

I Am, Therefore I Buy: Low Self-Esteem and the Pursuit of Self-Verifying Consumption

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The idea that consumers use products to feel good about themselves is a basic tenet of marketing. Yet, in addition to the motive to self-enhance, consumers also strive to confirm their self-views (i.e., self-verification). Although self-verification provides self-related benefits, its role in consumer behavior is poorly understood. To redress that gap, we examine a dispositional variable—trait self-esteem—that predicts whether consumers self-verify in the marketplace. We propose that low (vs. high) self-esteem consumers gravitate toward inferior products because those products confirm their pessimistic self-views. Five studies supported our theorizing: low (vs. high) self-esteem participants gravitated toward inferior products (study 1) because of the motivation to self-verify (study 2). Low self-esteem consumers preferred inferior products only when those products signaled pessimistic (vs. positive) self-views and could therefore be self-verifying (study 3). Even more telling, low self-esteem consumers' propensity to choose inferior products disappeared after they were induced to view themselves as consumers of superior products (study 4), but remained in the wake of negative feedback (study 5). Our investigation thus highlights self-esteem as a boundary condition for compensatory consumption. By pinpointing factors that predict when self-verification guides consumer behavior, this work enriches the field's understanding of how products serve self-motives.

Keywords: self-esteem, self-verification, self-enhancement, symbolic consumption, inferior consumption, compensatory consumption

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Consumers strive to feel good about themselves (Allport 1937; Baumeister 1998). Attractive products serve this desire to self-enhance by boosting self-views, distracting consumers from threats, and signaling desired qualities to the self and others (Braun and Wicklund 1989; Rucker and Galinsky 2008).

Yet consumers' actual product choices call into question the predominance of using consumption to self-enhance. Today's hypercompetitive marketplace continues to provide products, brands, and services that arguably signal unfavorable information about the consumers who choose them. For instance, although many consumers believe that store brands are of lower quality (Richardson, Dick, and Jain 1994), store brands accounted for 20% of in-store sales in 2017 (Private Label Manufacturers Association 2017). And while budget retailers and service providers tend to have a more negative image than their upscale competitors (Mazursky and Jacoby 1986), they continue to fare well. In

2018, Walmart captured 25% of the US grocery market share, Aldi enjoyed a double-digit increase in sales (Statista.com 2018a, 2018b), and Supercuts was ranked as the #1 hair-salon franchise in the US by *Entrepreneur* magazine for eight years in a row (Supercutsfranchise.com 2018). Frugality is one clear explanation for why consumers sometimes choose marketplace offerings that they perceive as inferior (Lastovicka et al. 1999). However, there might be other reasons.

In the present work, we propose that choosing inferior marketplace offerings may sometimes serve the basic motivation to confirm self-views—in this case, pessimistic self-views. Our hypothesis is based on decades of research that have established that self-verification provides important psychological benefits, such as a feeling that the world is safe, comfortable, and predictable (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 1992; Swann and Read 1981a, 1981b). For consumers with low self-esteem, those benefits are particularly valuable because they construe their environment as threatening and hostile (Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton 1989; Leary, Cottrell, and Phillips 2001; Tice 1991). In this way, we predicted that low-self-esteem consumers may be especially inclined to self-verify by choosing inferior products, brands, and services. To illustrate, when given the option between a haircut at a relatively superior hair salon, such as Tony and Guy, or a relatively inferior hair salon, such as Supercuts, we anticipate that consumers with pessimistic self-views (i.e., those with low self-esteem) will be more inclined to choose Supercuts because that brand confirms their self-views.

Consumers with high self-esteem, on the other hand, perceive their environment in an optimistic fashion and confidently believe they will be successful in life (for a review, see Blaine and Crocker 1993). Because holding positive self-views is pleasurable (Robins and Beer 2001), and because consumers with high self-esteem are confident that they can live up to those positive self-views (Taylor and Brown 1988), self-enhancement entails few costs but many benefits for these individuals. To satisfy the motive of seeing oneself in a desirable light, high- (vs. low-) self-esteem consumers may be more inclined to choose superior over inferior products.

To test the hypothesis that low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers are more inclined toward inferior products because of the self-verification motive, we assessed whether that motive could statistically explain the product choice of low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers. In addition, we examined boundary conditions implied by the logic of our hypothesis. First, when an objectively low-end product signals positive characteristics (i.e., because it is associated with being “cool”), it can no longer confirm the self-views of low-self-esteem consumers; therefore, preference for the “cool” inferior product will be dampened. Second, if low-self-esteem consumers use inferior products to confirm self-views, then their choice of inferior products should

decrease when they are induced to view themselves as consumers of superior products in a specific category (e.g., alcohol). Moreover, that pattern should be evident only for the manipulated product category (i.e., alcohol products); in unrelated product categories (e.g., clothing), low-self-esteem consumers should continue to gravitate toward inferior products. Third, if low-self-esteem consumers seek to self-verify rather than self-enhance, then they should not engage in compensatory consumption in the wake of negative feedback.

By identifying personality and situational factors that elucidate the role of self-verification in the shaping of product choice, our research provides a more nuanced understanding of how self-motives guide consumer choice. That is, in addition to consumers using pleasant products to boost their self-views, specific consumers, under specific circumstances, use inferior products to confirm their self-views. In this way, we shed novel light on when and why consumers choose inferior products. Finally, we uncover a novel boundary condition for compensatory consumption by demonstrating that self-enhancement in response to threatening feedback is contingent upon chronic self-views.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Benefits of Self-Verification and Self-Enhancement

People's actions are a reflection of their self-views, but can also serve to manage and change their self-views (Swann, Chang-Schneider, and Larsen McClarty 2007). Both patterns can be explained by two basic motivations: the desire to self-enhance and the desire to self-verify.

The self-enhancement motive entails the desire to boost the positivity of one's self-views (Baumeister 1998). Consumers self-enhance because increasing the positivity of one's self-views is pleasurable (for a review, see Taylor and Brown 1988). Holding flattering, rather than realistic, views about one's intelligence, for instance, has been linked to greater happiness and improved well-being (Robins and Beer 2001).

In addition to the desire to enhance self-views, consumers also desire to confirm their existing self-views (i.e., self-verification; Leary 2007). Acting in a way that confirms one's self-views, even when those self-views are negative, confers important benefits. Verifying self-views bolsters perceptions of control (Heider 1946; Lecky 1945) and generates a sense of stability and order, which makes consumers feel as though they live in a safe and predictable world (Swann et al. 1992, 2007; Swann and Read 1981a, 1981b). Acting in line with one's self-views also helps to protect the self from further drops in self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 1989). More specifically, by acting in a way that confirms self-views, consumers set realistic

expectations about future outcomes for themselves and others. In this way, consumers avoid creating overly positive expectations that they could eventually disappoint.

Even though both motives guide everyday behavior, the lion's share of past work in consumer research has focused on the role of self-enhancement—for example, self-gifting to induce positive emotions (Mick and DeMoss 1990), choosing high-status products to restore lost status (Rucker and Galinsky 2008), and selecting competence-affirming products to bolster self-views after one's intellectual ability has been cast in doubt (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). Indeed, prior research has concluded that consumers use products to help restore threatened positive self-views (for a review, see Mandel et al. 2017).

In contrast, few investigations have examined whether consumers desire products that confirm their existing self-views. Indirect support comes from studies finding that consumers perceived overlap between their own personality and the personality of their car or favorite brands (Birdwell 1968; Dolich 1969; Malär et al. 2011). However, because those studies were correlational, it is equally possible that consumers began to perceive their products as extensions of themselves after having purchased them (Kassarjian 1971). Thus, existing evidence for self-verifying choices in the marketplace is inconclusive. We sought to redress this gap by examining a dispositional variable—trait self-esteem—that elicits the self-verification motive.

