Influence via Comparison-Driven Self Evaluation and Restoration: The Case of the Low-Status Influencer

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Ample research shows that consumers accept influence from a source they identify with, and reject influence from a source they wish to dissociate from. The current paper moves beyond the well established identification principle and delineates a new influence process. Influence via comparison-driven self evaluation and restoration (CDSER) takes place when one observes a counter-stereotypical product user, and as a result questions one's relative standing on the trait that the product symbolizes. In response to this threatening self evaluation, the observer becomes more interested in the target product. To clearly distinguish CDSER from identification influence, we focus our investigation on product users from low socioeconomic classes. In contrast to the predictions of the identification principle, we demonstrate that low-status users can in some circumstances positively influence observers and *increase* their purchase intentions. The "low-status user effect" and the CDSER mechanism are demonstrated across multiple product categories in four studies.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine the following scenario: a new technological product was launched three days ago and you are considering purchasing it. Like most tech gadgets, it carries a prohibitive premium price tag, yet offers the exciting prospect of exploring innovative functions and applications. On your way to the office, still undecided, you pass through the office lobby. The building janitor is in the lobby and you notice that he is casually using the technological product over which you were contemplating. How will such an observation affect your purchase decision?

The ways in which consumers influence each other is of major interest to modern marketers. Numerous studies have investigated the psychological mechanisms that foster social influence. Notably, one principle stands out and consistently emerges: consumers accept influence from a source they identify with and reject influence when they wish to dissociate from the source (Berger and Heath 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Ferraro, Bettman, and Chartrand 2009; White and Dahl 2006). We consider this finding a manifestation of "*identification influence*," wherein one accepts (or rejects) influence in order to demonstrate identification with (or dissociation from) the source. Such identification, in turn, may enhance the social status of the recipient (Deutsch and Gerard 1955; Hyman and Singer 1968) by allowing him to *(a)* establish or maintain a relationship with the source (Kelman 1961), or *(b)* signal to a third party that he is similar or dissimilar to the source (Berger and Heath 2008).

The principle of identification suggests that individuals with certain traits should be more influential than others. Indeed, research shows that likeable (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Bichsel, and Hoffman 2002), attractive (Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2008; Chaiken 1979), similar (Lowry 1973), and high-status (Strodtbeck, James, and Hawkins 1957) sources are

more persuasive than others. In a similar vein, the marketing literature profiles the typical "influential" as slightly more educated, with higher income, and better occupation than the average consumer (Boster et al. 2009; Corey 1971; Row 2004).

Although identification is a prominent driver of interpersonal influence, it doesn't underlie all instances of social influence (Turner 1991). In the current paper we outline a different type of influence and suggest that its underlying motive is self evaluation and restoration. We posit that consumers evaluate themselves on specific traits by observing the possessions of others. For example, a consumer who observes an elderly lady wearing professional running shoes might infer that people in general are more athletic than before. The observer may therefore conclude that his relative standing on athletics is lower than he thought. This change in his self evaluation may then drive his purchase decisions. He may, for example, attempt to restore a sporty self image by purchasing new running shoes. This type of influence is not driven by normative concerns but by a need to evaluate oneself and to restore a certain self image. It takes place whenever a comparison to another person diminishes one's self evaluation and in turn affects one’s cognitions, emotions, or behavior. We call this type of influence comparison-driven self evaluation and restoration (CDSER).

To clearly distinguish CDSER influence from identification influence, we focus our investigation on a particular type of influencers – consumers from low socio-economic status (SES). If the identification principle universally applies, then one would not expect consumers from low SES to influence high-status others. Consumers typically do not aspire to be members of a low status group and would not normally accept influence from actual members of that group. However, if low status sources *do* exert positive influence on others, one may conclude that a qualitatively different psychological mechanism is at work.

Next, we outline the psychological mechanism underlying CDSER influence. We derive our conceptual framework from social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) and from the literature on product symbolism (Belk 1988; Grubb and Hupp 1968; Levy 1959).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Comparison Theory

People need to evaluate their abilities and opinions (Festinger 1954). Absent objective mechanisms for self evaluation, people compare themselves to others. Our need to evaluate is so strong that comparisons arise automatically (Gilbert, Giesler, and Morris 1995), unintentionally, and outside awareness (Stapel and Blanton 2004). Comparisons may be to a person or to a group of people. People compare themselves to the average in a population (Weinstein 1980; Windschitl, Kruger, and Simms 2003) or to a hypothetical "prototype" – a typical member of a target group (Gibbons and Gerrard 1995; Wood, Taylor, and Lichtman 1985).

Research shows that people react to social comparisons in a variety of ways. While favorable comparisons – in which we outperform another person – result in positive feelings and ego enhancement, unfavorable comparisons may hurt our feelings and call for special mechanisms to restore our confidence (Brickman and Bullman 1977). Unfavorable comparisons are especially painful when they are directed *downward*, that is, when our prior expectation is that we will outperform the target on the compared ability or trait. Such unfavorable downward comparisons suggest that our performance on the compared ability is worse than we had previously thought or has deteriorated over time (Alicke 2000).

In response to an unfavorable comparison, individuals may employ different cognitive and behavioral strategies. Some may dismiss the validity of the comparison information or search for contradictory information about their performance (Brickman and Berman 1971; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and LaPrelle 1985). Others will lower their standards and seek comparison with somewhat less capable targets (Gibbons, Benbow, and Gerrard 1994). However, often times the unfavorable comparison will affect the comparer's aspirations and enhance motivation in the compared domain (Festinger 1942, 1954; France-Kaatrude and Smith 1985). As we explain next, the latter mechanism is of great relevance to the consumer realm.

Social Comparisons among Consumers

Consumers may compare themselves to others (Argo, White, and Dahl 2006; Burson 2007; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011) on various traits or abilities. We suggest that the basis for comparison depends on the consumed product and the trait that it symbolizes (Belk 1988; Grubb and Hupp 1968; Levy 1959). Using new technological products may signal a high level of innovativeness and eating organic foods may signal a high level of health consciousness. We hereby define the *"focal trait"* of a product as the human trait that users of that product are expected to have at high levels. Thus, the focal traits for new technological products and organic foods would be innovativeness and health awareness, respectively.

Consumers judge their relative standing on a focal trait in light of their perceptions of how others are distributed on that trait (Gershoff and Burson 2009). Such distribution beliefs, in turn, depend on casual observations of other consumers. Observing large rather than small numbers of consumers of technological products will result in a belief that technological

innovativeness is ubiquitous rather than rare. Distribution beliefs may also depend on the unique consumers observed (Rothbart et al. 1978). The observation of a counter-stereotypical product user, that is a person that is not expected to use the product, may lead one to infer that the average level of the focal trait in the population is higher than expected ("if even this elderly lady is wearing jogging shoes, the average person must be more athletic than I realized"). As a result, the observer will infer that *his own* relative standing on the focal trait is lower than he previously thought (Alicke 2000), and this perception may threaten his self concept.

In attempt to restore his shaken self concept, a consumer can purchase a relevant, symbolic product. For example, Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv (2009) show that when one's self-view as an exciting person is temporarily in doubt, he becomes motivated to choose products that bolster his original self-view (e.g., choosing an Apple over an IBM computer). Accordingly, a consumer may enhance his relative-standing on a focal trait by purchasing a relevant product. Inadvertently, the counter-stereotypical user can affect the purchase intentions of the observer.

In sum, we posit that an observed counter-stereotypical product user may change the observer's self concept. We use the term "*observer*" throughout to denote a consumer who currently does not own a target product and observes another consumer using it. Consequently, the observer becomes interested in products that could bolster his self view on the focal trait: the same product of the observed user or another product that is associated with the same focal trait.

Using the Special Case of the Low Status User to Unravel CDSER and Identification Influence

Although the theoretical formulation of CDSER influence bears little, if any, similarity to that of identification influence, the two processes may be empirically inseparable (Hyman and

Singer 1968). For example, if one emulates his mother's choice of an innovative technological product, it is hard to tell whether this behavior is driven by identification with a close person or by a perceived threat to the self concept.

To clearly distinguish CDSER from identification influence, we use a specific influence source for which the predictions of identification and CDSER diverge. We chose a counter-stereotypical product user that is unlikely to evoke identification - a consumer with low socio-economic status (SES). Participants in all our studies were from a relatively high SES and we reasoned, and later tested and confirmed, that they would not identify with a low status source. If identification influence were at work, a high status consumer should reject products that a low status person uses. Yet for certain products, a low status user would be counter-stereotypical and could instigate a CDSER influence process. In this case, a high status observer would become more interested in the product that a low status consumer is using. We expect that under certain specifiable conditions, higher status observers will demonstrate the "*Low-Status User Effect*," that is, they would have greater intentions to buy a product after learning that it is used by a low- versus a high-status person. In sum, we expect that the observation of a low-status product user would elicit a CDSER process, wherein the observer evaluates his relative standing on the focal trait. Based on the comparison, the observer *(a)* infers that his relative standing is lower than expected, and consequently *(b)* attempts to restore it by purchasing the target product.

Linking CDSER to the Low Status User Effect

If the driving mechanism underlying the low status user effect is CDSER, then the effect should be sensitive to two well established moderators of social comparison processes. First,

social comparison processes affect the individual only when the domain of comparison is considered important or self-relevant (Lockwood 1997; Tesser 1988). Therefore:

H1: The low status user effect is moderated by the importance of the focal trait to the observer. A high status observer who considers (does not consider) the focal trait important will (not) have greater intentions to buy a brand after learning about a low-status versus a high-status user.

Second, social comparison processes take place mainly when the comparer is unconfident about his standing on the compared trait (Buunk et al. 1990; Festinger 1954; Morse and Gergen 1970). Therefore:

H2: The low status user effect is moderated by the observer's confidence about his relative standing on the focal trait. An unconfident (a confident) observer will (not) have greater intentions to buy a brand after learning about a low-status versus a high-status user.

