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Emotional Expressions and Brand Status

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Abstract

This project investigates emotionality by brands on social media. First, a field data set of over 200,000 text and images posts by brands across two major platforms is analyzed. Using recent automated text analysis (Study 1a) and computer vision methods (Studies 1b and 1c), the author provides initial documentation of a negative relationship between brand emotionality and status. Exploring this relationship further, in Studies 2, 3, and 4, the author finds that brands can leverage this association, reducing emotionality in brand communications to increase perceived brand status. This strategy is effective because reduced emotionality is associated with high-status communication norms, which evoke high-status reference groups. This finding is moderated by the status context of the brand (Study 2) and the product type (Study 4).

Keywords

emotional expression, status, reference groups, text analysis, computer vision, social media

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Recently, research on social media and word-of-mouth advertising has teemed with studies on emotional expression, perhaps due to the centrality of emotionality in social media communication (e.g., Berger 2014). Emotionality, which refers to language conveying affective content (e.g., Melumad, Inman, and Pham 2019; Rocklage and Fazio 2020), can be expressed via the rich word choices, images, and even punctuation used in social media posts. Not only are consumers producing emotional content on social media, but so too are brands, which are responding to consumer interest for multimodal digital content using visuals, video, and voice (Donnelly 2019). Brand behavior calls for more analysis of emotionality in marketing analytics (Dodd 2018), and recent methodological advances in areas such as text analytics and computer vision have made it possible to generate insights about emotionality applicable to the volume and scale of social media communication.

Researchers have examined consumer expression of emotionality (Melumad, Inman, and Pham 2019; Ransbotham, Lurie, and Liu 2019) and analyzed the inferences made by readers of consumer reviews on the basis of the emotionality in these reviews (Rocklage and Fazio 2020; Yin, Bond, and Zhang 2017). For brands and platforms, it has become increasingly clear how critical emotionality is for content virality (Akpinar and Berger 2017; Berger and Milkman 2012; Tucker 2015; Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019). Yet as brands continue to increase the volume of text and image messaging as well as interactions with consumers on social media, more research is needed about the creation of brand meaning in digital spaces (for a review, see Keller [2020] or Swaminathan et al. [2020]). Regarding branding and emotionality, a key question remains: How does brand emotionality in social media posts shape brand perceptions?

This work focuses on one fundamental dimension of brand positioning: brand status (Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003; Truong, McColl, and Kitchen 2009). I combine canonical cultural theory on emotionality and status with an analysis of rich, unstructured social media text and image data to suggest that a *negative* relationship exists between emotionality and brand status. First, in an analysis of over 200,000 text and image posts by brands across two different cultural contexts, I found evidence of a negative correlation between emotionality and status. Given this correlation, I examined this relationship further, assessing whether brand emotionality on social media can actually decrease perceptions of brand status. Three experiments explore an underlying mechanism by which emotionality is misaligned with high-status communication norms, evoking lower-status reference group associations. I also investigate boundary conditions for this effect, including brand status contexts and product type.

This work contributes to the understanding of social media marketing by exploring how emotionality in text and image posts can affect perceptions of brands' status. While much managerial discussion has focused on the positive effects of higher levels of emotionality for marketing (e.g., Gobe 2010), less

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is known about potential negative or "backfire" effects (e.g., Rocklage and Fazio 2020)—in this case, lowered inferences of brand status. While canonical cultural theory posits that lowered emotional expression is associated with high status (e.g., Bourdieu 1984), it has not been proven through analysis of data at scale. Applying recently developed methods in natural language processing (NLP) and computer vision, I document a negative emotion–brand status relationship and empirically connect theory to social media and branding phenomena. Through a multimethod inquiry combining analysis of field and experimental data, this work provides managerial insights at the rich intersection of emotionality, social media, status branding, and the management of brand perceptions online.

Emotionality in Social Media

Emotionality plays a critical role in social media. For instance, consumers are eager to share and discuss emotional content (e.g., Berger and Milkman 2012). They are also eager to produce emotional content via reviews and other word-of-mouth communication about products and experiences (for a review, see Berger [2014]). Researchers are learning more about when consumers are more likely to express emotionality in social media text (Melumad, Inman, and Pham 2019; Ransbotham, Lurie, and Liu 2019) as well as about the impact of consumer emotionality on key marketing outcomes, such as the persuasiveness (Ludwig et al. 2013) and helpfulness (Rocklage and Fazio 2020; Yin, Bond, and Zhang 2017) of reviews.

Not only do consumers post emotional content on social media, so do brands, with varied goals in mind. As an example, brands might try to increase the virality of commercials via emotional appeals, though virality may not always be truly meaningful for the brand (Akpinar and Berger 2017; Tucker 2015). Because managers expect digital brand communication to have less of a "commercial" feel (Voorveld 2019), in the future brands may also increasingly rely on emotional text and image messages on digital platforms, as these messages can increase engagement (Lee, Hosanagar, and Nair 2018; Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019). More generally, emotional messaging may also help brand managers build deeper emotional connections with consumers (Gobe 2010).

One underexplored area of research, however, is the consequences of this emotionality on consumer perceptions of brands. Although research has examined how emotional messaging influences outcomes for specific messages (e.g., likes on a post), the question remains: How does emotionality affect the broader associations that consumers make for a brand? How brand meaning is constructed in the high-volume, high-velocity context of social media is a key research question in the realm of branding (see Swaminathan et al. 2020). The current research builds on existing frameworks to suggest that emotion-laden content can shape brand perceptions (Luangrath, Peck, and Barger 2017) but diverges from existing academic and managerial ideas on brand emotionality in social media by considering how emotionality can actually "backfire" (i.e., create unintended brand inferences). Table 1 provides a summary of key research on emotionality in social media.

Shaping Perceptions Relating to Brand Status

This project explores a critical brand inference that has been studied since the earliest days of marketing research (Levy 1999): brand status. Brand status (also referred to as "brand prestige") refers to the level of social status associated with a brand (Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003; Truong, McColl, and Kitchen 2009). It is considered a fundamental dimension of brand positioning (Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991), perhaps due to the volume of literature demonstrating that consumers prefer high-status or high-prestige brands (Baek, Kim, and Yu 2010; Vigneron and Johnson 1999). A wealth of literature has explored how practitioners can shape perceptions of brand status (for a summary of relevant work, see Web Appendix W1A-1). However, more research at the intersection of social media and status branding is needed (Stephen 2020).

Existing research suggests that a brand's reference group associations can generate status inferences for the brand (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999; Shenkar and Yuchtman-Yaar 1997). Brands can build associations with such groups by featuring high-status ambassadors and celebrities (Kapferer and Valette-Florence 2016) or high-status lifestyles (Heine et al. 2018) in messages to consumers. Similarly, brands can bring to mind a prototypical consumer who holds a high level of status, thus alluding to the idea that the brand is the "ordinary consumption of extraordinary people" (Czellar, Dubois, and Laurent 2020, p. xix). By leveraging high-status reference group symbolism in their messaging, brands may increase perceptions of brand status, perhaps even becoming status symbols that are purchased as signals of social identity (Holt 1998).

One avenue through which a brand can generate high-status reference group associations is the stylistic components of its messaging. This possibility exists because certain communication styles can be symbolically associated with higher-status groups (Bourdieu 1973; Goffman 1951; Labov 2006) and lead to differential inferences of social status (Bradac and Wisegarver 1984). As a result, through both aesthetic and linguistic choices in its messaging, a brand may be able to bring to mind the "cultural code" of the upper class, symbolically connecting products and brand to high-status reference groups and increasing the prestige associated with the brand (Heine et al. 2018). Importantly, the high-volume nature of social media engagement may offer greater ability for brands to repeatedly generate high-status reference group associations using digital messaging style. In the next section, I build on the connection between a brand's communication style and brand status inferences, leveraging theory to explore how one key feature of brand messaging—emotionality—can be uniquely influential in shaping perceptions of brand status.

Table 1. Summary of the Effects of Emotionality in Social Media.

