After centering materialistic values and self-discrepancies, we computed cross-product terms of materialistic values with linear and quadratic terms for SES change, and with self-discrepancies. We entered all three cross-product terms as main effects and as cross-level interaction terms predicting variation in the status projection effect (Model 5). Although only a marginally

significant improvement over Model 4, this model accounted for an estimated 88.9% of variability in the status projection slope, another substantial increase in modeled variance.

Crucially, as predicted, the model showed a significant 3-way interaction between materialistic values, the quadratic term for perceived SES change and possession choice ($\beta = .62, p < .05$). Figure 4 shows the estimated magnitude of the status projection effect as a function of perceived SES change and materialistic values. Supporting H5, the curvilinear effect of perceived SES change on status projection was stronger among those with higher materialistic values. We then recomputed Model 5 using various linear transformations of perceived SES change to establish under which circumstances materialistic value endorsement showed a significant effect on status projection (Aiken & West, 1991). Materialistic values were significantly related to status projection at SES change scores of 2 or below (downward change) and at scores of 4.5 or above (upward change); however, materialistic values were not significantly associated with status projection at values between 2.5 and 4 (representing relatively stable or slightly improved SES). Similarly, we used various transformations of materialistic values to establish under which circumstances

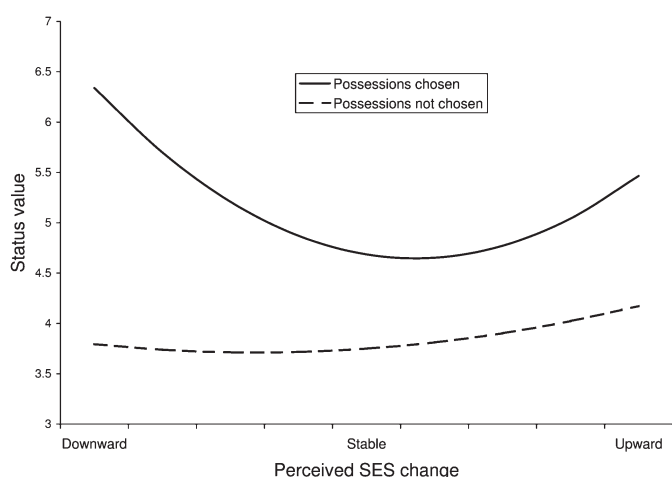


Figure 1. Estimated status value of possessions chosen and not chosen as a function of perceived socioeconomic status change

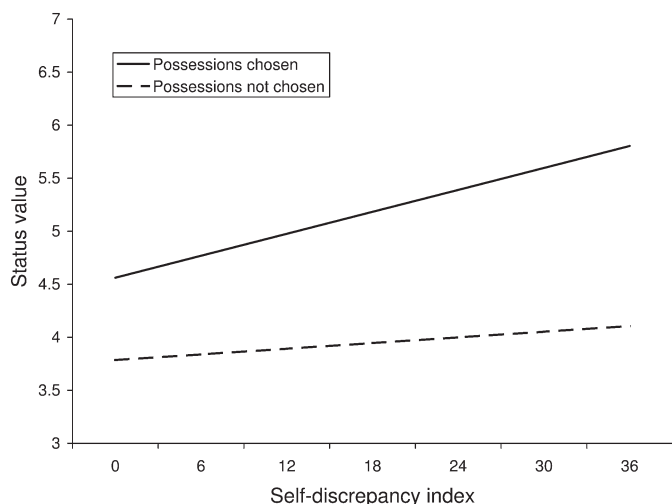


Figure 2. Estimated status value of possessions chosen and not chosen as a function of self-discrepancy scores

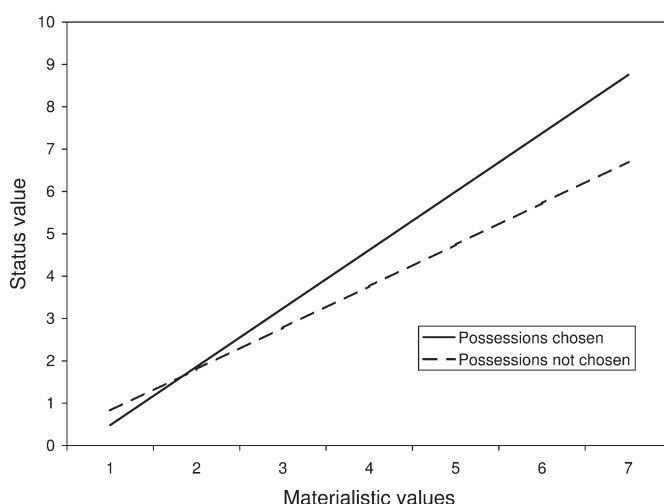


Figure 3. Estimated status value of possessions chosen and not chosen as a function of materialistic values

