

The Status Signals Paradox

Stephen M. Garcia¹, Kimberlee Weaver², and Patricia Chen³

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Abstract

Making friends is critical to well-being. We also live in a society where the display of status is ubiquitous and billions of dollars are spent on high-status consumer goods. In the present analysis, we introduce the *Status Signals Paradox*: When making new friends, people tend to think that displaying high-status markers of themselves (e.g., a BMW, a Tag Heuer watch) will make them more attractive to others than neutral markers (e.g., a Honda, a generic brand watch); however, from the perspective of would-be friends, individuals who display high-status markers are found to be less attractive as new friends than those with neutral status markers. Six studies provide converging evidence of the status signals paradox.

Keywords

social comparison, presenter paradox, decision-making, naive realism

“People, people who need people, are the luckiest people in the world”—however sentimental and dramatic, these lyrics sung by Barbra Streisand intimate an irrefutable point: Our happiness in life rests firmly on the social relations we make (Rath & Harter, 2010). Friends not only affect our happiness and emotional well-being (Umberson & Montez, 2010), but they affect our cognitive and physical well-being as well (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Yet in our ever-increasing status hungry (de Botton, 2008; Frank, 2010; Podolny, 2010) and lonely society (Putnam, 2001), do people use signals effectively to portray themselves as potential friends to others? Merging social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Johnson, 2012) and naive realism (Ross & Ward, 1996; Weaver, Garcia, & Schwarz, 2012), we posit that differences in perspective between those who are seeking friendship and those who are potential friends will lead to a *Status Signals Paradox*: People trying to make friends think that markers of status, such as driving a BMW instead of a Honda, will make them seem *more* attractive to potential friends. Yet such status signaling backfires from the perspective of these potential friends, who perceive someone with neutral status markers to be *more* attractive as a new friend.

Status Signaling Through Social Comparison

The desire to maintain, improve, and signal status permeates our society (de Botton, 2008), and status signaling strategies are often adaptive and associated with material benefits (Podolny, 2010). At the psychological level, social comparison with others can often motivate people to improve their relative standing in domains of personal importance (Festinger, 1954; Rijsman, 1974), subsequently fueling competitiveness within those domains (Garcia, Tor, & Schiff, 2013; Johnson, 2012)

and general anxiety about maintaining and improving their status in society (de Botton, 2008). Thus, one way social comparisons work is by motivating people to demonstrate a positional advantage so as to feel good about themselves when they compare favorably to others.

A common way that people convey their status in today’s world is through their consumption patterns (Frank, 2010; Veblen, 1899). An individual may make a distinctive purchase, for instance, to convey a unique identity to others (Berger & Heath, 2007), or may make a high-end purchase to transmit a signal that he or she is at the top of the social hierarchy (e.g., Veblen, 1899). The consumption of status goods such as designer clothes, expensive watches, and luxury cars has adaptive self-enhancing functions for individuals (e.g., Hudders & Pandelaere, 2013) and can even protect against self-threats such as low-socioeconomic standing, failure to attain wished-for goals, and lower perceived group standing in society (Charles, Hurst, & Roussanov, 2009; Lee & Shrum, 2012; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Since signaling status is adaptive in many circumstances, it is possible that people will believe that exhibiting status signals will also be an effective way to make new friends.

Interestingly, while social comparison can lead people to attempt to outperform others, the same social comparison

¹ University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

² University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Israel

³ National University of Singapore, Singapore

Corresponding Author:

Stephen M. Garcia, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.

Email: smgarcia@umich.edu

mechanism has also been shown in other contexts to lead to a pressure toward uniformity within a group (Festinger, 1954; Rijsman, 1974). This pressure can be especially strong in cases where a positional advantage can cause another to lose face. For instance, gifted children and high-performing college students have been shown to downplay their achievements in conversations with lower performing peers (for a review, see Exline & Lobel, 1999). From this perspective, it is possible that presenters may believe that displaying more neutral status signals would be most effective in making new friends because it would help them fit in rather than stand out from the group.

While the social comparison literature provides evidence of both social competition and uniformity, it is an empirical question which will be more common in the current context. Based on the pervasiveness of status signaling in social life, we hypothesized that people who want to make friends would keep choosing high-status signaling products when wanting to make friends, believing that status signals would be more beneficial in making new friends than neutral signals. At the same time, we predicted that this would be an inefficient strategy from the perspective of potential friends, as outlined below.

