



Status without cost: how color darkness can increase preferences and perceptions of status[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Status signals are traditionally assumed to entail costs. Yet consumers often infer status from visual cues that involve little or no cost, such as darker colors in products. This research examines how and when non-costly product elements, such as color darkness, can signal status despite lacking the cost emphasized in costly signaling literature. Across six studies, we demonstrate that darker colors increase consumers' perceptions of status and consequently product preferences for consumers actively seeking status. Besides this active motivation, these effects depend on cognitive conditions that determine whether associations between dark colors and status get activated. The effects are attenuated when color darkness is made explicit, but reemerge under cognitive busyness that limits cognitive processing. By identifying conditions under which non-costly signals increase perceptions of status, this research helps reconcile a theoretical debate about the costly nature of status signals, and advances understanding of how consumers interpret symbolic cues.

1. Introduction

Managers frequently offer products designed to help consumers signal status (Geiger-Oneto et al., 2013; Han et al., 2010), a fundamental social need (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Extensive research on status signaling suggests that consumers typically infer status from products that entail costs (Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999), in terms of money that consumers spend (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010; Han et al., 2010; Fuchs et al., 2013) or effort that consumers expend (e.g., Desmichel et al., 2020; Drèze & Nunes, 2009) to obtain these products. Hence, product elements that increase costs for both consumers and producers¹ can also increase the status that consumers perceive from these products. Examples of such product elements are special ornaments or materials (Berry, 1994; Griskevicius et al., 2010), like the crocodile skin in the Himalaya Hermes Birkin bag (Chayanin, 2023), or the unique flavorings in the Starbucks seasonal “Dragon Drink with Mango

Dragonfruit” (Starbucks 2025). In comparison to common elements, such as unbranded synthetic materials or regular flavors for drinks, special product elements increase costs, and hence can also increase consumers' perceptions of status.

At the same time, emerging literature suggests that non-costly signals might also be able to signal status. For instance, literature on the influence of visual product elements suggests that the color darkness of a product can increase status perceptions (Chung & Saini, 2022; Wong & Shavitt, 2010). From these two lines of research, a puzzle emerges: even if color might in certain situations increase cost (e.g., the orange of the luxury brand Hermès; or the scarce and prohibitively expensive color blue in ancient civilizations; Holmes, 2015), color darkness is usually not costly. Both production costs and the associated retail prices remain relatively constant for products that vary in color-darkness. For example, a handbag in navy blue typically costs the same as one in sky blue, and they carry the same retail price. In addition, in a brief exploratory study we conducted with consumers (N = 100) recruited

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¹ Throughout the manuscript, when we refer to “costs” we mean both production costs and prices consumers pay, as these two are usually aligned. If we refer only to one of the two, we mention which one explicitly.

from Prolific Researcher, 51% didn't think that either lighter or darker colors are costlier, 30% believed that darker are costlier, and 19% believed that lighter colors are costlier ($\chi^2(1) = 4.08, p = .25$). Hence, although color darkness can potentially increase status perceptions (Chung & Saini, 2022; Wong & Shavitt, 2010), it does not influence real or perceived cost of products. This research aims to help in addressing this theoretical tension, by investigating the motivational and cognitive conditions under which consumers interpret product elements that are not costly, as signaling status, thereby increasing perceptions of status and preferences.

This research makes important contributions to the literature. It is among the first to identify the motivational and cognitive conditions under which non-costly product elements can increase status perceptions. Specifically, we identify three key moderators that either enable or inhibit the effect of darker colors on perceptions of status: consumers' status seeking needs (primed, triggered by the consumption context, or chronic), explicit consideration of color darkness, and cognitive busyness. In addition, this research contributes to the literature about the influence of visual cues on psychological states such as perceptions of status (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015), by showing how this influence can be contingent on processes outside of visual processing, such as consumer needs. Finally, it adds to the marketing literature by illustrating how and when aesthetic product attributes, such as color darkness, can serve consumers' social needs.

Managerially, our findings resonate with managers who often try to predict the right color for their products (Dillon, 2018), yet often make sub-optimal decisions (Gorn et al., 1997). To ensure industry-relevant perspectives, we conducted a 2-question survey with luxury industry professionals ($N = 113$), recruited from LinkedIn and Prolific Researcher. This survey aimed to test the intuition of expert managers of status products regarding the importance of color selection. The results indicated that choosing the right color for marketing luxury products is important ($M = 6.31, SD = .85$, average of two 7-point scales: "How important do you think it is to choose the right color ... when marketing luxury products" / "... in marketing activities in the luxury industry?", 1 = not important at all; 7 = very important). In another pilot survey, we elicited the general beliefs (we refrained from using images to avoid anchoring responses on specific stimuli) of marketing and/or product management professionals ($N = 95$, recruited from Prolific Researcher) about how color darkness may influence status perceptions. The results were split, with 45% believing that darker colors would increase perceptions of status, 52% expressing the opposite opinion, and 3% indicating that they don't know ($\chi^2(1) = .391, p = .53$). These results highlight the practical relevance of our research question: managers consider color important, but (perhaps influenced by the conflicting views in the literature) are uncertain about the role of darker colors in signaling status. Overall, "status without cost" is also a topic relevant for managers, as they seek to satisfy consumers' need for status while controlling costs, but also for consumers, as they want to signal status without incurring high costs.

The moderators we uncover tap directly into managerial practice. Chronic and contextually activated status seeking needs are useful for psychographic and behavioral segmentation and targeting, respectively. Explicit verbal communication of color darkness provides guidance on the content of potential purchase advice or advertisements. Cognitive busyness emulates the loads of information and distractions consumers face when shopping either online or offline.

Finally, by identifying when a non-costly product element can increase perceptions of status, our research is particularly, but not only, relevant for the mass luxury movement (masstige; Debenedetti et al., 2024; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003), which is gaining importance for middle-earning households interested in attainable luxury (Nunes et al., 2004).

Next, we review the relevant literature leading to our hypotheses, we present six studies testing them, and we discuss our theoretical and managerial contributions.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

2.1. Color darkness and its effects on status perceptions

Color is composed of hue, chroma, and color darkness (or color-value). *Hue* is the pigment of the color (e.g., red, yellow, green, blue). *Chroma* is the saturation or richness of a color. *Color darkness* is the degree to which a color is dark or light, and varies from 0% (e.g., the color black) to 100% (e.g., the color white; Gorn et al., 1997). Different configurations of these elements result in color variations. For example, when hue and chroma are constant, changing color darkness leads to lighter or darker versions of the same color.

All dimensions of color influence consumer perceptions and preferences (e.g., De Bock et al., 2013; Mahnke, 1996). We focus on color darkness because it is the one associated with status-related perceptions in both psychological and marketing literature. Specifically, darker colors hold status-related associations such as perceived dominance (Puhalla, 2008; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994), power (Amhorst & Reed, 1986), and strength (Wexner, 1954). For instance, Valdez and Mehrabian (1994) found that darker colors are associated with high-dominance emotions for chromatic and achromatic colors, while Amhorst and Reed (1986) suggested that job applicants wearing darker colored jackets were perceived as being more powerful and competent.

Moreover, in the marketing domain research suggests that color darkness can also increase perceptions of brand competence (Labrecque & Milne, 2012), product quality (Hagtvedt, 2020), hierarchical position of a product in bundles (Chung & Saini, 2022), traditional brand image (Zeng et al., 2024). For instance, Labrecque and Milne (2012) found that darker logos increased perception of a brand's competence. Hagtvedt (2020) demonstrated that darker colored laptops were perceived to last longer. Chung and Saini (2022) suggested that darker colors can improve the perceived hierarchical position of a product in a bundle of products. Moreover, darker logos can convey an older, more traditional brand image (Zeng et al., 2024), which can carry positive connotations such as legacy, heritage, and prestige in status-relevant domains (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). On the other side, there is no prior work suggesting that dark colors do not enhance status perceptions, potentially because of publication bias against null effects (Franco et al., 2014; Rosenthal, 1979). Still, robust theoretical argumentation that effective status signals are costly would argue against such a possibility. We outline this argumentation next.

2.2. Costs as a requirement for increasing perceived status

The status signaling literature suggests that cost, in the form of money consumers spend, but also in terms of effort consumers expend to obtain something, tends to increase perceptions of status (Connelly et al., 2011; Dr  ze & Nunes, 2009; Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899). Specifically, cost creates a barrier to access, thereby enhancing the exclusivity and perceived value of the signal, to the extent that cost itself has been argued to be the benefit of products perceived as high-status (Godin 2013, 2023). Products made from unique materials (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) or designed by elite designers (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Husic & Cicic, 2009; Spence, 1973), tend to be more costly *both* for the businesses that produce them and for the consumers who acquire them. Such rare and expensive products improve the perceived status of an individual (Connelly et al., 2011; Finkelstein, 1992; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899). For instance, a bag made from crocodile skin can be perceived as higher in status than one made from Togo leather or from raffia. Even within costly bags, the ones made with materials that are rare and exclusive and create "extra costs" signal greater status.

Similarly, consumers could increase their perceived status by acquiring products that require effort (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899). For instance, the effort put in reaching a top tier in a loyalty program could signal a higher position in the "status" hierarchy

of a specific airline (Drèze & Nunes, 2009). But having a loyalty program also requires extra costs for a firm, for the benefits and services offered to loyal customers (Melnik & Bijmolt, 2015).

Along the same lines, collectible, limited-edition products, or ephemeral luxury products may be both relatively expensive and difficult to obtain, hence require money and effort, but they improve someone's position in a "connoisseur" or "uniqueness" hierarchy (Desmichel et al., 2020; Lynn & Harris, 1997a,b; Lynn & Snyder, 2002). These products tend to be costlier for the producer too, because they are often made with components in short supply (Koford & Tschoegl, 1998). Overall, both companies and consumers often incur higher costs for products that can improve positions in social hierarchies (e.g., Fournier & Richins, 1991; Han et al., 2010; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008).

2.3. Reconciliation: when color darkness can increase perceived status

In this research, we investigate the conditions under which product elements that are not costly, such as color darkness, can increase status perceptions and preferences for products. Although the status signaling literature suggests that color darkness should not improve one's perceived positions in a hierarchy, because it does not entail extra costs, significant research suggests that color darkness can have this effect (Chung & Saini, 2022; Wong & Shavitt, 2010). We now explore conditions under which this is possible.