Research	Key Findings	Sample Type	Additional Factors
Akpinar and Berger (2017)	Emotional appeals in online ads (via two coders) are more likely to be shared, influence brand positivity and likelihood of purchase	240 online video ads, two laboratory experiments	Brand integral versus nonintegral ads, persuasion attempt, brand knowledge
Berman et al. (2019)	Positive and negative emotionality (via LIWC) in a tweet increases retweet during and after a political debate	9.5 million tweets	
Herhausen et al. (2019)	High-arousal emotion words (via LIWC) in negative eWOM messages relates to greater virality in online brand communities	472,995 negative customer posts on Facebook, and at least 331,370 firm responses to these posts	Strength of structural ties, linguistic style matching
Lee, Hosanagar, and Nair (2018)	Emotional content (MTurk coding plus supervised NLP) is associated with higher levels of consumer engagement (likes, comments, shares) with a message	106,316 Facebook brand messages	Humorous content
Li and Xie (2020)	Pictures with happy faces (via Google Cloud Vision API's face detection) were associated with fewer retweets	4,537 tweets about airlines with image content	
Ludwig et al. (2013)	Greater increases in positive affective content (via LIWC) in customer reviews have a smaller effect on subsequent increases in conversion rate	18,682 customer reviews on Amazon	Valence, linguistic style matching
Meire et al. (2019)	Emotional content (via coders) affects customers' digital engagement	265,530 comments on a sport team's Facebook posts	
Ransbotham, Lurie, and Liu (2019)	Affective content (via LIWC measure) increases perceived consumption value (likes on a review)	275,362 reviews on Urbanspoon	
Rocklage and Fazio (2020)	Greater emotionality (via an Evaluative Lexicon measure) can lead to decreased review helpfulness and favorability toward the product	5.9 million Amazon product reviews, four laboratory experiments	Utilitarian or hedonic products, mistrust, experts, explanations of reaction
Tellis et al. (2019)	Positive emotions (via coders and PCA) affect sharing of online video ads	1,962 YouTube video ads	Platform, drama elements, discrete positive emotions
Tucker (2015)	Emotional response in online video ads can decrease persuasiveness while increasing attention/virality	396 online video ads, 24,367 survey respondents	Humor, number of comments, comments that mention product name
Van Laer et al. (2019)	Emotional change (via LIWC) over the course of a review story line increases narrative transportation and persuasion	190,461 TripAdvisor reviews, two laboratory experiments	
Villarroel Ordenes et al. (2019)	Consumers are more willing to share brand messages with emotional content (via Whissell's DAL and LIWC)	12,374 Facebook posts and 29,413 brand-generated tweets	Twitter versus Facebook
Yazdani, Gopinath, and Carson (2018)	Reviews with more affective content (via LIWC) are associated with greater Amazon sales	Amazon review and sales activity for 182 new music albums	
Yin, Bond, and Zhang (2017)	Expressed emotional arousal (via Revised DAL Whissell measure and textual paralanguage) in a review affects reader perceptions of its helpfulness	418,415 reviews on Apple's App Store, two laboratory experiments, and one survey	Nonlinear effect due to perceived effort, utilitarian versus hedonic products

Notes: eWOM = electronic word of mouth; NLP = natural language processing; PCA = principal component analysis; DAL = Dictionary of Affect in Language; LIWC = Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count.

Emotionality and Brand Status

In terms of specific stylistic communication characteristics that could evoke high-status reference groups, an intriguing possibility lies in emotional expression, which may be *negatively* correlated with such groups. For instance, in canonical theory on social distinction, Pierre Bourdieu documented the indifference and distance expressed by cultural elites while consuming cultural goods and theorized that a lack of emotional expression could distinguish higher from lower social classes in Western society (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper 1990). Research has traced this negative correlation back to the philosophies of such scholars as Kant, Plato, and Aristotle, which created a duality between emotion and reason and generated the perception that the emotion expression might be less elevated, informed, and well-mannered (Bourdieu 1991; Rampton 2003; for an overview, see Korsmeyer 2002). This perspective took hold and was appropriated by elite social groups beginning in the eighteenth century (Bennett 2007; Cohen

1988). Through social reproduction over time and the resulting symbolic capital associated with lowered emotionality, it is said that in contemporary society, communicators who employ differing levels of emotionality can bring to mind different status groups (Rampton 2003).

The evolution of this emotion–status association over time and maintenance through repeated interactions has resulted in the development of specific norms of communication (Asher and Lascarides 2001; Lewis 2008) that individuals are expected to adhere to in order to be read as members of a particular status group (Labov 2006). Because people categorize others into social groups in line with others' adherence to expectations (Fiske 1993; Smith and Zarate 1990), performing in a manner consistent with the social norm for high-status groups can increase one's own likelihood of being categorized with such groups (Goffman 1951). Thus, cultural expectations of lowered emotionality for high-status groups might in turn generate associations with high-status groups when a person matches these behavioral expectations via their reduced emotionality.

By extension, through low-emotionality communication, brands may be able to leverage norms relating to emotionality and status to generate associations with groups that are culturally elite. First, prior research has shown that brands can make use of existing communication norms (e.g., expectations that hedonic experiences should involve assertive language) to favorably influence perceptions of brand and product attributes (e.g., appearing more hedonic via assertive language in brand messaging; Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012; Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). Second, existing research suggests that brands may already rely on norms of communication to manage brand status perceptions. For instance, in an ethnography of a luxury hotel, Sherman (2007) describes managerial encouragement of cultivated vocabulary (e.g., "good evening" and "my pleasure" instead of "hi" and "okay") among service workers. Similarly, in a study of luxury retail stores, Dion and Borraz (2017) suggest that firms can make consumers aware of the firm's status via the service staff's style of communication.

Whereas prior research has not detailed specific communication features influencing brand status, I integrate cultural and sociolinguistic understandings of emotional expression to explore the role of emotionality in shaping status-related brand inferences. I propose that brands can influence perceptions of brand status via social media content that uses linguistic and visual markers of low emotionality. Specifically, because of the association between high-status groups and low emotionality, I propose that lower (relative to higher) brand emotionality can increase consumer perceptions of a brand's alignment with high-status communication norms. Given this perception of alignment with high-status norms, lower brand emotionality can evoke higher-status reference groups, ultimately shaping perceptions of brand status. Drawing on prior insights about how brand status might be influenced by reference group associations (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999), I explore the following direct (H_1–H_2) and mediational (H_3) hypotheses relating brand emotionality to brand status:

H_1: Brands that engage in lower emotionality generate inferences of higher brand status.

H_2: Brands that engage in lower emotionality (a) increase perceptions of alignment with high-status communication norms and (b) evoke higher-status reference groups.

H_3: The negative relationship between brand emotionality and perceived brand status is mediated by alignment with high-status communication norms, which evokes associations with higher-status reference groups.

The Role of Status Context

While I propose a primary negative effect of emotionality on brand status, there may be contextual moderators, as the effect may be more likely or of greater magnitude in certain contexts. For instance, brands may operate in different status contexts (e.g., places, industries, categories) that vary in their associations with prestige or status (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Johnston and Baumann 2007). High-status contexts in particular may both (1) gain status from the types of consumers who frequent them (Sandefur 2001) and (2) take on the norms of behavior held by these consumers (Labov 2006). Thus, within these contexts, there may be behavioral expectations that are inherited from and in line with the expected behaviors of high-status individuals. Given that lowered emotionality may be an expected communication pattern for high-status groups, it may also serve as an expectation in high-status contexts, which could impact the degree to which status inferences are made when different levels of emotionality are communicated within these contexts.

Research has documented behavioral norms in high-status settings. As an example, in some high-status contexts (e.g., luxury retail stores), consumers of varied status backgrounds practice high-class mannerisms, social styles, and dress codes that are tied to norms of conduct among social elites. Engaging in these communication practices allows consumers to conform to a "class model," which helps establish their social legitimacy and status (Dion and Borraz 2017). The pressure to align with such norms in high-status contexts may be strong, as high-status norms can include expectations of conformity within these contexts (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Bellezza and Keinan 2014) as well as strong tendencies to differentiate those who belong from those who do not (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, violations of these norms may be especially likely to result in perceptions of dissimilarity from typical high-status individuals in these contexts, leading to contrast effects (Huang and Washington 2015; Mussweiler 2003) and possible attributions of lower status (Podolny 1993).

If lowered emotionality is normative in high-status contexts (relative to other contexts), I propose that brands' choice of emotionality may result in stronger status inferences in these contexts. Unlike contexts where such status-based communication norms are more likely to be absent (e.g., lower-status contexts), deviation from emotionality norms in high-status contexts may more readily lead to perceptions of dissociation

from the high-status reference groups that are associated with such contexts. As a result, the presence or absence of brand emotionality may have the greatest effect on perceived brand status in high-status contexts, where norms surrounding emotionality may be most operant in signifying status affiliations or lack thereof. In short, I suggest that the impact of brand emotionality on brand status will be moderated by status context.

H_4: The negative relationship between brand emotionality and perceived brand status is greater in higher- (relative to lower-) status contexts.

The Role of Hedonic Product Type

I also consider product type as a moderator of the relationship between emotionality and brand status, as brands may communicate about different types of products on social media. I consider communication about hedonic products (Woods 1960), which are defined as being emotional and affective in nature (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Prior research has shown that certain styles of branded communication may fit better with certain product types, yielding more positive outcomes for the brand when congruent language is used (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012; Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). Because hedonic products are more likely to generate emotions and to be consumed for affective reasons (Batra and Ahtola 1991), emotionality may be especially befitting of communication about hedonic products (Kronrod and Danziger 2013; Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012). Recent research has also offered some evidence that emotional language can generate more positive inferences for communicators when describing hedonic (relative to utilitarian) products (Rocklage and Fazio 2020).

Given the strong linkage between hedonic products and emotionality, it may be the case that when brands post on social media about hedonic products, emotionality is less likely to be detrimental to perceptions of brand status, given the fit between this type of communication and the product category. For instance, instead of directly decreasing perceived alignment with high-status communication norms, the emotionality in brands' messages may be attributable, in part, to the emotional nature of the product. Consumers may also have an expectation that hedonic products are promoted with emotionality, because these products induce positive moods among consumers (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012). Thus, emotionality may be an expected part of communication when brands communicate about these types of products.