The Needs and Self-Motives of Consumers with Low and High Trait Self-Esteem

An extensive body of literature suggests that self-views serve as guiding lenses for making sense of and navigating the world (Cooley 1902; Lecky 1945). The positive self-views of individuals with relatively high self-esteem foster expectations of future superiority, success, and acceptance. In contrast, the pessimistic self-views of individuals with relatively low self-esteem foster expectations of future inferiority, failure, and rejection (McFarlin and Blascovich 1981; Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 2000; Scheier, Carver, and Bridges 1994). The very different self-views of those with low and high self-esteem give rise to distinct needs and therefore strategies to satisfy those needs.

Consumers with Low Self-Esteem Tend to Self-Verify. Consumers with low self-esteem tend to doubt that they are likable and capable (Baumeister 2002). They perceive the world as somewhat hostile and chronically fear that they will not live up to their own and others' expectations (Anthony, Wood, and Holmes 2007; McFarlin and Blascovich 1981; Murray et al. 2000). Because consumers with low self-esteem live in an environment that, subjectively, disapproves of them, one might expect that they have a strong need to feel better about

themselves. However, research suggests that their insecurities and self-doubt cause them to be reluctant to enhance their self-views, particularly after threat (Dodgson and Wood 1998; Shrauger 1975; Song, Huang, and Li 2017; Swann et al. 1987). Indeed, a meta-analysis concluded that consumers with low (vs. high) self-esteem were much less likely to engage in compensatory behaviors in the wake of psychological threats (van Dellen et al. 2011).

Previous research suggests that consumers with low self-esteem may try to confirm their self-views in order to secure important psychological benefits. For example, low (but not high) self-esteem participants preferred interaction partners who saw them unfavorably rather than favorably because the former felt safe and familiar, while the latter felt risky and threatening (Swann et al. 1992; Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde 1992). Similarly, when meeting new acquaintances, low-self-esteem individuals presented themselves humbly to avoid disappointing expectations and being rejected (Schütz and DePaulo 1996; Schütz and Tice 1997). Taken together, low-self-esteem consumers might benefit from self-verification because it provides a sense of predictability, safety, and self-protection.

Self-enhancement, in contrast, may be a risky strategy for individuals who chronically see themselves as inferior. Previous research suggests that low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers do not seek to augment their self-views because such efforts may set them up for future failure and rejection (Baumeister et al. 1989). For example, "positive" life events (e.g., receiving a compliment, getting promoted, falling in love) triggered anxiety and stress in participants with low (but not high) self-esteem (Ayduk et al. 2013; Brown and McGill 1989). Instead of using those instances to bolster their self-views, low-self-esteem participants dwelled on the negative aspects of those "positive" events to restore their usual understanding of themselves (Kille et al. 2017; Wood, Heimpel, and Michela 2003; Wood et al. 2005). Moreover, after an initial success, participants with low (but not high) self-esteem presented themselves humbly to lower others' expectations of their future performance (Marecek and Metee 1972; Schlenker, Weigold, and Hallam 1990). In summary, because self-verification helps to satisfy the specific needs of individuals with low self-esteem, we expected consumers with low (vs. high) self-esteem to seek products that can confirm, rather than enhance, their self-views.

Consumers with High Self-Esteem Tend to Self-Enhance. As mentioned, because individuals with high self-esteem believe they are at least equally, if not more, competent and likeable compared to others (Taylor and Brown 1988), and because achieving gains for their self-views is pleasurable (Robins and Beer 2001), self-enhancement entails few costs but many benefits for these individuals. Indeed, much research has demonstrated that individuals with high self-esteem doggedly pursue

self-enhancement. For example, consumers with high self-esteem created a self-enhancing public self-image to garner attention and admiration (Baumeister et al. 1989), derogated people who criticized them (Baumeister, Smart, and Boden 1996), and preferred to interact with those who saw them in a positive light (Rudich and Vallacher 1999). They overestimated their performance, took more credit for success than they deserved, and downplayed negative feedback and emotions (Crary 1966; Schlenker, Soraci, and McCarthy 1976; Wood et al. 2003). In sum, because self-enhancement confers many benefits but few costs for those with high self-esteem, consumers with high (vs. low) self-esteem were expected to seek products that enhance their self-views.

Inferior versus Superior Products

The symbolic nature of consumption enables consumers to use products to construct their self-views (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005). Indeed, the compensatory consumption literature (Gao et al. 2009; Lisjak et al. 2015; Rucker and Galinsky 2008) has repeatedly documented the notion that consumers choose products symbolic of positive self-views (e.g., high-status products) to restore positive self-views after threat. Building on these findings, we suggest that consumers with low self-esteem might choose inferior products because the symbolic value of those products can be used to confirm their pessimistic self-views.

Just as consumers judge themselves to be relatively inferior or superior to others, so too do they judge products. When faced with product choices, consumers are quick to integrate various product cues such as brand, aesthetics, or country of origin to determine which of two products is inferior and which is superior (Dawar and Parker 1994; Rao and Monroe 1989; Zeithaml 1988). If consumers with low self-esteem seek products that confirm their inferior self-views, then low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers should be more inclined to choose inferior products. In contrast, if high-self-esteem consumers seek products that make them feel good about themselves, then high- (vs. low-) self-esteem consumers should be more inclined to choose superior products.

To test our hypotheses, we examined preference for (or choice of) relatively “inferior” versus relatively “superior” products (e.g., basic alcohol vs. premium alcohol). We define inferiority as the perception that a product alternative is significantly lower quality, lower status, or less aesthetically pleasing than a product alternative. We examined preferences across a range of product categories (e.g., beverages, clothing, automobiles, restaurants), all of which have been shown to signal information about the self and serve self-motives (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012; Guendelman, Cheryan, and Monin 2011).

Boundary Conditions

To test the self-verification account of inferior consumption, we examined boundary conditions that derive from our hypothesis.

Product Signal. If low-self-esteem consumers use products to confirm their self-views, then they should be sensitive to what the product symbolizes about the self—namely, the product’s signal (Berger and Heath 2007). We elicited the role of product signal by manipulating whether an objectively inferior product (in this case, a dingy restaurant) signaled positive or pessimistic self-views while holding its objective inferiority constant. More specifically, when an objectively inferior product is associated with a “cool” customer base, it loses its original signal—pessimistic self-views—and therefore its ability to confirm pessimistic self-views. Instead, this objectively inferior but “cool” product takes on a new signal—positive self-views (Warren and Campbell 2014)—and can thus be used to enhance self-views. If consumers with relatively low self-esteem prefer products that confirm their self-views, then they should prefer the inferior product more when it signals pessimistic rather than positive self-views. In contrast, given their hypothesized tendency to self-enhance, the opposite pattern should be observed among those with relatively high self-esteem.

Product Self-Views. The self-verification account of inferior consumption posits that low-self-esteem consumers gravitate toward inferior products because those products confirm their pessimistic self-views. If this logic is correct, then their tendency to choose inferior products should be mitigated when they are induced to see themselves as consumers of superior products. Moreover, that shift should be product-category specific. In unrelated product categories, low-self-esteem consumers should resume choosing inferior products. In contrast, because high-self-esteem consumers are expected to choose products that enhance their self-views, their tendency to choose superior products should be impervious to a self-view manipulation. Instead, they should choose superior products even when they are induced to hold self-views of being a consumer of inferior products.

Self-Related Feedback. If low- and high-self-esteem consumers pursue different self-motives, then they should respond differently to negative self-related feedback. While negative self-related feedback (e.g., being relegated to a subordinate role in a group task) threatens the chronic positive self-views of those with high self-esteem, it may merely confirm the chronic pessimistic views of those with low self-esteem. If low-self-esteem consumers choose products that confirm their self-views, they should choose inferior products equally in the wake of negative feedback and no feedback, given that self-views are relatively pessimistic in both cases. In contrast, failure outcomes threaten

the superiority expectations of high-self-esteem consumers (Baumeister 1982; Baumeister et al. 1996), which in turn strengthens their need to self-enhance (Mandel et al. 2017; van Dellen et al. 2011). Hence, negative feedback should intensify high-self-esteem consumers' inclination toward products that symbolize success and superiority. In sum, we expected that high- but not low-self-esteem consumers would show a compensatory-consumption effect in response to negative feedback.