The Interplay between CDSER and Identification Influence

If a low status user can evoke two processes – identification and CDSER influence, when will each process prevail? We propose that the type of influence that a user will exert depends on the used product. Whereas some products and brands (e.g., Apple, Jaguar) are strongly associated with a focal trait (creativity, success), others are not (e.g., Dell, Ford). We expect low status users to exert CDSER influence when the brand is unambiguously associated with a focal trait; otherwise we expect identification influence. Next we elaborate on this proposition.

By default, we expect an unambiguous focal trait to trigger CDSER influence. Social

comparisons are natural, ongoing (Wheeler and Miyake 1992) and arise automatically (Gilbert et al. 1995; Stapel and Blanton 2004) and unexpectedly (Alicke 2000), when cues in the environment prime the domain and the standard of comparison. When another consumer uses a product with an unambiguous focal trait, both requirements for social comparison are met. The observed user provides a standard of comparison, and the unambiguous focal trait primes the comparison domain, so a social comparison process should occur. In contrast, when the focal trait is ambiguous, CDSER influence cannot take place because a comparison domain – the basis of comparison - is missing; a brand without a clear focal trait does not prime any human trait on which one might evaluate his relative standing. Also, the ambiguity of the focal trait and the brand increases the observer's need for, and hence sensitivity to information about other users. In the absence of any other information about the brand, the observer will utilize cues about brand-users to judge the brand and base his purchase decision on identification influence. In sum:

H3: The low status user effect is moderated by the observer's perceptions of the brand's focal trait. When the focal trait is unambiguous (ambiguous), the observer will have greater (lower) intentions to buy a brand after learning about a low-status versus a high-status user.

Next, we report four studies that test our hypotheses. Study 1 demonstrates that the low status user effect can sometimes occur. Studies 2 and 3 test the proposition that the effect is driven by a social comparison process, and is therefore sensitive to two classic moderators of social comparison processes. Studies 2 and 3 also test the proposed psychological process through direct measurement of self affect and perceived relative standing on the focal trait. Finally, study 4 tests the moderating role of the ambiguity of focal trait on the effect.

EXPERIMENTS

Our studies were designed to avoid a common bias in social comparison research. Specifically, unfavorable comparisons may affect perceptions of closeness and similarity to the comparison target (Alicke 2000; Tesser 1988; Tesser, Millar, and Moore 1988) and/or of the comparison target's characteristics (Alicke et al. 1997). Thus measurement of source perceptions could yield biased source manipulation checks. To avoid this, we base our source manipulations on pretests that establish the *a priori* perceptions of the observed users (see the web appendix for details).

Study 1: Demonstrating the Low Status User Effect

Can observing a low status person using a product ever increase intentions to buy that product? The purpose of study 1 is to demonstrate that the low status user effect can occur. We manipulate the SES of the observed user and measure the observers' intentions to buy a target product associated with sophistication.

Method

Participants and design. Fifty five students in a Northeastern university participated in this study in exchange for course credit and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (source status: high vs. low).

Procedure. Participants read a description of an apparel brand–"ABC"-that features well

designed casual clothes, and whose typical consumer was portrayed as highly sophisticated. Next they read two online reviews about the brand's T-shirt. After this, participants rated their buying intentions towards ABC T-shirts, indicated how relevant the T-shirt category is for them, and reported their average annual spending in the category. Then they rated the reliability and helpfulness of the consumer reviews about the T-shirts. Finally, participants responded to a suspicion probe, answered demographic questions, and were thanked and debriefed.

Independent Variable and Covariates

Source status. We manipulated source status via the consumer review section. Each questionnaire included two positive reviews about ABC T-shirts. The first review neither changed between conditions nor disclosed any information about the writer (i.e., the user). For the second review (see appendix A), in the *low (high)* status condition the writer was *a grocery packer (a college student)*. A pretest (see web appendix) confirmed that the grocery packer was perceived to have a lower SES status and evoked less identification than the college student. The content of the review (i.e., the text pertaining to the T-shirt) was the same in both conditions.

Category relevance. Participants indicated their agreement (1= Strongly disagree, 7= Strongly agree) with the statements "T-shirts are a very important product category to me" and "T-shirts matter to me a lot." The two items ($r = .95$, $p < .01$) were averaged into a category relevance score. We also measured how much participants typically spend in the T-shirt category and how helpful was each review. The two experimental groups did not vary on category spending and review ratings so these covariates are not discussed any further.

Dependent Variable

Purchase intentions. Participants indicated how likely (1= Not at all, 7= Very) they were to purchase an "ABC" T-shirt in the next month and in the next three months. The two items (r = .90, $p < .01$) were averaged to form a purchase intentions score.

Results and Discussion

Despite random assignment to conditions, participants in the two experimental groups differed in their category relevance scores; the average score was higher for the high- (M = 4.54) than for the low-status group (M = 3.69; $t(50.45) = -1.97$, p = .05). We therefore include category relevance as a covariate in the analysis of factors that influence intentions. A one-way ANOVA (source status: high vs. low) with category relevance as a covariate ($F(1, 52) = 3.83$, p = .06) on purchase intentions revealed a significant difference between the groups. Those who read the review by a low status consumer had greater purchase intentions (M = 4.66, SE= .34) than those who read the review by a high status consumer (M = 3.72, SE= .33; $F(1, 52) = 3.88$, p = .05.)

These results show that a low status user can increase an observer's purchase intentions. Those who learned about a low-, rather than a high status user were more likely to buy a sophisticated apparel product. This result diverges from classic findings on identification, as pretest participants reported greater identification with the high- than with the low status user.

We also replicated study 1 using a different product category with a different focal trait. In another study we measured students' attitudes and buying intentions towards an innovative MP3 player after learning about either a low status (grocery packer) or a high status (brand

manager) user. We found that participants in the low status condition were more surprised by the purchase of the observed user and were more interested in the target product than those in the high status condition. However, the source status manipulation did not affect product attitudes. This finding is consistent with our suggested psychological process, which does not involve changes in the observer's perception of the product, but in his psychological need for that product to remedy a threatened self image. Since we replicated this pattern in the subsequent studies where we measured both intentions and attitudes, for the rest of the paper we report only the source status effect on buying intentions but not the null effect on attitudes.

Together, these studies demonstrate the low status user effect. Their findings do not adhere to the predictions of identification principle, and thus support a distinct type of influence. Next, we seek to test the psychological mechanisms that potentially underlie this influence.

Study 2: The Moderating Role of the Focal Trait's Importance to the Observer

According to our theory, learning that a low status person owns a target product may elicit a social comparison process wherein the observer concludes that his relative standing on the focal trait is lower than previously thought. The outcomes of this self evaluation process may evoke negative feelings, and as a result motivate consumption of products that symbolize the focal trait. In study 2, we seek support for this theory in two different ways. First, we examine whether observing a low status user elicits the assumed negative emotional reaction. We do so by measuring self affect following the source status manipulation. We expect participants who learn about the low status user to feel worse about themselves than participants who learn about the high status user. Second, we examine whether the impact of source status on self affect and

purchase intentions depends on a classic moderator of social comparison processes, namely the importance of the focal trait to the observer (Salovey and Rodin 1984; Tesser 1988). We expect a low status user to exert a negative effect on self affect and a positive effect on buying intentions, but only when the observer considers the focal trait important (H1).

Another goal of this study is to examine a wider range of outcomes that may occur with influence via CDSER. Thus far we have shown that a low status user can increase purchase intentions towards the observed brand. However, if indeed this outcome is driven by the observer's attempt to restore self affect, than any product that symbolizes the focal trait should become more desired. To test this, in addition to measuring purchase intentions for the target brand, we also measure purchase intentions towards other brands in the same product category.

Method

Participants. One hundred and twenty two participants (M_{age} = 37.38; 86 females) from an online panel completed the survey in exchange for entry into a $100 lottery. To ensure that the final sample did not include low SES individuals, we included only participants whose reported SES *or* education level were high. Participants described their SES as "lower," "lower-middle," "middle," "upper-middle," or "upper," and indicated the highest level of education they have achieved. We included participants who met one of two conditions: (1) their education level was a 4-year college degree or higher, or (2) their reported SES was middle or higher. This resulted in a sample of 99 participants (M_{age} = 37.06; 70 females). We then excluded participants with prior knowledge about the target product (although their inclusion did not change the key results). The final sample consisted of 77 respondents (M_{age} = 39.38; 61 females).

Design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (source status: high vs. low). The second independent variable - importance of the focal trait - was measured.

Procedure. Participants first answered the focal trait importance scale questions. Then they read a short description and saw an image of the target technological product - "The Powermat" - an electronic surface that enables simultaneous wireless charging of multiple technological products. A pretest (see web appendix) indicated that Powermat users were perceived to be technologically innovative and from a high socioeconomic status. Next participants read two reviews about the target product, reported their self affect, and indicated their purchase intentions towards the Powermat brand and towards the wireless charging solutions category. Finally, participants responded to a suspicion probe, answered the demographic questions, and were thanked and debriefed.

Independent Variables

Source status. We manipulated the source's status via the consumer review section. Each survey included two positive reviews about the Powermat (see appendix B). For the first review, in the *low status* condition the writer of the review (i.e., the user) was a security guard, while in the *high status* condition the writer was an architect. A photograph of the user was also included. We used the same model for the photograph in both conditions and manipulated SES only through clothing and descriptive labels. A pretest (see web appendix) indicated that the security guard evoked less identification and was perceived to be less technologically innovative and of lower SES than the architect. The second review utilized a generic image of an anonymous person and did not disclose any information about the occupation or the SES of the writer. The

content of the reviews (i.e., the text pertaining to the product) was the same for both conditions.