Because brand emotionality is less likely to result in clear violations of high-status communication norms when communicating about hedonic products, I suggest that product type moderates the emotion–brand status relationship:

H_5: The negative relationship between brand emotionality and perceived brand status is reduced when brands communicate about hedonic products.

Overview of Studies

In summary, the goal of this research is to examine whether brand emotionality in social media content can shape inferences of brand status. I suggest that given existing communication-based associations between high status and low emotionality, brands may generate inferences of higher brand status via lowered emotionality in social media posts. Because evidence of an emotionality–status association in social media is currently lacking, I first investigated the possibility of large-scale field evidence for this phenomenon. To this end, Studies 1a–1c analyze the social media of brands of varying status and quantified emotionality (via natural language processing and computer vision) in over 200,000 texts and images posted by these brands.

Evidence of an existing association between emotionality and brand status in this data would (1) connect sociolinguistic theories and ideas to branding phenomena and (2) support the idea that brands could potentially decrease emotionality to increase status perceptions, as brands have been able to take advantage of other communication-based associations to shape brand outcomes (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012; Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). However, the data in Studies 1a–1c did not allow for a direct test of the key hypotheses, as consumer perceptions of brand status following exposure to brand emotionality were not observed. Thus, Studies 2–4 are experiments to explore whether the manipulation of brands' emotionality in social media posts can impact consumers' inferences of brand status. I tested the proposed mechanism that expressions of less emotionality by brands can increase perceptions of alignment with high-status communication norms, bringing to mind higher-status reference groups that ultimately elevate perceived brand status. I also extended the analysis by exploring variation in status contexts (Study 2) and product types (Study 4). See Figure 1 for a conceptual model. Overall, through a multimethod approach, I aimed to document an existing communication-based association between brand emotionality and brand status (in Studies 1a–1c) and assess how it could be used in brand communication to directly influence perceptions of brand status (in Studies 2–4).

Study 1a: Emotional Expressions In Text

Study 1a examines the relationship between emotionality and brand status. Because the emotionality–status relationship has limited empirical support, I explore evidence of this correlation, which would reinforce the possibility that brands could influence perceived brand status via reduced emotionality on social media (H_1). First, I collected field data in the form of social media posts by brands on Twitter. Twitter is an important platform for luxury branding, as several top brands have millions of Twitter followers (Clement 2019), and managers believe they can attract their target audience on this platform (Mondalek 2020). Over 160,000 tweets from 74 brands in the luxury personal goods market were ultimately collected.

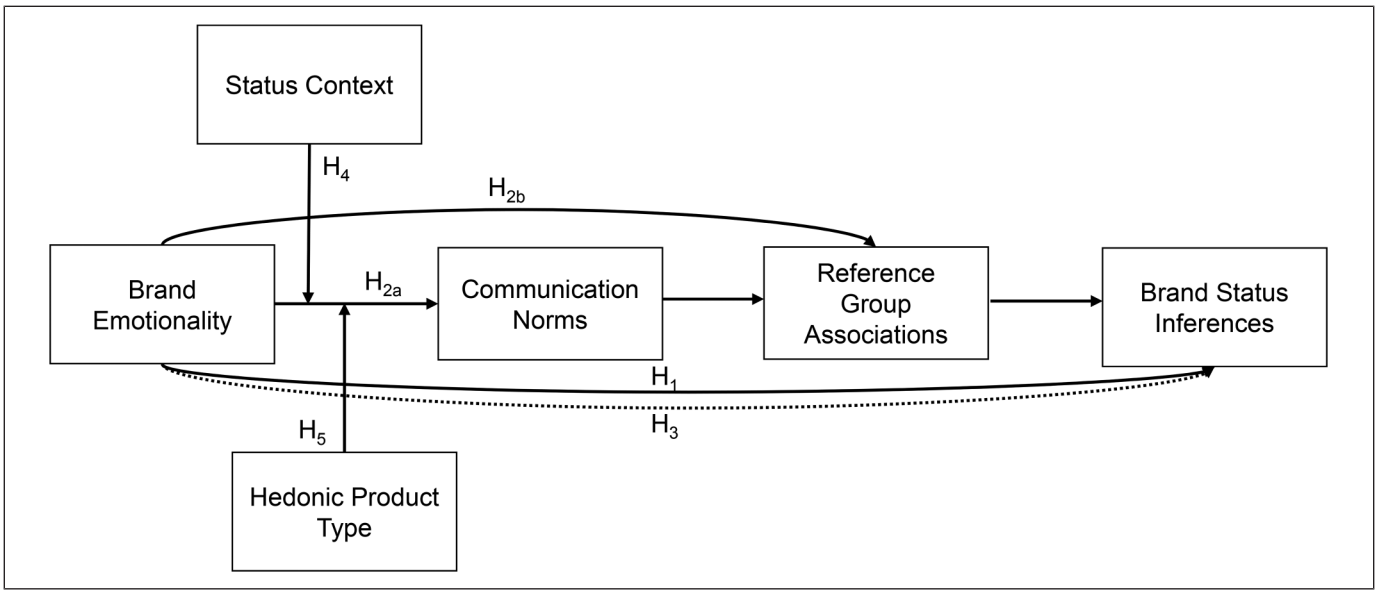

Figure 1. The effect of brand emotionality on brand status inferences.
Notes: The dotted line refers to the indirect effect through communication norms and reference associations.

I focused on this market given the importance of brand status to marketing in this industry (Okonkwo 2016).

The first step was to generate a list of brands with the goal of analyzing their communication on social media. I created this list in two phases. First, I identified a set of brands in March 2016 by examining the full list of brands that sell items in the women's "shoulder bags" category at three major online retailers: Saks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom, and Neiman Marcus. I chose the shoulder bags category given the prototypicality of this specific bag type in the luxury personal goods market and the high volume of listings of this type of bag among the three websites. I replicated this exercise in March 2019 and focused on Saks Fifth Avenue, as well as Net-a-Porter, given the high volume of listings on these two websites at the time of data collection.

I used the Twitter application programming interface (API) to collect the most recent 3,200 tweets from the final list of 74 brands. On average, each brand contributed 2,215 tweets to the final data set. To operationalize brand status, the official websites of these brands were scraped and the prices of all shoulder bags sold on each brand's website were collected. The median price for bags in the data set was $975. Following previous research describing brand price as a proxy for brand status in the luxury industry (Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn 1999; Vigneron and Johnson 1999), I equated higher brand prices with higher brand status within the product category of women's bags. Consistent with existing research, higher brand prices in this domain should reflect higher-status reference group associations via a wealthier target audience (Berger and Heath 2008; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999). For the full list of brands and median prices generated from this exercise, see Web Appendix W1A-2.

I employed multiple checks to ensure the validity of the website-based price data. First, price data from Saks Fifth Avenue and Net-a-Porter were collected. Median brand prices between brand websites and retailer websites exhibited a high degree of correlation ($r = .89$). Thus, among the list of brands, "self-reported" prices on brand websites reflected the prices sold at major online retailers, implying that brand website prices exemplified not only the prices at which brands wished to sell their products but also the prices that retailers believed the brands could command in the marketplace. Second, I conducted a separate survey on luxury consumers via a major Facebook group to construct an alternative measure of brand status. The use of this alternative measure (as opposed to brand website prices) replicated the pattern of results described next. For full results on this alternative measure, see Web Appendix W1A-3 to W1A-5.

Methods

I used several Python packages to preprocess all text data for subsequent analyses (for more information, see Web Appendix W1A-6). Emotionality in the text data was assessed with a variety of measures based on previous research that operationalized this construct. First, I employed measures from previous marketing research on emotionality in social media text (Yin, Bond, and Zhang 2017) that examined both individual words (via Whissell's Revised Dictionary of Affect in Language; Whissell 2009) and textual paralanguage, such as exclamation points and capitalized words (Luangrath, Peck, and Barger 2017), as indicators of emotional expression. Second, I supplemented these measures with the Evaluative Lexicon (Rocklage and Fazio 2015), a text analysis approach that assigns emotionality scores to individual words. Finally, I leveraged the 2015 Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) affect dictionary to provide another measure of emotionality (Pennebaker et al. 2015). Collectively, these measures reflect several well-known,

psychometrically validated approaches for capturing the degree of emotionality in written text. For commentary on differences among these approaches, see Web Appendix W1A-7.

The analyses focus on the relationship between the measures of emotionality and brand status. I operationalized brand status using the natural log of the median priced bag sold by the brand on its website. I conducted an ordinary least squares exercise with clustered standard errors by brand and controls for unique characteristics of the tweet (e.g., word count, URLs, mentions, hashtags), the year of the tweet, whether the tweet was posted via a desktop or laptop (labeled as "source"), and related language features in the tweet (e.g., readability, informality) derived from prior research (Davis et al. 2019; Pennebaker et al. 2015; for additional details, see Web Appendix W1A-8).