Status Signals Can Undermine Social Affiliation Goals

As much as people may try to attract new friends by displaying their status, there are several reasons why potential friends may not be as receptive to status signals (Muller & Fayant, 2010). One reason is that social comparisons can sometimes conflict with affiliation goals. In a striking example, Pleban and Tesser (1981) found that when a confederate performed better than a research participant on a dimension of personal relevance, the participant chose to sit significantly further away from the confederate in another room after the competition.

This is consistent with other research on social comparison: People dislike it when others surpass them on personally relevant dimensions—and even more so when these others are their friends (Tesser, 1988). In domains of personal importance, people tend to feel more threatened by the successes of their friends than that of strangers and exhibit more competitive behavior toward the former (Tesser & Campbell, 1982; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988; Zuckerman & Jost, 2001). For example, people actually dislike it when their friends become more successful than themselves (Zuckerman & Jost, 2001) and even exhibit more competitive behavior toward them (Tesser, 1988). These types of comparison dynamics can end up shaping people's patterns of friendship, as people tend to avoid friendships with those who outperform them in important domains (Tesser, Campbell, & Smith, 1984). Thus, social comparison can impede interpersonal closeness and friendship from a potential friend's perspective.

The Status Signals Paradox

Naive realism suggests that people in different roles—like actors and observers—rarely see eye-to-eye (Ross & Ward, 1996). And

differences in perspective between people presenting information to others and people evaluating information that is presented have also been shown in other domains (Weaver et al., 2012). Linking differences in perspective to differences in social comparison concerns, we hypothesize that presenters who are seeking to make new friends will desire to compare favorably relative to others and will thus believe that status signaling will *increase* their chances of forming new friendships. However, we hypothesize that such status signaling will backfire from the perspective of evaluators—the potential friends—who will be *less* inclined to like it when a would-be friend compares favorably to them; these evaluators would prefer to avoid disadvantageous social comparison.

Study I: The Basic Effect

Study 1A seeks to establish the basic effect among upscale main street shoppers. We predicted that presenters, people with a goal of making new friends, would believe that choosing a luxury car over a basic one would be more effective in making new friends. However, we predicted that the social comparison mind-set of the would-be friends would actually lead them to exhibit the opposite preference: more friendship interest in people driving a basic car than a luxury one.

Study 1A: Main Street Shoppers

Participants

We recruited 125 participants (64 female) from an upscale main street of a high-income suburb (median household income = US\$112 K, cf. U.S. median = US\$52 K). All measures and manipulations are reported in this and subsequent studies. A power analysis on data from pilot studies demonstrated a large effect size of $d = .8$ (Cohen, 1988). Thus, we recruited at least 30 participants per cell, which gives 80% or greater power (Cohen, 1988; VanVoorhis & Morgan, 2007).

Procedure

Main street shoppers in the presenters condition made a within-subjects choice, "Imagine that you are going to an outdoor wedding party where you are hoping to make some new, close friends. If you owned a luxury car and a basic car, which car would you take to the party to make some new close friends?" Participants then chose one of the two options: "Basic Car" or "Luxury Car" (options are always counterbalanced or randomly presented in these studies).

Main street shoppers in the evaluators condition were in a between-subjects design and read, "Imagine that you are going to an outdoor wedding party where you are hoping to make some new close friends. At the party, you notice someone who just arrived in a (basic car/luxury car)." We then measured their friendship interest with a composite variable which averaged three questions ($\alpha = .68$): (a) "To what extent would this person fit your ideal of a new close friend?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*), (b) "How approachable would this person be?"

(1 = *not approachable*, 7 = *very approachable*), (c) “How likely would you be to start a conversation with this person?” (1 = *not likely*, 7 = *very likely*).

Results and Discussion

The results supported our central hypothesis: 65.6% of the shoppers in the presenter’s condition believed the luxury car would be more effective in making new friends than the basic car, $\chi^2(1) = 6.25, p = .012$. However, this choice backfired from the perspective of the would-be friends themselves. They expressed significantly *less* social interest in the potential friend driving the luxury car ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.05$) than in the potential friend driving the basic car ($M = 5.38, SD = 1.00$), 95% confidence interval (CI)_{mean diff.} = $[-2.08, -1.04]$, $F(1, 60) = 35.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .375$.