STIMULI VALIDATION

We conducted three validation studies (see [web appendices A, B, and C](#)) to validate that participants perceived the inferior (superior) stimuli as inferior (superior). In these studies, we asked participants from the same population as those who completed the main studies to rate our product stimuli on the dimension of interest (e.g., quality, status, or aesthetics). To illustrate, participants saw the pairs of alcohol products from study 1 and answered, "Which product is of lower quality?" After rating the products, participants completed the trait self-esteem scale used in the main studies (Rosenberg 1965). Our validation studies confirm that the inferior product stimuli were perceived as inferior (i.e., rated below the scale midpoint of 4). Moreover, perceptions of inferiority were not moderated by individual differences in self-esteem.

STUDY 1: LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND INFERIOR PRODUCTS

In study 1, we measured trait self-esteem and assessed relative preference for inferior (lower-quality) versus superior (higher-quality) alcoholic beverages. We predicted that participants with low (vs. high) self-esteem would report a higher preference for inferior alcohol.

We varied whether self-esteem was measured before or after the alcohol-preference task to ensure that preference for inferior products was not due to the activation of self-views by the completion of the self-esteem scale. In addition, we assessed the alternative explanation of frugality. Consumers with low self-esteem may gravitate toward inferior alcohol products because of a general desire to save money rather than because of a basic desire to self-verify. We controlled for frugality to evaluate this alternative explanation.

Design and Procedure

Participants. Our hypotheses depend on the assumption that products convey information about the self. Because alcohol is not part of abstinent consumers' self-definitions, choosing specific alcohol products may not serve self-motives (Reed et al. 2012). Thus, we prevented abstainers from completing the study. The effect size was

unknown but, as a rule of thumb, about 100 participants are needed to reliably detect medium-sized effects (Cohen 1988). To detect potentially smaller effects, and to provide a fair test of the possibility that measurement timing moderates our core effect, we boosted our power by aiming to recruit 350 Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participants.

Participants first indicated whether they were abstinent on a binary measure ("I never drink alcohol" vs. "I drink alcohol"). Sixty-three abstinent participants were redirected to a different survey, leaving 289 nonabstinent participants (173 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.88$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.82$). In all the studies reported in this article, the tasks were framed as unrelated to minimize the likelihood that demand characteristics would influence the results.

Independent Variable: Self-Esteem. Participants completed the widely used Rosenberg (1965) trait self-esteem scale. This 10-item scale assesses general feelings about the self without reference to any specific quality or attribute (e.g., "I take a positive attitude towards myself"; "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") using four-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly agree to 4 = Strongly disagree). We reverse-coded positively worded items and averaged the 10 items to create an index of trait self-esteem ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.03$, $SD = .61$).

Dependent Variable: Product Preference. Participants were randomly assigned to complete the self-esteem scale either before or after the alcohol-preference task. Participants were presented with six alcohol product pairs ([web appendix D](#)). Each pair contained pictures of two alcoholic beverages, one relatively inferior (lower-quality) and one relatively superior (higher-quality; see validation study in [web appendix A](#)). To illustrate, one product pair consisted of vodka in a glass bottle for \$25 (Reyka) and vodka in a plastic bottle for \$6 (Skol). Presentation order was randomized. For each pair, participants indicated which product they would choose for themselves (e.g., 1 = Reyka vodka to 7 = Skol vodka). We counterbalanced on which side of the screen the inferior alcohol product was displayed. We averaged the ratings to form an index of relative preference for inferior alcohol. Higher values indicated a greater relative preference for inferior alcohol ($\alpha = .75$, $M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.27$).

Alternative Explanations. As a last step, we measured trait frugality with four items (e.g., "I believe in being careful in how I spend my money"; 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree; Kasser 2005; $\alpha = .87$, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.70$).

Results and Discussion

We predicted that self-esteem would be negatively associated with preference for inferior alcohol products regardless of timing of measurement. To test those hypotheses,

we regressed the inferior-alcohol index on self-esteem (centered), the effect-coded timing condition (before vs. after), and their interaction. As predicted, we detected a negative association between self-esteem and preference for inferior alcohol ($\beta = -.182$, $t(285) = -3.106$, $p = .002$, partial $r = -.181$). Consistent with expectations, this relationship was not modified by time of measurement ($\beta = -.005$, $t(285) = -0.092$, $p = .926$, partial $r = -.005$), and there was no main effect for timing ($\beta = .058$, $t(285) = 0.993$, $p = .321$, partial $r = .059$). Stepwise analyses using dummy coding yielded results with similar conclusions and are reported in [web appendix E](#).

Next, we examined the alternative explanation of frugality by regressing the inferior-alcohol index on self-esteem and frugality. Our predicted negative relationship between self-esteem and inferior-alcohol preference was robust to the inclusion of frugality ($\beta = -.209$, $t(286) = -3.505$, $p < .001$, partial $r = -.203$). In this model, frugality was not significantly related to inferior-alcohol preference ($\beta = .085$, $t(286) = 1.421$, $p = .156$, partial $r = .084$). In this study, and all future studies, frugality did not moderate the association between self-esteem and inferior-alcohol preference ([web appendix F](#)).

Results of study 1 provided initial support for the hypothesis that consumers with low (vs. high) self-esteem are more inclined toward inferior products, regardless of timing of measurement. The possibility that frugality explained the relationship between trait self-esteem and inferior-alcohol preference was not supported.

STUDY 2: MEASURING THE SELF-VERIFICATION MOTIVE

To provide a direct test of the self-verification account of inferior consumption, we assessed the strength of participants' self-verification motive and linked that motive to product choice. After completing the self-esteem scale, participants made a consequential choice between a superior hair salon and an inferior hair salon. Then we assessed the self-verification motive. Because there is no validated scale to measure the self-verification motive, we asked participants to verbalize the reasons for their hair-salon choice (adapted from [Swann et al. 1992](#)). Two raters coded the participants' stated desire to go to a hair salon that confirmed their self-views.

Given that the negative self-views of consumers with low (vs. high) self-esteem create a heightened need for the psychological benefits of self-verification ([Baumeister et al. 1989](#); [Leary et al. 2001](#); [Tice 1991](#)), we hypothesized that low- (vs. high-) self-esteem participants would report a stronger self-verification motivation. More important, we predicted that a stronger self-verification motive among low- (vs. high-) self-esteem participants would statistically explain their heightened choice of the inferior hair salon.

Consumers do not tend to admit to self-enhancement ([Pronin, Lin, and Ross 2002](#)). Indeed, when we coded for self-enhancement, only 1% of participants showed strong evidence of self-enhancement ([web appendix G](#)). Because of this floor effect, we do not analyze or discuss it further in this study. We again assessed the alternative explanation of a desire to save money by assessing both trait frugality and income.

Design and Procedure

Participants. Because there were no manipulated factors, and because the size of the basic association in study 1 was small to medium, we recruited 200 participants ([Cohen 1988](#)). At the end of data collection, 201 Prolific Academic participants from the US (97 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.03$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.36$) had completed the study.

Independent Variable: Self-Esteem. Participants first completed the Rosenberg trait self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.63$).

Dependent Variable: Raffle Choice. Next, we asked the participants to make a binary, consequential choice between two hair salons. Participants learned that, when the study was complete, we would raffle off gift certificates—one for a superior hair salon chain and one for an inferior hair salon chain (see validation study in [web appendix B](#)). We asked participants to select which of the two raffles they wanted to enter; this binary choice (inferior-salon raffle vs. superior-salon raffle) was our dependent variable. The inferior and superior hair salons were presented with pictures ([web appendix H](#)) and were labeled “budget hair salon” and “high-end hair salon,” respectively. Presentation position (left vs. right) was randomized.

Mediator: Self-Verification Motive. Next, we assessed the self-verification motive. Participants were again presented with the pictures of the hair salons and read: “We would like to know more about the motivations that were important to you when making your choice. Aside from basic concerns (e.g., the price, the quality of the haircut), what was the primary motive that guided your choice between these hair salons? Please tell us your gut reaction.” We timed this survey to ensure that participants would write for at least one minute.