Results

See Table 2 for a summary of results. I found that increased emotionality in brand tweets correlated with decreased brand status when emotionality was operationalized with both count and normalized ("!!" recoded as "!") measures of exclamations ($\beta = -.246$, $t = 3.64$, $p = .001$; $\beta = -.383$, $t = 5.17$, $p < .001$), Whissell's affect measure ($\beta = -.100$, $t = 2.13$, $p = .036$), LIWC's affect measure ($\beta = -.010$, $t = 3.66$, $p < .001$), and, to a marginal extent, Evaluative Lexicon's emotionality measure ($\beta = -.027$, $t = 1.69$, $p = .094$). At the same time, this pattern did not hold with presence of capitalized words as an emotionality measure ($\beta = -.158$, $t = 1.24$, $p = .218$), implying that capitalizations may be a less discriminating feature for brand status. For an alternative measure of brand status and a similar pattern of results, see Web Appendix W1A-3 to W1A-5. Overall, these results reveal a general negative relationship between brand emotionality and brand status.

Brand Positioning Analysis

Given the richness of the unstructured text data, I also conducted a brand positioning analysis to explore general differences across brands in messaging. Drawing on prior research showing that a brand's positioning can be derived from evaluative adjectives associated with the brand (Aggarwal, Vaidyanathan, and Venkatesh 2009), I employed the Evaluative Lexicon (which is largely based on evaluative adjectives) for the analysis. Specifically, I clustered brands via the evaluative adjectives in their tweets using a combination of (1) a machine learning approach called word2vec (Mikolov et al. 2013), (2) k-means clustering combined with a silhouette analysis (Rousseeuw 1987), and (3) t-distributed stochastic neighbor embedding (t-SNE) for dimension reduction (Van Der Maaten 2014). There is evidence for a reliable two-cluster solution (for additional information on this analysis, including details on methods, brand maps, and word clouds, see Web Appendix W1A-9 to W1A-13).

Subsequent brand-level analyses revealed that between these two brand clusters, one was more associated with lower emotionality per tweet, when operationalized with both count and normalized ("!!" recoded as "!") measures of exclamations ($\beta = -.178$, $t = 5.64$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -.144$, $t = 5.41$, $p < .001$), LIWC's affect measure ($\beta = -1.28$, $t = 5.68$, $p < .001$), and the Evaluative Lexicon's emotionality measure ($\beta = -.364$, $t = 8.61$, $p < .001$)[1]. This brand cluster was also associated with greater brand status relative to the other cluster ($\beta = .401$, $t = 4.03$, $p < .001$; for results on an alternative measure of status, see Web Appendix W1A-10). In a supplementary analysis, this brand cluster's adjectives were also rated as more consistent with that of a sophisticated brand relative to the other cluster ($Cluster_1 = 53.03$ vs. $Cluster_2 = 46.34$; $t(60) = 2.51$, $p = .015$) by a sample of participants. Overall, these results provide additional support for the negative relationship between emotionality and brand status and for the potential importance of these variables as fundamental differentiators among brands.

Discussion

Analyzing over 160,000 tweets across more than 70 brands in the luxury personal goods industry, I documented a negative relationship between emotionality in social media posts and brand status (based on brand pricing). This pattern of results generally held across most, but not all, operationalizations of emotionality (e.g., presence of capitalizations). For additional analyses with an alternative measure of brand status, see Web Appendix W1A-3 to W1A-5.

A separate analysis on emotional valence (see Web Appendix W1A-14) found that brand tweets in the corpora were 60 times more likely to be clearly positive (e.g., 2 SD from a neutral valence score) than negative, and only .13% ($n = 210$ tweets) of tweets could be labeled as clearly negative. Thus, I focused on positive-valence emotionality in subsequent experimental tests (Studies 2–4). However, brand status in this study was associated with both LIWC's negative ($\beta = -.016$, $t = 2.32$, $p = .023$) and positive ($\beta = -.009$, $t = 3.37$, $p = .001$) emotion variables.

I also considered the positioning of these brands on the basis of the evaluative adjectives they used (see Web Appendix W1A-9 to W1A-13). Brands were clustered into one of two groups that differed on measures of emotionality and brand status variables, suggesting the potential discriminating value of these variables among brands. Next, I build on the results of Study 1a by exploring another indicator of emotionality: images posted by these brands on Twitter.

Study 1b: Emotional Expressions In Images

Recent research has demonstrated the value of analyzing image data for marketing insights (Li and Xie 2020; Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019). To explore the findings of Study 1a in a different context, I leverage the Twitter data collected in Study 1a, specifically the images that were included in tweets. Although other social media platforms (e.g., Instagram) are more visually

[1] Note that this pattern did not hold with presence of capitalized words ($\beta = -.009$, $t = .57$, $p = .568$) or Whissell's affect measure ($\beta = -.005$, $t = 1.49$, $p = .142$) as measures of emotionality.

Table 2. Relationship Between Emotionality and Median Price (Study 1a).

	Emotionality IVs											
	Exclamation Points		Normalized Exclamation Points		Presence of Capitalization		Whissell's Activation Subdictionary		LIWC's Affect Subdictionary		Evaluative Lexicon Emotionality	
DV = Median Price	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Predictors												
Emotionality IV	−.246**	.067	−.383***	.074	−.158	.128	−.100**	.047	−.010***	.003	−.027*	.016
Control Variables												
Word count	.018***	.005	.019***	.005	.018***	.005	.017***	.005	.015***	.005	.013**	.006
URL	.020	.051	.009	.049	.057	.053	.063	.054	.040	.054	.046	.060
Mentions	−.055	.037	−.052	.037	−.066*	.038	−.064*	.038	−.061	.037	−.084**	.039
Hashtags	.026	.042	.024	.041	.030	.043	.031	.043	.031	.042	−.019	.040
Nonword frequency	.895***	.199	.850***	.197	1.049***	.229	.981***	.206	.934***	.199	1.005***	.211
Informal words	−.017***	.005	−.015***	.004	−.020***	.005	−.023***	.006	−.020***	.005	−.027***	.006
Source	.170**	.074	.175**	.073	.160**	.077	.162**	.077	.163**	.077	.106	.078
Year of tweet	.062*	.034	.058*	.033	.076**	.036	.077**	.036	.077**	.036	.082**	.038
Observations	163,905		163,905		163,905		163,905		163,905		56,697	
R^2	.153		.169		.125		.123		.127		.114	

*Significant at 10% level.
**Significant at 5% level.
***Significant at 1% level.
Notes: DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable.

oriented and perhaps more critical as sources of brand image data, the brands in Study 1a still posted many images on Twitter. Approximately 55% of tweets contained images; thus, from the previous data collection, I had access to approximately 91,148 images posted by 74 brands. I processed these data using Microsoft Azure's cloud-based Face API. Although there are many options for image classifiers (e.g., Google Cloud Vision API, Kairos), I chose the Face API due to its relative success with Twitter data, as well as with the overall classification of benchmark facial characteristics (Jung et al. 2018). Azure's Face API analyzes the emotionality of faces and provides the quantification of such variables as happiness, neutrality, and sadness as part of Microsoft Azure's computer vision services. A pretest using Instagram brand posts also found that human-coded emotionality ratings correlated strongly with the emotion ratings provided by the Face API ($p < .001$). For more details, see Web Appendix W1B-1.

Methods

First, I submitted the image data collected from Study 1a to the Face API. This process resulted in the automated coding of 91,148 images. According to the Face API, approximately 60% of these images did not have faces. I focused the analysis on the images with faces (n = 36,967), where the Face API was able to provide output on the emotionality in the image. In this analysis, I examined the Face API's summed "emotionality score," capturing ratings on emotions including anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. In cases where an image had multiple faces, the scores across faces were averaged for each variable.

Consistent with Study 1a, I again used the natural log of the median priced bag sold by each brand on its website as a measure of brand status. Given prior research on how image–text fit could lead to positive outcomes for social media content (Li and Xie 2020), I also explored the interplay of image and text emotionality on brand status. To do so, I normalized all of the emotionality measures (subtracting from the mean and dividing by standard deviations) and ran regressions with both text and image emotionality variables, as well as an interaction term to account for their joint influence on brand status. As in Study 1a, I again clustered the standard errors by brand and employed the same control variables.

Results

See Table 3 for results. Across all models, there were significant main effects on brand status for the image emotionality variable (all $ps < .001$). For the effects of linguistic measures of emotionality on brand status, I found significant main effects for normalized ("!!" recoded as "!") measures of exclamations ($\beta = -.155$, $t = 2.34$, $p = .022$); marginal main effects for count measures of exclamations ($\beta = -.136$, $t = 1.70$, $p = .094$), LIWC's affect measure ($\beta = -.062$, $t = 1.94$, $p = .057$), and Evaluative Lexicon's emotionality measure ($\beta = -.065$, $t = 1.72$, $p = .089$); and no effects for presence of capitalized words ($\beta = .024$, $t = .49$, $p = .628$) or Whissell's affect measure ($\beta = -.029$, $t = 1.61$ $p = .112$). I also found some evidence of a "multiplicative" negative effect between text and image emotionality on brand status, when considering interaction terms involving count or

Table 3. Joint Effects of Image and Text Emotionality on Median Price (Study 1b).