Focal trait importance. Participants indicated their agreement (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) with six statements adjusted from the Domain Specific Innovativeness scale (Goldsmith and Hofacker 1991) and the Innate Innovativeness scale (Martínez and Montaner 2006): “It is important for me to try new and different technological products," "Compared to my friends, I own many technological products," "It is important for me to keep up with contemporary technologies," "It is important for me to be among the first people to own new technological products," "It is important for me to be able to make recommendations to others about technological products,” and "When I see a technological product somewhat different from the usual, it is important for me to check it out." The items (α = .93) were averaged into an innovativeness importance score.

Dependent Variables

Purchase intentions towards the brand and category. Participants indicated how likely (1= Not at all, 7= Very) they were to purchase a Powermat in the next three months and in the next year. The two items (r = .87, p < .01) were averaged to form a brand purchase intentions score. Participants also received a short explanation about the difference between the Powermat brand and the wireless charging solutions category, which read "The wireless charging solutions category is rapidly growing and Powermat competes with other brands of similar qualities and price ranges. The next questions relate to the general wireless charging solutions *category*, and not to the Powermat brand." Then participants indicated how likely (1= Not at all, 7= Very) they were to purchase any wireless charging solution in the next three months and in the next year.

These two items (r = .88, p < .01) were averaged into a category purchase intentions score.

Self affect. The items in this scale were selected to tap into a well defined set of emotions that are most likely to arise from an unfavorable comparison. Participants indicated how they felt about themselves using 10-point bipolar scales anchored at "Bad about myself"/"Good about myself," "Not at all confident"/"Very confident," "Inferior to others"/"Superior to others," and "Distressed"/"Content." The four items were averaged into a self-affect score (α = .90).

Results

Self affect. To examine the moderating effect of the importance of the focal trait (i.e., technological innovativeness) on the relationship between source status and self affect, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The first step model included the effect of source status on self affect. In the second step we entered the focal trait importance score. In the final step, an interaction variable computed as focal trait importance times source status was entered to test for its effect over and above the effects of the two variables separately. The regression analysis revealed a marginally significant source effect (1st step: R^2 = .04, p = .07; 3rd step: ß = .71, p = .08), suggesting that participants in the low status condition experienced more negative self affect than those in the high status condition. We also obtained a significant focal trait importance effect (2nd step: ΔR^2 = .05, p = .05; 3rd step: ß = .39, p < .04), suggesting that self affect was more positive among those who assigned high importance to technological innovativeness. In contrast to our expectation, the interaction between source status and focal trait importance did not have a significant effect on self affect (3rd step: ΔR^2 = .01, ß = -.26, p = .33). We will return to this finding and elaborate on it in the discussion.

Purchase intentions towards the brand and category. The same regression analysis was applied to purchase intentions towards the brand. We did not obtain a significant source status effect (1st step: R^2 = .00, p = 1.00; 3rd step: ß = -.55, p = .87), but we obtained a focal trait importance effect (2nd step: ΔR^2 = .27, p < .01; 3rd step: ß = .90, p < .01) and a source status by focal trait importance interaction effect (3rd step: ΔR^2 = .06, ß = -.59, p = .01) consistent with H1. Specifically, as focal trait importance increased, the effect of the low status source on purchase intentions became more positive. The results of this analysis are shown in table 1 and the pattern of the predicted means based on the regression model appears in figure 1.

Insert table 1 and figure 1 about here

The same analysis was applied to purchase intentions towards the category and confirmed that the influence via CDSER extends beyond brand intentions. Source status alone was not significant (1st step: R^2 = .01, p = .54; 3rd step: ß = .21, p = .56). Mirroring the findings at the brand level, category purchase intentions were significantly effected in the same manner by focal trait importance (2nd step: ΔR^2 = .28, p < .01; 3rd step: ß = .96, p < .01) and by the interaction between source status and focal trait importance (3rd step: ΔR^2 = .07, ß = -.63, p = .01).

Discussion

Study 2 provides the first link between the low status user effect and a social comparison mechanism. Supporting hypothesis 1, participants for whom the focal trait was important had higher purchase likelihood following exposure to the low- versus the high status user. In contrast, participants for whom the focal trait was less important did not demonstrate an increase in

purchase intent following exposure to the low status user. Importantly, the interactive effect of user status and focal trait importance on purchase intentions was obtained both at the target brand and at the category level. This delineates another distinction between identification and CDSER influence. Under identification influence, the goal is to become associated with and be like the observed user; the observer would want to purchase the exact same brand as the user, and not just any brand in that same category. In contrast, under CDSER influence the observer becomes interested in all brands in the target category as long as they symbolize the focal trait.

This study also tested the impact of user status on self affect. We expected a low status user to negatively influence self affect, but only when the focal trait is considered important. Observers, for whom the focal trait is not important, were not expected to engage in the comparative process or to draw painful inferences about their relative standing on the focal trait. Still, we found that exposure to the low status user worsened self affect, independently of focal trait importance. It is not clear why those, for whom the focal trait was *not* important, reacted negatively to the low status user. One likely explanation is that individuals, who previously did not consider the focal trait important, started to doubt their priorities and preferences when they realized that a low status person found the focal trait important. Social comparison theories (Festinger 1954; Goethals and Darley 1977; Suls 2000) suggest that people use information about others' preferences to assess the validity of their personal preferences and to answer questions such as "should I like or care about *X*?" In sum, low importance participants might have started to doubt their attitude toward the focal trait ("maybe I should care more about innovativeness"). Possibly, as a result, these participants felt worse about themselves.

Study 3: The Role of Confidence in the Focal Trait

Study 3 was primarily designed to further test the proposition that social comparison drives the low status user effect. Prior research has shown that individuals become more interested in social comparison information (Buunk, Schaufeli, and Ybema 1994) and are more sensitive to comparison outcomes (Buunk et al. 1990) when they lack confidence in their relative standing in the comparison domain. We therefore expect the low status user effect to be greater for those who lack confidence about their standing on the focal trait (H2).

In addition, study 3 seeks more direct evidence of a CDSER process by measuring perceptions of relative standing following exposure to the user status manipulation. We expect exposure to a low status user to lower the observer's perceptions of his relative standing on the focal trait, but only when the observer lacks confidence about his relative standing on the focal trait. The product category used in this study is Wi-Fi detectors and the focal trait (based on a pretest that appears in the web appendix) is technological innovativeness.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and thirteen female undergraduate students in a northeastern university participated in a computer study in exchange for course credit. We recruited only women to this study because in a pretest, women, but not men, perceived the product to be associated with the focal trait. In addition, our confidence manipulation was less effective among men than among women. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (source status: high vs. low) X 2 (focal trait confidence: high vs. low) between subjects design.

Procedure. We first measured participants' self perceptions of their technological

innovativeness. Next participants completed a “technology survey” which conveyed the confidence manipulation. Participants were then told about a second alleged purpose of the survey: to understand how college students utilize other consumers’ opinions about technological products. Participants read a short explanation about Wi-Fi detectors. A focal trait pretest (see web appendix) indicated that women perceived the Wi-Fi detector users as technologically innovative. Next participants read a testimonial card which was ostensibly written by a Wi-Fi detector user either from a high or a low SES. After rating the testimonial, participants indicated their buying intentions and willingness to pay (WTP) for the Wi-Fi detector. Next, participants rated their relative standing on technological innovativeness, completed a suspicion probe, and answered a few demographic questions.

Independent Variables and Covariates

A priori self perception of technological innovativeness. Participants indicated their agreement (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) with ten statements about their technological innovativeness (e.g., “In general, I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new high-tech product when it appears”) and their interest in technological products (e.g., “I have a strong interest in high-tech products”). These ratings were averaged into a single score (α= .93).

Focal trait confidence. Confidence may be defined, measured, and manipulated in different ways. In the current context the construct refers both to self confidence and to judgmental confidence. Self confidence is captured by one's rating of his standing on the focal trait. A higher self rating on the focal trait indicates greater self confidence. Judgmental confidence is the strength of one's judgment of his standing on the focal trait. A stronger belief

that the focal trait judgment is accurate indicates greater judgmental confidence.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (focal trait confidence: low vs. high) in a confidence diminishing (bolstering) "tech survey." The survey allegedly measured personal knowledge about, and rate of adoption of high tech products. In the low (high) confidence condition the knowledge questions were difficult (easy) and the adoption questions led participants to doubt their technological innovativeness (assured participants about their level of technological innovativeness). A more detailed description of the tech survey appears in the web appendix. Since confidence in the compared domain may, like perceptions of the comparison target, change following a social comparison process (Larrick, Burson, and Soll 2007; Lin and Kulik 2002), we pretested this focal trait confidence manipulation using a separate sample than that used for the main study (see web appendix).

Source status. Participants read a testimonial card, ostensibly written by a Wi-Fi detector user. The card included the consumer's first name, occupation, and opinion about the product. A photo of the consumer was not presented. Based on a pretest (see web appendix), participants in the *low (high) status condition* learned that the user is a grocery-packer (architect).

Dependent Variables

Purchase intentions were measured by having participants indicate how likely (1=Not at all, 7=Very) they were to purchase a Wi-Fi detector within a year. Participants also indicated their *willingness to pay* (the maximum amount in US dollars) for a Wi-Fi detector. Finally we measured *relative standing on the focal trait* by having participants indicate who they thought is more tech savvy (1=Definitely the average American, 9=Definitely me).

Results

A priori self perception of technological innovativeness. Unexpectedly, a one way ANOVA with experiment condition as a 4-level factor revealed an a priori difference in participants' perceptions of their technological innovativeness ($F(3, 109) = 2.48$, $p = .07$). Since the DV of relative standing was directly affected by it, we treat a priori self perception as a covariate when analyzing the effect of source status and focal trait confidence on participants' ratings of their relative standing. Other DVs were not affected by this measure.