Two independent raters who were blind to the research hypothesis and participants' self-esteem coded how much each participant's choice was guided by the motive to confirm self-views. The coding scheme instructed the raters to code responses that were tightly aligned with the definition of self-verification (“seeking to confirm existing self-views”) as manifestations of the self-verification motive (e.g., This hair salon “fits me,” “corresponds with how I see myself,” “is for people like me”; [web appendix I](#)). After being trained on the coding scheme, the raters coded the degree to which each participant's decision was guided

by the self-verification motive (1 = not at all to 5 = very much). To illustrate, responses like “I wouldn’t feel like myself if I went in there,” or “The [...] salon just looked more like me” were coded as strong manifestations of the self-verification motive. The level of agreement between the raters was high: $r(199) = .808$. We thus averaged the coders’ ratings to form an index of the relative strength of the self-verification motive ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.36$).

Alternative Explanations. Finally, participants completed the frugality scale from study 1 ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.57$). We also assessed monthly income after fixed costs.

Results

Raffle Choice. To test the prediction that self-esteem would be negatively associated with the likelihood of entering the inferior-salon (vs. superior-salon) raffle, we regressed raffle choice on self-esteem in a binary logistic regression model. Conceptually replicating study 1, self-esteem was negatively associated with choosing to enter the inferior-salon raffle ($b = -.678$, $\chi^2 = 7.852$, $p = .005$). The lower participants’ self-esteem, the more likely they were to enter the inferior-salon raffle (thereby foregoing the superior-salon raffle).

Mediation. We conducted a mediation analysis to test the hypothesis that the self-verification motive explains the tendency for low-self-esteem consumers to choose the inferior-salon raffle. We used PROCESS model 4 and included self-esteem as the independent variable, self-verification as the putative mediator, and the dichotomous raffle choice as the dependent measure. As predicted, self-esteem was negatively associated with the strength of the self-verification motive ($a = -.3314$, $SE = .1518$, 95% CI $[-.6308, -.0320]$), and the self-verification motive was positively associated with choosing the inferior-salon raffle ($b = .7770$, $SE = .1967$, 95% CI $[.3916, 1.1625]$). Most important, the model revealed a significant indirect effect of self-esteem on inferior-salon raffle choice through the proposed mechanism of self-verification ($c = -.2575$, $SE = .1395$, 95% CI $[-.5832, -.0214]$). In this model, the direct effect of self-esteem on inferior-salon raffle choice remained significant ($c' = -.5784$, $SE = .2599$, 95% CI $[-1.0877, -.0691]$), presumably due to differences in the self-enhancement motive.

Alternative Explanations. To test the possibility that a strong self-verification motivation leads to low self-esteem, rather than vice versa, we reran the focal mediation model using self-verification as the independent variable and self-esteem as the mediator. The indirect effect was not significant in this model ($c = .0408$, $SE = .0284$, 95% CI $[-.0002, .1087]$).

To evaluate the possible role of frugality, we repeated the focal mediation analysis with the addition of frugality

and income as covariates. The indirect effect remained significant ($c = -.2662$, $SE = .1470$, 95% CI $[-.6025, -.0212]$) when we controlled for frugality and income.

Discussion

Study 2 provides evidence for the conjecture that low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers are inclined toward inferior products because they seek to verify their self-views. We directly measured whether participants had an active goal to confirm their existing self-views when choosing between an inferior and superior hair salon. As predicted, as participants’ self-esteem decreased, it became more important for them to choose a product that confirmed how they saw themselves. Moreover, the motivation to self-verify mediated the basic association between self-esteem and choice of inferior products. Frugality and income did not statistically explain the association between low self-esteem, the self-verification motive, and inferior consumption.

STUDY 3: MANIPULATING THE PRODUCT SIGNAL

To provide additional support for the self-verification account of inferior consumption, in study 3 we held constant the inferior quality of a product while varying whether the product signaled positive or pessimistic self-views. One way that products can acquire symbolic value is through their association with the groups or “types” of individuals who consume them (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003; 2005). Following this logic, we varied whether going to a dingy Chinese restaurant signaled positive or pessimistic self-views by associating the restaurant with a “cool” or “non-cool” customer base, respectively.

The framing of the restaurant was expected to moderate the association between self-esteem and willingness to go to the restaurant. If low-self-esteem consumers choose inferior products because those products confirm their self-views, then they should be more willing to patronize the non-cool (vs. cool) restaurant. Hence, when the restaurant signaled pessimistic self-views, we expected to conceptually replicate the negative association between self-esteem and product preference. However, when the restaurant signaled positive self-views, we expected that low-self-esteem participants would be less inclined to go to the restaurant than high-self-esteem participants. Indeed, given that high-self-esteem participants are inclined to self-enhance, they should be more willing to patronize the cool (vs. non-cool) restaurant.

Design and Procedure

Participants. Study 3 measured self-esteem and manipulated within-subjects the restaurant signal (pessimistic vs.

positive self-views). We aimed to collect 300 participants to provide enough power for small to medium effects and a potential interaction. At the end of data collection, 302 MTurkers had completed the study (157 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.29$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.65$).

Independent Variable: Restaurant Framing. The participants were presented with two branches of a Chinese restaurant chain that ostensibly were located two blocks from each other. Both restaurants featured the same objective characteristics indicating that the restaurant was low quality. More specifically, pictures depicted the restaurants' dingy interior and exterior and the menu, which featured the same low-priced dishes. However, we varied the product signal by varying the "coolness" of the typical patron. The non-cool restaurant was located opposite a secondhand office furniture store and therefore attracted walk-in customers. In contrast, the cool restaurant was located opposite an art school and therefore attracted hip customers such as art students and young professionals. The descriptions and pictures of the two restaurant branches were presented side-by-side. We counterbalanced the pictures and street addresses of the restaurants, and we counterbalanced branch presentation order (web appendix J). A validation study confirmed that this manipulation altered perceptions of "coolness" but not restaurant quality (web appendix A).

Dependent Variable: Willingness to Patronize the Restaurants. On the same page, we asked participants how much they wanted to go to each restaurant branch on two 100-point scales. Higher scores indicated a higher willingness to go to the restaurant ($M_{\text{cool}} = 63.14$, $SD = 25.92$; $M_{\text{non-cool}} = 60.76$, $SD = 26.01$). The "cool" branch was labeled "Restaurant opposite the University of Arts," while the non-cool branch was labeled "Restaurant opposite the secondhand office furniture store." The order of the scales was randomized.

Independent Variable: Self-Esteem. After this dependent measure, participants completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.59$).

Results

We predicted that restaurant framing would moderate the relationship between self-esteem and willingness to patronize the restaurant. We expected that low-self-esteem participants would be more willing to go to the non-cool (vs. cool) restaurant, whereas high-self-esteem participants would be more willing to go to the cool (vs. non-cool) restaurant. To test this prediction, we conducted a repeated-measures regression, in which we regressed willingness to go to the restaurant on the predictors of self-esteem (centered), the effect-coded framing condition (non-cool vs. cool; within-subjects), and their interaction. The model revealed the predicted interaction between self-esteem and framing condition on

FIGURE 1

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND RESTAURANT FRAMING



NOTE.—Vertical lines represent johnson-neyman points.

willingness to visit the restaurant ($Exp(b) = -6.825$, $t(300) = -3.419$, $p < .001$). There were no main effects of self-esteem ($Exp(b) = 1.770$, $t(300) = 1.155$, $p = .249$) and framing condition ($Exp(b) = -1.192$, $t(300) = -1.017$, $p = .310$).

We dissected the interaction by identifying the regions of the self-esteem distribution beyond which restaurant framing had an effect on willingness to go (figure 1; Montoya 2018). Consistent with the self-verification account of inferior consumption, participants with self-esteem scores at or below 2.35 (-1.2 SD; 11.3% of the sample) indicated a higher willingness to visit the non-cool (vs. cool) restaurant. At the top end of the distribution, participants with self-esteem values at or above 3.23 ($+0.30$ SD; 37.4% of the sample) indicated a higher willingness to visit the cool (vs. non-cool) restaurant.

