

**Conspicuous Consumption of Time: When Busyness at Work and Lack of Leisure Time  
Become a Status Symbol**

SILVIA BELLEZZA

ANAT KEINAN

NEERU PAHARIA

Silvia Bellezza, Doctoral Candidate at Harvard Business School, Morgan Hall 180B, Soldiers Field Road, Boston, MA 02163, +1 617 803 1611, [sbellezza@hbs.edu](mailto:sbellezza@hbs.edu). Anat Keinan, Associate Professor of Marketing at Harvard Business School, Morgan Hall 193, Soldiers Field Road, Boston, MA 02163, [akeinan@hbs.edu](mailto:akeinan@hbs.edu). Neeru Paharia, Assistant Professor of Marketing at the McDonough School of Business, Georgetown University, Rafik B. Hariri Building, Washington, DC 20057, [np412@georgetown.edu](mailto:np412@georgetown.edu). The authors are grateful for helpful comments and suggestions received from participants in seminars and lab groups at Harvard Business School and Harvard Kennedy School, John T. Gourville, Debora V. Thompson, Francesca Gino, and Michael I. Norton. The article is based on part of the first author's dissertation.

## CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

While research on conspicuous consumption has typically analyzed how people spend *money* on products that signal status (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010; Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Wang and Griskevicius 2014), we investigate conspicuous consumption in relation to *time*. In contrast to the predictions of the theory of the leisure class (Veblen, 1899/2007), we demonstrate the conditions under which displaying one's busyness at work and lack of leisure time can lead to inferences of status and convey a high aspirational image in the eyes of others. Our novel predictions contribute to recent consumer behavior research analyzing more subtle signals of status (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Berger and Ward 2010; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010) by uncovering the role of busyness as a status symbol. We demonstrate a more nuanced kind of conspicuous consumption that operates by shifting the focus from the preciousness and scarcity of goods, to the preciousness and scarcity of individuals.

## ABSTRACT

This research examines the conspicuous spending of time. In contrast to the theory of the leisure class (Veblen 1899/2007), we propose that exhibiting busyness at work and lack of leisure time can signal high status and portray an aspirational image in the eyes of others. These positive inferences in response to busyness at work are mediated by perceived "scarcity" of the busy individual and are considerably weakened in the absence of agency over the decision to be busy. Moreover, we explore cross-cultural differences (U.S. vs. Europe) in response to busyness at work and demonstrate a reversal of the effect, whereby busyness leads to lower rather than higher inferences of status in the eyes of Europeans. We demonstrate a nuanced kind of conspicuous consumption that operates by shifting the focus from the preciousness and scarcity of goods, to the preciousness and scarcity of individuals.

Movies, magazines, and popular TV shows such as “the Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” often highlight the abundance of money and leisure time among the wealthy. Consistent with this portrayal, Veblen’s (1899/2007) theory of the leisure class suggests that the wealthy demonstrate their ability to live idle lives by consuming time unproductively. However, complaining about being busy is an increasingly widespread phenomenon in modern society. On Twitter, celebrities publicly complain about “having no life” or “being in desperate need for a vacation.” A New York Times social commentator suggests that a common response to the question “How are you?” is “Busy!” (Kreider 2012). An analysis of holiday letters indicates that references to “crazy schedules” have increased since the 1960s (Schulte 2014). Contrary to the prediction that spending time leisurely is associated with high status and wealth, we propose that busyness and lack of leisure time have also become a status symbol and are regarded as an aspirational lifestyle.

In this research we uncover a nuanced kind of conspicuous consumption that operates by shifting the focus from the preciousness and scarcity of goods to the preciousness and scarcity of individuals. When a person is viewed as busy, people may infer that she is a scarce resource, highly sought after, in constant demand, and for that reason may be of higher status and financially more well-off. While in reality, according to U.S. labor statistics, working long hours and salaries are not always correlated (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014), we test whether, and under what conditions, a busy person would be ascribed more status and a higher aspirational image than a less busy person. Our investigation of the underlying mechanisms reveals that the positive inferences in response to busyness and lack of leisure time are mediated and driven by the perception that a busy person is a scarce resource in high demand. We then consider moderators related to agency, whether working long hours is perceived as a deliberate choice,

and find that the positive status attributions associated with busyness at work are muted when an individual is perceived to have no agency in her choice to be busy. We also investigate cross-cultural differences (U.S. vs. Europe) as a boundary condition of the positive associations linked to busyness at work and lack of leisure time. We obtain a reversed effect in Europe, with busyness signaling lower rather than higher status. Beyond these mechanisms, we show how social media can be a strategic vehicle to signal social status by revealing information about one's busyness. In addition, we consider how the use of time-saving services (e.g., Peapod, online shopping and delivery) and multitasking products (e.g., Bluetooth headsets) can signal status and convey an aspirational image to others.