	Emotionality Text IVs											
	Exclamation Points		Normalized Exclamation Points		Presence of Capitalization		Whissell's Activation Subdictionary		LIWC's Affect Subdictionary		Evaluative Lexicon Emotionality	
DV = Median Price	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Predictors												
Emotionality text IV	−.136*	.080	−.155**	.066	.024	.049	−.029	.018	−.062*	.032	−.065*	.038
Emotionality image IV	−.100***	.021	−.097***	.021	−.095***	.022	−.094***	.022	−.097***	.021	−.111***	.023
Text × Image interaction	−.043**	.020	−.036*	.018	−.010	.010	.002	.008	−.021**	.010	−.005	.010
Control Variables												
Word count	.020***	.006	.020***	.006	.018***	.007	.019***	.006	.019***	.006	.011	.008
URL	−.208***	.071	−.206***	.071	−.202***	.070	−.197***	.071	−.204***	.071	−.274***	.083
Mentions	−.007	.049	−.005	.049	−.009	.051	−.011	.051	−.011	.051	−.016	.054
Hashtags	.045	.046	.045	.046	.047	.048	.046	.047	.047	.046	.000	.050
Nonword frequency	.648**	.275	.634**	.273	.653**	.308	.703**	.280	.664**	.274	.676**	.288
Informal words	−.020***	.007	−.019***	.007	−.024***	.007	−.024***	.008	−.022***	.008	−.025***	.009
Source	.208**	.094	.213**	.094	.203**	.095	.204**	.095	.201**	.095	.153	.112
Year of tweet	.012	.042	.012	.042	.022	.042	.021	.042	.020	.042	.059	.045
Observations	36,967		36,967		36,967		36,967		36,967		11,000	
R^2	.129		.134		.116		.116		.118		.102	

*Significant at 10% level.
**Significant at 5% level.
***Significant at 1% level.
Notes: DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable.

normalized measures of exclamations ($\beta = -.043$, $t = 2.21$, $p = .031$; $\beta = -.036$, $t = 1.96$, $p = .054$) or LIWC's affect measure ($\beta = -.020$, $t = 2.05$, $p = .044$). For results on an alternative measure of brand status that yielded similar findings, see Web Appendix W1B-2.

Discussion

By quantifying the image emotionality in Study 1a's brand tweets, I find additional support for a negative relationship between emotionality and brand status. The image emotionality relationship with brand status appears to be especially strong when the variables of text and image emotionality are jointly considered. Several linguistic measures of emotionality did remain significant or marginally significant after inclusion of image emotionality in the models, suggesting the partially independent relationship of image and text emotionality with brand status. However, I also observed some evidence that the combination of text and image emotionality could further predict lower brand status. Thus, heightened emotionality in *both* brand texts and images might accelerate the negative inferences of brand status generated from either source alone. Note that the brands in Studies 1a and 1b might be more likely to exhibit an emotion–status relationship given their availability in high-end stores (i.e., a high-status context; see H_4). In subsequent studies (e.g., Study 2), I explore the moderating role of status context more fully.

Study 1c: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

One unique aspect of image data is that it lends itself more readily to cross-cultural comparisons relative to text data. For example, while it is challenging to compare text data between two social media platforms due to language differences (e.g., China-based Weibo vs. U.S.-based Twitter), much research on facial expression has argued that there is universality (and, therefore, detectability) of facial emotionality across different cultures (e.g., Ekman and Friesen 1971). Given this possibility, I collected additional social media data from another platform, Weibo, to explore whether the observed emotion–status relationship extends to a different cultural context.

Weibo, a major Chinese social media platform, exhibits many similarities to Twitter. It is a micro-blogging website with similar functionality (e.g., hashtags, replies, mentions) and similar levels of widespread adoption (Clement 2020). Because of these similarities, some cross-cultural researchers have compared data between Twitter and Weibo to generate insights into cultural differences (Gao et al. 2012). The choice of Weibo is motivated by these platform similarities and applications in prior research (Gong et al. 2017). This choice is also motivated by the increasing importance of the luxury consumer market in China, as this market is now one of the largest in the world (Jarosinski and Cotte 2014). Thus, data from this platform are managerially relevant for the brands in the data set.

Using the same list of brands in Study 1, I identified and scraped these brands' social media posts on Weibo from

January 2018 to September 2019. Note that I did not encounter an API limit on Weibo (unlike Twitter), allowing for the collection of a full Weibo data set for these brands during this time. Over half of the brands (n = 40) in the Twitter data set had official Weibo accounts and images, with faces in both Twitter and Weibo data sets (for a list of brands on the platform, see Web Appendix W1C-1). On average, these brands were more expensive (M = $1,373.80) relative to those with only official accounts on Twitter (M = $500.34). I was able to collect 57,073 posts from Weibo. These data were processed again through Azure, which detected 29,831 images with faces from which emotionality could be quantified via Azure's Face API.

Results

For brands that had posted on both Weibo and Twitter in the data, I submitted all quantified emotionality scores in brand-posted images to a regression model, with logged brand median price as the dependent variable and image emotionality as the predictor. The model also included social media platform (Weibo vs. Twitter) and the interaction between emotionality and platform as additional predictors. Analyzing 61,519 Twitter and Weibo images posted by 40 brands, I found that emotionality again predicted brand status ($\beta = -.084$, $t = 9.52$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the interaction term was significant, suggesting that the emotion–status relationship differed between Weibo and Twitter ($\beta = -.034$, $t = 3.92$, $p < .001$). Analyses revealed that the relationship between emotionality and brand status was stronger on Twitter ($\beta = -.118$, $t = 10.29$, $p < .001$) than on Weibo ($\beta = -.049$, $t = 3.70$, $p < .001$). These results imply that the negative emotion–status relationship exists cross-culturally, but that it may be stronger in some cultural contexts. For similar results with an alternative measure of brand status, see Web Appendix W1C-2.

Discussion

By exploring cross-cultural differences in image emotionality across two major social media platforms, I found additional evidence of a negative association between emotionality and brand status. Notably, I observed cross-cultural differences in this association. This finding may reflect underlying cultural differences in the interpretation and use of emotionality (Markus and Kitayama 1994) and merits additional research. While the choice to explore Twitter images in Study 1b allowed for a cross-cultural comparison with images from Weibo in Study 1c, future research could explore platforms that are more visually oriented (e.g., Instagram).

Studies 1a, 1b, and 1c documented a general negative correlation between brand emotionality and brand status. Given this evidence, it may be the case that brands could causally influence perceptions of brand status by manipulating their emotionality online. Study 2 explores this possibility, testing via an experiment whether reduced brand emotionality can increase associations with high-status reference groups, ultimately shaping status inferences for brands posting on social media.

Study 2: The Moderating Role of Status Context

Given the results in Studies 1a–1c, in Study 2 I explored whether brands that engage in lower emotionality can generate inferences of higher brand status (H_1). I also tested the direct effects of emotionality on mediating variables such as high-status reference group associations (H_{2b}) and whether such effects can ultimately increase brand status perceptions. Finally, I explored whether lowered emotionality by brands can lead to higher perceptions of status across varying status contexts. Borrowing from prior work on status context differences across cuisine types (e.g., French, Mexican, and American cuisine; Johnston and Baumann 2007), I conducted a between-subjects experiment in which several tweets from a given restaurant brand were presented. The brand was described as serving either French culinary classics (e.g., steak frites), Mexican culinary classics (e.g., carne asada), or American comfort food (e.g., meatloaf). As a manipulation check, participants were asked the extent to which (depending on their condition) French cuisine, Mexican cuisine, or American cafeteria cuisine is a prestigious context (1 = "strongly disagree," and 7 = "strongly agree"). Results confirmed prior findings that French cuisine is seen as more prestigious than Mexican cuisine, which is seen as more prestigious than American cafeteria cuisine ($M_{French} = 5.29$, $SD = 1.15$ vs. $M_{Mexican} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.62$ vs. $M_{American} = 3.23$, $SD = 1.74$; $t = 7.24$ and $t = 5.22$, respectively, $ps < .001$). Given these mean differences and a scale midpoint at four, I labeled these status contexts as high, moderate, and low for the three respective restaurant types.

Tweets were generated by collecting similar tweets from several major restaurant chains. I made changes to the tweet content to make the tweets match the cuisine type (e.g., "fine wine" is described for the French restaurant whereas "cold beer" is described for the American cafeteria). Borrowing from Yin, Bond, and Zhang (2017), I manipulated the level of emotionality in different tweets using nonverbal, textual paralanguage. All sentences ended in a period for lower-brand-emotionality participants, and in an exclamation point for higher-brand-emotionality participants (for stimuli, see Web Appendix W2-1). I predicted that brands in higher-status contexts are more able to manipulate brand status perceptions (via lower or higher emotionality) than brands in lower-status contexts (H_4), because high-status communication norms relating to emotionality are more prevalent in higher-status contexts. In a pretest, participants indicated that lowered emotionality was more likely to match a high-status communication norm in the high-status context, relative to the moderate-status context and especially the low-status context (see Web Appendix W2-2). Thus, in high-status contexts, reduced brand emotionality may be most aligned with high-status communication norms and most likely to generate higher inferences of brand status.