2.4. Enabling condition: active status seeking needs

Need for status plays a fundamental role in consumer behavior. Status provides benefits such as access to resources, influence, and prestige (Anderson et al., 2015). Although cost may convey status regardless of status seeking needs of an individual (Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899), in this research we propose how status seeking needs may influence status perceptions from non-costly signals.

A well-established finding in evolutionary psychology, social cognition, and consumer research (e.g., Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Han et al., 2010; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) is that consumer needs and motives shape how individuals perceive and process their environment. Rather than attending, processing, and interpreting all available information, individuals with specific active motivations selectively notice, process, and evaluate information that is relevant to their current goals (Bruner, 1957; Lang et al., 2013), influencing their behavior in subtle ways (Custers & Aarts, 2005; Di Nocera et al., 2014; Förster et al., 2005; Lee & Labroo, 2004). Such motivational mechanisms are potent enough to influence even basic attentional processes (Di Nocera et al., 2014; Lang et al., 2013; Most et al., 2000).

More related to our arguments, motivational states such as needs and goals also influence reasoning and information processing (Kunda, 1990). For example, Förster et al. (2005) demonstrated that words related with an active goal were more accessible than words not related with that goal. In terms of interpreting information, Balcetis and Dunning (2006) showed that when participants were motivated to perceive a specific outcome in an ambiguous stimulus (e.g., an image that could be seen as either the letter B or the number 13), they were more likely to interpret the figure in line with their active goals. Overall, the activation of motives makes individuals process and interpret, even automatically, relevant cues in the environment, and behave accordingly to satisfy the active motive (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996).

Consistent with the motivated reasoning framework (e.g., Balcetis & Dunning, 2006; Kunda, 1990), individuals with an active status seeking need are more likely to interpret and to be sensitive to signals that communicate hierarchy and status (Anderson et al., 2015; Han et al., 2010; Kunda, 1990; O'cass & Frost, 2002). Because products often serve as a medium for gaining status perceptions (e.g., Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011; Veblen, 1899; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014; Ward & Dahl, 2014), individuals with active status seeking needs would process product-embedded cues related to status more (e.g., Mandel et al., 2006;

Rucker & Galinsky, 2008), perceiving and interpreting them in ways relevant to social standing (Han et al., 2010; O'cass & Frost, 2002). Hence, consumers seeking status may be more motivated to interpret the signals that they perceive as increasing status perceptions, even if these signals do not entail any cost, such as color darkness. Moreover, while costly signals may convey status independently of consumers' status seeking state (Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999), non-costly cues associated with status constructs may signal status only for consumers actively seeking status.

Such a signal could be color darkness. Since color darkness is not inherently costly, its impact on status perceptions is more likely to stem from simple associative processes, than from deliberate, cognitive cost-based reasoning which could highlight its non-costly nature. As discussed above, darker colors are associated with notions related to status (e.g., Amhorst & Reed, 1986; Chung & Saini, 2022; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994; Wexner, 1954). Therefore, consumers seeking status (but not those who do not) may interpret color darkness as a status signal. Formally, we hypothesize:

H1: Consumers seeking status will tend to prefer darker over lighter products. Consumers not seeking status will not have this preference.

H2: Consumers seeking status will perceive higher status from darker over lighter products. Subsequently, higher status perceptions will positively influence the tendency to prefer darker over lighter products. Perceptions, and therefore preferences, of consumers not seeking status will not be influenced by color darkness.

We test H1 and H2 with four different manifestations of status seeking states. Psychologically manipulating status seeking (Galinsky et al., 2003; Griskevicius et al., 2010; studies 1A and 4) offers a controlled test of our hypotheses. Past status-related purchases give an observable way for managers to identify status seeking states (study 1B). Status consumption contexts emphasize social standing and signaling of rank or prestige (Han et al., 2010; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; study 2), activating status seeking needs. Finally, the Status Consumption scale (Eastman et al., 1999; studies 3 and 5) provides an established psychographic instrument to capture need for status, useful for market research.

2.5. Boundary condition: explicitness of the status signal

As described, the influence of color darkness on status perceptions (H1 and H2) is likely to be based on simple reflexive associations of color darkness (e.g., with strength, power, and competence), requiring minimal cognitive elaboration (Balota & Lorch, 1986; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Wegener & Petty, 2001). Indeed, cues processed passively often influence perceptions (Lee, 2001; Montoya et al., 2017), such as visual stimuli effects that happen without much processing (e.g., Bornstein & D'Agostino, 1992; Montoya et al., 2017).

Hence, a boundary condition for H1 and H2 relates to the likelihood of processing the non-costly nature of color darkness. Specifically, the effect of color darkness is inconsistent with the premise that status signaling requires some cost (Connelly et al., 2011; Drèze & Nunes, 2009; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999). *Explicit* mentions of color darkness (e.g., as a comment like "this model comes in dark and light finishes" in a sales pitch, a marketing copy, or an on-site advertisement) may trigger processing that highlights that it is not costly, potentially questioning its legitimacy as a status cue. Under these conditions, status-seeking consumers may recognize that darkness does not represent a legitimate costly signal, and therefore no longer infer higher status from darker products, diminishing the influence of color darkness on status perceptions (see also Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Wegener & Petty, 2001 for similar discounting processes). Formally, we hypothesize:

H3: Making color darkness explicit will attenuate the relative preference for darker over lighter products of consumers seeking status.
H4: Perceptions of status will mediate this relationship: making color darkness explicit will attenuate the relative tendency to perceive higher status from darker over lighter products, for consumers seeking status. Subsequently, lower perceptions of status will result in a lower tendency to prefer darker over lighter products.

Overall, our framework helps reconcile conflicting research views on whether darker colors can signal status. We propose that the influence of color darkness on status perceptions suggested in the literature (e.g., Amhorst & Reed, 1986; Chung & Saini, 2022; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994; Wexner, 1954) is applicable when consumers' status seeking state is activated. On the contrary, the suggestion that color darkness should not influence status perceptions because it is not costly (Connelly et al., 2011; Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999) should hold when consumers' status seeking state is inactive, or color darkness is made explicit. We now present studies 1-3 that provide empirical support for these suggestions. Next, for studies 4 and 5 we develop further hypotheses that study these relationships in greater depth.

3. Study 1a: psychological status seeking state influences preference for darker over lighter products

We hypothesized that consumers seeking status, but not those that do not, may prefer darker over lighter products (H1). This study tested this hypothesis in a controlled laboratory setting by manipulating participants' status seeking states and recording real choices between two pens

that differed in terms of color darkness. We predicted that those seeking status would prefer darker over lighter products.

3.1. Method

Participants. Eighty-four graduate students (31 females; $M_{Age} = 23.96$, $SD = 1.50$) at a European university, from diverse nationalities and demographic backgrounds, participated in this 2-cell lab study in partial fulfillment of course requirements. The sample size for this study was relatively limited (we opted to not complement it with additional sources, such as online participants, to avoid variations in the dependent variable), due to the constraints in the laboratory's pool of participants. Subsequent studies had larger sample sizes, drawn from different populations, providing greater robustness and generalizability.

3.1.1. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either the "seeking status" or the "not seeking status" condition in a two-cell between-participants design. Following an established procedure to manipulate status (Galinsky et al., 2003), half of the participants imagined as vividly as possible what it would be like to be an employee wanting to improve their position at a company (status seeking state), whereas the other half imagined what it would be like to already have a position of status, without room for improvement (not status seeking state). Next, participants were given a paper questionnaire to answer. The experimenter offered each participant a pen holder containing exactly six office-type pens of the same sleek design, model, size, and price, appropriate to signal status in a work setting (e.g., Berger and Ward 2010). These pens were achromatic, 3 white and 3 black (see Fig. 1), lacking hue and



Fig. 1. EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI USED IN STUDIES *For each set of stimuli, darker to lighter products appear left to right.

chroma and differing only on darkness (Fairchild, 2013); white represents 0% color darkness, and black represents 100% color darkness, providing a clean manipulation of color darkness. Participants were asked to choose one pen, which was theirs to keep. The choice of pen (either white or black) was our dependent variable. Finally, participants completed a status seeking manipulation check and demographic questions.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Manipulation check

The manipulation of status seeking state was successful: participants in the “status seeking” condition reported feeling significantly less status ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.49$) than those not seeking status ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.58$; $t(82) = 5.34$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .25$).

3.2.2. Preference for darker products

A chi-square test revealed a significant effect of status seeking state ($\chi^2(1) = 20.504$ (likelihood ratio), $p < .001$, $\phi = .48$, see Fig. 2A), such that participants seeking status were significantly more likely to choose the darker than the lighter product (84% vs. 16%; $\chi^2(1) = 19.558$, $p < .001$). Conversely, choice percentages for the darker and the lighter product (37% vs. 63%) did not differ significantly for participants not seeking status ($\chi^2(1) = 2.95$, $p = .086$).

As studying achromatic colors (white vs. black) can reduce the scope of our results, we use colors of different hues and chromas, while varying only darkness, in subsequent studies. Moreover, the status-signaling potential of pens may be specific to professional contexts. Accordingly, in subsequent studies, we used as stimuli other products that can convey status.

4. Study 1b: a behavioral manifestation of status seeking state influences preference for darker over lighter products.

Study 1B aimed to increase the generalizability and validity of the previous findings in two ways. First, this study used another product category (water bottles), and a new hue (green). Second, psychological states, such as need for status manipulated in study 1A, may be harder to identify by managers than overt behaviors (e.g., Berman, 2011). Hence, study 1B aimed to replicate the results of study 1A with a simple behavioral manifestation of status seeking: past purchases of luxury products, which are easily tracked by managers (e.g., through surveys or customer tracking data). Specifically, we operationalized status seeking

states via self-reported “past purchases of luxury products,” in the online participants’ recruitment platform Prolific Researcher. Participants self-reported this behavior when they first registered in the platform. Hence, this self-report happened before and outside the setting of our study. Like study 1A, this study also involved a consequential choice task, simulating as much as possible a real-life choice in the context of an online purchase; all participants were informed that they may get their chosen product, as part of a raffle. This study was preregistered: <https://aspredicted.org/t3mi5.pdf>.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

Two hundred and ninety-two participants were recruited through Prolific Researcher in exchange for monetary compensation.