Purchase intentions. A 2 (source status) by 2 (focal trait confidence) ANOVA on purchase intentions revealed a significant interaction between source status and focal trait confidence ($F(1, 109) = 4.57$, $p = .04$). As shown in figure 2, participants in the high confidence condition were not influenced by source status ($M_{low} = 2.57$, $M_{high} = 2.97$; $F(1, 109) = .86$, $p = .36$). As expected, low confidence participants had higher intentions to buy the Wi-Fi detector when they learned that it was previously purchased by the low status versus the high status user ($M_{low} = 3.48$, $M_{high} = 2.61$; $F(1, 109) = 4.52$, $p = .04$). The main effects of source status and focal trait confidence were not significant (both F's < 1).

Insert figure 2 about here

Willingness to pay. A 2 (source status) by 2 (focal trait confidence) ANOVA on WTP revealed a significant interaction between source status and focal trait confidence ($F(1, 104) = 6.96$, $p = .01$). Participants in the high confidence condition were not influenced by source status ($M_{low} = 26.91$, $M_{high} = 35.25$; $F(1, 104) = 2.16$, $p = .14$). Conversely, low confidence participants

were willing to pay a higher price when they learned that the product was previously purchased by the low status than by the high status user (M_{low} = 43.63, M_{high} = 31.13; $F(1, 104) = 5.17$, p = .03). The main effects of source status ($F(1, 104) = .28$, p = .60) and focal trait confidence ($F(1, 104) = 2.54$, p = .11) were not significant . We conducted the same analysis using a log transformation of WTP and obtained a similar and statistically significant pattern of results.

Relative standing on the focal trait. We conducted a 2 (source status) by 2 (focal trait confidence) ANOVA with prior self perception of technological innovativeness as a covariate ($F(1, 108) = 3.37$, p = .07) on the measure of relative standing. The main effects of source status ($F(1, 108) = .01$, p = .91) and focal trait confidence ($F(1, 109) = 1.70$, p = .20) were not significant. Importantly, the source status by confidence interaction was significant ($F(1, 108) = 6.87$, p = .01). Low confidence participants rated their relative standing on the focal trait lower after learning about a low- versus a high status user (M_{low} = 5.55, M_{high} = 6.35; $F(1, 108) = 3.88$, p = .05), while high confidence participants were not significantly affected by the source status manipulation (M_{low} = 6.70, M_{high} = 5.97; $F(1, 108) = 2.95$, p = .09).

Discussion

Consistent with H2 and the proposed CDSER mechanism, participants with low confidence in their focal trait standing had greater intentions to buy, and greater WTP for the target product following exposure to the low than the high status user. Participants with high confidence in their focal trait standing were not affected by user status.

The relative standing results provide converging evidence favoring a CDSER process. Low confidence participants, whom we expected to be sensitive to comparison information, rated

their relative standing on the focal trait lower after observing a low- rather than a high status user. High confidence participants were unaffected by source status.

Study 4: The Interplay between CDSER and Identification Influence

Studies 1-3 provided compelling evidence supporting the proposed CDSER influence. Yet past research has documented multiple manifestations of identification influence. We suggest that the interplay between the two influences depends on the product and its focal trait (H3). A product that is associated with an unambiguous focal trait would provide a clear comparison domain and prompt CDSER influence. On the other hand, a non-symbolic product would prompt an identification process. Study 4 tests this proposition.

As in study 1, participants indicated their buying intentions towards an apparel brand after learning about a low or a high status user of that brand. However, in the current study the typical brand consumer was either unambiguously described as sophisticated or was not discussed – leaving the focal trait ambiguous. We predicted that when the focal trait is ambiguous, identification influence will manifest; that is, participants will have greater buying intentions when they observe a high-status versus a low-status user. In contrast, we expected a CDSER influence when the focal trait-sophistication-was unambiguous; the low status, rather than the high status user would lead to greater buying intentions.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and sixty six undergraduate students (102 women) at a Northeastern University participated in this study in exchange for course credit or monetary

compensation. They were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (source status: high vs. low) by 2 (focal trait: ambiguous vs. unambiguous) between subjects design.

Procedure. The procedure was similar to that of study 1: participants learned about a premium apparel brand, responded to a focal trait manipulation check, read two reviews about the brand's T-shirts and provided their ratings on the dependent measures. The key difference between the current study and study 1 lies in the focal trait manipulation described below.

Independent Variables

Focal trait. The description of the apparel brand conveyed information about the marketing strategy of the brand. Participants in the *unambiguous* (*ambiguous)* focal trait condition learned that the company successfully targets sophisticated customers (successfully meets its growth goals and increases the number of its stores).

Source status was manipulated in the same way as in study 1. The *low status* user was represented by a grocery packer while the *high status* user was represented by a college student.

Dependent Variable and Manipulation Check

Purchase intentions. Participants indicated how likely (1= Not at all, 7= Very) they were to purchase an "ABC" T-shirt in the next month and in the next three months. The two items (r = .86, $p < .01$) were averaged to form a purchase intentions score.

Focal trait manipulation check. Participants rated how sophisticated (1=Not sophisticated, 9=Sophisticated), stylish (1=Not stylish, 9=Stylish) and trendy (1=Trendy, 9=Not-

trendy) the typical user of the apparel brand is. These items ($\alpha = .70$) were averaged into a single *sophistication* score. In addition participants rated the brand user on economic wealth (1=Poor, 9=Rich) and education (1=Uneducated, 9=Educated).

Results

Focal trait manipulation check. A 2 (source status: high vs. low) X 2 (focal trait: ambiguous vs. unambiguous) ANOVA on sophistication yielded a main effect of focal trait ($F(1, 161) = 9.44$, $p < .01$). The brand user was rated as more sophisticated by participants in the unambiguous focal trait condition ($M = 5.77$, $SE = .14$) than by their counterparts in the ambiguous condition ($M = 4.13$, $SE = .16$), suggesting that the manipulation was successful. The source status effect and the source by focal trait interaction were not significant (both F's < 1).

A similar analysis on economic wealth showed that participants in the unambiguous focal trait condition expected the brand user to be wealthier than did those in the ambiguous focal trait condition ($M_{unamb} = 6.20$, $M_{amb} = 5.55$; $F(1, 161) = 13.30$, $p < .01$). The main effects of source status ($F(1, 161) = 1.96$, $p = .16$) and the interaction effect ($F < 1$) were not significant. Participants in all conditions rated the user as moderately educated and their ratings did not differ significantly ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.33$; all $F(1, 162)$'s < 1.1). In sum, the focal trait manipulation was successful: the user in the unambiguous focal trait condition was expected to be more sophisticated and of higher SES than in the ambiguous focal trait condition.

Purchase intentions. A 2 (source status: high vs. low) X 2 (focal trait: ambiguous vs. unambiguous) ANOVA on purchase intentions revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 162) = 6.65$, $p = .01$). The main effects of source status and focal trait were not significant (both

F's < 1). As shown in figure 3, when the focal trait was ambiguous, participants exhibited classic identification influence; those who learned about a low status user had lower purchase intentions than those who learned about a high status user (M_{low} = 3.57, M_{high} = 4.22; $F(1,162) = 2.91$, p = .09). In contrast, when the focal trait was unambiguous, we obtained the low status user effect; the low status user prompted greater purchase intentions than the high status user (M_{low} = 4.39, M_{high} = 3.75; $F(1, 162) = 3.89$, p = .05).

Insert figure 3 about here

Discussion

Study 4 shows that the same observed user can exert either a CDSER or an identification influence, depending on the target product and the focal trait. When the product did not symbolize any particular focal trait, participants demonstrated the classic identification influence; compared to those in the high status condition, those in the low status condition had lower intentions to buy the target brand. Conversely, when the product unambiguously symbolized a desirable focal trait, participants demonstrated a CDSER effect; the observation of a low status user resulted in greater buying intentions than the observation of a high status user.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current paper outlined a new type of social influence process, namely influence via comparison driven self evaluation and restoration (CDSER). Our key argument is that influence via CDSER is qualitatively different from identification influence. To highlight the differences

between identification and CDSER influence, we focused our investigation on a special case where the outcomes of the two processes diverge – the case of the low status user. If identification influence takes place, a high SES consumer would emulate the choice of a high status and not of a low status person. But if the opposite outcome is observed, one can infer that a different psychological process has come into play.

Four studies demonstrate that a low status user can positively affect an observer's intentions to purchase a target product. The first study demonstrates that the low status user effect can occur. Supporting H1 and H2, we show that the low status user effect depends on two classic moderators of social comparison processes: the importance of the focal trait to the observer (study 2) and the observer's confidence in his standing on the focal trait (study 3). Studies 2 and 3 also demonstrate the negative effect that the low status user has on self affect and on perceptions of relative standing. Supporting H3, we find that the low status user effect manifests only when the product unambiguously symbolizes a desirable focal trait (study 4).

The socio-economic profile of our samples was deliberately chosen to rule out the possibility that the findings could be attributed to identification influence. The samples consisted mostly of individuals from high SES – students in a highly competitive private university or non-students with high levels of education or income. We posited (and confirmed in our pretests) that observers from high SES do not want to be associated with a low status consumer. Thus, the positive effect of the low status user on intentions cannot be attributed to identification influence.

We do not claim that influence via CDSER is more or less widespread than influence via identification. Instead, we systematically outline the CDSER influence process, provide preliminary insights into the circumstances favoring its manifestation, and compare it to identification influence. The discussion that follows is organized around five key questions.

First, we explain *why* CDSER influence arises and *what* its likely outcomes are. Next, we elaborate on *who* is most susceptible to CDSER influence: what are the characteristics and dispositions that make an observer susceptible to CDSER influence? The mirror question - *whom* - addresses the characteristics of an effective CDSER influence source. Finally, we explain *which* types of products are likely to instigate the CDSER influence.

Why Does Influence via CDSER Arise?