Additional evidence. We also conducted a follow-up “real choice” experiment with university students ($N = 281$) who completed “part one” of a “friendship formation study” online. Presenters chose between photos of a BMW or Honda to put on an online profile for prospective friends to learn more about them. Between-subjects evaluators saw a profile with one of the photos and completed the friendship interest composite ($\alpha = .86$). Presenters again thought the status signal (BMW) would be more effective in making new friends (59%), $\chi^2(1) = 3.90, p = .048$, and evaluators again expressed *less* friendship interest in the peer with the high-status (BMW; $M = 3.01, SD = 1.18$) than the neutral (Honda) status signal ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.30$), 95% CI_{mean diff.} $[-0.84, -0.06]$, $F(1, 156) = 5.19, p = .024, \eta_p^2 = .032$. For more detail, see “Real Behavior Study” in Online Supplemental Materials.

To control for similarity among presenters and evaluators as a counterexplanation, we replicated the pattern with a preselected wealthy sample (household income > US\$100 K, cf. U.S. median = US\$52 K) and assessed whether the same pattern obtained even when the same people first chose what car to drive *themselves* and then evaluated others based on *their* cars. The results were the same: When high-income participants were in the presenter role, most chose to drive the BMW (67.7%), $\chi^2(1) = 24.75, p < .001$, but when the same participants subsequently evaluated a potential friend in a between-subjects design, more expressed “yes” to befriend a basic car driver (86.7%) than a luxury car driver (60.6%), $\chi^2(1) = 17.6, p < .001$. For full details, read “Wealthy Hypocrisy Study” in Online Supplementary Materials.

Study 1B: Unified Dependent Measure Across Perspectives

While presenting (i.e., making a choice) and evaluating (i.e., making a judgment) are fundamentally different tasks in the real world, Study 1B assesses whether the same pattern emerges when the same underlying dependent measure is used across both the presenter and evaluator conditions.

Participants

We recruited 150 participants (66 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.32$) from Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT).

Procedure

Presenters read, “Imagine you’ve just moved to Denver, and you’re going out to a social activity at a downtown bar. You really want to make some new, close friends. As you’re getting ready, you’re trying to decide on which of two watches that you own that you should wear. One is an expensive Tag Heuer watch and the other is an inexpensive generic watch. Both match your outfit. To what extent would people be attracted to become friends with you if you wore the Tag Heuer [generic] watch?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Evaluators read the same first two sentences above, followed by “At the social, you notice two people who just arrived separately. One is wearing an expensive Tag Heuer watch and the other person is wearing an inexpensive generic watch. To what extent would you be attracted to become friends with the person wearing the Tag Heuer [generic] watch?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). A pretest ($N = 103$) showed that this single-item measure is highly correlated with the friendship interest composite used in Study 1A ($r = .88, p < .001$). All participants then answered questions about friendship versus instrumental social motives, responded to an attention check, and reported demographics (e.g., gender, age, social class) here and in subsequent studies.

Results and Discussion

Nine participants missed the attention check and were dropped. We predicted an interaction between perspective (presenter/evaluator; between-subjects) and watch (brand name/generic; within-subjects) on the attractiveness to new friends measure.

A mixed-design analysis of variance showed the predicted interaction, $F(1, 140) = 29.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .173$. As expected, participants in the presenters condition believed that wearing the Tag Heuer watch would make them significantly more attractive as a potential friend ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.32$) than the generic watch ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.31$), 95% CI_{mean diff.} $[-1.13, -0.35]$, $t(73) = -3.79, p < .001, d = -.444$. However, the would-be friends showed the opposite pattern: They expressed more friendship interest in the person wearing the generic watch ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.26$) than the Tag Heuer watch ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.33$), 95% CI_{mean diff.} $[0.37, 1.16]$, $t(67) = 3.89, p < .001, d = .469$. This interaction remained significant even when controlling for participants’ social motives to make friends, instrumental motives to improve their network for opportunities, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, $F(1, 135) = 32.46, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .194$.

Together, Studies 1A and 1B illustrate the status signals paradox: Presenters think that high-status markers will help their efforts to make close friends more than neutral status markers, but ironically, these high-status markers actually hurt their efforts from the perspective of would-be friends.