4.1.2. Stimuli

Using a design software (i.e., Pixlr, a cloud-based image editing tool), we created two versions of a trendy water bottle, which differed by 50% in color darkness (see Fig. 1). Hue and size remained constant. Although originally functional, water bottles are increasingly used as markers of status, particularly among urban and health-conscious consumers (The Economist, 2025).

4.1.3. Procedure

In this study we used a pre-screening question (i.e., “Do you own more than two fashion items that cost over £200?”; pounds were used because Prolific is a UK-based company) to operationalize status seeking states. This question was part of a battery of questions that participants of the online recruitment platform Prolific Researcher complete when they register. So, it was asked in a setting independent of our study. Since the relationship between status seeking and the purchase of expensive fashion items has been shown repeatedly (Eastman et al., 1999; Han et al., 2010; O’cass & Frost, 2002), participants who answered “yes” to this pre-screening question were considered as seeking status more than those who answered “no” to this question. We administered simultaneously an identical study to each of these two groups of participants, having thus a two-cell (state: seeking status ($N = 112$) vs. not ($N = 113$)) between-participants design.

Participants went through a visual task aiming to detect color vision deficiencies that could affect the results of our experiment (similar visual task was included in all subsequent studies). Then, all participants were asked to imagine that they were looking for a water bottle to take to work or when going out. We highlighted that others would be able to see the bottle, and asked participants to choose between the two options that they found while searching online: a light vs. a dark green water bottle, presented in random order. These bottles were of the same model, design, size (22oz), hue (green), and price (20 USD). They only differed in their darkness (i.e., color darkness). The choice of bottle (either light or dark) was our dependent variable. Participants were told that they would have the opportunity to get their preferred choice, if their response was selected in a lottery following the study. Thus, this choice was potentially consequential. Finally, although prior research has repeatedly demonstrated a link between status seeking and the purchase of expensive fashion items (Eastman et al., 1999; Han et al., 2010; O’cass & Frost, 2002), distinguishing between status seekers and non-status seekers based solely on past expensive purchases may not perfectly capture active status motivations. To ameliorate this concern, participants completed the status consumption scale (Eastman et al., 1999; $\alpha = .73$), to be used as a manipulation check in this study. Participants answered an attention check (i.e., a question asking to select a specific word from a list of six words; similar check was included in all subsequent studies), and demographic questions.

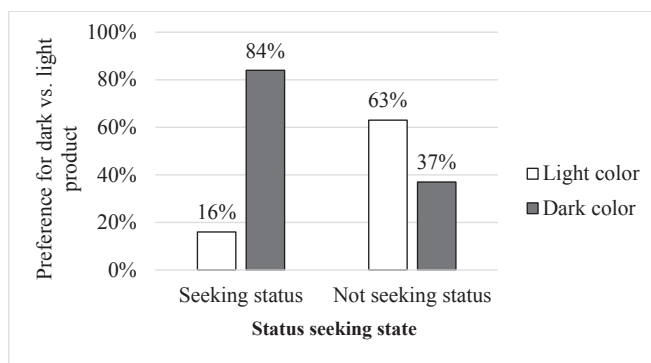


Fig. 2A. STUDY 1A: EFFECT STATUS SEEKING STATE ON PREFERENCE FOR DARKER VERSUS LIGHTER PRODUCT (PEN) Status seeking on preference for dark vs. light product: $\chi^2(1) = 20.504$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.48$ **Pairwise Comparisons:** Seeking status condition – dark products vs. light products: $p < 0.001$; Not seeking status condition – dark products vs. light products: $p = 0.086$; Dark products – Seeking status vs. not seeking status conditions: $p = 0.003$; Light products – Seeking status vs. not seeking status conditions: $p = 0.001$.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Manipulation check

As pre-registered, the two hundred and twenty-five participants (140 females; $M_{Age} = 41.02$, $SD = 13.09$) who passed the attention and visual check were included in the analyses. To check our assumption that participants who own two or more fashion items that cost over £200 seek status more than those who do not, we run a t-test with the answer to the pre-screening question ("Do you own more than two fashion items that cost over £200?"): -1 = no; 1 = yes) and status consumption scale (1 = low status seeking; 7 = high status seeking). Results revealed that participants who reported owning more than two such items seek status more ($M = 3.50$) than those who do not ($M = 2.05$, $t(223) = 71.71$, $p < .001$). Thus, the pre-screening question reflects the status seeking state of participants.

4.2.2. Preference for darker products

A chi-square test revealed a significant effect of status seeking state ($\chi^2(1) = 4.49$ (likelihood ratio), $p = .04$, $\phi = .14$, see Fig. 2B), such that participants seeking status were significantly more likely to choose the darker than the lighter product (66% vs. 34%; $\chi^2(1) = 11.571$, $p < .001$). This was not significant for participants not seeking status (48% vs. 52%; $\chi^2(1) = 1.562$, $p = .21$).

4.2.3. Discussion

Study 1A and 1B showed that consumers seeking status, but not those who do not, tend to prefer darker over lighter products. Similar to real shopping, darker and lighter products in these studies were presented side-by-side and evaluated comparatively, adding external validity to our results. We obtained our results both for contextually activated status seeking states (study 1A), and for a behavioral segmentation criterion (past luxury products purchases; study 1B). Hence, even when managers might have difficulties using psychological scales, they could use past purchase information to identify and target status seeking segments with the right color product offerings. Importantly, past purchase information may capture status seeking state cross-sectionally: in study 1B, past purchases for expensive fashion items predicted choice for a water bottle.

Although verified by the results of our manipulation check, using past behavior as a proxy for current status seeking needs may not be experimentally clean. In the next studies, we activate status seeking needs with a status consumption context or measure them. Finally, a limitation of studies 1A and 1B is that we did not test the mediating role

of perceptions of status. In the next study, we sought to test perceptions of status as a potential mediator.

5. Study 2: the effect of consumption context on the perceptions of status and preference for darker products

Previous studies showed that consumers seeking status, but not those who do not, prefer darker over lighter products (H1). This study aimed to replicate this finding with status seeking states activated by consumption context, as well as test the mediating role of perceptions of status (H2). In this study, participants were presented with consumption contexts activating (vs. not) status needs, mirroring research demonstrating that context can enable or inhibit status motivations (Berger & Heath, 2007; Griskevicius et al., 2007).

We also sought to examine these hypotheses using a more traditionally status-relevant product category, designer blazers. The stimuli were tailored to participants' gender, with either a female- or male-oriented design, providing ecological validity and allowing participants to naturally and accurately evaluate the products. Finally, we manipulated color darkness between participants and used a different dependent variable potentially capturing future behavior, purchase intentions, and tested our predictions with an additional hue (i.e., blue).

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

Five hundred and eighteen participants were recruited through Prolific Researcher in exchange for monetary compensation.

5.1.2. Stimuli

We created two female-oriented and two male-oriented versions of a high-end blazer (Hugo Boss). We used a design software (Pixlr) to create versions with different degrees of color darkness, and an artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT) to adapt the design based on the target gender. The two versions for each gender differed in darkness by 33% (see Fig. 1). Hue and chroma were held constant.

5.1.3. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (consumption context: egalitarian vs. status) x 2 (color darkness: light vs. dark) between-participants design. First, participants were asked to indicate their gender. Then, all participants were asked to imagine that they had a managerial role. Participants in the "status consumption context" condition read: "Imagine you just got a managerial role in an organization with a very hierarchical structure. Hence, at your first networking event, you aim to project the status associated with your role. You want to earn the respect of everyone, and you are trying to select a blazer that will help you project status.", thus highlighting status relevance. Participants in the "egalitarian consumption context" condition read: "Imagine you just got a managerial role in an organization with a very flat structure. Hence, at your first networking event, you aim to project the accessibility associated with your role. You want to connect naturally with everyone, and you are trying to select a blazer that will help you look approachable."

Next, participants were presented with either the dark or the light version of the blazer matching the gender they disclosed at the beginning of the study (see Fig. 1), and indicated the likelihood of purchasing the blazer for the networking event. Perceptions of status were captured on a scale adapted from established literature (Drèze & Nunes, 2009). This measurement included four, 7-point scales. Specifically, participants were asked: "What degree of status would this blazer confer to the person using it?", "When you are using this blazer in public, how special would it make you feel?", "How difficult it would be for others to buy this blazer?", and "If you enter a store wearing this blazer, how much attention would you expect to receive in comparison to other people?". We used the average of these four items ($\alpha = .62$) as the mediator

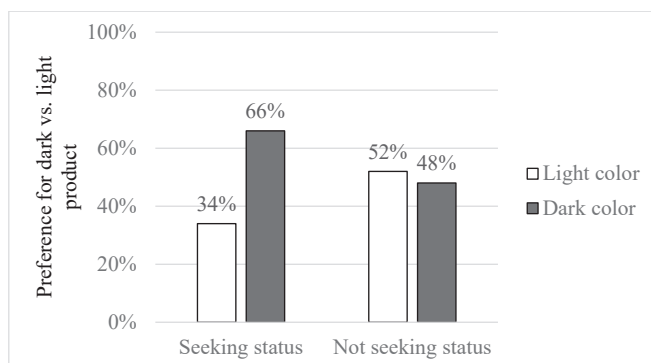


Fig. 2B. STUDY 1B: EFFECT STATUS SEEKING STATE ON PREFERENCE FOR DARKER VERSUS LIGHTER PRODUCT (WATER BOTTLE) Status seeking on preference for dark vs. light product: $\chi^2(1) = 4.49$, $p = 0.04$, $\phi = 0.14$ **Pairwise Comparisons:** Seeking status condition – dark products vs. light products: $p < 0.001$; Not seeking status condition – dark products vs. light products: $p = 0.185$; Dark products – Seeking status vs. not seeking status conditions: $p = 0.193$; Light products – Seeking status vs. not seeking status conditions: $p = 0.095$.

variable in our analyses, whereby higher values indicated higher perceptions of status, and lower values indicated lower perceptions of status from the assigned product. Finally, participants completed a consumption context manipulation check (i.e., “In the scenario described before, what was your purpose while attending the event?”, choices were “to project status”, “to project accessibility”, and “to have fun”), an attention check and demographic questions.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Manipulation check and initial analysis

Four hundred and ninety-six participants passed the visual and attention checks and were included in analyses (246 females; $M_{Age} = 40.75$, $SD = 16.85$). A chi-square test revealed a significant effect of the consumption context ($\chi^2(1) = 272.204$ (likelihood ratio), $p < .001$, $\phi = .70$), indicating that the consumption context manipulation was successful. Participants in the status consumption context were significantly more likely to indicate that their goal in the described context was “to project status” (79%; $\chi^2(1) = 396.723$, $p < .001$). Conversely, participants in the egalitarian consumption context were significantly more likely to indicate that their goal was “to project accessibility” (92%; $\chi^2(1) = 206.486$, $p < .001$).