Procedure

Six hundred twenty-nine North American residents, recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) ($M_{age} = 37$ years; 307 women), participated in this experiment for a small payment. Participants were assigned to conditions in a 3 (status context: low, moderate, high) × 2 (level of brand emotionality: lower vs. higher) between-subjects experiment. Participants were asked to read a set of four tweets, one at a time. In this study, the tweets were posted by a restaurant brand. Participants saw the same level of emotionality across tweets in line with their condition assignment.

After reading the tweets, participants rated the perceived status of the brand, using four items asking the extent to which they thought the brand was "high-status," "well-respected," "prestigious," and "high-end" (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Bellezza and Keinan 2014; 1 = "not at all," and 7 = "very much"; $\alpha = .937$). Participants were also asked whether the brand was more likely to be "for rich people," "a very expensive brand," and "an elitist brand" to capture high-status reference group associations (Vigneron and Johnson 1999; $\alpha = .957$). As a manipulation check, participants were asked to indicate the level of emotionality in the restaurant brand's tweets, using Yin, Bond, and Zhang's (2017) bipolar scale items (passive vs. active, mellow vs. fired up, low energy vs. high energy; $\alpha = .837$). Results suggested that the lower- and higher-emotionality conditions differed in perceived emotionality ($M_{lower} = 5.20$, $M_{higher} = 5.63$; $t(627) = 5.35$, $p < .001$).

Results

Perceived status and reference groups. For full statistics from this study, see Table 4. A 3 (cuisine type) × 2 (level of emotionality) analysis of variance (ANOVA) examined participants' perceptions of brand status across conditions. Results revealed a two-way interaction ($F(1, 625) = 8.98$, $p = .003$). I decomposed this two-way interaction by analyzing the data for each status context level separately. Participants in the high-status context (e.g., French cuisine) condition evaluated the lower-emotionality brand as higher in status ($M_{lower} = 5.92$, $SD = .82$) than the higher-emotionality brand ($M_{higher} = 5.40$, $SD = 1.20$; $F(1, 625) = 15.24$, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants in the moderate-status context (e.g., Mexican cuisine) conditions evaluated the lower-emotionality brand as higher in status ($M_{lower} = 5.35$, $SD = .97$) than the higher-emotionality brand ($M_{higher} = 4.98$, $SD = 1.21$; $F(1, 625) = 6.26$, $p = .013$). However, for participants in the low-status condition (American cafeteria cuisine), there was no significant difference in perceptions of status between lower- and higher-emotionality brands ($M_{lower} = 3.93$, $SD = 1.27$ vs. $M_{higher} = 4.11$, $SD = 1.52$; $F(1, 625) = .55$, $p = .46$). A similar pattern was observed for the reference group variable.

Mediation. To test whether differences in reference group associations mediated the effect of the cuisine type and emotionality interaction on perceptions of brand status, I employed the mediation analysis suggested by Hayes (2017), using PROCESS Model 8 (see Web Appendix W2-3). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect revealed full mediation via reference group associations (effect = −.09, SE = .04, 95% confidence interval [$CI_{95\%}$]: [−.17, −.02]). Notably, the mediation path through reference group associations was significant for both high-status (effect = −.17, SE = .05, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.26, −.07]) and moderate-status contexts (effect = −.07, SE = .03, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.14, −.01]), but not lower-status contexts (effect = .02, SE = .06, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.09, .13]). These results provide evidence of moderated mediation, explaining how lower levels of emotionality can affect status perceptions, depending on the status context in which brand communication occurs.

Discussion

Study 2 results revealed a negative effect of emotionality on inferences of higher brand status (H_1), which was moderated by status context (H_4). In an experiment, emotional differences in brand communication had less of an effect on inferences of brand status in lower- (vs. higher-) status contexts. Particularly, within moderate- and high- (but not low-) status contexts, brand emotionality could evoke high-status reference group perceptions and greater brand status (H_{2b}). Furthermore, I observed evidence of moderated mediation, such that the negative relationship between brand emotionality and perceived status was mediated by reference group associations, but only in moderate- and high-status contexts.

A few observations are noteworthy. First, I found that the effect of brand emotionality on brand status was attenuated in low-status contexts. By contrast, the effect of status context on brand status was significant regardless of whether the brands exhibited low or high emotionality (see Table 4). Thus, the findings uniquely highlight status context as offering a boundary condition for the effects of brand emotionality. Second, it may be that perceptions of a brand's emotionality were influenced by the brand's status context. For instance, might brands operating in higher-status contexts be perceived as less emotional given existing status-based expectations? The data did not provide support for this possibility. Using the emotionality manipulation check as a dependent variable, I found that brands in low-status contexts were seen as exhibiting *lower* emotionality ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.08$) relative to brands in moderate-status contexts ($M = 5.59$, $SD = .95$), which were perceived as exhibiting higher emotionality than brands in high-status contexts ($M = 5.42$, $SD = .99$). These observations further support the direct effect of brand emotionality on inferences of brand status, along with the moderation of this effect in different status contexts.

Study 3: Norm Alignment and Group Associations as Mediators

Study 3 expands on the results of Study 2 by testing the role of multiple mediating variables in the conceptual model. In particular, I examine whether brand emotionality increases perception of alignment with high-status communication norms (H_{2a}), which can shape reference group associations and,

Table 4. Summary of Results for Study 2.

	Low-Status Context		Moderate-Status Context		High-Status Context	
DVs	**$M_{low\ emotion}$ (N = 102)**	**$M_{high\ emotion}$ (N = 107)**	**$M_{low\ emotion}$ (N = 103)**	**$M_{high\ emotion}$ (N = 108)**	**$M_{low\ emotion}$ (N = 105)**	**$M_{high\ emotion}$ (N = 104)**
Brand status	3.93	4.11	5.35	4.98	5.92	5.40
	(1.27)	(1.52)	(.97)	(1.21)	(.82)	(1.20)
Contrast *p*-value	$p = .459$		$p = .013$		$p < .001$	
Reference groups	2.75	2.89	4.49	4.10	5.44	4.92
	(1.41)	(1.79)	(1.54)	(1.46)	(1.10)	(1.36)
Contrast *p*-value	$p = .682$		$p = .029$		$p = .002$	

Notes: DV = dependent variable. N = 629, 307 women, M_{age} = 37 years, MTurk. One participant from the original sample of N = 630 opted out of the survey.

ultimately, brand status (H_3). Similar to Study 2, participants read a set of tweets from a fictitious brand (abeddrys, bondi, doryeves, or sueretto; the brand name was randomly assigned). I generated the stimuli by collecting actual tweets from major brands in the fashion industry. Original brand names mentioned in the text of each tweet (e.g., #prada) were replaced with the name of the fictitious brand (e.g., #abeddrys).

Tweets were manipulated to create three treatment versions that exhibited either low, moderate, or high levels of emotionality. Specifically, the levels of emotionality varied across tweets, such that the low-, moderate-, and high-expression tweets had sentences that ended in either a period (low emotionality), an exclamation point (moderate emotionality), or three exclamation points (e.g., high emotionality), respectively. Following Yin, Bond, and Zhang (2017), I also capitalized a word or phrase in the high-emotionality tweets (for stimuli, see Web Appendix W3-1). Participants saw the same level of emotionality across tweets based on their condition assignment. Consistent with Study 2, participants were asked to indicate the level of emotionality in each tweet ($\alpha = .893$). Perceived emotionality did vary among the tweets labeled as low- ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.30$), moderate- ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.32$), and high- ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.25$) treatment versions (all $ps < .001$). A separate pretest (see Web Appendix W3-2) confirmed that these tweets did not differentially influence brand credibility, quality, sincerity, or participant attention levels.

Procedure

Four hundred twenty-five North American residents, recruited from MTurk ($M_{age} = 41$ years; 206 women), participated in a between-subjects experiment (brand emotionality: low, moderate, high) for a small payment. Participants were presented with a set of three tweets from a randomly assigned fictitious fashion brand. Across conditions, tweets varied in terms of the level of emotionality in the brand's tweets (low, moderate, or high). After reading the tweets, participants saw the same questions from Study 2 and rated the perceived status of the brand, ($\alpha = .973$) and whether the brand was associated with a high-status reference group ($\alpha = .970$). Participants also answered a question on perceived alignment with high-status communication norms (similar to the item in a pretest of Study 2; see Web Appendix W2-2). Specifically, I adapted a single-item measure from Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2014) capturing the degree of stylistic conformity to a behavioral norm: "To what extent does this language conform to a high-end fashion brand's communication style?" (1 = "not at all," and 7 = "very much").