We also decomposed the interaction by examining the association between self-esteem and willingness to go to the cool and non-cool restaurant separately. Conceptually replicating study 1, we detected a negative association between self-esteem and willingness to go to the non-cool restaurant ($Exp(b) = -5.056$, $t(300) = -1.993$, $p = .047$). In contrast, and also consistent with predictions, the association between self-esteem and willingness to go to the cool restaurant was positive ($Exp(b) = 8.595$, $t(300) = 3.443$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The results of study 3 are consistent with the theory that consumers with low and high self-esteem pursue different

self-related motives in the marketplace. Participants with relatively low self-esteem preferred the non-cool restaurant over the cool restaurant, arguably because they sought to confirm their pessimistic self-views. In contrast, participants with relatively high self-esteem preferred the cool restaurant over the non-cool restaurant, ostensibly because the cool restaurant enabled them to feel good about themselves. Conceptually replicating study 1 and 2, low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers were more inclined toward the product that signaled pessimistic self-views—in this case, the non-cool restaurant. In contrast, when the restaurant was framed as cool and thus signaled positive self-views, low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers were less willing to patronize the restaurant.

STUDY 4: MANIPULATING PRODUCT SELF-VIEWS

If low-self-esteem consumers choose inferior products to confirm pessimistic self-views, then that effect should disappear when they are induced to hold superior self-views. We therefore experimentally manipulated whether participants perceived themselves as consumers of inferior or superior products in a specific product category—in this case, alcohol products. We included a baseline condition to ascertain chronic alcohol product self-views. Thus, the design of the study was a 3 (inferior-alcohol consumer vs. superior-alcohol consumer vs. baseline) \times 2 (self-esteem; continuous) between-subjects design.

If participants with low self-esteem choose products to confirm their self-views, then their alcohol choice should reflect their induced alcohol self-views: superior in the superior condition and inferior in the inferior and baseline conditions. In contrast, if participants with high self-esteem choose products that enhance their self-views, then they should choose superior alcohol regardless of their induced alcohol self-views. To show specificity for our proposed process, we also assessed product choice in an unrelated category (i.e., clothing). Because we did not manipulate clothing self-views, we expected to conceptually replicate the basic negative relationship between self-esteem and choice of inferior products (in this case, inferior clothing).

Our previous studies left open the possibility that low-self-esteem consumers shy away from superior products because they do not feel entitled to those products (Callan, Sutton, and Dovale 2010; Cavanaugh 2014; Newheiser, Sawaoka, and Dovidio 2012). We therefore measured deservingness to examine whether it would explain participants' alcohol choice.

Design and Procedure

Participants. Study 4 measured self-esteem and manipulated participants' self-views for alcohol products

(inferior vs. superior vs. baseline; between-subjects). Because our dependent measure was dichotomous, we aimed to increase statistical power and thus boosted our sample size to 500 MTurk participants. As in study 1, participants who indicated that they abstained from drinking alcohol at the beginning of the survey were redirected to a different survey ($n = 11$). The final sample consisted of 504 participants (279 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.13$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.35$).

Independent Variable: Inducing Product Self-Views. Our manipulation of inferior (vs. superior) alcohol self-views was an adaptation of an existing procedure (Cornelissen et al. 2008). Participants were presented with five common alcohol choice behaviors, and they indicated whether they usually engaged in each behavior (1 = I do not agree to 7 = I fully agree). In the inferior condition, the five behaviors involved choosing lower-quality alcohol (e.g., "I buy alcohol at convenient bottle shops even though they have lower-quality brands"; $\alpha_{\text{inferior}} = .78$; $M_{\text{inferior}} = 4.48$, $SD_{\text{inferior}} = 1.37$; web appendix K). In the superior condition, the five common behaviors involved choosing higher-quality alcohol (e.g., "I choose well-known brands over store brands because I want something of high quality"; $\alpha_{\text{superior}} = .79$; $M_{\text{superior}} = 4.69$, $SD_{\text{superior}} = 1.30$; web appendix K). The items were pretested to ensure that most participants highly endorsed the behaviors. Because consumers make inferences about themselves when they see themselves agreeing to questions (Schwarz 1999), we anticipated that participants in the superior (vs. inferior) condition would correspondingly perceive themselves as consumers of superior (vs. inferior) alcohol. Participants in the baseline condition did not complete the manipulation.

Manipulation Check. To check the effectiveness of the manipulation, we assessed participants' alcohol-related self-views using an adapted version of an existing scale (Sirgy et al. 1997): these alcohol products "are characteristic of me," "are representative of me," and "suit me." The endpoints of the seven-point response scale were labeled "premium alcohol" (1) and "basic alcohol" (7), respectively ($\alpha = .97$; $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.59$).

Dependent Variable: Alcohol-Raffle Choice. Next, to assess alcohol choice, we raffled off both superior and inferior alcohol products. Participants were instructed to enter their name in one of two raffles. They chose between a raffle for a chance to win one of several inferior alcohol products (labeled "basic alcohol") or a raffle for a chance to win one of several superior alcohol products (labeled "premium alcohol"; i.e., binary measure). The alcohol products were presented with pictures (web appendix L). Presentation position (left vs. right) was randomized.

Dependent Variable: Clothing-Raffle Choice. We repeated the raffle procedure to measure clothing choice. Participants made a binary choice between a raffle for a

chance to win (a) one of several inferior clothing items (e.g., unstylish jeans) or (b) one of several superior clothing items (e.g., stylish jeans; [web appendix L](#)). A validation study ensured that the clothing items differed in terms of perceived aesthetic design quality ([web appendix A](#)). We matched the clothing items to participants' gender. Presentation position (left vs. right) was randomized.

Independent Variable: Self-Esteem. After the choice measures, participants completed the [Rosenberg \(1965\)](#) trait self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.59$).

Alternative Explanations and Suspicion Probe. Next, we assessed the deservingness alternative explanation with a five-item deservingness scale ([Cavanaugh 2014](#); e.g., "How deserving do you feel of treating yourself?"; 1 = not at all to 7 = extremely; $\alpha = .97$; $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.51$). The study concluded with a suspicion probe ([Bargh and Chartrand 2000](#)). None of the participants recognized that the initial questions about their alcohol-related behaviors were a manipulation. Hence, potential results cannot be attributed to experimental demand.

Results

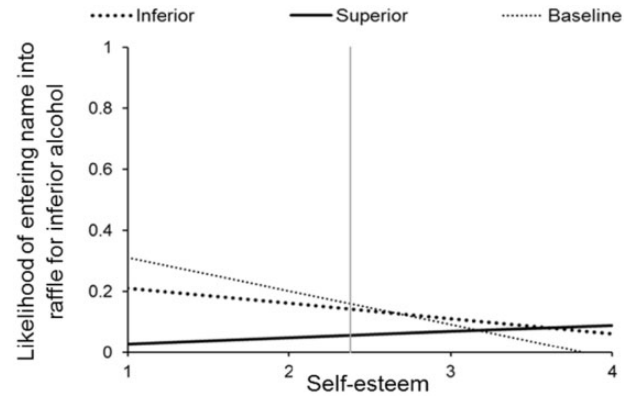
Manipulation Check. To check that our manipulation altered alcohol self-views as intended, we regressed alcohol self-views on self-esteem (centered), the superior-alcohol condition (vs. baseline condition; effect-coded), the inferior-alcohol condition (vs. baseline; effect-coded), and the two-way interactions between self-esteem and the condition variables.

The manipulation was successful. The superior-alcohol manipulation (vs. baseline) increased superior alcohol self-views ($\beta = -.117$, $t(499) = -2.380$, $p = .018$; partial $r = -.106$), while the inferior-alcohol manipulation (vs. baseline) increased inferior alcohol self-views ($\beta = .211$, $t(499) = 4.292$, $p < .001$; partial $r = .189$). Confirming the assumption that, the lower a participant's self-esteem, the stronger their inferior alcohol self-views, there was a negative main effect of self-esteem ($\beta = -.127$, $t(499) = -2.419$, $p = .016$; partial $r = -.108$). Self-esteem did not interact with the inferior (vs. baseline) ($\beta = .029$, $t(499) = 0.590$, $p = .555$; partial $r = .026$) nor the superior (vs. baseline) manipulation ($\beta = .095$, $t(499) = 1.793$, $p = .074$; partial $r = .080$).