Initial analyses revealed that gender design (female vs. male blazer design) did not moderate the status consumption context $\times$ color darkness interaction effects on purchase intentions ($F(3,488) = .84$, $p = .36$) or perceptions of status ($F(3,488) = .31$, $p = .58$). Thus, following established practice (e.g., Luffarelli et al., 2018), we pooled data for the two gender designs. The conclusions of the analyses reported below did not change when gender design was included as a separate variable in the analysis. Similarly, results remain similar when including income and age, as controls in the analyses.

5.2.2. Purchase intentions for darker product

An ANOVA with consumption context (-1 = egalitarian; 1 = status) and color darkness (-1 = light; 1 = dark) as independent variables, and purchase intention (1 = not at all likely; 7 = very likely) as the dependent variable, revealed no significant effects of status consumption context ($F(1, 492) = .40$, $p = .53$, $\omega^2 = .001$) and color darkness ($F(1, 492) = .268$, $p = .10$, $\omega^2 = .003$), but a significant interaction between consumption context and color darkness on purchase intentions ($F(1, 492) = 5.43$, $p = .02$, $\omega^2 = .01$; see Fig. 3). Pairwise contrasts supported our predictions: when in a status consumption context, participants reported higher purchase intentions for the darker than for the lighter blazer ($M_{Dark} = 6.05$, $SD = 1.03$ vs. $M_{Light} = 5.60$, $SD = 1.29$; $F(1, 492) =$

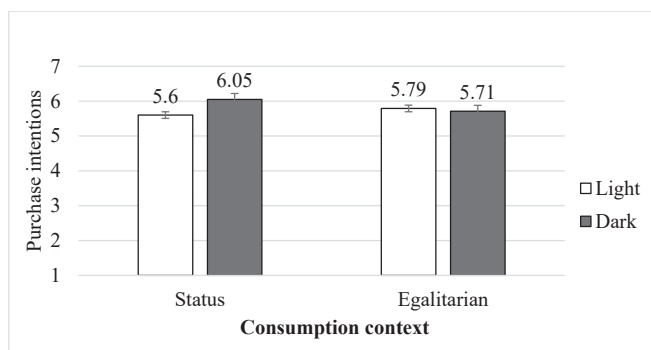


Fig. 3. STUDY 2: EFFECT OF CONSUMPTION CONTEXT ON PURCHASE INTENTIONS Consumption context $\times$ color darkness on purchase intentions: ($F(1, 492) = 5.43$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta^2 = 0.011$) **Pairwise Comparisons:** Status consumption context condition – dark product vs. light product: $p = 0.005$; Egalitarian consumption context condition – dark product vs. light product: $p = 0.62$; Dark product – Status consumption context vs. Egalitarian consumption context conditions: $p = 0.04$; Light product – Status consumption context vs. Egalitarian consumption context conditions: $p = 0.23$.

2.81 , $p = .005$). However, when the consumption context was making status irrelevant, no differences emerged ($M_{Dark} = 5.71$, $SD = 1.46$ vs. $M_{Light} = 5.79$, $SD = 1.26$; $F(1, 492) = -.49$, $p = .62$).

5.2.3. Perceptions of status as mediator

A moderated mediation analysis (Process Model 8; Hayes, 2014) tested for the indirect effect of the status consumption context $\times$ color darkness interaction on purchase intentions, via perceptions of status. Consumption context (-1 = egalitarian; 1 = status) and color darkness (-1 = light; 1 = dark) were the independent variables, perceptions of status (1 = lower; 7 = higher) was the mediator, and purchase intention (1 = not at all likely; 7 = very likely) was the dependent variable. Analyses revealed a significant moderated mediation (95% CI: .0050 to .5435, index = .27). In support of our hypothesis, results showed a significant consumption context $\times$ color darkness interaction effect on perceptions of status ($\beta = .35$, $SE = .18$, $t = 1.96$, $p = .05$; see Fig. 4).

Further analyses showed that in the “status consumption context” condition, participants perceived relatively higher status from the darker over the lighter product ($M_{Dark} = 5.94$, $SD = .88$ vs. $M_{Light} = 5.52$, $SD = 1.07$; $\beta = .41$, $SE = .13$, $t = 3.31$, $p = .001$). In the “egalitarian consumption context” condition, there were no significant effects on perceptions of status ($\beta = -.07$, $SE = .13$, $t = .53$, $p = .60$). Subsequently, perceptions of status increased preference for darker over lighter products ($\beta = .76$, $SE = .25$, $t = 16.38$, $p < .0001$). In the “status consumption context” condition, perceptions of status had a positive indirect effect on the purchase intention for the darker over the lighter product (95% CI: .1371 to .5227). However, this effect was not significant for participants in the “egalitarian consumption context” condition (95% CI: -.1420 to .2377).

5.3. Discussion

The findings of this study show that consumption context matters for the influence of color darkness on status perceptions, and thus on preferences. The observed effects of color darkness appear consistent with the notion that status-related cues are more salient in contexts activating need for status. This effect is not found in egalitarian consumption contexts where social harmony and equality is emphasized, reducing the relevance of status signaling (e.g., Aaker et al., 2010). Moreover, this study provides evidence that consumers motivated by status prefer darker over lighter products, and that this effect is mediated by perceptions of status. By examining a traditionally status-relevant product category, high-end designer blazers that are highly visible in social contexts, we demonstrate that darkness can serve as a subtle yet meaningful status signal. The use of gender-tailored designs enhances ecological validity, and the between participants manipulation of color darkness indicates that our results are not contingent on direct comparisons of color darkness. Moreover, the effect generalizes to an additional hue (blue).

Study 3 aimed to test if the effect obtained so far was attenuated when color darkness was explicit (H3, H4). Specifically, we predicted that these effects would be attenuated when color darkness became explicit during evaluations of status, because color darkness is not costly. We tested our predictions with the two hues (red and blue) that are most preferred across cultures and are frequently utilized in previous color research (e.g., Gorn et al., 1997; Krishna & (Ed.), 2011). Finally, we use comparative perceptions of status and preference measures, in which we presented both stimuli with the darker and lighter versions of the products as anchors of the scales.

5.4. Method

5.4.1. Participants

Two hundred and forty-three participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for payment.

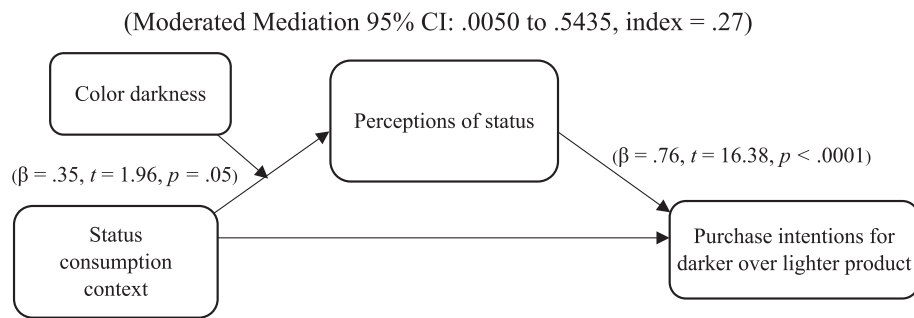


Fig. 4. STUDY 2: EFFECT OF STATUS CONSUMPTION CONTEXT $\times$ COLOR DARKNESS ON PURCHASE INTENTIONS FOR DARKER PRODUCTS, MEDIATED BY PERCEPTIONS OF STATUS (Moderated Mediation 95 % CI: 0.0050 to 0.5435, index = 0.27).

5.4.2. Stimuli

We used two pairs of products from high-end manufacturers (i.e., Louis Vuitton hats, Hermès scarves) presented exactly as they were in the brands' online stores. That is, we used the products as they were without altering any color component. Hence, the stimuli in this study traded a bit of experimental control for greater generalizability and external validity (across studies, our purpose was to balance strict manipulations of color darkness and external validity. While stimuli development in studies 1A, 1B, and 2 used strict experimental controls, this study prioritized external validity). Each participant saw a pair of products including a dark and a light version, photographed from the same angle, and having the same design, brand, hue (i.e., red and blue, respectively), material, dimensions, and price. Color darkness was different between the pair of products (see Fig. 1).

5.4.3. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (color darkness explicitness: explicit vs. non-explicit color darkness) $\times$ 2 (product replicate for generalizability purposes: red hat vs. blue scarf) between-participants factorial design. First, they were randomly presented with either the pair of hats or the pair of scarves described above, with the lighter and darker version of each pair presented in random order. Next, before participants responded to the measures, we manipulated color darkness explicitness by either explicitly emphasizing differences in color darkness or not (adapted from Putnam-Farr & Morewedge, 2020). Specifically, participants in the "explicit color darkness" condition were told that "The *light-colored*, and the *dark-colored* hats (vs. scarves) are still displayed for your convenience". Those in the "non-explicit color darkness" condition were told "The two hats (vs. scarves) are still displayed for your convenience", without any reference to color darkness. As a measure of preference, participants indicated which hat (vs. scarf) they would be more likely to buy using a dichotomous measure: the light or the dark hat (vs. scarf). Subsequently, the "color darkness explicitness" manipulation text was repeated right before participants indicated perceptions of status. To probe the robustness of our results using different measurements, perceptions of status were captured on a different 6-point scale, "Which hat (vs. scarf) is more prestigious?", "Which hat (vs. scarf) is more elegant?", and "Which hat (vs. scarf) is more special?". These evaluations were made comparatively, with the light and the dark product presented randomly as the low and high anchors of the scale (from 1 = either the light or the dark product to 6 = either dark or the light product). We used the average of these three items ($\alpha = .76$) as the mediator in our analyses, with higher values indicating higher perceptions of status for darker products, and lower values indicating higher perceptions of status for lighter products. Participants completed the status consumption scale (Eastman et al., 1999; $\alpha = .73$) to capture chronic status seeking, an attention check, and demographics.