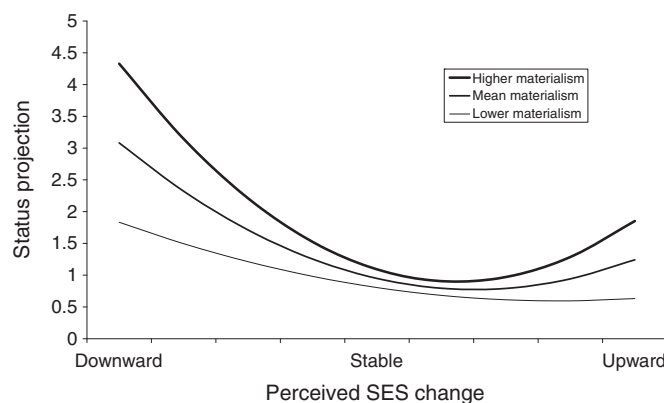


Figure 4. Estimated magnitude of the status projection effect as a function of perceived SES change and materialistic value endorsement. Thicker lines represent greater endorsement of materialistic values

perceived SES change was a significant curvilinear predictor of status projection. SES change was a significant curvilinear predictor of status projection at materialistic value scores of 3.7 or above (close to the theoretical midpoint of 4).

In contrast, the interaction effect involving generalized self-discrepancies was non-significant and close to zero ($\beta = .00$, $p = .99$). Thus, against H6, there was no evidence to suggest that the effect of generalized self-discrepancies on status projection was moderated by materialistic values.³

DISCUSSION

In this study, we documented the self-presentational phenomenon of *status projection*: participants chose to present to others especially those of their material possessions that they associated with higher SES. Previous research into self-evaluation and impression management has typically focused on individual or interpersonal qualities such as competence or likeability as value dimensions (see Schlenker, 2003; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003), paying little attention to social structural conceptions of value often examined elsewhere in the social sciences (for exceptions, see Dittmar, 1992; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983; Heine, Harihara, & Niiya, 2002). However, the present results highlight the importance of SES as a valued identity domain, even among adolescents in an individualistic society during the historical period of late modernity (Giddens, 1991). Indeed, as social structures become more fluid, this arguably makes judgments and portrayals of SES *more* amenable to the cognitive and self-presentation biases involved in motivated identity construction.

We used symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) to predict individual differences in status projection. Previous research has supported a symbolic self-completion account of the acquisition of material possessions (Dittmar, 2005a) and of cognitions about one's possessions and consumer choices (Braun & Wicklund, 1989), but this was the first study to test a symbolic self-completion account of actual behavioral choices about which of one's material possessions to present to others. Results supported two discrete pathways to status projection, reflecting different forms of identity incompleteness: status projection was significantly enhanced (1) among those reporting either upward or downward change in SES, but only to the extent that they endorsed materialistic values; and (2) among those reporting greater self-discrepancies, irrespective of materialistic values.

Symbolic self-completion studies have often operationalized identity incompleteness in terms of being new to a particular identity position (e.g., Braun & Wicklund, 1989). Although we did not measure potential mediators here, we propose that members of upwardly mobile families may have felt relatively uncertain of their elevated social status—especially in the context of social discourse about “old” and “new money”—increasing their need to display their social status to others in search of self-verification (Swann, 1983).

We focused here on past-to-present improvement in SES, but it would be interesting to explore whether expected present-to-future improvement may have similar effects. Guimond and Dambrun (2002) found that participants led to expect future improvements in their economic circumstances showed increased prejudice and ethnocentrism, although they did not consider symbolic self-completion as a possible explanation. Future research might test whether participants expecting future improvements in SES would also show increased status projection.

Status projection was higher also among participants reporting downward change in SES. For these participants, status projection may have been driven by somewhat different concerns, perhaps involving self-continuity maintenance (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003). Although status projection appeared stronger among downwardly mobile than among upwardly mobile participants, this is not certain from the current analyses—only that the effect of perceived SES change was significantly curvilinear. In fact, relatively few participants were located at the downward end of the SES change continuum—perhaps reflecting historically rising levels of affluence or else some normative bias in the self-report scale. Guimond and Dambrun (2002) also found some evidence for increased prejudice among participants led to expect future decline in their economic circumstances—although in their studies the effects were weaker than those of expected improvement.

Supporting symbolic self-completion theory, the curvilinear relationship between perceived SES change and status projection was strongest among those who more strongly endorsed materialistic values (Figure 4). Materialistic values entail commitment to SES as an important identity domain; hence, it may be only among relatively materialistic people that SES change is problematic for identity, creating the need for status projection. Consistent with this reasoning, perceived SES change was associated with greater status projection only among participants with materialistic values scores of 3.7 or above—showing neutral or positive endorsement of materialistic values. Thus, perceived SES change did not predict status projection among those who rejected materialistic values.

We should acknowledge that we did not measure directly how people felt about the change or stability they reported in their SES. Theoretically, one might expect that those reporting either upward or downward change would show some indication of insecurity—such as feelings of uncertainty or discomfort—and that these feelings would mediate effects of the incompleteness on status projection. However, such feelings may be difficult to detect, especially in a correlational study, because participants in a position of incompleteness would be expected already to have used one or more self-completion strategies to avoid or resolve such feelings. Hence, future research should use experimental methods, as well as implicit measures, to attempt to detect such feelings at the moment they occur and without participants necessarily having to verbalize them.