We propose that two psychological motives drive CDSER influence: self evaluation (Festinger 1954; Tesser 1988; Trope 1986) and the need to maintain a certain self image (Dunning 2007; Gao et al. 2009). Both forces may act spontaneously and in response to information about the purchases of other people. As shown in study 3, in response to information about the purchase of another person, an observer reevaluates his relative standing on the focal trait. Furthermore, this re-evaluation threatens the observer's self image and results in negative self affect (study 2). Likely, the unexpected purchase by a low status person implies that the focal trait is more common in the population than before; and hence the observer's relative standing on it is lower than he realized. This surprising notion shakes the observer's self image and calls for a self-view restoring remedy. One such remedy is the purchase of a product that symbolizes the desired trait (Gao et al. 2009) – either the same product that was purchased by the low status user or another product from the same category (van de Ven et al. 2011). Ironically, the observer is influenced by another consumer, with whom he does not identify.

The underlying mechanism driving CDSER influence is different than the one driving identification influence. Under identification, people form an impression about the source and

ask themselves whether they identify with him or her; in contrast, under CDSER people form an impression about the source and ask themselves how they compare to others with respect to the focal trait. Likewise – the outcome, that is the change in purchase intentions, reflects different motives under identification and CDSER influence. Under identification, the change in purchase intentions reflects a desire to identify with or dissociate from another person; however, under CDSER, it reflects an attempt to remedy a threatened self view.

The distinction between identification and CDSER influences is reminiscent of the literature on contrast and assimilation effects in social judgments (Dijksterhuis et al. 1998; Stapel, Koomen, and van der Pligt 1996; Stapel and Winkielman 1998). A contrast effect, in which judgment of a target is displaced away from a referent person, takes place when the referent serves as a *comparison* standard. Assimilation, in which judgment of a target is displaced toward the referent, takes place when the referent serves as a *frame for interpretation*. On the face of it, identification processes sound like assimilation, whereas CDSER sounds like contrast. Moreover, the literature on contrast and assimilation provides evidence that is consistent with our findings. For example, Stapel, Koomen, and van der Pligt (1996) find that activation of an actor-trait link, wherein a concrete exemplar and a specific trait are primed, leads to contrast in social judgments; conversely, activation of an abstract trait or a stereotype leads to assimilation. We also find that CDSER takes place only when both an unambiguous focal trait (specific trait) is activated and a concrete product user (exemplar) is observed (study 4).

However, we do not think that our findings about identification (study 4) should be interpreted as evidence of assimilation. Assimilation takes place when a specific trait is activated in the absence of a concrete exemplar. Yet, our experimental protocols always involve concrete exemplars – the observed users. If anything is missing in our experiments (study 4), it is a focal

trait. Not surprisingly, the contrast-assimilation literature does not speak to cases wherein a specific trait is absent. To the contrary, its underlying assumption is that both contrast and assimilation relate to a known trait. Both are outcomes of a *comparative* judgment, wherein an object is judged to be dissimilar or similar to another object (Mussweiler 2003) on a known dimension. In sum, we think that identification does not involve a comparative judgment and should not be interpreted using the framework of the contrast-assimilation literature.

What Are The Consequences of Influence via CDSER?

We examined the effect of CDSER influence on purchase intentions. In all studies we found that observing a low status user can increase the purchase intentions towards the target brand, and in study 2, we show that the effect extends to other products in the category. This delineates another difference between CDSER and identification influence. Under identification the observer's interest is to become as similar as possible to the source; therefore, the observer desires the exact same brand that the source is using. However, under CDSER the observer's goal is to remedy a threatened self image by buying a product that symbolizes the focal trait. For that purpose, the specific brand the source is using is equivalent to any other brand in the category.

Since our focus was on shifts in purchase intentions, we might have erroneously led the reader to believe that CDSER influence must leave its traces in buying intentions. Yet buying a product is just one means to restore a shaken self image. A threatened observer may restore his self image by seeking a compliment or additional information about the possessions of others.

Who Is Most Susceptible to CDSER Influence?

Our research identifies several variables that affect the observer's susceptibility to CDSER influence. First, some deficit in self confidence is necessary to instigate a self evaluation process (Kruglanski and Mayseless 1990). In study 3, low confidence participants were more likely to demonstrate the low status user effect than high confidence participants. In that study we manipulated confidence using an easy or difficult quiz about the focal trait. However, confidence in the focal trait may depend on chronic characteristics of the observer such as general self esteem (Rosenberg 1965) or self certainty (Baumgardner 1990; Morse and Gergen 1970). Focal trait confidence may also depend on the observer's ownership status. An owner of a similar or identical target product should feel less threatened when observing a low status user than an observer who only considers the product. Thus an owner is less likely to experience CDSER influence than a non-owning observer.

Second, a person is more likely to engage in self evaluation when the evaluated domain is considered important or self-relevant (Mettee and Smith 1977; Salovey and Rodin 1984; Tesser 1988). Study 2 shows that only participants who considered the focal trait important exhibit the low status user effect, suggesting that only these participants were influenced via CDSER.

Third, past research has shown that certain individuals are more inclined to engage in social comparisons than others (Gibbons and Buunk 1999; Lennox and Wolfe 1984). It stands to reason that observers with high social comparison orientation (Gibbons and Buunk 1999) will be more susceptible to CDSER influence, but future research is needed to address this possibility.

By *Whom* Are Observers Most Likely to Be Influenced?

The current research focuses on the CDSER influence that users from low SES may exert. However, we believe that CDSER influence may be prompted by other types of users. In sharp contrast to the low status user effect, a similar process may be at work when the observed user is of high SES, yet the focal trait is associated with low status. For example, usage of certain working tools is associated with "handiness" and possibly with low SES. According to our theoretical framework, a person who considers himself a handyman may feel threatened after seeing an elite, female, Beverly Hills socialite using a certain craftsman tool to fix her sprinkler system; as a result, the person may show greater interest in that tool.

In general, the profile of the effective CDSER source need not be defined by SES. A young boy or an elderly lady using the latest technological gadget, as well as an accountant driving a Harley Davidson, all represent examples of surprising users who may increase our purchase intentions. When the identity of the user is unexpected or implies that the focal trait is more widely disseminated in the population than previously thought, CDSER influence is likely to occur. Thus, we expect the CDSER effect to be more general and extend to other surprising characteristics of the source, beyond the specific case of SES shown herein.

Another source characteristic that may determine the likelihood of CDSER influence is numerosity. Encountering a single surprising brand user should not affect the brand’s image or association with the focal trait (Kunda and Oleson 1997; Matta and Folkes 2005). However, encountering multiple surprising users may result in an updated image of the typical brand user. This reasoning may account for the seeming inconsistency between our findings and those reported by researchers such as Berger and Heath (2008), Escalas and Bettman (2003), and White and Dahl (2006). In these studies, when a product is associated with an out-group or with a dissociative reference group, it becomes less desired. Yet unlike our research, which employs a

single observed user, these studies employed *groups* of users. Possibly, groups of users affect perceptions of the typical brand user and evoke different influence processes – ones that are driven by identification, dissociation, or identity signaling concerns. On the other hand, if the brand image is unambiguous, CDSER influence may take place even when multiple counter-stereotypical users are observed. Under such circumstances, observing multiple counter-stereotypical users may even *increase* the experienced threat, and enhance the CDSER effect. Further research is needed to reconcile these predictions and determine the impact of numerosity.

Finally, CDSER influence should depend on the perceived similarity between the user and the observer. We expect CDSER influence to be stronger when the surprising user is similar (Festinger 1954; Goethals and Darley 1977; Zanna et al. 1975), significant, self-relevant, or close to the observer (Tesser 1988). One should be more readily influenced by her technologically-challenged close friend than by a surprising stranger who is using the latest technological gadget.

Which Types of Products Are Likely to Instigate CDSER Influence?

Our research identifies one product characteristic that determines whether CDSER influence will take place: the existence of a focal trait (Levy 1959). Study 4 demonstrates that when the product is not symbolic of a clear, desirable trait, identification influence manifests. However, for highly symbolic products, one can expect CDSER influence to prevail.

An important question concerns the role of the product conspicuousness in CDSER influence. On a pragmatic level, CDSER influence arises when one *observes* another product user; thus CDSER requires some degree of product conspicuousness. Yet, on a theoretical level, CDSER influence should not depend on product conspicuousness. In contrast to shifts in

purchase intentions that are driven by normative or impression management concerns, the shifts caused by CDSER influence are motivated by a desire to enhance (or stabilize) a private self image. Thus privately consumed products may instigate CDSER influence as well. Future research is needed to enhance our understanding of this issue.

Managerial Implications

Companies go out of their way in attempt to recruit “influentials" for their marketing campaigns: celebrities, good looking, and high status consumers. The current work contributes to practitioners' efforts by identifying a novel, surprising type of "influentials" – consumers from low SES. Like other influencers, low status users will not always be effective, and the current work sheds light on the conditions in which they are likely to exert the desired impact.

At the same time, implementation of our findings may prove to be challenging. If low status users are effective influencers, then firms should direct their marketing efforts at them. However, if low status users become a primary segment of users, the brand's image might become less "glamorous." Future research can help determine how firms should balance targeting low status users and sustaining a positive brand image. Still our findings do suggest an important guideline. Firms should harness low status users to market brands in relatively mature stages of their product lifecycle, when the brand image has been clearly established. As shown in study 4, a non-symbolic brand is more likely to lead to identification than to CDSER influence. Future research should test this guideline and more generally examine whether, when, and how firms should incorporate low status users in their marketing campaigns.

Appendix A

Study 1: Consumer Opinions about ABC's T-shirts

Review 1 (identical across the two conditions)

☆☆☆☆☆ **ABC's short sleeve T-shirts**

Nothing wrong with these t-shirts: soft, correct sizing, outstanding quality. I have washed them several times and there was no shrinkage and they hold their shape well. I love these T-shirts!

Review 2: Low Status Condition

☆☆☆☆☆ **GREAT Shirt**

I like wearing this T-shirt after a long day at work. I'm a grocery packer and my job is physically hard. Every day, when I get home after my 8-hour shift, I like to treat myself with a nice shower and slip into this great 100% cotton shirt. This is not a hip-hop down-to-your-knees shirt. It's well designed and makes you look good. I have it in different colors and several people have already asked me where I got it. The only downside is the price. It's slightly expensive.