5.5. Results

Two hundred and twenty-two participants passed the visual and attention checks and were included in analyses (122 females; $M_{Age} = 38.01$, $SD = 12.25$). Initial analyses revealed that product replicate (hat vs. scarf) did not moderate the status seeking $\times$ color darkness explicitness interaction effects on preference ($\beta = -.22$, $SE = .55$, $z = .28$, $p = .43$) or perceptions of status ($\beta = -.11$, $SE = .11$, $t = -.95$, $p = .35$). Thus, following established practice (e.g., Luffarelli et al., 2018), we pooled data for the two product replicates. The conclusions of the analyses reported below did not change when product replicate was included as a separate variable in the analysis. Similarly, results remain when including income, gender, and age, as variables in the analysis.

5.5.1. Preference for darker product

A binary logistic regression with status seeking (1 = low in status seeking; 7 = high in status seeking), color darkness explicitness (-1 = explicit color darkness; 1 = non-explicit color darkness), and their interaction as the independent variables, and preference (-1 = lighter product; 1 = darker product) as the dependent variable, revealed directional effects of status seeking ($\beta = .23$, $SE = .13$, $z = 1.77$, $p = .08$), and color darkness explicitness ($\beta = -.62$, $SE = .32$, $z = -1.94$, $p = .053$). These effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction between status seeking and color darkness explicitness on preference ($\beta = .32$, $SE = .13$, $z = 2.41$, $p = .02$; see Fig. 5). A spotlight analysis at 1SD above/below the mean of the status seeking scale showed that participants high in status seeking tended to prefer the darker (vs. lighter)

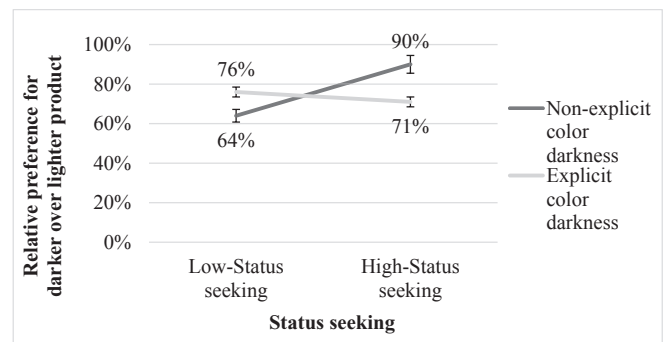


Fig. 5. STUDY 3: EFFECT OF STATUS SEEKING ON PREFERENCE FOR DARKER PRODUCTS MODERATED BY COLOR DARKNESS EXPLICITNESS Status seeking $\times$ color darkness explicitness on preference: $\beta = 0.64$, $SE = 0.26$, $z = 2.41$, $p = 0.016$ **Pairwise Comparisons (spotlight analysis 1SD above/below the mean of the status seeking scale):** High-Status seeking – Non-explicit color darkness vs. explicit color darkness: $p = 0.032$; Low-Status seeking – Non-explicit color darkness vs. explicit color darkness: $p = 0.172$; Non-explicit color darkness – High-Status seeking vs. low-Status seeking: $p = 0.015$; Explicit color darkness – High-Status seeking vs. low-Status seeking: $p = 0.528$.

products in the “non-explicit color darkness” condition more than in the “explicit color darkness” condition (non-explicit = 90%, explicit = 71%; $\beta = .63$, $SE = .30$, $z = 2.14$, $p = .03$). Color darkness explicitness did not affect the preference of participants low in status seeking (non-explicit = 64%, explicit = 76%; $\beta = -.30$, $SE = .23$, $z = -1.37$, $p = .17$). Thus, color darkness explicitness attenuated the relative preference for darker over lighter products, but only for consumers seeking status (H3).

5.5.2. Perceptions of status as mediator

A moderated mediation analysis (Process Model 8; Hayes, 2014) tested the indirect effect of the status seeking and color darkness explicitness interaction on preference, via perceptions of status. Status seeking (1 = low in status seeking; 7 = high in status seeking) and color darkness explicitness (-1 = explicit color darkness; 1 = non-explicit color darkness) were the independent variables, perceptions of status (1 = lighter product; 6 = darker product) was the mediator, and preference (-1 = lighter product; 1 = darker product) was the dependent variable. This analysis revealed a significant moderated mediation (95% CI: .0106 to 0.5056, index = .23). In support of our hypothesis, results showed a significant status seeking $\times$ color darkness explicitness interaction effect on perceptions of status ($\beta = .13$, $SE = .06$, $t = 2.37$, $p = .02$; see Fig. 6).

We examined the effect of color darkness explicitness at 1SD above/below the mean of the status seeking scale using a spotlight analysis. This analysis showed that high status seeking participants (1SD above the mean) perceived more status for darker (vs. lighter) products in the “non-explicit color darkness” condition than in the “explicit color darkness” condition ($\hat{y}_{Non-explicit} = 4.59$ vs. $\hat{y}_{Explicit} = 3.85$, $\beta = .37$, $SE = .11$, $t = 3.30$, $p = .001$), but color darkness explicitness did not affect perceptions of status of participants low in status seeking ($\beta = -.004$, $SE = .11$, $t = -.04$, $p = .97$). Subsequently, higher perceptions of status increased preference for darker over lighter products ($\beta = 1.76$, $SE = .27$, $t = 6.47$, $p < .001$). For participants high in status seeking, color darkness explicitness had a positive indirect effect on the preference for darker over lighter products, through perceptions of status (95% CI: .2094 to 1.2638). However, perceptions of status did not mediate preferences of participants low in status seeking (95% CI: -.4142 to .3922).

6. Discussion

Study 3 demonstrated that consumers who are seeking status, but not those who are not, tend to perceive higher status from darker than from lighter products. This difference in perceived status, in turn, mediated the relative preference for darker products. Importantly, these effects were attenuated when color darkness was made explicit during evaluations of status, indicating that color darkness does not affect perceptions of status when it is explicit.

These findings advance our understanding of how product design elements influence perceptions of status and highlight important managerial implications: brands targeting status seeking consumers may benefit from leveraging darker colors, if they avoid explicit references to color darkness in their marketing communications. A limitation of the

studies so far is that we just used two levels of color darkness for each product. However, sometimes, products are available in the market in multiple levels of darkness. The next study addressed this issue while testing for cognitive busyness as a moderator.

7. Study 4: cognitive busyness increases preferences for darker products for consumers seeking status when color darkness is explicit

The previous studies showed that consumers seeking status tended to perceive greater status from, and therefore prefer, darker over lighter products. However, these effects were attenuated when color darkness was made explicit. We argue that this may be happening because (a) the effect of color darkness on perceived status is reflexive, relying on the associations of color darkness with status-related constructs such as perceived dominance (Puhalla, 2008; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994), power (Amhorst & Reed, 1986), strength (Wexner, 1954), competence (Labrecque & Milne, 2012), and product quality (Hagtvedt, 2020), and (b) this effect is corrected by more elaborate processing triggered by explicit mentions of color darkness, which makes the lack of cost of color darkness salient. We test this proposition directly in study 4.

Specifically, reflexive effects, such as the influence of color darkness on status perceptions that we propose, may operate even when individuals are cognitively busy and their cognitive resources are constrained (Fitzsimons & Williams, 2000). Cognitive busyness is a temporary occupation of cognitive resources (e.g., Gilbert et al., 1988; Fitzsimons & Williams, 2000), and it could emerge by information overload or distraction (Korbach et al., 2018). While cognitively busy, individuals have limited cognitive resources and reduced capacity for elaborate information processing, and are more likely to rely on associative cues (Kahneman, 2003; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Indeed, cognitive busyness is a well-established and widely used construct in social cognition and consumer research, frequently used to demonstrate shifts from controlled to automatic evaluation when processing capacity is constrained (e.g., Gilbert & Osborne, 1989; Pontari & Schlenker, 2000). The underlying reason is that although effects based on associations can often operate even when individuals are cognitively busy, correcting such effects requires cognitive resources (Epley & Gilovich, 2006; Kahneman, 2003). Hence, in our case, status seeking consumers under cognitive busyness may rely on status-related associations of color darkness. In contrast, when their cognitive resources are unconstrained and color darkness is made explicit, status seeking consumers would be able to engage in more elaborate cognitive processing, potentially pondering on the illegitimacy of darkness as a costly signal, and discount its influence on perceived status. Hence, under conditions of cognitive busyness, explicit mentions of color darkness may not be sufficiently processed to discount color darkness as non-costly. Consequently, associations between darker colors and status-related constructs may still shape perceptions of status and preferences even when color darkness is made explicit, because cognitive resources are limited. Formally:

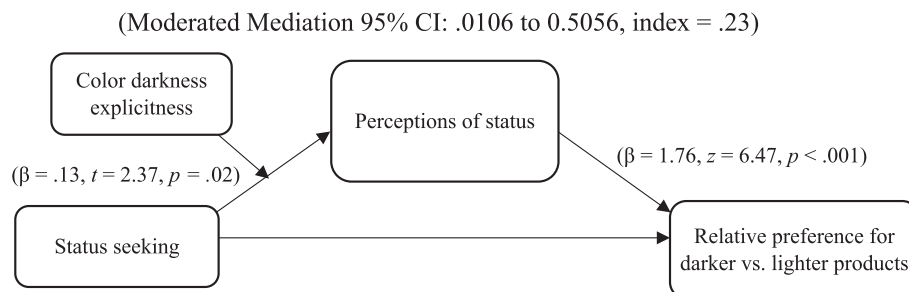


Fig. 6. STUDY 3: EFFECT OF STATUS SEEKING STATE $\times$ COLOR DARKNESS EXPLICITNESS ON RELATIVE PREFERENCE FOR DARKER PRODUCTS, MEDIATED BY PERCEPTIONS OF STATUS (Moderated Mediation 95 % CI: 0.0106 to 0.5056, index = 0.23).

H5: Consumers seeking status under cognitive busyness will prefer darker over lighter products, when color darkness is explicit.