Results

Perceptions of status, communication norms, and reference group associations. For full statistics and results from this study, see Table 5. An ANOVA revealed differences among levels of emotionality and perceptions of brand status ($F(1, 422) = 15.36$, $p < .001$), conformity to high-status communication norms ($F(1, 422) = 25.93$, $p < .001$), and reference group associations ($F(1, 422) = 20.26$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, results revealed a negative relationship between higher levels of emotionality and these variables, consistent with H_1, H_{2a}, and H_{2b}. For instance, low-emotionality brands generated higher inferences of brand status ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.27$) than moderate-emotionality brands ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.49$; $p = .008$), which generated higher inferences of brand status than high-emotionality brands ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.69$; $p = .005$).

Following Yin, Bond, and Zhang (2017), I separated the analyses, comparing low versus moderate levels of brand emotionality and moderate versus higher levels of brand emotionality. For low versus moderate emotionality, planned contrasts revealed a significant decrease in in alignment with high-status communication norms, reference group associations, and perceived status. Similarly, comparing moderate versus high levels of emotionality, contrasts revealed a significant decrease in alignment with high-status communication norms, reference group associations, and perceived status. For details on means and contrast comparisons, see Table 5.

Mediation. I used Hayes (2017) PROCESS Model 6 for mediation analyses, again comparing low versus moderate, and subsequently moderate versus high, levels of brand emotionality. For low versus moderate emotionality, a bootstrap confidence interval for indirect effects through norm alignment and reference group associations suggested evidence of mediation (effect = −.17 SE = .06, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.31, −.06] at 95% significance level), while the direct effect between emotionality and

Table 5. Summary of Results for Study 3.

	Emotionality			*p*-Values	
DVs	M_{low} (N = 142)	$M_{moderate}$ (N = 138)	M_{high} (N = 145)	Low/Moderate Contrast	Moderate/High Contrast
Brand status	5.00 (1.27)	4.50 (1.49)	4.03 (1.69)	.005	.008
Norm alignment	5.22 (1.40)	4.63 (1.51)	3.86 (1.87)	.002	<.001
Reference groups	4.95 (1.43)	4.40 (1.60)	3.74 (1.78)	.005	.001

Notes: DV = dependent variable. N = 425, 206 women, M_{age} = 41 years, MTurk.

brand status disappeared (effect = −.04, SE = .09, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.22, .14]). Similar results were found when comparing moderate versus high brand emotionality conditions (indirect effect = −.22 SE = .08, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.38, −.09]; direct effect = .14, SE = .10, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.06, .34]). For other statistics from this analysis, see Web Appendix W3-3.

Discussion

Study 3 results revealed that decreased levels of emotionality in social media posts can increase brand status perceptions (H_1) as well as alignment with high-status norms (H_{2a}) and reference group associations (H_{2b}). Mediation analyses showed that this effect can be attributed to alignment with high-status communication norms, which evokes high-status reference group associations (H_3). In Web Appendix W3-4, I considered alternative explanations such as perceptions of brand intention to persuade, competence, and coolness (for measures, see Web Appendix W4-1). When used as covariates, these constructs did not influence the interpretation of the mediation results. Overall, the findings of Study 3 build on Study 2, providing support for the mediational role of norm alignment and reference group associations in the negative effects of brand emotionality on brand status.

Study 4: The Moderating Role of Hedonic Products

Given prior research suggesting that emotional language may be especially fitting to describe and talk about hedonic products (Kronrod and Danziger 2013; Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012), in Study 4 I examined whether brand emotionality is less likely to be detrimental to perceptions of brand status for hedonic products (H_5). To test these ideas, I designed an experiment that presented an Instagram post from a given car brand, where the product was either a convertible (a hedonic product; e.g., Okada 2005) or a sedan. A manipulation check item (−3 = "totally utilitarian, not at all hedonic," and 3 = "totally hedonic, not at all utilitarian"; O'Donnell and Evers 2019) confirmed that convertibles are perceived to be hedonic in nature ($M_{convertible}$ = 1.69, SD = 1.19; t(108) = 14.79, $p < .001$), whereas sedans are perceived to be utilitarian (M_{sedan} = −.61, SD = 1.19; t(112) = 5.45, $p < .001$). While the median price estimate for a typical convertible was higher ($Price_{convertible}$ = $40,000) than the estimate for a typical sedan ($Price_{sedan}$ = $25,000), inclusion of this covariate in analyses did not affect the interpretation of the results.

The stimuli were constructed drawing on actual posts by luxury car brands on Instagram. Consistent with prior studies, I manipulated the level of emotional expression in different advertisement posts using textual paralanguage (e.g., exclamation points). However, I also selected words for the Instagram caption from the Evaluative Lexicon that differed in emotionality without differing in degree of positivity (e.g., "awesome" and "amazing" vs. "perfect" and "excellent"). Finally, I aimed to manipulate levels of emotionality using image stimuli. Specifically, Adobe Photoshop was used to generate multiple versions of a photo with a human model expressing varying levels of emotion while sitting in either a sedan or a convertible. For stimuli and original posts, see Web Appendix W4-2.

Procedure

Two hundred twenty-three North American residents, recruited from MTurk (M_{age} = 42 years; 114 women), participated in this online experiment for a small payment. Participants were assigned to a 2 (hedonic product: yes, no) × 2 (level of emotionality: lower vs. higher) between-subjects experiment. After seeing an Instagram post produced by the Rondi car brand (e.g., "A perfect experience paired with excellent craftsmanship. The 2020 Rondi convertible."), participants rated the perceived status of the brand (α = .962), and whether the brand was associated with a high-status reference group (α = .958) as in Studies 2 and 3.

Consistent with Study 3, participants answered a question capturing alignment with high-status communication norms: "To what extent does this communication conform to a high-end car brand's communication style?" (1 = "not at all," and 7 = "very much"). This single-item measure was supplemented with three items adapted from Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu (2012) to capture communication expectations: "To

what degree is the phrasing and communication of this message typical/expected/standard for a high-end brand?" (1 = "not at all," and 7 = "very much"). These four measures of alignment with high-status communication norms exhibited strong reliability (α = .959); thus, I averaged scores on these measures to construct a norm alignment composite. Finally, as a manipulation check, participants indicated the level of emotionality in the car brand's ads, via Yin, Bond, and Zhang's (2017) bipolar scale (α = .924). I found that stimuli in the lower-emotionality conditions differed from the higher-emotionality conditions in perceived emotionality ($M_{lower} = 3.40$, $SD = 1.42$, $M_{higher} = 5.02$, $SD = 1.21$; $t(221) = 9.15$, $p < .001$).

Results

Perceived status, communication norms, and reference groups. For full statistics from this study, see Table 6. A 2 (hedonic product: yes or no) × 2 (level of emotionality) ANOVA examined participants' perceptions of brand status across conditions. Results revealed a two-way interaction ($F(1, 219) = 12.63$, $p = .002$). I decomposed this interaction by separately analyzing the data for each product type. Participants in the nonhedonic product conditions evaluated the lower-emotionality brand as being higher in status ($M_{lower} = 5.00$, $SD = 1.40$) than the higher-emotionality brand ($M_{higher} = 3.84$, $SD = 1.50$, $F(1, 219) = 22.56$, $p < .001$). At the same time, participants in the hedonic product conditions did not evaluate the lower-emotionality brand as being higher in status ($M_{lower} = 5.09$, $SD = 1.06$) than the higher-emotionality brand ($M_{higher} = 5.02$, $SD = 1.13$ $F(1, 219) = .06$, $p = .80$). A similar pattern of results was observed for the norm alignment and reference group variables. Overall, these results revealed that the negative relationship between brand emotionality and perceived brand status is significantly reduced for hedonic products.

Mediation. To test whether differences in alignment with high-status communication norms and reference group associations mediated the effect of the two-way interaction between product type (hedonic: yes or no) and emotionality on perceptions of status, I employed a similar mediation analysis from Studies 2 and 3 (PROCESS Model 85 [Hayes 2017]). A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect revealed full mediation via alignment with high-status communication norms and reference group associations (effect = .22, SE = .09, $CI_{95\%}$: [.04, .40]). However, after accounting for this indirect effect, the direct effect of emotionality on brand status failed to reach significance for both hedonic (effect = .08, SE = .07, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.06, .22]) and nonhedonic (effect = −.07, SE = .07, $CI_{95\%}$: [−.21, .08]) product conditions. These results provided evidence of moderated mediation, explaining how lower levels of emotionality can affect brand status perceptions (via the mediators of norm alignment and reference group associations) depending on whether the product type is hedonic or not.

Discussion

Study 4 results describe another moderator for the emotionality–status relationship for brands. In a between-subjects experiment, participants were likely to associate brands selling nonhedonic (e.g., sedans) products with lower status when these brands engaged in higher levels of emotionality (H_1). At the same time, this pattern of results did not hold for hedonic products (e.g., convertibles). In other words, the magnitude of the relationship between emotionality and brand status was reduced for hedonic products, in support of H_5. This moderator might be explained by reduced perceptions of misalignment with high-status communication norms when brands employed emotionality in messages about hedonic products. This result is notable given that the convertible product category was also generally perceived to be higher priced, implying that other communication-based associations (e.g., between hedonic products and emotionality) can help moderate the general negative effect between emotionality and brand status.