Alcohol-Raffle Choice. If participants with relatively low self-esteem choose products that confirm self-views, then they should be more likely to enter the superior-alcohol raffle in the superior condition (vs. baseline), but they should be equally likely to enter the inferior-alcohol raffle across the baseline and inferior conditions. In contrast, if participants with relatively high self-esteem choose products that enhance self-views, they should be equally inclined to enter the superior-alcohol raffle across conditions. Put differently, high-self-esteem participants'

FIGURE 2

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND PRODUCT SELF-VIEWS



NOTE.—Vertical line represents johnson-neyman point.

alcohol choice should be unaffected by the manipulation of alcohol self-views.

To test this hypothesis, we regressed alcohol-raffle choice on the same predictors used to predict alcohol-related self-views in a binary logistic regression. We detected the predicted interaction between self-esteem and the superior-alcohol (vs. baseline) manipulation ($b = .487$, $\chi^2 = 4.796$, $p = .029$; [figure 2](#)). The main effects of self-esteem and the alcohol self-view manipulation were not significant in this omnibus model (all $\chi^2 < 1.594$, all $p > .207$). A stepwise omnibus analysis using dummy coding produced similar results ([web appendix M](#)).

To decompose the interaction between self-esteem and the superior-alcohol (vs. baseline) manipulation, we first identified the regions of the self-esteem distribution where the superior-alcohol manipulation (vs. baseline) increased choice of the superior-alcohol raffle. Supporting the self-verification account of inferior consumption, participants with self-esteem at or below 2.38 (-1.26 SD; 9.94 % of the sample) became significantly more likely to enter the superior-alcohol raffle in the superior (vs. baseline) condition. Consistent with the notion that high-self-esteem consumers self-enhance, the alcohol-raffle choice of high-self-esteem participants was not affected by the superior-alcohol (vs. baseline) manipulation.

We then dissected the interaction by estimating the relationship between self-esteem and alcohol-raffle choice in the superior and baseline conditions separately. Conceptually replicating our basic effect, self-esteem was negatively associated with choosing the inferior-alcohol raffle in the baseline condition ($b = -.740$, $\chi^2 = 7.433$, $p = .006$). Perhaps more important, that relationship was

mitigated when low-self-esteem participants were induced to hold self-views of being a superior-alcohol consumer ($b = .235$, $\chi^2 = 0.442$, $p = .506$).

The self-verification account of inferior consumption predicts that low-self-esteem consumers' likelihood of entering the inferior-alcohol raffle should not differ between the inferior-alcohol and baseline conditions, given that they hold inferior alcohol self-views across both conditions. Furthermore, high-self-esteem participants were expected to be impervious to the manipulation because they self-enhance. Thus, we expected no interaction between self-esteem and the inferior (vs. baseline) manipulation in the omnibus model, which indeed was the case ($b = .242$, $\chi^2 = 1.873$, $p = .171$). Consistent with theorizing, we detected a main effect of self-esteem across the inferior and baseline conditions ($b = -.499$, $\chi^2 = 7.968$, $p = .005$).

Clothing-Raffle Choice. Because we did not manipulate clothing self-views, we expected that clothing-raffle choice would *not* be impacted by the alcohol self-views manipulation. Instead, we expected that the clothing-raffle choice would be predicted by trait self-esteem. We repeated the above binary logistic regression model, this time using clothing-raffle choice (inferior vs. superior) as the dependent measure. In this model, we detected the predicted negative association between self-esteem and inferior-clothing choice, although it was only marginally significant ($b = -.197$, $\chi^2 = 2.987$, $p = .084$). Consistent with theorizing, this main effect of self-esteem was not moderated by the inferior-alcohol (vs. baseline) manipulation nor the superior-alcohol (vs. baseline) manipulation; there were no main effects of the manipulations (all $\chi^2 < .258$, all $p > .611$). A stepwise omnibus analysis using dummy coding (web appendix N) produced results that are consistent with this analysis.

Deservingness. Next, we evaluated the alternative explanations of deservingness. We tested whether the negative association between self-esteem and alcohol-raffle choice in the baseline condition was robust to the inclusion of deservingness; it was ($\beta = -.592$, $\chi^2(1) = 3.977$, $p = .046$). Deservingness was not a significant predictor of inferior-product choice in this model ($\beta = -.254$, $\chi^2(1) = 1.218$, $p = .270$). In sum, deservingness was not able to explain the association between self-esteem and choice of the inferior alcohol raffle.

Discussion

The pattern of results of study 4 supports the self-verification account of inferior consumption. Low-self-esteem participants who were subtly induced to view themselves as consumers of superior alcohol products were more likely to choose superior alcohol products than low-self-esteem participants whose self-views were not altered. In this way, the previously obtained relationship between

self-esteem and inferior-product choice was eliminated in the superior-alcohol condition. Also consistent with the self-verification account of inferior consumption, low-self-esteem participants were equally likely to choose the inferior-alcohol product across the inferior self-views condition and the baseline condition. Finally, in an unrelated product category, where low-self-esteem consumers ostensibly hold pessimistic self-views, low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers reverted to choosing inferior products (clothing), regardless of experimental condition.

The results for high-self-esteem consumers support the theory that they select products to enhance, rather than verify, their self-views. Regardless of experimental condition, and regardless of the product category, high-self-esteem consumers chose superior products, ostensibly because doing so enabled them to feel good about themselves. Study 4 suggests that deservingness cannot explain our effect.

STUDY 5: SELF-ESTEEM AND COMPENSATORY CONSUMPTION

Study 5 aimed to reconcile our theory with compensatory consumption (Mandel et al. 2017). More specifically, we tested the hypothesized moderating role of chronic self-views (i.e., trait self-esteem) on the link between negative self-related feedback (in this case, being assigned to a position of low power; Rucker and Galinsky 2008) and product preferences. The different motivations of low- and high-self-esteem participants yield distinct predictions about their behavior in response to negative feedback.

Because consumers with low self-esteem harbor expectations of inferiority, failure, and rejection (Baumeister 2002), manipulations that are designed to threaten self-views may instead be congruent with and hence confirmatory of their pessimistic self-views. In the domain of social hierarchy, indirect support for this notion comes from work finding that participants who doubted their value to the group preferred to occupy lower-status (vs. higher-status) positions in a group task (Anderson et al. 2012). If the hypothesis that consumers with low self-esteem choose products that confirm their self-views is correct, then participants' inclination toward inferior products should be equivalent in the control and low-power conditions. Thus, low- (vs. high-) self-esteem participants should be less inclined to engage in compensatory consumption.

Consumers with high self-esteem, on the other hand, expect superiority, success, and acceptance (McFarlin and Blascovich 1981; Murray et al. 2000). Manipulations that deliver negative feedback (such as assignment to a subordinate role) are threatening to high-self-esteem participants' positive self-views, thereby strengthening their motivation to self-enhance (Baumeister 1982; Sedikides and Gregg 2008; van Dellen et al. 2011). We therefore expected that,

consistent with work on compensatory consumption, participants with high self-esteem would show a stronger preference for superior products when assigned to a low-power (vs. control) position.

In study 5, we measured trait self-esteem and then randomly assigned participants to a low-power or control condition using an adaptation of a previous manipulation (Mead et al. 2018). Then, participants made seven binary choices between superior (high-status; e.g., BMW automobile) and inferior (low-status; e.g., KIA automobile) products.

Because we examined high status and therefore relatively expensive products, we again measured trait frugality and income to ensure that participants with low self-esteem were not choosing inferior products because they wanted to save money. In addition, we evaluated the alternative explanation of deservingness.

Design and Procedure

Participants and Cover Story. Study 5 measured trait self-esteem and manipulated participants' relative power within the group (low-power vs. control condition; between-subjects). Undergraduate students could sign up to participate in the experiment during five consecutive workdays. We aimed to collect as many participants as possible but at least 50 per "cell" (i.e., 200 in total). At the end of day five, 290 undergraduates (116 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.52$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.70$) had completed the experiment in return for partial course credit.