Study 2: Addressing Counterexplanations

Studies 2A–2C rule out counterexplanations. Study 2A addresses the issue that what evaluators *say* versus *do* may not be the same. Study 2B shows that presenters are choosing status and not just aesthetics per se. Study 2C shows that presenters are choosing status and not just the perceived popular choice.

Study 2A: Evaluators’ Real Choice

While would-be friends in Studies 1A and 1B *say* they would prefer to be friends with someone who signals neutral instead of high status, but do they *actually* show this preference in the context of an impending interaction? Doob and Gross (1968), for example, found that although people generally *say* that they would honk more at a high status rather than a low-status car stopped at a green light, their behaviors in reality tend to show the opposite pattern. In Study 2A, we show that even in a context where social interaction is ostensibly imminent, participants still prefer to interact with someone who signals neutral instead of high status.

Participants

Sixty-two Midwestern university participants (35 female, $M_{age} = 19.79$) participated in a “friendship formation” study for small amount of money.

Procedure

In a between-subjects design, participants were recruited in campus student centers, with adjacent meeting rooms in the vicinity, and asked if they would be willing to participate in a “get-to-know-you” conversation for a study on friendship formation. They were told that they would shortly be interacting with another research participant in another room. However, they could choose the research participant based on “profiles” that included a few demographic variables and information about interests and hobbies, the car they drive, home state, and what kind of winter coat they wear.

At this point, participants chose one of two “research participants.” The *high-status condition* included a choice of interacting with either a high-status signals person (i.e., 2017 BMW car, Canada Goose winter coat—status symbols on this campus) or a neutral status signals person (i.e., 2012 VW Golf car, Columbia brand winter coat):

PERSON A	PERSON B
My interests: Hiking, running, concerts	My interests: Netflix, movies
Car I drive: '17 BMW 3-series	Car I drive: '12 VW Golf
Home state: New Jersey	Home state: Maryland
Winter coat: Canada Goose	Winter coat: Columbia

Persons A and B were randomly ordered. The *control condition* was identical except the car and winter coat for Person A were neutral signals: a Honda Civic and Gerry jacket. Person B was the same:

PERSON A	PERSON B
My interests: Hiking, running, concerts	My interests: Netflix, movies
Car I drive: '17 Honda Civic	Car I drive: '12 VW Golf
Home state: New Jersey	Home state: Maryland
Winter coat: Gerry	Winter coat: Columbia

After their selection, participants were informed that the study was completed and that they would not be interacting with anyone else.

Results and Discussion

Results were consistent with predictions. Upon believing that they would soon interact with someone of their choosing for a “get-to-know-you” conversation, participants were less willing to choose a person whose interests included hiking, running, and concerts and whose home state was New Jersey when that person had high-status signals (2017 BMW, Canada Goose jacket) than when that person had neutral status signals (2017 Honda, Gerry jacket). In the high-status signals condition, only 22.6% of the participants chose to interact with Person A, while 77.4% chose to interact Person B. In contrast, in the control condition, 48.4% chose to interact with Person A (who now had neutral status signals) and 51.6% chose to interact with Person B ($\chi^2 = 4.51, p = .034$). This suggests that what people *say* and *do* are the same in the status signal paradox.

Study 2B: Are Presenters Just Choosing Aesthetics?

Status and beauty are typically confounded in the real world. Study 2B controls for aesthetics by testing the prediction that presenters will choose a simple white T-shirt that signals status over one that does not.

Participants

We recruited 202 participants (123 female, $M_{age} = 35.16$) from AMT.

Procedure

In a between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to a presenter or evaluator condition. Presenters read, “Imagine that you are going to a picnic where you are open to meeting new close friends, and you are deciding which t-shirt to wear to make you seem likable. However, the only t-shirts that are available for you to wear for the picnic are simple white t-shirts with the names of retailers written in plain black script on the front. Which t-shirt would you wear to make close

friends?" They then chose between the options: "T-shirt that says 'Saks Fifth Avenue'" and "T-shirt that says 'Walmart'."

Evaluators read, "Imagine that you are going to a picnic where you are open to meeting new close friends. At the picnic you noticed two people who just arrived separately, each wearing a simple plain white t-shirt. One person's t-shirt says 'Walmart' in plain black script, and the other person's t-shirt says 'Saks Fifth Avenue' in plain black script. Which person would you be open to being close friends with?"