To test this hypothesis, study 4 manipulated cognitive busyness while holding color darkness explicit for all participants. Moreover, for generalizability purposes, we used a different established manipulation of status seeking state (i.e., Need for Status; adapted from [Griskevicius et al., 2010](#)). Finally, to further boost external validity, we examined preferences for a set of four versions of the same product, differing only in degree of darkness, simulating real-life situations in which consumers typically have multiple options from which to choose.

From a managerial perspective, Study 4 aimed to identify conditions that can help managers understand when color darkness can influence status perceptions and preferences even when it is explicitly referenced. One such condition occurs when consumers are distracted by the cognitive demands they often face during purchasing (e.g., [Spenner & Freeman, 2012](#)). These can take the form of multiple stimuli while shopping in a physical store, multitasking while browsing online, or engaging in social interactions while viewing an advertisement.

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants

Given that this study used a product only relevant for women (i.e., a handbag), we recruited four hundred and twenty-four female participants ($M_{Age} = 35.70$, $SD = 11.87$) through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation.

7.1.2. Stimuli

Using a software for professional graphic design, we created four versions of a high-end handbag (i.e., Hermes Bolide bag), differing by 14% color darkness increments (see [Fig. 1](#)). Other aspects of the stimuli, including hue (blue) and size, remained constant.

7.1.3. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (status seeking state: not seeking status vs. seeking status) $\times$ 2 (cognitive busyness: control vs. high) between-participants design. First, status seeking state was manipulated by using an established manipulation of status seeking state (adapted from [Griskevicius et al., 2010](#)). All participants were asked to imagine that they worked at a large and prestigious company, and that they were competing for a promotion against two other individuals. Next, participants in the “seeking status” condition read: “you are constantly thinking about this promotion as it will allow you to move up in the hierarchy of the company and obtain higher status relative to your peers”, thus highlighting status needs. However, participants in the “not seeking status” condition read that they received the promotion: “you have moved up in the hierarchy of the company, and now you have higher status relative to your peers”, thus satisfying status needs.

Next, we manipulated cognitive busyness. Following an established and validated procedure ([Fitzsimons & Williams, 2000](#)), participants were distracted by counting their eye blinks until instructed to report how many times they had blinked. Participants in the control condition were asked to report this number on the screen immediately following these instructions. Participants in the “cognitive busyness” condition were required to count their eye-blinks for the duration of the study. Hence, all participants received the same product information, although the cognitive resources were constrained by engaging in a different task for those in the cognitive busyness condition, but not for those in the control condition. Participants were presented with a 4-point scale, with each point representing one of the four different versions of the high-end handbag described above. All participants were explicitly told that the four versions “differ in the extent to which they are dark or light colored”, making thus color darkness explicit for everyone. After that, participants used the scale to indicate which of the four versions they liked and preferred the most. These items were averaged ($r = .89$) into a

single preference measure, which served as the dependent variable in our analyses. Next, participants were reminded that the four versions “differ in the extent to which they are dark or light colored,” and were asked to indicate which of the four handbags they perceived as having higher status. Perceptions of status were captured on the same scale as in study 2 ([Drèze & Nunes, 2009](#)). However, this measurement included four, 4-point scales in which each point represented one of the four different versions of the high-end handbag described above. Specifically, participants were asked: “Which bag would confer the highest degrees of status to the person using it?”, “Which bag would make you feel the most special in public?”, “Which bag would be the most difficult for others to buy”, and “With which bag would you expect to receive the most attention in comparison to other people, when entering a store?”. We used the average of these four items ($\alpha = .67$) as the mediator variable in our analyses, whereby higher values indicated higher perceptions of status from darker products, and lower values indicated higher perceptions of status from lighter products. At this point, participants in the “high cognitive busyness” condition reported how many times they had blinked. Finally, all participants answered two manipulation checks assessing status seeking states (i.e., “How much did you desire to increase your social status when you were writing about this situation?”, “How much desire for prestige did you feel while writing about this situation?”) that were averaged for analysis ($r = .82$), an attention check, and demographic questions.

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Manipulation check

Three hundred and eighty-one female participants passed the visual and attention checks and were included in analyses ($M_{Age} = 35.70$, $SD = 11.87$). A one-way ANOVA showed that the “status seeking” manipulation was effective: participants in the “status seeking” condition reported seeking status more ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.77$) than those in the “not seeking status” condition ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.88$; $F(1, 377) = 15.88$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .04$).

7.2.2. Preference for darker product

A two-way ANOVA with status seeking (-1 = not seeking status; 1 = seeking status) and cognitive busyness (-1 = control; 1 = high) as independent variables, and preference (1 = lightest product; 4 = darkest product) as the dependent variable, revealed no significant effects of status seeking state ($F(1, 377) = 1.63$, $p = .20$, $\omega^2 = .002$) and cognitive busyness ($F(1, 377) = .57$, $p = .45$, $\omega^2 = .001$), but a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 377) = 4.53$, $p = .03$, $\omega^2 = .01$; see [Fig. 7](#)). Pairwise

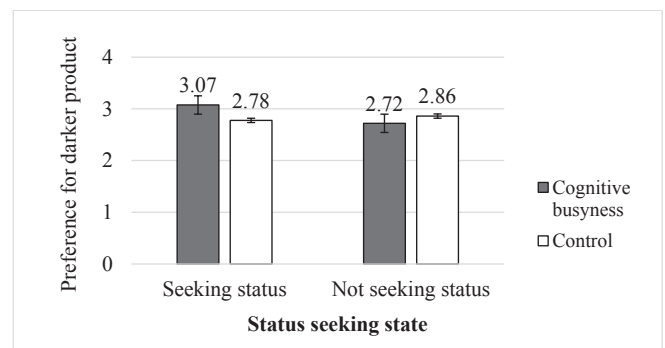


Fig. 7. STUDY 4: EFFECT OF STATUS SEEKING STATE ON RELATIVE PREFERENCE FOR DARKER OVER LIGHTER PRODUCTS MODERATED BY COGNITIVE BUSYNESS, WHEN COLOR DARKNESS IS EXPLICIT Status seeking state $\times$ cognitive load on preference: $F(1, 379) = 4.53$, $p = 0.03$ **Pairwise Comparisons:** Seeking status condition – Cognitive busyness vs. control: $p = 0.04$; Not seeking status condition – Cognitive busyness vs. control: $p = 0.34$; Cognitive busyness – Seeking status vs. not seeking status conditions: $p = 0.01$; Control–Seeking status vs. not seeking status conditions: $p = 0.57$.

contrasts supported our predictions. In this study, in which color darkness was explicit for everyone, high cognitive busyness increased the tendency to prefer darker over lighter products for participants seeking status ($M_{\text{CogBusy}} = 3.07$, $SD = .93$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 2.78$, $SD = 1.02$; $F(1, 186) = 4.39$, $p = .04$, $\omega^2 = .02$). No difference emerged for participants not seeking status ($M_{\text{CogBusy}} = 2.72$, $SD = 1.04$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 2.86$, $SD = 1.03$; $F(1, 191) = .90$, $p = .34$, $\omega^2 = .00$). Results remain similar when including income and age as controls in the analyses.

7.2.3. Perceptions of status as mediator

A moderated mediation analysis (Process Model 8; Hayes, 2014) tested for the indirect effect of the status seeking state $\times$ cognitive busyness interaction on preference, via perceptions of status. Status seeking state ($-1 = \text{not seeking status}$ $1 = \text{seeking status}$) was the independent variable, cognitive busyness ($-1 = \text{control}$ $1 = \text{cognitive busyness}$) was the moderator, perceptions of status was the mediator ($1 = \text{lightest product}$; $4 = \text{darkest product}$), and preference ($1 = \text{lightest product}$; $4 = \text{darkest product}$) was the dependent variable. Analyses revealed a significant moderated mediation (95% CI: .0089 to .2700, index = .14). In support of our hypothesis, results showed a significant status seeking state $\times$ cognitive busyness interaction effect on perceptions of status ($\beta = .09$, $SE = .04$, $t = 2.14$, $p = .03$; see Fig. 8). Results remain similar when including income and age as controls in the analyses.

We examined the effect of cognitive busyness on status perceptions depending on the status seeking condition. Results showed that high cognitive busyness increased status perceptions for darker over lighter products for participants seeking status ($M_{\text{CogBusy}} = 2.99$, $SD = .78$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 2.74$, $SD = .75$; $\beta = .13$, $SE = .06$, $t = 2.11$, $p = .04$). However, cognitive busyness did not affect these perceptions for participants not seeking status ($\beta = -.05$, $SE = .06$, $t = -.92$, $p = .36$). Higher perceptions of status increased preference for darker over lighter products ($\beta = .77$, $SE = .05$, $t = 15.53$, $p < .001$). For participants seeking status, cognitive busyness had a positive indirect effect on the preference for darker over lighter products, through perceptions of status (95% CI: .0113 to .1824). However, this indirect effect was not significant for participants not seeking status (95% CI: $-.1415$ to .028).

7.3. Discussion

Study 4 showed that individuals seeking status perceived higher status and thus preferred darker products more when cognitively busy, when color darkness was explicit. We argued that cognitive busyness had this effect because it does not suppress associative effects (Fitzsimons & Williams, 2000) but suppresses the correction of these effects (Kahneman, 2003). Managerially, distraction coming from cognitive busyness is common when consumers face the mental pressures and cognitive demands of modern shopping situations (e.g., Spenner & Freeman, 2012).

Finally, preference and perceptions of status were measured

comparatively using a set of four products that only differed in color darkness. Adding to the external validity of our findings, this setting simulated real-life consumer evaluations of multiple options.

8. Study 5: associating color darkness with costs increases preferences for darker products for consumers seeking status when color darkness is explicit

Previous studies showed that consumers seeking status preferred darker over lighter products and that when color darkness was explicit during evaluations of status perceptions, its effects on preference were attenuated. We also explore conditions under which color darkness may increase perceived status even when it is explicit during product evaluations.

We argue that making color darkness explicit can attenuate its effect because explicitness may trigger elaborate processing, highlighting lack of cost for color darkness. If so, consistent with research showing that signals associated with cost increase status perceptions even when explicit (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010; Bellezza & Berger, 2020), color darkness may still shape preferences of consumers seeking status if it is associated with costs. Hence, we hypothesize:

H6: When color darkness is explicit, consumers seeking status will prefer darker over lighter products, if color darkness is associated with some costs.