More generally, I found additional support for the hypothesized main relationships and suggested underlying processes (H_1, H_{2a}, H_{2b}, and H_3). Replicating the results of Study 3, I found that lower emotionality led to alignment with high-status communication norms, which evoked high-status reference groups that ultimately increased perceptions of brand status. Follow-up mediation analyses suggested that this process was significant for both hedonic ($CI_{95\%}$: [−.64, −.33]) and nonhedonic ($CI_{95\%}$: [−.41, −.13]) products. Thus, even though lower emotionality did not directly generate significantly higher inferences of brand status for hedonic products, for this product type, there is still some evidence for an indirect relationship on status perceptions via the mediators in this study. For a consideration of differences in perceived assertiveness and brand attitudes as alternative explanations, see Web Appendix W4-1.

General Discussion

In this research, I used cultural and sociolinguistic understanding of elites and emotionality to inform the hypotheses about the relationship between brand emotionality and brand status. First, I documented this correlation in text and image data produced by brands in social media via analysis of over 200,000 text and image posts using recent automated text analytic (Study 1a) and computer vision (Studies 1b and 1c) methods in two different cultural contexts. Given these findings, I then explored a causal implication of this relationship: whether brands can manipulate emotionality to increase perceived status. Results of three experiments (Studies 2–4) supported this possibility and provided insights into the mechanism behind this relationship. I found that reduced emotionality can increase perceived alignment with high-status communication norms, which evoke high-status reference groups for the brand. This, in turn, invokes inference of higher brand status.

Table 6. Summary of Results for Study 4.

	Hedonic Product		Nonhedonic Product		*p*-Values		
DVs	M_{low} (N = 58)	M_{high} (N = 52)	M_{low} (N = 53)	M_{high} (N = 60)	Hedonic Cells Contrast	Nonhedonic Cells Contrast	2 × 2 Interaction
Brand status	5.09 (1.06)	5.02 (1.13)	5.00 (1.40)	3.84 (1.50)	.801	<.001	.002
Norm alignment	5.34 (1.14)	4.20 (1.63)	5.26 (1.38)	3.17 (1.68)	<.001	<.001	.017
Reference groups	5.01 (1.31)	4.92 (1.44)	4.60 (1.57)	3.44 (1.72)	.760	<.001	.009

Notes: DV = dependent variable. N = 223, 114 women, M_{age} = 42 years, MTurk. "Low" and "high" refer to low- and high-emotionality conditions, respectively.

Theoretical Implications

This work provides novel empirical support for longstanding theories and ideas on emotionality as a form of distinction among different social classes (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper 1990). I extend these ideas to marketing phenomena by examining whether status positions in the marketplace can be evidenced through analysis of multimodal social media data. This work follows recent calls in social science to leverage new methods of data analysis to examine longstanding theories of human behavior (Lazer and Radford 2017). Notably, this article is one of the first to connect theories of emotion and status with quantified forms of expression via language and image processing methods developed at the critical intersection of psychometrics and computer science.

This work also contributes to existing research on emotionality and status. Some research suggests a positive relationship between power and emotionality (e.g., Kemper 1981). The current research implies that a negative association may exist when looking specifically at status rather than power. Power reflects control and the relative state dependence between two or more parties, whereas status reflects social respect and admiration, which can relate to sociological dimensions such as class and wealth (e.g., Magee and Galinsky 2008). The findings of this article suggest an important distinction between these closely related constructs, as emotions such as anger and disgust might be more relevant for contexts where power hierarchies are at play (e.g., in boss–employee relationships) than for contexts more closely related to status than power (e.g., luxury brand messaging on social media). I hope these findings can stimulate more research on how emotionality is socially structured and how it can lead to nuanced inferences about communicators.

Finally, this research not only relates to longstanding theories in cultural sociology but also connects these theories with marketing research. In particular, I connect the important construct of reference group associations (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Escalas and Bettman 2005) with emotionality, which is emerging as a critical variable in social media research. The findings suggest that there is a pathway by which less emotional communication impacts reference group constructs as well as the perceived status of the brand. In this regard, the findings are particularly relevant to existing ideas in marketing on brand status (e.g., Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991; Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003) and new frameworks on how emotion-laden content can shape perceptions of brands (Luangrath, Peck, and Barger 2017).

Managerial Implications

This work builds on existing research about brand management in social media by moving beyond high-level social media variables (e.g., presence of a social media account, volume of messages) and into the nuances of what is said online and how (e.g., the emotionality of content) and its impact for branding. The data reveal that brands can increase their perceived status through a strategy of reduced emotionality. This finding may be especially critical for branding in the era of social media, given the emerging evidence on the importance of emotionality in online content. This approach also points to novel uses of automated text analytic and computer vision methods, with which brands can monitor rich, unstructured text and image messages on social media. I also provide a demonstration of the value of social media image data in unlocking cross-cultural branding analysis via the comparison of images on Twitter and Weibo.

This article advances knowledge on the management of brand status. Research is limited in this domain, particularly on the topic of brand communication. Some research has suggested that negative sales representative behaviors such as haughty facial expressions and unintelligible language can increase consumers' sense of social intimidation, which reinforces consumers' own negative self-perceptions of status relative to the brand (Dion and Borraz 2017). Similar negative communication by sales representatives has also been shown to increase favorability toward a brand (Ward and Dahl 2014). In this work focused on the context of social media, I found that negative brand messaging is extremely rare (for an analysis of negative Twitter data, see Study 1a), thus limiting the potential generalizability of existing work for digital contexts. This research contributes to the literature by suggesting that through careful management of the fundamental communication feature of emotionality in social media, brands might be able to align with high-status communication norms and reference group associations, ultimately increasing perceptions of brand status.

Future Research

While managerial thought has generally espoused the value of emotional branding (e.g., Salzman 2019) and focused on high "return on emotion" in social media (Martin 2020), this work presents a cautionary tale, as negative inferences of brand status can follow emotionality in messaging. However, it is likely that emotionality in social media yields several positive benefits to brands. While Studies 1–4 demonstrate that increased emotionality is associated with lower brand status, in a separate study comparing the language of different brands (see Web Appendix W5-1), I found that consumers perceived brands with greater emotionality to have greater brand warmth as well as stronger relationship characteristics, such as brand effort (e.g., likelihood of putting effort and thought into the customer relationship) and brand helpfulness (e.g., willingness to serve). Consistent with prior research, the results did not provide a clear picture regarding a "warmth–status" tradeoff (see W5-1 Discussion). However, I believe that emotionality can generate strong brand perceptions in digital contexts, and additional research may more fully uncover both the promise and peril of emotionality in brands' digital communications.

The multimethod approach also uncovered several potential boundary conditions for the emotion–status relationship in branding. For instance, managers promoting hedonic products may have greater license to employ emotionality in their brand messaging, given the strong association between the product category and emotionality. By extension, it may also be the case that managers promoting brands with a hedonic (relative to a utilitarian) nature (Huber, Eisele, and Meyer 2018) may enjoy similar benefits when employing emotionality in their digital communication. Furthermore, in the computer vision analyses of brand images (Study 1c), I found that the relationship between brand emotionality and status was weaker on Weibo relative to Twitter. Given this finding, it may be that brand managers operating in non-Western contexts may be less likely to bring to mind lower-status reference groups via messages with higher emotionality. Notably, cultural differences (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism) may explain differences in the interpretation of emotionality (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1994). Thus, more research on the cross-cultural reception of brand emotionality would be especially helpful for global managerial practice.

Finally, future research could also explore the management of brand emotionality across the many different social touchpoints now experienced by consumers online (Roggeveen et al. 2021). Consumers have a wide variety of digital interactions with brands, including one-to-one (e.g., chat messages) or one-to-many (e.g., live video streams) experiences with brand representatives and even online chatbots powered by artificial intelligence. Increasingly, consumers are also experiencing brands through interactions with social media influencers, a phenomenon that is especially true for luxury products (Czellar, Dubois, and Laurent 2020; Glassman 2019). Can these different digital touchpoints be leveraged to generate positive brand associations such as brand status? And is the emotionality from some touchpoints (e.g., chats with salespeople) interpreted differently from other touchpoints (e.g., chatbots, influencers), perhaps due to their perceived social distance from the brand? More research is needed to capture the heterogeneity across these emerging touchpoints and their differing consequences for brand perceptions.

Conclusion

Combining cultural theory, recent methodological tools for handling multimodal data, and experiments that delve into underlying mechanisms, this research reveals converging evidence of a *negative* relationship between brand emotionality and brand status. I find that brands can increase their perceived status via reduced emotionality in social media through alignment with high-status communication norms and associations with high-status reference groups. This work highlights a distinct advantage of managing—and in fact *lowering*—brand emotionality in online content and adds to a growing literature on the importance of emotionality in social media. Given the rapid-fire and increasingly information-rich nature of social media content, I believe that additional analysis of text, image, and video communication can unlock more insights into how social media content can ultimately shape status perceptions and other key branding outcomes.

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