Our work contributes to several streams of literature. First, we expand research on the decline of leisure time (Gershuny 2005; Hamermesh and Lee 2007; Hochschild 1997; Rutherford 2001; Schor 1992; Southerton and Tomlinson 2005) by systematically examining the conditions under which busyness and long hours of work operate as a status symbol. Second, while past research has primarily focused on how the expenditure of *money* has been a vehicle to signal social status (Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Berger and Ward 2010; Griskevicius et al. 2007; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010; Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Wang and Griskevicius 2014; Ward and Dahl 2014), we explore how the expenditure of *time* can lead to the same end and test whether the amount of leisure time one has (or does not have) can signal status to others. Finally, our novel predictions contribute to recent consumer behavior research analyzing more subtle and counterintuitive signals of status (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Berger and Ward 2010; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010).

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

The concept of busyness has been defined in several different ways by various scholars (Gershuny 2005). Of particular relevance to our work is Schor's (1992) framework, which suggests that total hours can be broadly divided into three time categories. First, paid work time is represented by the total hours of remunerated employment. Second, unpaid work time (a category whose major components are cleaning, cooking, and child care) is constituted of hours of household labor. Finally, the residual hours are composed of leisure time. In this research, we focus on the first time category and define busyness in terms of long hours of paid work time.

Ancient philosophers have often portrayed paid work as the degeneration and enslavement of the human existence. The free man in ancient Greece and Rome had only contempt for work while slaves performed tasks of labor. In Cicero's words (44B.C./1913): "A citizen who gives his labor for money degrades himself to the rank of slaves." This insight continued in the thoughts of more modern thinkers. In his theory of the leisure class, Veblen (1899/2007) defined leisure as the non-productive consumption of time and proposed that "conspicuous abstention from labor [...] becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability; and conversely, since application to productive labor is a mark of poverty and subjection, it becomes inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community" (p. 30). Consistent with his view, studies of leisure and labor patterns argue that in the 19th century one could predict how poor somebody was by how long they worked (Economist 2014; Voth 2001). Accordingly, economic theory on the dynamics of labor supply suggests that beyond a certain wage level, income will cause workers to supply less labor and work less (the "income effect"). The economist John Maynard Keynes in his 1930

essay “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” predicted a fifteen-hour week by 2030, an end to the human struggle to survive, and time to enjoy “the hour and the day virtuously and well”(Schulte 2014). Recent research on happiness and wellbeing offers a similar perspective and shows that the desire to earn more income is driven by a belief that greater income will allow for less work and more leisure time (Kahneman et al. 2006). Thus, based on normative premises, one may infer that a person with time for non-productive leisure may be of higher social status and wealth, and that those who are busy with work may be less well off. Moreover, from a descriptive standpoint, working long hours and salaries are not always correlated. In the U.S., for example, people employed in management professions earn almost twice as much as people employed in production and transportation, though both categories are the highest in terms of number of hours worked per week (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014).

Contrary to the prediction that observers attribute higher status and wealth to individuals who conduct idle, though enjoyable lives, we propose that busyness at work and lack of leisure time have now become a more powerful status symbol. The shift of status attribution based on time expenditure may be linked to the development of knowledge-intensive economies, characterized by structured employment markets. In advanced economies, the market for human resources is typically highly specialized both on the supply side, with individuals investing in their human capital through education and specialized knowledge (Nakamura 2000; Wasik 2013), and on the demand side, with a large body of companies, institutions, and head hunters competing to hire the best talents. Those possessing the skills and abilities that employers or clients value are expected to be in high demand and short supply, and command more compensation. According to research conducted at the Federal Reserve Bank, in the “new economy” human capital and talent are increasingly viewed as the scarcest economic resources

(Nakamura 2000). Consistent with this view, a recent New York Times article (Wasik 2013) discussing the return on investing in one's education and human capital suggests that "the biggest financial asset in your portfolio is you." While working hard in economic systems that were (and some that currently are) mostly based on less-skilled agriculture and manufacturing may have been perceived as virtuous, it may not have implied an individual was scarce or in high demand. In contrast, we propose that in an advanced economic environment, busyness is a signal that one is both in high demand and in short supply (i.e., is doing important or valuable work that cannot be easily done by others), and therefore may be viewed as scarce. Busyness at work might speak to the intrinsic qualities and capabilities of the individual who, as a scarce and precious resource herself, is like a rare gemstone and thus perceived to have high status and is greatly admired.