Results and Discussion

One person missed the attention check and was dropped. In the presenters condition, 76.0% chose to wear the basic T-shirt with "Saks Fifth Avenue," $\chi^2(1) = 27.04, p < .001$. In contrast, evaluators showed the exact opposite pattern: 60.4% indicated they would be more open to being a close friend with someone wearing a basic T-shirt stating "Walmart" over someone wearing a basic T-shirt stating "Saks Fifth Avenue," $\chi^2(1) = 4.37, p = .037$. Study 2B thus suggests that the effect emerges even when the beauty of the option is held constant and the only thing that varies is the status signal.

Study 2C: Is It Just a Desire for Conformity or Uniqueness?

Another counterexplanation is that presenters are not choosing status but rather are simply conforming to popular options (e.g., Wan, Xu, & Ding, 2014) or are choosing to be unique (e.g., Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011). Study 2C therefore manipulates the popularity of the options, additionally controlling for individual differences in conformity and susceptibility to peer pressure. We predicted that presenters would choose the high-status option regardless of its popularity or uniqueness.

Participants

We recruited 161 participants (78 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.9$) from AMT.

Procedure

In a two condition between-subjects design, participants were asked to make a choice in one of the two scenarios: "Imagine that you enjoy going to social events to meet new close friends, and you want to buy the car that will make you seem likable. You are deciding between a BMW 3-Series and a Ford Fusion. Most people would choose to drive the [Ford Fusion/BMW 3-Series]. Assuming that cost is not an issue, which do YOU think would be the most effective in making close new friends?" Participants indicated their choice and completed conformity (Goldsmith, Clark, & Lafferty, 2005) and peer pressure (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000) scales.

Results and Discussion

Ten participants who missed the attention check were dropped. A χ^2 analysis on car choice by popularity manipulation was

significant, $\chi^2(1) = 5.78, p = .016$, suggesting there was a main effect of popularity on car preferences. However, despite the success of our popularity manipulation, presenters still tended to choose the BMW regardless of the popularity condition: 61.5% chose the BMW when they had been told the Ford Fusion was popular, $\chi^2(1) = 4.15, p = .042$, and 79.5% chose the BMW when they were told the BMW was popular, $\chi^2(1) = 25.33, p < .001$. Moreover, the conformity and peer pressure scale choice correlations within each popularity condition were nonsignificant (all $ps > .191$). The choice of the status option does not appear to be driven by a desire to be unique either (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980)—otherwise fewer people would have chosen the BMW when it was the popular choice. Thus, presenters are not making their signaling choices on the basis of conformity or uniqueness.

Study 3: Moderation by Signaling Goal

Although signaling status with the social goal of making new friends appears to backfire, a status signal need not always backfire. Study 3 probes this boundary condition and tests the prediction that signaling status with the professional goal of making business contacts can be beneficial.

Participants

We recruited 251 participants (117 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.81$) from AMT.

Procedure

Participants were assigned to either a presenter or an evaluator condition and were given either a social goal or a professional goal.

Presenters read the following between-subjects vignette (goal: social/professional): "Imagine that you are going to an outdoor wedding party where you are hoping to make some new close friends [new business contacts], and so you want to be likable [competent]. If you owned a basic car and a luxury car, which car would you take to the party to make some new close friends [new business contacts]?" (luxury/basic car).

Evaluators read the following 2 (goal: social/professional) \times 2 (status: luxury/basic) between-subjects design: "Imagine that you are going to an outdoor wedding party where you are hoping to make some new close friends [new business contacts], and so you want to get to know someone who is likable [competent]. At the party, you noticed someone who just arrived in a luxury [basic] car. Would you want to be friends [business contacts] with this person?" (yes/no).

Results and Discussion

Fourteen participants missed the attention check and were dropped. In the friendship context, the results replicated Studies 1–3: 77.3% of presenters thought that the luxury car would make them seem more likable when looking for new close friends, $\chi^2(1) = 13.09, p < .001$, but evaluators showed the opposite pattern: 92.5% wanted to be friends with the person

driving the basic car but only 58.3% wanted a friendship with the luxury car driver, $\chi^2(1) = 12.23, p = .005$.

As predicted, a different pattern emerged in the business context where the goal was to appear competent. Now 90.0% of presenters chose to take a luxury car, $\chi^2(1) = 25.60, p < .001$, and that preference was matched among the evaluators: 89.2% wanted to become business contacts with a luxury car driver and 73.2% wanted to be business contacts with the basic car driver, a marginally significant difference, $\chi^2(1) = 3.21, p = .073$.