Review 2: High Status Condition

☆☆☆☆☆ **GREAT Shirt**

I like wearing this T-shirt after a long day at school and work. My campus and dorms are downtown but my work is in a music studio uptown. So at the end of the day, after all this commuting, I like to treat myself with a nice shower and slip into this great 100% cotton shirt. This is not a hip-hop down-to-your-knees shirt. It's well designed and makes you look good. I have it in different colors and several people have already asked me where I got it. The only downside is the price. It's slightly expensive.

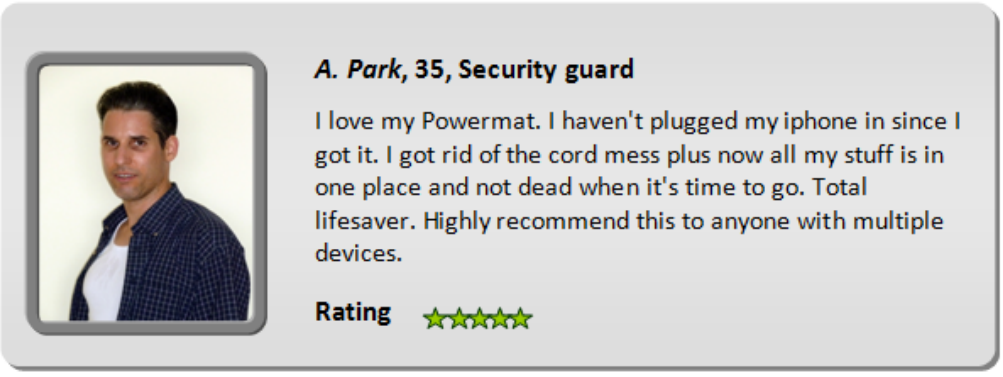
Appendix B

Study 2: Pretest Target Persons

High status condition

Low status condition

Study 2: Main Study Users in The Low Status Condition
(in the high status condition, "A. Park" was the pretested architect)



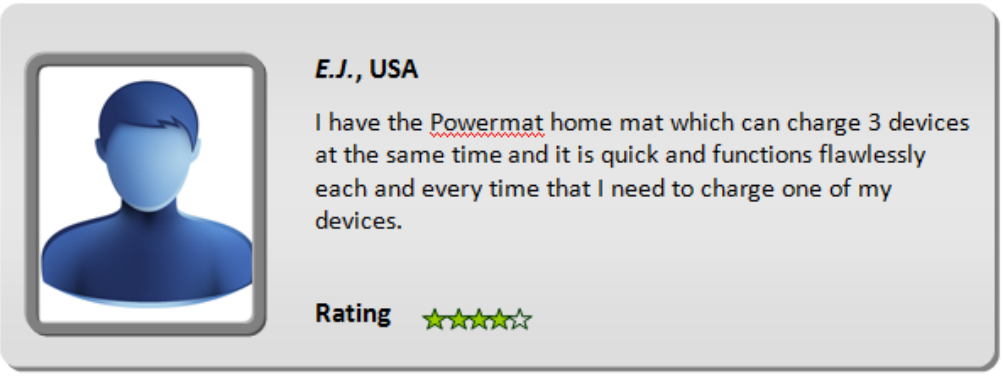


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Table 1: The Moderating Role of Focal Trait Importance (Study 2)

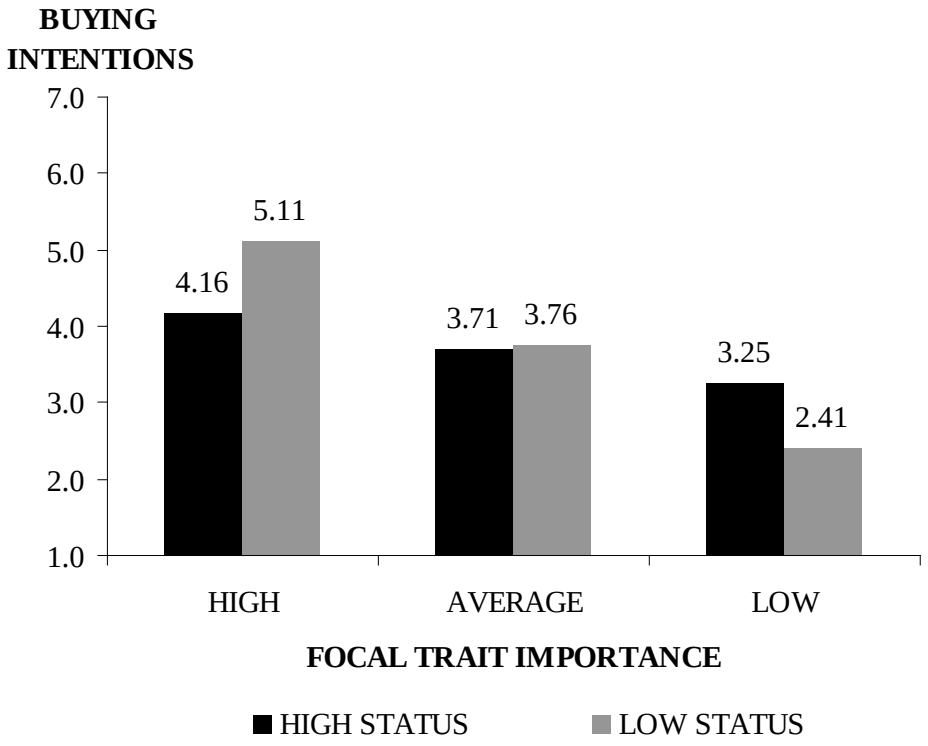
Variable	β (SE)	ΔR^2	*F* change	*P*
Step 1: source status	.00 (.41)	.00	.00	1.00
Step 2: innovativeness importance	.62 (.12)	.27	29.92	< .01
Step 3: interaction between source status and innovativeness importance	-.59 (.23)	.06	6.72	.01

Results of hierarchical multiple regression predicting purchase intentions towards the brand.

[a] Source status was coded 0 and 1 for the low status and high status source, respectively.

[b] Innovativeness importance and the interaction variable were centered.

FIGURE 1: BUYING INTENTIONS AS A FUNCTION OF SOURCE STATUS AND FOCAL TRAIT IMPORTANCE

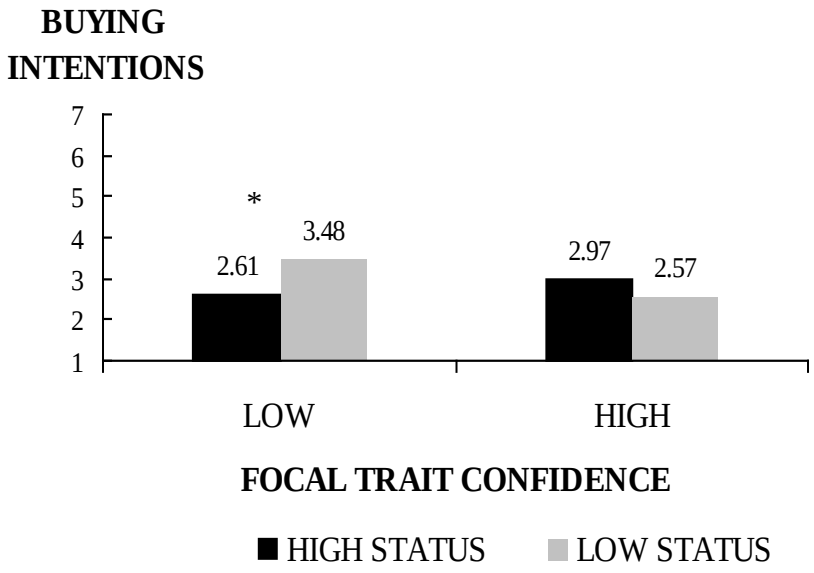


Study 2. Predicted means of buying intentions based on the regression equation

[a] Innovativeness importance was centered.

[b] High and low innovativeness importance were operationalized as one *SD* above and below the mean, respectively.

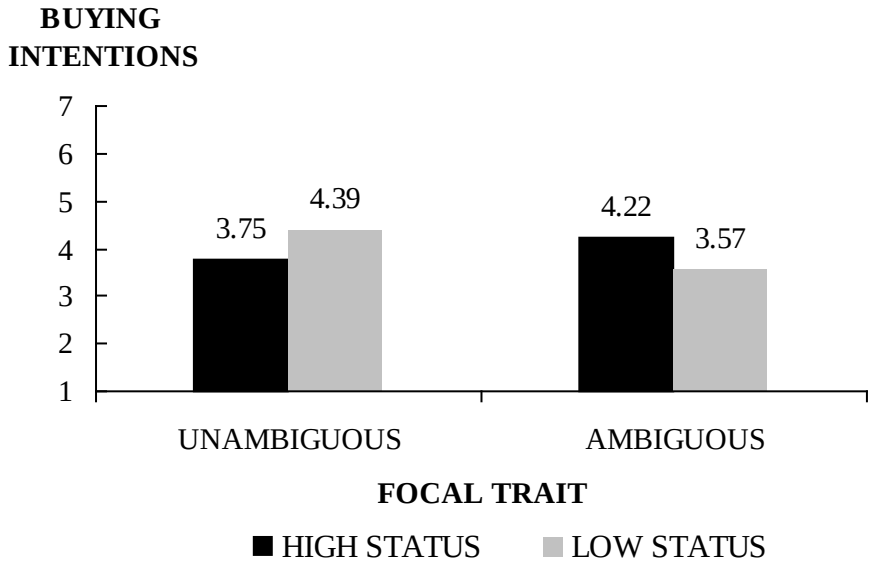
FIGURE 2: THE MODERATING ROLE OF FOCAL TRAIT CONFIDENCE



Buying intentions as a function of source status and focal trait confidence

*p<.05

FIGURE 3: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE COMPARATIVE AND THE IDENTIFICATION INFLUENCE



Buying intentions as a function of source status and focal trait

+p<.1 *p<.05

HEADINGS LIST

Web Appendix for

Influence via Comparison-Driven Self Evaluation and Restoration: The Case of the Low-Status Influencer

By Edith Shalev and Vicki G. Morwitz

The web appendix extends the report on the empirical work in the paper. It details the research protocol and findings of the pretests that tested the effectiveness of the manipulations and stimuli employed in the main studies. In addition, it provides a detailed description of a follow up study that replicated the results of study 1 using different stimuli and a different manipulation.