### Scarcity and Status

We argue that busyness at work is a signal that one is in demand, and therefore may be scarce. In the domain of luxury goods, scarcity is a central attribute to maintaining product value (Lynn 1991). Accordingly, luxury researchers categorize various types of scarcity that marketers can take advantage of, which include natural scarcity (diamonds), techno-scarcity (new technologies), and limited-edition scarcity, which can all be used to demand higher market prices (Catry 2003). Research has further documented a "scarce-is-good" heuristic which suggests that consumers learn based on their buying experiences that scarce objects tend to be more valuable than non-scarce objects (Cialdini 1993). Others have suggested that scarcity is appealing based on psychological reactance, where scarcity threatens one's freedom to attain unavailable

resources (Brehm 1966) or because people need to be unique (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). The possession of scarce products has also been associated with feelings of status. In a recent study, researchers found that participants desired a scarce limited-edition picture when they felt powerless in an attempt to regain feelings of status (Rucker and Galinsky 2008).

Status represents the respect one has in the eyes of others, and the need to communicate status has been attributed to the motivation to attain advantage in social relationships (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Accordingly, because products have been found to communicate information about the identities of their owners, people may be willing to pay for products that are status symbols (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Shavitt and Nelson 1999). A large stream of research has found that individuals display their status through the publicly visible act of consuming luxury goods (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010; Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006; Wang and Griskevicius 2014). In addition, recent research has uncovered the role of more subtle signals of status such as larger food and drink packages, smaller logos, and nonconforming behaviors (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Berger and Ward 2010; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010). In this research, we propose another novel way to communicate status, through the conspicuous displays of one's busyness. Just as items that are scarce may be afforded more status and value, so might a person who is scarce. In addition to measuring perceived status, we also examine whether busyness is somewhat ironically perceived as more aspirational than a more leisurely lifestyle. We propose that observers will express greater admiration and stronger desires to emulate busy individuals rather than less busy ones, regardless of the hectic pace of life and demanding lifestyle conducted by these busy people. Specifically, we examine whether busy individuals are perceived as



“winners” in society and the extent to which observers desire to be like these hard-working people.

**H1:** Busyness can lead to inferences of higher status and project a more aspirational image in the eyes of others as compared to non-busyness.

**H2:** Perceived scarcity of the busy individual will mediate the positive inferences of high status and aspirational image in response to busyness.

Our next hypothesis explores the role of perceived agency, defined here as the extent to which one’s busy lifestyle and lack of leisure time are perceived to be the product of a voluntary and deliberate choice. Previous research on agency demonstrates its impact on product preferences and consumer satisfaction (Bhattacharjee, Berger, and Menon 2014; Botti and McGill 2011; Fuchs et al. 2013). In our studies, rather than manipulating one’s level of agency (the presence or absence of choice), we manipulate the perceived agency of others and examine how it interacts with busyness. Given that low-wage workers must work long hours and cannot afford leisure time in order to make ends meet, whereas high-wage workers may *choose* to work long hours and skip leisure time, we propose that lack of agency over the decision to be busy is a moderator for the effect. We predict observers will ascribe a heightened status and aspirational image to busyness when they believe that the busy individual has agency over the decision to work long hours. That is, the observer assumes that the busy individual is potentially able to work less and conduct a more leisurely lifestyle, but she deliberately decided to accept a demanding job and to conduct a busy lifestyle. Our predictions are in line with recent research exploring inferences of status and perceived intentionality in response to nonconforming behaviors (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014). When a specific nonconforming behavior, such as wearing a red bow tie at a formal black-tie party at a country club, was depicted as unintentional

(i.e., “it was not his intention to dress in a way that potentially deviates from the norm”), the nonconforming conduct was no longer associated with greater status.

Similarly, we expect that agency over the decision to be busy will also interact with perceived scarcity such that a busy person will not be perceived as a scarce resource in the absence of agency because her long hours of work will be attributed to necessity. Thus, we predict that inferences of higher status, aspirational image, and scarcity will be considerably diminished when busyness is depicted as driven by need rather than as a deliberate choice.

**H3:** Positive inferences of status, aspirational image, and scarcity in response to busyness at work will be moderated by perceived agency over the decision to be busy; observers’ inferences of status, aspirational image, and scarcity will be weakened in the absence of agency over the decision to be busy (i.e., when the choice to work long hours is perceived as non-deliberate).