Participants arrived in groups of four to eight people and were led to a large room that was set up to facilitate a group task (i.e., tables were equipped with pens, papers, and notebooks). The experimenter explained that the research session involved a group task, but before that started, they needed to complete some initial measures. The experimenter led participants to individual cubicles to complete those measures. In reality, those tasks constituted the study procedures.

Independent Variable: Self-Esteem. Once participants were seated in individual cubicles, they completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.42$).

Independent Variable: Power. Next, participants were randomly assigned to a position of low power (vs. control) through a validated procedure that manipulates participants' social power within a group (Case and Maner 2014; Maner and Mead 2010; Mead et al. 2018; Mead and Maner 2012). In the low-power condition, participants learned that they would complete a test measuring their leadership abilities and that their performance on this test would determine whether they would be "boss" or "subordinate" in the group task. In the control condition, participants

learned that they would complete a test as part of a pilot study.

Next, all participants completed the difficult version of the Remote Associates Test (RAT; Mednick 1968; see [web appendix O](#)). This was framed as a test of ability to be a boss (low-power condition) or an inconsequential pilot test (control condition). The RAT presents participants with three words (e.g., Elephant–Lapse–Wise) and asks them to think of a fourth word that ties together the three words (in this case, Memory). All participants were given 10 sets of words to complete and 200 seconds to work on the task.

Upon completion of the RAT, participants in both the low-power and control conditions received a realistically low score of 2.5. While all participants received the same feedback, we varied the implication of the feedback for participants' power in the group task. Participants randomly assigned to the low-power condition were told that, due to their low score, they would be a subordinate during the group task. By justifying participants' assignment to the subordinate role with their low score, we aimed to ensure that the role assignment was believable. They further learned that as subordinates, they would do most of the work in the group task, they would have no say about which tasks they would work on (their boss would decide), and their boss would evaluate them throughout the task and decide whether they would receive extra rewards for their work. In contrast, participants randomly assigned to the control condition were given equal control over the group task. They were informed the workload and extra rewards would be equally distributed among all team members. To check the effectiveness of the low-power manipulation, we asked participants how much power they would have in the group task (1 = "I feel that I have less power than others"; 4 = "I feel that I have as much power as others"; 7 = "I feel that I have more power than others"; $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.48$).

Dependent Variable: Product Choice. The dependent measure came next. Ostensibly because the group room was not yet available, participants were asked to complete a product choice task while they waited to start the group task. The cover story was given to encourage continued feelings of low power (vs. equal control) during the completion of the outcome variables. Participants saw seven prevalidated product pairs that consisted of one superior (high-status) product and one inferior (low-status) product ([web appendixes C and P](#); Rucker and Galinsky 2008). To illustrate, one product pair consisted of a BMW and KIA automobile. The price of each product was not shown. Presentation order was randomized, and we counterbalanced which side of the screen the inferior product was presented on. For each pair, participants indicated whether they would choose the right- or left-hand product (i.e., binary measure). To form an index of inferior-product choice, we summed the number of inferior products chosen ($\alpha = .70$, $M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.84$).

Alternative Explanations and Suspicion Probe. After the product-choice task, participants completed the deservingness scale from study 4 ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.80$), the frugality scale (study 1; $\alpha = .80$, $M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.78$), and monthly income (study 2). After a written debriefing, we administered the suspicion probe from study 4. An inspection of these answers revealed that none of the participants were aware of the hypothesis. In addition to the open-ended questions, we also administered a scale to probe for suspicion, which we used as an exclusion criterion. Participants indicated whether they believed that there would be a group task while doing the experiment (1 = “I did not believe there would be a group task at all”; 2 = “I was somewhat suspicious”; 3 = “I completely believed there would be a group task”). Eighteen participants who responded “I did not believe there would be a group task at all” were excluded because they were convinced that the group task was a hoax. Exclusions did not differ as a function of condition ($\chi^2 = 2.22$, $p = .136$). This left data from 272 participants for analysis (web appendix Q includes results without exclusions; the results are descriptively similar but weaker).

Results

Manipulation Check. We regressed self-reported feelings of power on self-esteem (centered), the effect-coded feedback condition (low power vs. control), and their interaction. The manipulation was successful: participants in the low-power condition felt less powerful than participants in the control condition ($\beta = -.664$, $t(268) = -14.528$, $p < .001$; partial $r = -.664$). This main effect was not moderated by self-esteem ($\beta = -.060$, $t(268) = -1.315$, $p = .190$; partial $r = -.080$), which indicates that the manipulation was effective regardless of levels of trait self-esteem. In the same model, self-esteem was not associated with feelings of power ($\beta = .064$, $t(268) = 1.398$, $p = .163$; partial $r = .085$).

Product Choice. Because our dependent measure was a count variable, we used Poisson regression models to test our predictions. We hypothesized that the effect of the low-power (vs. control) condition on inferior-product choice would depend on trait self-esteem. To test this prediction, we regressed the inferior-product index on self-esteem (centered), the effect-coded feedback condition (low power vs. control), and their interaction. Consistent with predictions, the effect of the low-power (vs. control) manipulation was moderated by trait self-esteem, as evidenced by a significant interaction ($\beta = -.096$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.699$, $p = .017$). In the same model, and replicating our core effect, there was a negative association between self-esteem and choosing inferior products ($\beta = -.284$, $\chi^2(1) = 49.835$, $p < .001$). There was also a significant negative main effect of feedback condition ($\beta = -.105$, $\chi^2(1) =$

5.880, $p = .015$), replicating the compensatory-consumption effect. Stepwise analyses using dummies yielded similar results (web appendix R).

To the best of our knowledge, the Johnson-Neyman technique cannot be applied in Poisson regressions. We therefore decomposed the interaction by examining the effect of the low-power (vs. control) manipulation on inferior-product choice among those with relatively low ($-1SD$) and high ($+1SD$) self-esteem. Consistent with predictions, low-self-esteem participants were equally willing to choose inferior products in the low-power and control conditions ($\beta = .017$, $\chi^2(1) = 0.030$, $p = .863$), whereas high-self-esteem participants chose more superior products in the low-power condition than in the control condition ($\beta = .402$, $\chi^2(1) = 9.026$, $p = .003$).

We continued to dissect the interaction by examining the association between self-esteem and inferior-product choice in the low-power and control conditions separately. Conceptually replicating studies 1 and 2, we detected a negative association between self-esteem and choice of inferior products in the control condition ($\beta = -.188$, $\chi^2(1) = 11.132$, $p = .001$). That is, the lower participant's self-esteem, the more they chose inferior products. Driven by high-self-esteem participants' tendency to engage in compensatory consumption, this negative association was accentuated in the low-power condition ($\beta = -.380$, $\chi^2(1) = 43.765$, $p < .001$).

Alternative Explanations. Next, we evaluated the alternative explanations of frugality, income, and deservingness. To do this, we assessed whether our core effect, the negative association between self-esteem and inferior-product choice in the control condition, was robust to the inclusion of these alternative accounts; it was: $\beta = -.159$, $\chi^2(1) = 7.209$, $p = .007$. Deservingness, frugality, and income did not predict inferior-product choice in this model (all $\chi^2 < 2.590$, all $p > .108$). In sum, the alternative accounts were unable to explain our core effect.

Discussion

In study 5, we elucidated the different self-motives of low- and high-self-esteem consumers by administering negative feedback (i.e., relegation to a subordinate role in a group task). As expected, trait self-esteem determined whether consumers self-enhanced with superior products in the wake of negative feedback. More specifically, low-self-esteem participants in this study did not engage in compensatory consumption (high-self-esteem participants did).

The pattern of results among low-self-esteem participants is consistent with the theory that they use products to confirm, rather than enhance, self-views. Replicating the effect in the previous studies, low-self-esteem participants were more inclined toward inferior products than their

high-self-esteem counterparts. What is more, because a subordinate role is consistent with their chronic self-views, and because they tend to self-verify rather than self-enhance, low-self-esteem participants chose the same number of inferior products across the low-power and control conditions. These results dovetail with the finding that consumers who doubt their value to the group prefer low-status roles over high-status roles because they believe their group members expect them to hold low-status roles (Anderson et al. 2012).