STUDY 1

Pretest: Source status manipulation

Forty four undergraduates (22 men) from a northeastern university participated in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions (target person: low vs. high status). In the *low* (*high*) *status* condition, the target person was a grocery packer in a supermarket (a college student).

Participants rated the target person on the traits sophistication (the focal trait), socio-economic status, influence potential, trustworthiness, opinion leadership in the apparel category, and identification. All items were measured on 7-point scales (1=Does not describe at all, 7=Describes very well). *Sophistication* was calculated as the mean on "sophisticated," "stylish,"

"chic," "elegant," "polished," and "fashionable" (α = .93). *Socio-economic status* is the mean on "has a high socio-economic status," "has a prestigious occupation," "has high income," "wealthy," "well educated," "successful," "smart," and "intelligent" (α = .98). *Influence potential* is the mean on "charismatic," "leader," "persuasive," and "popular" (α = .88). *Trustworthiness* is the mean on "trustworthy," "sympathetic," and "likeable" (α = .79). *Opinion leadership in the apparel category* is the mean of how informed (1=Poorly informed, 7=Well informed) and trustworthy (1=Not at all, 7=Very) the target person was likely to be about apparel, how likely participants would be to seek the target person's advice (1=Not at all, 7=Very) and how likely the target person would be to provide useful recommendations (1=Not at all, 7=Very) about apparel (α = .91). *Identification* is the mean of the extent to which participants could identify with (1=Not at all, 7=To a great extent), felt similar to (1=Not at all, 7=Very similar), would like to be like (1=Not at all, 7=A great deal), and would be interested in products purchased by (1=Not at all, 7=A great deal) the target person (α = .82).

Participants in the low status condition rated the target person as less sophisticated (M_{low} = 2.05, M_{high} = 4.20; $t(42) = 7.38$, $p < .01$), of lower socio-economic status(M_{low} = 2.11, M_{high} = 3.79; $t(42) = 4.91$, $p < .01$), with lower influence potential (M_{low} = 2.44, M_{high} = 4.22; $t(42) = 5.73$, $p < .01$), less likely to be an opinion leader (M_{low} = 1.95, M_{high} = 4.59; $t(42) = 7.15$, $p < .01$), and less likely to evoke identification (M_{low} = 2.16, M_{high} = 3.09; $t(42) = 2.79$, $p < .01$) than their counterparts in the high status condition. The trustworthiness ratings did not differ significantly between conditions (M_{low} = 3.84, M_{high} = 4.04; $t(42) = .64$, $p = .52$). The pretest confirms that the target persons evoke different impressions with respect to their standing on the focal trait and their socio-economic status. Moreover, the pretest reassures us that the low status person is not likely to evoke greater identification or exert greater social influence than the high status person.

STUDY 1 REPLICATION DESCRIBED IN THE DISCUSSION FOLLOWING STUDY 1

Note. The main study method and results follow the pretest reports.

Pretest: Focal trait

Twenty one participants (16 women) read a description of a new line of MP3 players and then indicated the extent to which certain characteristics described the new MP3 player user (1=Does not fit at all, 7=Fits very well). The characteristics comprised the measure of *socioeconomic status* (α = .94) used in the pretest of study 1 and a new measure of *technological innovativeness*, calculated as the mean on the items: "technologically innovative," "technologically informed," "tech savvy," "buys innovative products frequently," "expert in high technology products," and "experiences with the latest technological products" (α = .90).The results indicated that the MP3 player user is perceived to be highly technologically innovative (*M* = 5.60, *SD* = .98), and of a fairly high socio-economic status (*M* = 4.62, *SD* = 1.32).

Pretest: Source status manipulation

Sixty two undergraduates (26 men) participated in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to three conditions (target person: low status, high status1, or high status2). In the *low status* condition, the target person was "a grocery packer;" in the *high status1* condition the source was "a brand manager," and in the *high status2* condition the source was a business student. The target person was described both verbally and pictorially, as shown

below.

Low status  *"George is a grocery packer."*

High status1  *"Logan is an undergraduate business student."*

High status2  *"George is a brand manager."*

Participants rated the target person on the same perceived characteristics as in the source pretest for study 1a (perceived socioeconomic status (α = .96); influence potential (α = .84); trustworthiness (α = .77); opinion leadership in the technological products category (α = .97); identification (α = .84)) except that the measure of sophistication was replaced with the one for technological innovativeness (α = .97) since the latter is the focal trait of the target product.

Target person ratings were subjected to one-way ANOVAs. The mean ratings for the three source conditions are reported in table below.

Means and Standard Deviations for Ratings of Target Persons

Variable	Low status *M* (*SD*)	High status 1 *M* (*SD*)	High status 2 *M* (*SD*)
Technological innovativeness	2.27 (1.08)[a]	4.88 (1.73)[c]	3.55 (1.30)[b]
Socioeconomic status	2.40 (.72)[a]	5.17 (.81)[b]	4.59 (1.31)[b]
Influence potential	3.39 (1.00)[a]	4.94 (.84)[b,c]	4.24 (1.39)[a,b]
Opinion leadership	1.89 (1.07)[a]	5.49 (1.54)[c]	3.99 (1.01)[b]
Identification	1.95 (1.04)[a]	2.93 (1.31)[b]	3.24 (1.05)[b]

[a] Low status, High status 1, and High status 2 correspond to grocery packer, brand manager, and business student, respectively.

[b] Means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$ by Bonferroni test for multiple comparisons.

The ANOVAs revealed significant omnibus differences with respect to perceived technological innovativeness ($F(2, 59) = 18.37$, $p < .01$), socio-economic status ($F(2, 59) = 47.03$, $p < .01$), influence potential ($F(2, 59) = 11.03$, $p < .01$), opinion leadership for technological products ($F(2, 59) = 44.48$, $p < .01$), and identification ($F(2, 59) = 6.79$, $p < .01$). The trustworthiness ratings did not differ significantly between conditions ($F(2, 59) = 2.10$, $p = .13$). As expected, the low status source was perceived to be less technologically innovative, less likely to be an opinion leader in technological products, of lower socio economic status, and less likely to evoke identification than both high status sources.

Main study

The main objective of this study was to examine the low status user effect in a different product category with a different focal trait. A secondary objective was to test whether the results of study 1 can be replicated when the low status user is not the only one observed. In real life, an observer is more likely to run into "typical" (i.e., high status) users than low status users of a high-end brand. It is therefore important to examine whether the low status user effect holds when a high status user is observed in conjunction with a low status user.

Method

Participants and design. Sixty one undergraduate students (32 men) at a northeastern University participated in this study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (source status: high vs. low).

Procedure. The cover story described a company that launched a new line of MP3 players in a distant market and is now planning a launch in the participants' market. Participants were told that the new launch will involve a testimonial campaign that features real customers from the distant-market and the company wishes to get feedback about the effectiveness of two potential customer candidates for this campaign.

Participants read a description of the new MP3 player line and two testimonials about the new line, allegedly written by two consumers. The identity and testimonial of the first user were held constant across conditions and featured the second high status person from the pretest. However, the identity of the second user varied across conditions and featured either the first high status person or the low status person. The two testimonials appeared on the same page and

each was followed by measures of their effectiveness and how surprising they were. Next participants reported their buying intentions, product attitudes, and demographics.

Independent Variable

Source status was manipulated using pictures and information about the occupation of the second testimonial writer - a user named George. Based on the pretest, participants in the low (high) status condition learned that George is a grocery-packer (a brand manager).

Dependent Variables

Purchase intentions. Participants indicated how likely they were to purchase an MP3 player from the new line (1= Not at all, 7 = Very).

Product attitudes. Participants indicated how the product compares to other MP3 players (1= Extremely inferior, 7 = Extremely superior) and how favorable their overall opinion is about the new product (1=Very unfavorable, 7=Very favorable). The two items (Pearson $r = .55$, $p < .01$) were averaged to form a product attitude index.

Surprise caused by the observed user. Participants rated how surprising they thought it was that each of the observed users purchased the target MP3 player (1= Not at all, 7 = Very surprising). No difference between conditions was found with respect to the first (typical) user

(M_{low} = 3.66, M_{high} = 3.59, $t(59) = .15$, $p = .88$) so this measure will only be discussed with respect to the second user.

Testimonial effectiveness. Participants indicated how persuasive and how believable (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very) they found each testimonial. The two items were averaged to form a testimonial effectiveness index (Pearson $r_{user1} = .37$, $p < .01$; Pearson $r_{user2} = .66$, $p < .01$). Since the ratings on this measure were similar between the groups with respect to both the first (M_{low} = 5.08, M_{high} = 4.93, $t(59) = 0.54$, $p = .59$) and the second testimonial (M_{low} = 5.08, M_{high} = 5.08, $t(59) = 0.02$, $p = .98$), we do not discuss this measure any further.

Results

Surprise caused by the observed user. Participants in the low status condition were more surprised by the second observed user ($M = 5.34$) than those in the high status condition (M = 3.66), $t(59) = 3.67$, $p < .01$.

Purchase intentions. As expected, participants in the low status condition reported greater intentions to purchase the new MP3 player ($M = 4.83$) than those in the high status condition (M = 3.81; $t(59) = 2.43$, $p < .05$).

Product attitudes. No significant difference between conditions was obtained with respect to product attitudes (M_{low} = 5.36, M_{high} = 5.05, $t(59) = 1.33$, $p = .19$).