We explore the role of culture as an important boundary condition for the positive associations based on signals of busyness and lack of leisure time. North Americans and Europeans display different attitudes and values toward work and leisure. We surmise that these cultural differences could lead not only to attenuation, but even a reversal of the inferences observed with U.S. participants.

Americans view work as a priority and tend to idealize busyness and long hours of work (Gershuny 2005; Hochschild 1997; Rutherford 2001; Schulte 2014). Europeans, in contrast, regard their leisure time as important as, or more important, than work time (Brislin and Kim 2003; Richards 1998, 1999). Brislin and Kim (2003) show that in Western Europe, leisure and vacations are greatly valued and constitute the most important events in many people’s lives. Over the last half century, Western Europeans have gradually opted to work less and take longer vacations (Bennhold 2004) while Americans have increased the time spent at work (Ferguson 2003). According to a study by the OECD, between 1979 and 1999, the average American

working year lengthened by 50 hours, or nearly 3%, but the average working year in some European countries shrank by about 12% (Ferguson 2003).

This divergence of priorities and attitudes toward work and leisure is often attributed to culture and religion. In particular, the Protestant work ethic (Weber 1905/2002) which discourages frivolous and unproductive use of time. These values of hard work and determination are also reflected in the ethos of the American Dream (Adams 1931). Indeed, in the U.S. working long hours appears to pay off more than in Europe since possibilities for social mobility are perceived to be higher in the U.S. (Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch 2004). In the eyes of Americans, those who choose to be busy and skip leisure time may be associated with greater achievements and higher status.

Popular culture often reflects and amplifies these cultural differences; a recent Super Bowl commercial by Cadillac features a wealthy businessman who glorifies the busy American lifestyle and his limited leisure and vacation time, and lampoons Europeans for enjoying long vacations. Europeans typically present the opposite perspective; a New York Times article discussing Europe's love of leisure features European businessmen and economists who argue that "the main difference with the U.S. is that we spend more time enjoying life" and "leisure is a normal good, and as you become richer, economic theory says that you consume more of it" (Bennhold 2004).

We therefore predict that these cultural differences will lead to opposing results in the U.S. versus Europe: while Americans associate a busy lifestyle and long hours of work with high status, Europeans may view a leisurely lifestyle and the ability to enjoy life and take long vacation as a signal of status.

**H4:** Positive inferences of status, aspirational image, and scarcity in response to busyness at work will be moderated by cross-cultural differences; Americans will interpret

busyness at work as a stronger signal of status than leisure time, whereas Europeans will interpret leisure time as a stronger signal of status than busyness at work.

In conclusion, we propose that people will regard those who are busy to be higher in status and will want to emulate them more than those who are less busy. Like a rare gemstone, a busy individual is seen a scarce resource and in high demand.

## Overview of the Present Research

Six studies test our conceptual model (summarized in figure 1). We employ various methods to manipulate busyness and products related to busyness in a variety of interpersonal situations and consumption contexts. As a preliminary investigation, we first explore Twitter data categorized as “humblebrags,” which consist of self-deprecating boasts (Alford 2012), and find that a significant number of them relate to busyness at work. Inspired by these findings, study 1 uses hypothetical Facebook posts to either communicate a busy lifestyle or a non-busy lifestyle, in addition to considering the role of agency. In study 2, in addition to generalizing the effects from study 1, we also consider the mediating role of scarcity – the degree to which a person is perceived to be scarce and in demand. In study 3, we explore cross-cultural (i.e., North America vs. Europe) differences in response to busyness at work and we demonstrate a reversal of the effect, whereby busyness at work leads to lower rather than higher inferences of status in the eyes of Europeans. In studies 4A and 4B, we consider specific marketing implications for brands and products associated with busyness. Specifically in study 4A, we considered three brands: Whole Foods, pretested to be associated with an expensive lifestyle, Peapod, a service associated with a busy lifestyle, and a control brand, Trader Joe’s. In study 4B, we conducted a similar study but instead of grocery stores, participants considered a person who either wore a

Bluetooth ear device (associated with multitasking and a busy lifestyle) or a pair of expensive headphones for music (associated with a leisurely lifestyle). Finally, in study 5 we consider how busyness can be portrayed in advertisements. In the general discussion, we report additional findings exploring different working contexts (i.e., white-collar vs. blue-collar type of job) and demonstrate a boundary condition of the effect. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications, providing tangible prescriptions for how marketers can emphasize busyness and promote time saving products for status signaling purposes.