Overall, we also note that presenters in general expressed a nonsignificant difference in preferences for signaling status in the business context (90.0% chose the luxury car) versus the friendship context (77.3%), $\chi^2(1) = 2.44, p = .118$. However, in the evaluators condition, the social versus professional goal of the evaluator appears to be an important moderator as there is a significant interaction ($B = -3.28, p < .001$) between the evaluator's goal (social/professional) and the kind of car driven (basic/luxury). Evaluators show a preference for a basic car over a luxury car driver in the friendship context, but that preference somewhat reverses in the business contact context.

General Discussion

Status signals and the desire to signal status seem to permeate society (de Botton, 2008; Frank, 2010), and signaling status has an array of benefits in many circumstances (Podolny, 2010). In the present analysis, we explore whether this general tendency to signal status also pervades people's strategies for establishing new friendships. We hypothesize that people in their efforts to make friends mistakenly think that high-status markers instead of neutral ones will *help* them attract close friends. However, in the eyes of would-be friends, such high-status markers make a potential friend look *less* attractive. Across multiple studies and different, complementary measures of evaluators' friendship interest, we find evidence of the *Status Signals Paradox*. Studies 1A and B captured this irony, notably among upscale Main Street shoppers, in a real choice context, among a preselected wealthy sample, and on a unified dependent variable across presenters and evaluators. Studies 2A–C address counterexplanations and show that what evaluators *say* is what they actually *do* in a real choice situation and that the presenter's signal is indeed based on status and not on aesthetics, conformity, or uniqueness. Finally, Study 3 shows the moderating effect of having a social versus professional goal.

These results are also consistent with the social comparison mechanism we proposed: that differences in perspective between the actor and observer manifest in opposite social comparison-driven behaviors. Presenters are concerned with comparing favorably to others and, therefore, want to display high-status signals. However, evaluators also wish to be perceived as favorable themselves, leading them to shy away from disadvantageous comparisons. Whereas previous research shows that people can become sensitive to the potential envy they might incite by being superior (Exline & Lobel, 1999), the presenters in our studies appeared to emphasize comparing

favorably. Our findings raise meaningful questions about the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon for future research. For example, do presenters not even consider how would-be friends would feel about the comparison, do they try to take the other's perspective but fail to fully empathize with them, or do they understand the other's viewpoint but still choose to signal high status?

It is also possible that there are other circumstances beyond those we have tested under which signaling status may have positive benefits on friendship formation. For example, someone who is of high status, and who simultaneously conveys a great deal of interpersonal warmth and friendliness, may be attractive as potential friends to others. For example, if Apple CEO Tim Cook or American footballer Tom Brady says a genuine "hi" to someone, their gesture may pique friendship interest. And we also acknowledge that the manifestation of "high status" undoubtedly varies across the income and cultural spectrum. For instance, while the ultra-wealthy peers of Bill Gates will likely not suffer social comparison consequences from someone driving a BMW, they will likely show similar effects in the face of a higher status signal within their peer group.

Finally, there may be interesting downstream consequences of this status signal paradox. Research shows that losers of a competition might be vulnerable to aggressive behavior perpetuated by their winning peers (Muller, Bushman, Subra, & Ceaux, 2012) and that people who are ranked highly are also more likely to exhibit more competitive facial expressions (Chen, Myers, Kopelman, & Garcia, 2012). Thus, when presenters choose to signal status, their high-status markers may not be the only turn off to would-be friends—it is highly plausible that their behavior might be a turn off as well.

In sum, status signaling has its obvious benefits for the presenter, and in many cases, elevating one's social status above others can help one achieve instrumental goals (Podolny, 2010). But in the context of social affiliation, this same psychological process of social comparison can also make these actions backfire. Friendship seekers who send high-status signals ironically devalue their social attractiveness from the perspective of would-be friends. And to the extent that friends are important to well-being, those looking for friends may unwittingly be hindering—not promoting—their own well-being.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

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Author Biographies

Stephen M. Garcia is an associate professor of psychology and organizational studies at the University of Michigan.

Kimberlee Weaver is a senior lecturer of marketing in the department of business administration at University of Haifa.

Patricia Chen is an assistant professor of psychology at the National University of Singapore.

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