The pattern of results among high-self-esteem participants suggests that they use products in the pursuit of self-enhancement. High-self-esteem consumers expect to be successful, so being relegated to a subordinate role in a group threatens their positive self-views and boosts their usual motivation to self-enhance (Baumeister 1982; Mandel et al. 2017). In this study, that was evidenced by high-self-esteem participants choosing more superior products in the low-power condition than the control condition. The association between self-esteem and product choice was again robust to the inclusion of deservingness, income, and frugality. In this way, the results from this study did not support the alternative explanation that low-self-esteem consumers are inclined toward inferior products because they feel undeserving of nice things, nor did they support the alternative explanation that low-self-esteem consumers shy away from superior products because they desire to save money.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our investigation began with the hypothesis that choosing inferior products can help to construct the self and can thus serve self-motives. We hypothesized that choosing inferior products may serve the underexplored motive to confirm self-views (i.e., self-verification) among a substantial minority of consumers—those with low trait self-esteem. Five studies provide empirical support for this hypothesis through mediation and moderation. A stronger self-verification motive explained low- (vs. high-) self-esteem consumers' heightened inclination toward inferior (vs. superior) products (study 2). Our moderation studies manipulated the self-views signaled by inferior products (pessimistic vs. positive; study 3) and the self-views held by low-self-esteem consumers (inferior vs. superior; study 4). In each case, low-self-esteem consumers chose the product that confirmed their self-views. Finally, we reconciled our theory with compensatory consumption (Mandel et al. 2017). We observed compensatory consumption among high-self-esteem consumers (i.e., those who tend to self-enhance), but not among low-self-esteem consumers (i.e., those who tend to self-verify). Our findings were robust to alternative accounts, such as frugality, income, or deservingness.

Theoretical Contributions

This investigation extends and complements the field's knowledge about self-related motives for consumption in multiple ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, this work is the first to demonstrate that consumers use products to verify their self-views, especially when those self-views are pessimistic. Past findings, which provide indirect support for our theorizing, used correlational designs and/or focused on the affirmation of positive self-views (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Gao et al. 2009; Kassarjian 1971; Malär et al. 2011). Those approaches did not allow for the differentiation of self-verification from self-enhancement. In contrast, the current work disentangles those motives and elicits the role of self-verification in consumer behavior. We hope that our findings will inspire research on this underexplored motive.

Second, our research adds nuance to the field's understanding of the self-enhancement motive and a phenomenon contingent on that motive—compensatory consumption (Gao et al. 2009; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Our theory and findings suggest that, to predict whether consumers will compensate in the wake of negative feedback, one must take into consideration consumers' chronic self-views. In the current work, only consumers with positive self-views to begin with (i.e., those with high self-esteem) engaged in compensatory consumption. In contrast, those who perceived failure and inferiority as consistent with their trait self-views (i.e., those with low self-esteem) did not engage in compensatory consumption.

Third, our work contributes to an emerging stream of research that examines when and why consumers forgo hedonic pleasure to satisfy higher-order motives (Andrade and Cohen 2007; Cavanaugh 2014; Keinan and Kivetz 2011). In our studies, consumers with low self-esteem choose inferior products, such as low-quality alcoholic beverages or dingy restaurants, to confirm their self-views. Our work thus uncovers a novel explanation for counter-hedonic consumption: self-verification.

Managerial Implications

The notion that consumers desire products that boost their self-views is a basic tenet of marketing. Accordingly, many products are marketed as tools that will enable consumers to feel that they are great, if not even better than others. Our investigation highlights that this approach may be ineffective among a seemingly neglected segment of consumers—those with low self-esteem—because those consumers prefer inferior products that verify their pessimistic self-views. Due to the strong focus on the self-enhancing function of products, low-self-esteem consumers, who represent approximately one-third of the population (Diener and Diener 2009), might feel underserved and even ostracized in today's marketplace.

When targeting consumers with low self-esteem, an inferior (vs. superior) positioning might be more effective. Indeed, Walmart's competitively priced premium food line "Wild Oats" may have failed to gain widespread appeal because many customers did not (want to) identify as elitist consumers who buy premium groceries. Perhaps Walmart customers would have embraced those products more had the brand been introduced as an extension of an existing Walmart brand, as opposed to a separate, premium offering.

Indeed, our investigation implies that low-self-esteem consumers who buy products that are positioned as superior or self-enhancing may subsequently be dissatisfied with those products (i.e., because the products conflict with their self-views). The self-verification motive may thus be an overlooked reason for why marketplace offerings fail to appeal to audiences. To resolve this problem, practitioners can assess the fit between the dominant self-related motives of their target market and their product positioning. Customers who complain that a product "is not for people like me," "makes me feel like a phony," or "does not fit the type of person I am" likely have a thwarted self-verification motive. The marketer can reposition the product in a way to ensure it confirms, rather than conflicts with, the self-views of low-self-esteem consumers.

Careful marketing tactics may succeed in steering low-self-esteem consumers away from inferior options. Our investigation implies that low-self-esteem consumers may forgo affordable, superior products because they stay loyal to familiar, inferior options that confirm how they see themselves. To break this cycle, marketers could induce low-self-esteem consumers to see themselves as consumers of superior products in their product domain. For example, a company that wishes to sell a superior product could program its algorithm to display previously viewed superior rather than inferior products, even though the latter may be more commonly viewed by low-self-esteem consumers. In addition, past purchasing and viewing behavior could be framed as self-verifying. For example, specific wordings, such as "customers *similar to you* also bought" (instead of "*other* customers also bought") or "this product *fits you*," might make superior products seem self-consistent, which in turn may increase the likelihood they are chosen by consumers with low self-esteem.

Future Research

Our investigation highlights several directions for future research. The majority of consumer research has, perhaps unwittingly, focused on studying high-self-esteem consumers, as they constitute the majority in most populations. Our findings suggest that low-self-esteem consumers enter the marketplace with different expectations, needs, and motivations than their high-self-esteem counterparts. Thus, some of the discipline's theories, frameworks, and axioms

may not generalize to low-self-esteem consumers. We encourage researchers to consider the potential moderating role of trait self-esteem in future inquiries.

Our research focused predominantly on when low-self-esteem consumers embrace inferior products. However, even low-self-esteem consumers may sometimes reject inferior products. For example, below a certain threshold, inferior products might become threatening rather than self-confirming for consumers with low self-esteem. To illustrate, choosing extremely inferior products (e.g., damaged food such as a rotten apple or damaged products such as stained clothing) that signal extremely negative self-views might jeopardize the moderately negative self-views of consumers with low self-esteem. However, if chronic self-views are sufficiently negative, that threshold might differ and extremely inferior products might confirm the self-views of depressed individuals. In this way, products that are damaged yet safe to consume (e.g., "ugly fruit") may have a natural yet currently neglected target market.

Conclusion

The present work sheds light on a puzzling behavior: the consumption of inferior products in the face of superior options. Across five studies, we demonstrate that consumers with low self-esteem are inclined to choose inferior products in the service of self-verification. This work establishes the self-verification motive as a counterweight to the dominant conceptualization of products as vehicles for the self-enhancement motive. We hope that this work thereby complements the field's understanding of how self-views foster product choices. Apparently, some consumers sometimes think that non-cool restaurants, budget hair salons, and cheap alcohol represent the type of person they are. Future research should build on this finding to uncover whether consuming inferior products harms or hurts low-self-esteem consumers in the short and long run.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author collected and analyzed the data for all studies. The data for study 1 were collected on Amazon Mechanical Turk in December 2016. The data for study 2 were collected on Prolific Academic in January 2019. The data for study 3 were collected on MTurk in September 2016. The data for study 4 were collected on MTurk in September 2017. The data for study 5 were collected in the Erasmus Behavioral Lab in November 2017. The authors discussed the data analyses on multiple occasions.

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