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## RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS

### Pilot Study

To provide empirical evidence of the conspicuous display of busyness and lack of leisure time, we conducted a pilot study examining the content of more than one thousand tweets posted by famous people available on the “humblebrag” website. Humblebragging is the act of showing off about something through an ostensibly self-deprecating statement. For example, the cover of the book “Humblebrag, The Art of False Modesty” (Wittels 2012), mentions that the author “would love some free time but has been too busy writing for *Parks and Recreation*, *Easttown & Down*, and a bunch of other stuff #vacationplease.” The goal of this pilot was to examine the frequency of complaints about busyness on social media as compared to other types of self-deprecating statements, such as humblebragging about fame, popularity, and attractiveness. Our

dataset of brags was retrieved from the web (<https://twitter.com/Humblebrag>). Before publishing the Humblebrag book, the author asked people to email him leads on any humblebrags available online. About 1,600 statements, the majority of which were by famous people, were then retweeted on the humblebrag web page from 2010 to 2012. With the help of three research assistants, we coded 1,100 of these self-deprecating statements for busyness and found that about 12% of them related to complaints about hard work and lack of time (e.g., Tlaloc Rivas, stage director, “*Opened a show last Friday. Begin rehearsals for another next Tuesday. In-between that, meetings in DC. I HAVE NO LIFE;*” Austin Pettis, American football receiver, “*Had a lot going on these past few weeks and even more these next two ... this is wayyyy to much to handle!*” Kai Ryssdal, journalist, “*The CNN-LA green room is a cold and lonely place at 7 on a Sunday morning!*” Josh Sigurdson, singer, “*Hi, I’m 16 and I’m publishing 3 books and an album this year. Do you have any advice on how to handle it best?*”). Other humbles brags not related to time were, for example, about celebrity status (e.g., Lindsay Lohan, actress, “*Oh my god, I’m so embarrassed, paparazzi just blinded me with flashes again, as I was walking into dinner. They pushed me and I tripped!*”), or award winning (e.g., Olivia Wilde, actress, “*Watching my brother graduate from Andover today. So proud, it is silly. More important than MTV awards but thank you to all who voted for me!*”). In sum, this pilot study confirms that conspicuously displaying one’s busyness through social media is a practice pursued to some extent by people who enjoy success and celebrity status, and have been recognized to be bragging by the humblebrag community. Although these results are observational, they offer initial evidence that people use social media to publicly display how much they work and complain about lack of leisure time in an attempt to exhibit their high status.

## Study 1: Humblebragging about Busyness through Social Media

Over the last decade, the exponential growth of social networks and blogs has multiplied the chances consumers have to portray a virtual image of themselves in front of others and has opened up a new way to display one's time spending to a large audience. Through social media, consumers can share their lives (e.g., Facebook), their opinions and interests (e.g., Twitter, Pinterest), their professional achievements (e.g., LinkedIn), among others things. Consistent with the findings from the Humblebrag pilot, people also often brag about being busy on social media. In study 1, we consider the inferences in terms of status and aspirational image that people make about a person who posts status updates regarding their level of busyness at work. In addition, we examine the role of perceived agency over the decision to be busy. Consistent with our hypotheses, we expect that the attributions of enhanced status and high aspirational image will diminish when busyness at work is framed as non-deliberate.

*Method.* We recruited 352 respondents for a paid online survey through the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform (40% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 36$ , American). We randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions (busy brags condition, non-busy brags condition, or busy brags without agency condition) between-subjects. Participants read Facebook status updates of a hypothetical friend of theirs. To examine the effect of conspicuous busyness across genders, we varied whether the Facebook updates were posted by a man, named Sam Fisher, or by a woman, named Sally Fisher. Thus the sample was equally split between participants who read about the female individual and participants who read about the male individual. Since there were no significant differences in the patterns of results, the data were collapsed and analyzed jointly. For ease of exposition, we report the questions and results for the rest of the study in terms of the

male individual. All participants were asked to imagine they were friends with Sam Fisher on Facebook and to read a few of Sam's recent posts. The content of three status updates was manipulated between subjects. The status updates appeared one after another in chronological order on a simulated Facebook page (see Appendix A for a representation of the stimuli). In the busy condition, participants read the following posts: 1. Thursday 2pm, "Oh I have been working non-stop all week;" 2. Friday noon, "Quick 10 minute lunch;" 3. Friday 5pm, "Still at work!" In the non-busy condition, participants read the following posts: 1. Thursday 2pm, "I haven't worked much this week, had lots of free time;" 2. Friday noon, "Enjoying a long lunch break." 3. Friday 5pm, "Done with work!" Lastly, in the busy without agency condition, the first two posts were identical to the busy condition, however the third post made it clear this busy job was not Sam's deliberate choice: Friday 5pm, "Still at work, I wish I could have picked a different job!"