STUDY 2

Pretest: Focal trait

Fifty two undergraduate students (31 men) participated in a computerized study in exchange for course credit. Participants first read a short description of the "Powermat:" an electronic accessory that enables simultaneous wireless charging of multiple technological products. They next indicated the extent to which they thought certain characteristics fit the profile of the Powermat user (1=Does not fit at all, 7=Fits very well). The characteristics comprised the same measures of *technological innovativeness* and *socioeconomic status* that we used in the source pretest for the replication of study 1. The results indicated that the Powermat user was perceived to be technologically innovative (M = 5.93, SD = .82) and from a high socioeconomic status (M = 5.15, SD = 1.00). A follow up analysis on gender effects revealed that women associated the Powermat with greater technological innovativeness than did men ($M_{females}$ = 6.25, M_{males} = 5.72; $t(50) = -2.40$, $p = .02$), yet both groups associated the product with high technological innovativeness.

Pretest: Source status manipulation

Eighty nine participants (M_{age} = 39.78; 64 females) from an online panel participated in the survey in exchange for entry into a $25 lottery. To ensure that the results reflect the perceptions of individuals from high socioeconomic status, we screened the original sample based on the education level of the participants. The final sample included only respondents who held a 4-year college degree, a master's degree, or a doctoral degree, and consisted of forty five participants (M_{age} = 37.80; 30 females).

Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions (target person: low vs. high

status). In the *low status* condition, the target person was a security guard; in the *high status* condition the target person was an architect. The target person was presented using a picture and a short description of his age and occupation. While this source presentation may sound similar to the source manipulation used in the follow up study to study 1, it differs from it in an important way. In study 1's follow up study, different people served as models for the high and the low status users. As a result, it is possible that the source status effects reported in that study may be due to a particular characteristic of either the high status or the low status model. To overcome this potential shortcoming, in this study we employed the same model in both source status conditions. To lend credibility to the socioeconomic status manipulation, the model wore a suit in the high status condition and casual clothes in the low status condition (see appendix B).

Participants rated the target person on the same perceived characteristics as in the source pretest for studies 1 and its replication: (technological innovativeness (α = .95), socioeconomic status (α = .97), influence potential (α = .70), trustworthiness (α = .80), opinion leadership in the technological products category (α = .89), and identification (α = .90)).

Participants in the low status condition rated the target person as less technologically innovative (M_{low} = 3.10, M_{high} = 4.75; $t(43) = 5.65$, $p < .01$), of lower socio-economic status (M_{low} = 3.00, M_{high} = 5.13; $t(43) = 7.66$, $p < .01$), less likely to be an opinion leader in technological products (M_{low} = 3.23, M_{high} = 4.53; $t(43) = 3.97$, $p < .01$), and less likely to evoke identification (M_{low} = 2.37, M_{high} = 3.27; $t(43) = 2.52$, $p = .02$) than their counterparts in the high status condition.

The influence potential (M_{low} = 4.02, M_{high} = 4.24; $t(43) = .88$, $p = .39$) and trustworthiness ratings (M_{low} = 3.84, M_{high} = 4.22; $t(43) = 1.25$, $p = .22$) did not differ significantly between conditions. In sum, the target persons evoked different levels of

identification and different impressions with respect to their standing on the focal trait and their socio-economic status, but not with respect to their trustworthiness and influence potential.

STUDY 3

Pretest: Focal trait

Forty undergraduate students (21 men) participated in a computerized study in exchange for course credit. Participants first read a short description of a Wi-Fi detector and next indicated the extent to which they thought certain characteristics fit the profile of the Wi-Fi detector user (1=Does not fit at all, 7=Fits very well). The characteristics comprised the same measures of *technological innovativeness* and *socioeconomic status* that we used in the pretest for study 2. The results indicated that men and women rated the Wi-Fi detector users differently. Women associated the Wi-Fi detector with greater technological innovativeness than did men ($M_{females}$ = 5.68, M_{males} = 3.97; $t(38) = 3.44$, $p < .01$). Women also profiled the Wi-Fi detector user as of slightly higher socioeconomic status than did men ($M_{females}$ = 4.59, M_{males} = 3.81; $t(38) = 1.70$, $p = .1$). To ensure consistency in perceptions of the focal trait, we recruited only female participants in the main study.

Pretest: Focal trait confidence

Since confidence in the compared domain may, like perceptions of the comparison target, change following a social comparison process (Larrick, Burson, and Soll 2007; Lin and Kulik

2002), we pretested the focal trait confidence manipulation using a separate sample than that used for the main study.

Eighty four undergraduates (40 men) participated in a computerized study in exchange for course credit. The survey measured personal knowledge about, and rate of adoption of high tech products. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions (focal trait confidence: low vs. high). In the *low (high) confidence* condition the knowledge questions were difficult (easy) and the adoption questions led participants to doubt their technological innovativeness (assured participants about their level of technological innovativeness).

In both conditions the survey included nine technological knowledge questions and eight questions about adoption of technological products. The high confidence survey included easy knowledge questions such as “What does WWW stand for?” The low confidence survey included difficult knowledge questions such as “What does the DSP do in an MP3 player?” Participants also answered questions about whether and when they had bought different technological products. In the low confidence condition the possible response alternatives reflected more recent time periods than in the high confidence condition. For example, in the low confidence condition the question “When did you buy/get your laptop computer?” was followed by the response items “Less than 6 months ago,” “6-11 months ago,” “1-2 years ago,” “More than 2 years ago,” and “Don't have my own laptop computer;” in the high confidence condition the same question was followed by the response items “Less than 2 years ago,” “2-3 years ago,” “More than 3 years ago,” and “I don’t have my own laptop computer.” Thus, the response categories in the low confidence condition presented a less attainable criterion for technological innovativeness (buy a new tech product every 6 months) than in the high confidence condition (buy a new tech product every two years). We expected that participants would be less confident

in their level of technological innovativeness if they felt that they were less knowledgeable about technological products and slower to adopt new technological products.

The next part of the survey included the dependent variables. Participants estimated how knowledgeable they are about technological products (1=Not at all, 9=Very), how quick they are to adopt new tech products (1=Very slow, 9=Very quick), and overall – how tech savvy they were (1=Not at all, 9=Very). The three items were averaged into a *technological innovativeness self estimation* score (α = .92). Then participants indicated how confident (1=Not at all, 9=Very) and how certain (1=Not at all, 9=Very) they felt about their self estimates of technological innovativeness. The two items (r = .89, p < .01) were averaged to form a *judgmental confidence* score. Finally, participants indicated their gender. As in the focal trait pretest, the results of the current pretest were affected by gender. We therefore include gender as a second factor in our analysis.

Technological innovativeness self estimation. A 2 (focal trait confidence: low vs. high) by 2 (gender: male vs. female) ANOVA on the measure of technological innovativeness self estimation yielded a focal trait confidence effect (F(1, 80) = 11.43, p < .01). Those in the low confidence condition provided lower estimates of their technological innovativeness (M = 5.29, SE = .28) than those in the high confidence condition (M = 6.60, SE = .27). We also obtained a gender effect (F(1, 80) = 8.45, p < .01); men had higher estimates (M = 6.51, SE = .28) than women (M = 5.38, SE = .27). The focal trait confidence by gender interaction was not significant (F(1, 80) = .11, p = .75).

Judgmental confidence. A 2 (focal trait confidence: low vs. high) by 2 (gender: male vs. female) ANOVA on the measure of judgmental confidence yielded a focal trait confidence effect (F(1, 80) = 9.80, p < .01). Those in the low confidence condition felt less confident about their

judgment (M = 5.85, SE = .33) than those in the high confidence condition (M = 7.29, SE = .31). A gender effect ($F(1, 80) = 7.25$, $p < .01$) indicated that men had greater confidence in their judgment (M = 7.19, SE = .33) than women (M = 5.95, SE = .31). The focal trait confidence by gender interaction did not have a significant effect ($F(1, 80) = .45$, $p = .50$).

Pretests summary. According to our theoretical reasoning, CDSER influence can only take place when the observer associates the product with an unambiguous focal trait (hypothesis 3). The focal trait pretest indicated that women, but not men, perceived the Wi-Fi detector users as tech savvy. We therefore did not expect men to demonstrate the low status user effect in the context of the current product. In addition, while the confidence manipulation affected both men and women, men's confidence in the focal trait remained relatively high even in the confidence diminishing condition, too high to classify as "low confidence." Since both pretests yielded the desired outcomes for women but not for men, we included only women in the main study.

Pretest: Source status manipulation

Fifty respondents (20 males) were randomly assigned to two conditions (target person: low vs. high status). In the low status condition, the target person was a grocery packer; in the high status condition the target person was an architect. Participants indicated how well various traits described that person (1=Does not fit at all, 7=Fits very well). Relative to the high status person, the low status person was rated low on the *socio-economic* characteristics “well-educated” (M_{low} = 3.54, M_{high} = 4.92; $t(47) = -3.22$, $p < .01$), “successful” (M_{low} = 3.64, M_{high} = 5.12; $t(47) = -4.37$, $p < .01$), and “financially wealthy” (M_{low} = 2.84, M_{high} = 3.92; $t(48) = -2.89$, $p < .01$). The low status person was also rated lower than the high status person on *technological*

innovativeness (M_{low} = 2.98, M_{high} = 3.92; $t(48) = -2.80$, $p < .01$), calculated as the mean of "buys innovative products frequently," "contemporary," "technology freak," and "expert in MP3 players" ($\alpha = .86$). The low and high status persons had similar ratings on sympathy (M_{low} = 5.16, M_{high} = 4.56; $t(48) = 1.23$, $p = .23$), credibility (M_{low} = 4.60, M_{high} = 4.68; $t(48) = -.23$, p = .82), and interest in promoting a new MP3 brand (M_{low} = 3.28, M_{high} = 3.78; $t(48) = -1.05$, $p = .30$).