Study 5 directly tested this proposition. We manipulated the association between color darkness and cost. Hence, for some participants, we made explicit not only color darkness (as in study 3), but also the color darkness-cost-status association. We predicted that consumers seeking status would prefer darker products if they held cost associations.

8.1. Method

8.1.1. Participants

Four hundred and eight female participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation.

8.1.2. Stimuli

We used the same stimuli as in study 4

8.1.3. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to a two-cell (darkness associations with costs: present vs. absent) between-participants design. Following previous research (e.g., Briñol et al., 2006; Winkielman & Schwarz, 2001), we manipulated color beliefs by asking participants to complete a reading comprehension task about a purported excerpt from an article of a reputable fashion magazine. Two excerpts, one for each condition, were developed. These excerpts read ("dark is not costly"

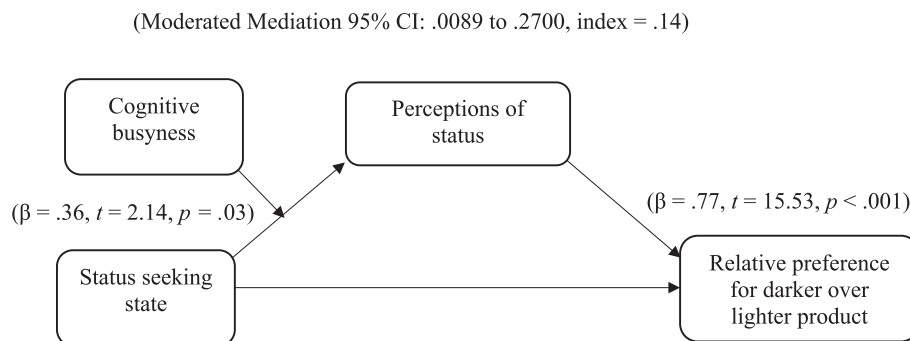


Fig. 8. STUDY 4: EFFECT OF STATUS SEEKING STATE ON RELATIVE PREFERENCE FOR DARKER OVER LIGHTER PRODUCTS MODERATED BY COGNITIVE BUSYNESS AND MEDIATED BY PERCEPTIONS OF STATUS, WHEN COLOR DARKNESS IS EXPLICIT (Moderated Mediation 95 % CI: 0.0089 to 0.2700, index = 0.14).

condition outside of parentheses; “dark is costly” condition in *italics*, and in parentheses): “A recent article in Vogue states that darker apparel and accessories are as expensive and as difficult to produce as lighter ones, because the dyeing process is very similar (vs. ...*are more expensive and difficult to produce than lighter ones, because the dyeing process is very different*). This is why 72% of leading fashion designers believe that wearing darker colors will not necessarily make you more respected nor more admired (vs. ...*will make you more respected and more admired*)”. These excerpts were pre-tested with a sample drawn from the same population as the main study ($N = 73$). Both texts were perceived as equally convincing ($M_{\text{Dark is costly}} = 3.70$, $M_{\text{Dark is not costly}} = 3.75$; $F(1, 71) = .013$, $p = .910$, $\omega^2 = .00$), plausible ($M_{\text{Dark is costly}} = 3.68$, $M_{\text{Dark is not costly}} = 3.61$; $F(1, 71) = .026$, $p = .872$, $\omega^2 = .00$), and did not affect participants’ status seeking state ($M_{\text{Dark is costly}} = 3.22$, $M_{\text{Dark is not costly}} = 3.36$; $F(1, 71) = .087$, $p = .769$, $\omega^2 = .00$). Further, a one-sample t-test against the midpoint of the scale (4) confirmed that neither excerpt was significantly different from the midpoint in terms of convincingness (p -values $> .3$).

In the main study, participants read the excerpt for their assigned condition. To follow up on the story about the reading comprehension task, immediately after, we asked participants to identify among seven different percentages, the percentage of leading fashion designers (i.e., 72%) who believe that wearing darker colors either will make them more respected and more admired, or will not necessarily make them more respected nor more admired (for the dark is not costly or dark is costly condition, respectively), according to the text. Recalling this information was an indication of whether participants paid attention to the immediately preceding experimental manipulation. Following established practice (e.g., Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018), participants who responded incorrectly were not asked any further questions, leaving us with a usable sample of 374 participants ($M_{\text{Age}} = 34.25$, $SD = 11.13$). These participants saw our stimuli (four versions of a handbag which differed by 14% color darkness increments, see Fig. 1), were explicitly told that the bags differ in their degree of darkness, thus making color darkness explicit for every participant, and were asked to indicate what level of color darkness of the bag they preferred. Finally, they completed the status consumption scale (Eastman et al., 1999), which served as a measure of status seeking.

9. Results

9.1. Preference for darker product

A regression with status seeking (1 = low in status seeking; 7 = high in status seeking), color beliefs (-1 = dark is not costly; 1 = dark is costly), and their interaction as independent variables, and preference (1 = lightest product; 4 = darkest product) as the dependent variable, revealed no significant effects of status seeking ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .03$, $t = .90$, $p = .37$) and color beliefs ($\beta = -.02$, $SE = .19$, $t = .10$, $p = .83$), but a significant interaction effect of status seeking $\times$ color beliefs on preference ($\beta = .07$, $SE = .03$, $t = 2.04$, $p = .04$; see Fig. 9). A spotlight analysis at 1SD above/below the mean of the status seeking scale revealed that participants high in status seeking tended to prefer the darker (vs. lighter) products in the “dark is costly” condition more than in the “dark is not costly” condition ($M_{\text{Dark is costly}} = 3.45$, $M_{\text{Dark is not costly}} = 2.96$; $\beta = .25$, $SE = .07$, $t = 3.67$, $p < .001$). Color beliefs did not affect preferences of participants low in status seeking ($M_{\text{Dark is costly}} = 3.17$, $M_{\text{Dark is not costly}} = 3.06$; $\beta = .05$, $SE = .07$, $t = .78$, $p = .44$). Results remain similar when including income and age as controls in the analyses.

Follow-up study. To further explore whether dark colors could be an effective status signal, we conducted a follow-up study ($N = 266$; web appendix) manipulating associations of color darkness with another type of cost: effort to obtain power. This study replicated the results of study 5: the status seeking $\times$ effort to obtain power interaction effect on preference was significant ($\beta = .09$, $SE = .03$, $t = 2.50$, $p = .01$). Participants high in status seeking tended to prefer the darker (vs. lighter)

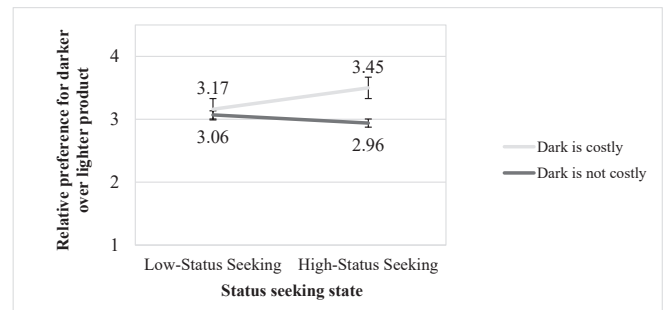


Fig. 9. STUDY 5: EFFECT OF STATUS SEEKING STATE ON RELATIVE PREFERENCE FOR DARKER OVER LIGHTER PRODUCTS MODERATED BY COLOR BELIEFS, WHEN COLOR DARKNESS IS EXPLICIT Status seeking state $\times$ color beliefs on preference: $\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 2.04$, $p = 0.042$ **Pairwise Comparisons (spotlight analysis 1SD above/below the mean of the status seeking scale):** High-Status seeking – Dark is costly vs. dark is not costly: $p < 0.001$; Low-Status seeking – Dark is costly vs. dark is not costly: $p = 0.44$; Dark is costly – High-Status seeking vs. low-Status seeking: $p = 0.03$; Dark is not costly – High-Status seeking vs. low-Status seeking: $p = 0.48$.

products in the “high effort” condition more than in the “low effort” condition ($M_{\text{HighEffort}} = 3.46$, $M_{\text{LowEffort}} = 3.13$; $\beta = .16$, $SE = .08$, $t = 1.95$, $p = .05$). This effect was not significant for participants low in status seeking ($M_{\text{HighEffort}} = 2.99$, $M_{\text{LowEffort}} = 3.26$; $\beta = -.13$, $SE = .08$, $t = -1.58$, $p = .12$).

9.2. Discussion

Study 5 found that associating color darkness with cost increased preferences of participants seeking status for darker over lighter products, when color darkness was explicit. This effect was attenuated when participants believed that color darkness was not costly. These results supported our hypothesis that the influence of color darkness on perceptions of status and preferences is attenuated when color darkness is explicit because color darkness is not costly. Hence, altering its associations with cost increased preference for darker products. To further probe this possibility, a follow-up study replicated these results with another type of cost: effort to obtain power. Managerially, these results imply that if color darkness can meaningfully be linked with some cost, it can be used to increase status perceptions even when it is explicit.

10. General discussion

We shed light into the puzzle of when color darkness can help to increase status perceptions, despite not inherently involving any increases in production costs or prices consumers pay. Five studies (and a follow-up) illustrate the conditions under which this can happen.

Study 1A demonstrated in a controlled and real choice setting, that consumers seeking status prefer darker over lighter products. Study 1B, also involving a consequential task, replicated these results using a behavioral criterion to segment consumers based on status seeking: past purchases of luxury products. Study 2 demonstrated that consumers engaged in a status-seeking context tended to perceive higher status from darker over lighter products, and that this difference mediated the relative preference for darker over lighter products. Study 3 further showed that these effects were attenuated when color darkness was explicit during evaluations of status perceptions. Study 4 showed that when consumers seeking status are cognitively busy (i.e., by performing a different task), they still prefer darker products even when color darkness is explicit. Finally, study 5 manipulated the association of color darkness with cost. When color darkness was associated with cost, participants seeking status relatively preferred darker over lighter products, even if color darkness was explicit. These results were further supported by a follow-up study which associated color darkness with

another type of cost, effort to obtain power. Across all studies, we used diverse procedures and stimuli, showing the generalizability of our results. We employed lab and online experiments, operationalized status seeking chronically and situationally, measured preferences and perceptions of status individually and comparatively, and used different products (i.e., pens, trendy water bottles, handbags, hats, scarves, blazers), with different designs and hues (i.e., black, green, red, blue), in the form of physical and digital stimuli.