Interestingly, sources of identity insecurity unrelated to SES were also linked to status projection. Controlling for the main and interactive effects of SES change and materialistic values predicted by symbolic self-completion theory, a generalized measure of actual-ideal self-discrepancies predicted additional

³The interaction of materialistic values with the quadratic term for SES change remained significant in a model excluding the interaction with self-discrepancies, and the interaction of materialistic values with self-discrepancies remained non-significant in a model excluding the interactions with SES change.

variance in status projection. Unlike perceived SES change, the self-discrepancy measure asked participants explicitly to report on feelings of identity incompleteness. Admittedly, if people often seek to hide or compensate for their insecurities, then self-reports of the magnitude and importance of self-discrepancies may underestimate the true extent of identity insecurity among participants. In particular, refusing to list any self-discrepancies may have been a defensive position reflecting high, rather than low, incompleteness. This could have influenced our results, weakening the observed relationship between self-discrepancies and status projection. Still, if this was the case, it would make the current significant finding a conservative estimate of the true effect.

Notably, this second pathway to status projection was not moderated by materialistic values. This helps us discriminate between two possible understandings of the role of identity commitment in symbolic self-completion processes. On the one hand, identity commitment may be involved in determining the extent to which incompleteness in a given domain is experienced as problematic, leading to psychological insecurity and attempts at self-completion; on the other hand, identity commitment may be involved in determining the extent to which a given behavior represents an attractive strategy for self-completion, irrespective of the initial source of incompleteness. The former account is consistent with the interaction of materialistic values and SES change observed in the current data; in contrast, the latter conceptualization was not supported here: materialistic values did not interact with generalized self-discrepancies to predict status projection. A purely methodological explanation for the lack of a significant interaction seems unlikely here. Materialistic values and self-discrepancies were only moderately correlated ($r = .29$), and so there remained a scope to find a significant interaction without creating problems of multicollinearity. As Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) recognize, individuals strive for recognition on self-defining aspects that are validated by the community. Thus, people experiencing insecurity may sometimes use status symbols because of society's readiness to respond to them, irrespective of their personal values.

We are not proposing that status projection is the only goal involved in the use of material possessions for identity construction. Possessions may be important to people for many reasons—including esthetic pleasure, prestige, self-esteem, social affiliation, differentiation, and continuity over time (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004; Pearce, 1992; Vignoles, Dittmar, Langton, Wright & Anderson, 2007)—and they may likely be presented to others for a similarly wide variety of reasons. Although we camouflaged our status ratings among filler items, making these ratings could possibly have increased the salience of status concerns, cueing participants to select high status possessions for the interaction task. Nevertheless, this would not explain the detailed pattern of cross-level interactions we found, showing that the magnitude of the status projection effect varied predictably as a function of SES change, self-discrepancies and materialistic values.

Because of its correlational methodology, the current study does not permit strong causal inferences. Although the results supported our theoretical predictions, they are also consistent with some alternative causal explanations—for example that a tendency towards status projection leads to identity insecurity.

We should reiterate that our main aims in this study were to document the existence of the phenomenon of status projection and to explore patterns of individual differences in a relatively naturalistic format, not to test predictions about causal sequence. Ample experimental evidence exists to support the causal direction of symbolic self-completion processes in other domains (e.g., Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Ledgerwood et al., 2007), as well as for defensive responses to identity threats more generally (reviewed by Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). Still, it would be valuable to use an experimental approach in future research to test the causal antecedents of status projection, as well as to test the effectiveness of status projection as a strategy for resolving feelings of incompleteness.

We should acknowledge that the present sample was not representative of British society as a whole. Earlier, we noted reasons to expect that status projection may be especially prevalent among adolescents—who typically strongly endorse materialistic values, but whose SES is not yet defined by occupying a position within the labor market. Moreover, participants were sampled from a relatively affluent geographical area, which may have reduced our ability to detect effects of SES. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that status projection is not restricted to affluent adolescents, but occurs among adults of various backgrounds, especially when experiencing rising affluence (Goffman, 1951; Smith, 2003). Moreover, the conditions of late modern society resonate with the characteristics of those participants in the current research among whom greater status projection was observed. Research has documented the increasing prevalence of materialistic values in Western cultures (e.g., Kasser et al., 2004). The breakdown of traditional class structures and availability of borrowed money have led to increased social mobility and higher socioeconomic aspirations among adults as well as adolescents, allowing for greater insecurity about one's SES and greater latitude for using status symbols to rectify such insecurity (Dittmar, 2008; Giddens, 1991).

To conclude, the present study offers a valuable first look at the self-presentational strategy of status projection. Our results relate this phenomenon to insecurity in the self-concept, instability of SES and the materialistic values that are prevalent in contemporary mass consumer society. Perhaps, for those living in contexts of rising affluence, some solace can be taken from the idea that those individuals engaged in status projection are not necessarily attempting to make others feel inadequate, but attempting to make themselves feel adequate.

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