10.1. Theoretical contribution

The present research offers key theoretical contributions. Most importantly, our findings help reconcile two lines of research that may seem superficially in tension. Traditionally, status signaling literature emphasize that status signals require cost. However, emerging literature suggests that non-costly signals might also be able to signal status due to associations with constructs related to status. Our research reconciles these two seemingly contradicting perspectives: non-costly product elements may increase perceptions of status under motivational and cognitive conditions that allow the activation of associations between dark colors and status, while limiting cognitive processing. Specifically, we propose that color darkness influences status perceptions when consumers' status seeking needs are activated, as long as color darkness is not explicit. When it is explicit, color darkness can still be influential if consumers seeking status are cognitively busy or associate it with some costs. On the contrary, color darkness should not influence status when consumers' status seeking needs are inactive, or when color darkness is made explicit, and consumers are not cognitively busy and do not associate it with some costs.

While bridging this gap, our research also contributes to the literature on status signaling and the psychological influences of visual cues. Whereas literature on status signaling shows how active status seeking needs attune consumers to costly status signals such as a luxury brand (e.g., Han et al., 2010), we show that this may happen also for non-costly signals such as color darkness. We also show that color darkness can influence not only perceived hierarchy among bundled products (Chung & Saini, 2022), but also perceptions of status from owning or using darker products.

Moreover, we show that explicitly communicating color darkness reduces its impact. Explicit processing of a signal is a novel moderator for the status signaling literature: status signals examined by previous literature entail some costs, such as high price (e.g., Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Wang & Wallendorf, 2006). These costly signals are consistent with status signaling and hence are effective even when they are explicit. This novel moderator could be relevant for other non-costly status signals that future research may uncover.

For the literature on the psychological influences of visual cues, we propose that established effects such as on perceptions of status (Wong & Shavitt, 2010), can be contingent on boundary conditions unrelated to visual properties such as salient consumer needs, or contextual effects. We illustrate these effects in the domain of color darkness.

Finally, we add to the literature on effective marketing communications (Belch & Belch, 2018; Tellis, 2003), specifically on how to verbally frame product attributes (e.g., Donovan & Jalleh, 1999; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). Although highlighting distinctive positive product attributes is key to communication (Reynolds & Whitlark, 1995), our research suggests that highlighting attributes that are neither positive nor negative per se, such as color darkness, can have more nuanced effects. For instance, such communications can diminish positive influences of these attributes, unless the attribute holds clear supporting associations. In our case, explicitly communicating color darkness diminishes its influence on status perceptions, unless color darkness is associated with some type of costs or consumers are under cognitive busyness.

10.2. Managerial implications

Our research bears important actionable guidance for managers in the luxury industry, estimated to be between €320-330 billion by 2025 (Bain and Company, 2020). As our introductory short survey suggested color decisions are important for marketing in this industry. Yet, choice of color is a decision which managers often do not optimize (Gorn et al., 1997). Our research offers actionable insights on when color darkness can be utilized to improve perceptions of status, summarized in Table 1.

Our research can help the customer-centric manager to use color darkness as an effective, simple, easy-to-vary product element that can be leveraged to offer social benefits without increasing production or material costs. We are aligned with research suggesting that color is a powerful yet accessible tool for marketers (e.g., Labrecque et al., 2013), and show how variations in darkness can be strategically leveraged. First, our results make recommendations for needs-based segmentation and targeting. We propose that color darkness can act as a product element for consumers who have active social needs, such as increasing their position in a hierarchy. Importantly for managers, we show that these consumers can be identified in three ways. First, managers can activate those needs with their marketing mix, for instance, in their advertising (e.g., Lynn, 1991, study 2). Second, these needs can be identified based on their past behavior, such as luxury products purchases (study 1B). Third, they can be identified through psychographic scales used in market research surveys (studies 3 and 5).

Moreover, these results may be especially important for managers targeting the increasing number of consumers who are looking to buy affordable luxury products in their search for status (Sebastian, 2021). This mass luxury movement (i.e., masstige; Debenedetti et al., 2024; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003) is becoming more and more important as the middle-earning households are growing in interest for luxury but attainable products (Nunes et al., 2004), offering an opportunity for companies to increase profit (Kumar et al., 2020).

Second, we provide guidance on the marketing communication of color darkness, so that it can help consumers seeking to improve their perceived social position. Specifically, on-site advertisements and personal selling should refrain from explicitly mentioning color darkness for products aiming to increase perceived status. Making color darkness explicit can defeat this purpose, and potentially make dark products less appealing. In addition, our findings suggest that it is safe to communicate explicitly color darkness, if consumers are cognitively busy (e.g., in busy retail environments), or if color darkness is meaningfully linked to costs.

Finally, although our studies focus on product preferences, they can potentially have implications for a wide spectrum of marketing communications, specifically on how to frame product attributes (e.g.,

Table 1
Conditions under which color darkness increases perceptions of status.

	Target segment: Consumers not seeking status		Target segment: Consumers seeking status	
	Color darkness communication			
	Explicit	Not explicit	Explicit	Not explicit
Color darkness associated with costs or consumers under cognitive busyness	Color darkness does NOT increase status perceptions (Studies 1–5)		Color darkness increases status perceptions (Study 4)	Color darkness increases status perceptions
Color darkness not associated with costs			Color darkness does NOT increase status perceptions (Studies 3, 4 and 5)	Color darkness increases status perceptions (Studies 1, 2, and 3)

Donovan & Jalleh, 1999; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990) in context such as advertising or website design. For example, companies that target consumers seeking perceived status gains can use darker colors for their graphic communications (e.g., billboards) or websites, to help them to attain their goals.

10.3. Limitations and future research

We acknowledge the limitations of our research and propose how future research may address them. Although past research (Connelly et al., 2011; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Spence, 1973; Veblen, 1899; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999) describes cost as a necessary condition for status, our work shows that this may not be the case. A natural extension to understand the full relationship between cost and status is the study of when cost is a sufficient condition of status. Specifically, it is unlikely that all factors that increase a product's costs would increase its status perceptions, so it would be interesting identifying the systematic conditions under which this happens. In line with this, although our theory focuses on darkness as a product element that is not costly, the broader question of low-cost or no-cost status signaling remains to be explored. Future research could extend beyond color to examine other non-costly product elements that may influence status perceptions. Such a signal could be the shape of a product. Literature suggests that angular shapes, compared to circular ones, evoke perceptions of toughness and strength (Berlyne, 1960). Toughness and strength imply superiority, and superiority relates to status (Dubois et al., 2001; Veblen, 1899). Hence, angular shapes might enhance perceived status. Exploring such elements across varied products and consumer groups could deepen our understanding of how status is communicated through subtle, non-costly cues.

Second, there might be situations when the patterns of effects shown in our studies are reversed: light colored products might increase status perceptions in a hierarchy more than dark products. There is evidence that in some cultures and in specific contexts, light skin colors are associated with prestige (Li et al., 2008), and that lighter colors may trigger favorable responses, in general (Banerjee et al., 2012; He et al., 2024; Meier et al., 2007). For example, lighter colors might signal status in domains linked to modernity, technology, and minimalism. Hence, Apple products are often characterized by sleek, light-colored designs that convey innovation and refinement. A possibility is that when brands consistently use lighter colors, over time, these colors might symbolize status through learned associations with the brand itself (e.g., Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001), and reverse our proposed effects. Another possibility is that transient consumer states, like active moods, interact with color darkness. Thus, further investigation is needed to understand the conditions regarding when and how darkness can increase consumers' perceptions of status.

Third, although this research focuses on the effect of color darkness on status perceptions due to the associations of color darkness with constructs related to status such as dominance (Puhalla, 2008; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994) and power (Amhorst & Reed, 1986), it is not well-understood how these associations emerged at the first place. One potential explanation could be that visual processing of darker colors is more demanding than that of lighter colors, making color darkness feel demanding, and hence implicitly perceived as costly. A second potential explanation could suggest that due to evolutionary reasons, there is a human preference for status signals of darker colors.

Fourth, while we focus on the influence of color darkness on preference formation, another direction for future research would be how consumers make sense of past color related choices. For example, attribution theory (Heider, 1958) suggests that individuals often generate explanations for their own behaviors post hoc. When would consumers attribute retrospectively the choice of a dark product to status? Would status seeking states influence these attribution processes? Moreover, literature provides nuanced distinctions between distractedness and information overload (Forster & Lavie, 2008; Lavie, 1995; Malhotra, 1982) as ways to manipulate cognitive busyness. Would

attributions differ under different types of cognitive busyness (e.g., distraction, vs. information overload)? Future research could examine whether post-choice attributions weaken or sustain the status signaling function of darker products over time.

Fifth, our research focuses on products such as personal accessories or wearables that are visible to others and often used for impression management. A potential avenue for future research would be to test our hypotheses for functional or utilitarian products. For instance, would a darker versus a lighter wall paint be perceived as increasing the status of a professional office? Although our research suggests so, color use in interior design is also shaped by functional and aesthetic considerations (e.g., lighting, space constraints). For example, very dark tones could appear visually excessive. Even more so, a black handbag may signal prestige, whereas a black trash bag likely would not. Understanding when symbolic versus functional versus aesthetic considerations drive preferences for color darkness is an interesting question for future research.

Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to examine whether similar effects emerge for dark *packaging*, rather than product. Such study could offer valuable extensions of our work. Along the same lines, brands make choices that might implicate subtle design cues as status signals. For example, luxury brands such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton use darker colors in their visual identities. Similarly, brands like Instagram, Spotify, and Uber have transitioned from lighter to darker branding, potentially signaling a shift toward a positioning of status. We encourage future research to test if our findings extend to other product visual elements.

Finally, while our investigation studies color darkness, we acknowledge that hue and chroma are indeed important dimensions of color that may interact with darkness. For example, the associations of low saturation with authenticity (Pichierri & Pino, 2023) could act as validating cues of those of color darkness with status, leading to more generalized impact. In summary, our findings can help researchers and managers comprehend social position seeking and inspire further research on the relationships between product visual elements and perceptions of status.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Susan Calderón Urbina: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Antonios Stamatogiannakis:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2026.116484>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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