Subsequently, we measured the two dependent variables of interest: perceived status and aspirational image. First, participants answered three questions assessing the individual's perceived status. Throughout the studies, three items compose our measure of perceived status. The first item taps into the perceived social status of the described individual. The other two items tap into perceived financial wealth and are meant to measure what Veblen referred to as "pecuniary achievements." Specifically, participants answered the following three questions: 1. On a scale from 1 to 7, how would you rank the social status of the individual described? (1 = Low social status, 7 = High social status); 2. Do you think he is financially wealthy? (1 = Not wealthy, 7 = Extremely wealthy); 3. What is Sam's most likely gross salary per year? (1 = \$20,000 or less, 2 = around \$30,000, 3 = around \$50,000, 4 = around \$70,000, 5 = around \$90,000, 6 = \$100,000 or more). Subsequently, respondents rated the aspirational image conveyed by Sam. Throughout the studies, four items displayed in randomized order compose



our second dependent variable of aspirational image. Two items measure whether the target individual is perceived as a “winner” or as a “loser” (reverse coded and included to reduce potential demand effects). Two additional items measure the extent to which observers look up to and would like to be like the described individual. Specifically, participants indicated how they view Sam on the following four items: 1. View him as a winner; 2. View him as a loser (reverse coded); 3. Look up to him; 4. Want to be like him (all items measured on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 = Not at all, to 7 = Extremely). Lastly, a manipulation check measured Sam’s busyness: How busy is Sam? (1 = Not busy at all, 7 = Extremely busy). In addition, two additional items were measured to check the effectiveness of the agency manipulation: 1. How deliberate is Sam’s choice to pick this work? (1 = Not deliberate at all, 7 = Extremely deliberate); 2. To which extent does Sam want his job? (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much).

*Results.* The analysis of the busyness manipulation check confirmed that Sam was perceived as busier in the busy ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 5.62$ ) and busy without agency ( $M_{\text{busy no agency}} = 5.66$ ) conditions than in the non-busy condition ( $M_{\text{non busy}} = 2.16$ , both  $p$ -values  $< .001$ ). Likewise, the manipulation check for agency (2 items,  $\alpha = .58$ ) confirmed that Sam’s career choice was perceived as more deliberate in the busy ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 4.93$ ) and non-busy ( $M_{\text{non busy}} = 4.28$ ) conditions than in the busy without agency condition ( $M_{\text{busy no agency}} = 3.90$ , both  $p$ -values  $< .05$ ).

The analyses of the two dependent variables yielded the hypothesized pattern of results. First, the three items measuring Sam’s status were collapsed into a single composite (3 items,  $\alpha = .82$ ), after transforming the gross salary item from a 6 to a 7 point scale. A one-way ANOVA analysis of perceived status revealed a significant effect of condition ( $F(2, 349) = 13.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As illustrated by figure 2A, planned contrasts revealed that participants saw Sam as higher status in the busy condition ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 3.61$ ) than in the non-busy ( $M_{\text{non busy}} = 2.89$ ;  $t(349) = 5.28$ ,  $p$

$< .001$ ) and in the busy without agency ( $M_{\text{busy no agency}} = 3.25$ ;  $t(349) = 2.52$ ,  $p = .012$ ) conditions. The difference between the non-busy condition ( $M_{\text{non busy}} = 2.89$ ) and the busy without agency condition was also significant ( $M_{\text{busy no agency}} = 3.25$ ;  $t(349) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .015$ ).

Second the four items measuring Sam's aspirational image were collapsed into a single composite (4 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ). As illustrated by figure 2B, a one-way ANOVA analysis of aspirational image revealed a significant effect of condition ( $F(2, 348) = 12.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that participants rated the aspirational image conveyed by Sam as higher in the busy condition ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 3.87$ ) than in the non-busy ( $M_{\text{non busy}} = 3.07$ ;  $t(348) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and busy without agency ( $M_{\text{busy no agency}} = 3.35$ ;  $t(348) = 3.08$ ,  $p = .002$ ) conditions. There was a marginally significant difference between the non-busy condition ( $M_{\text{non busy}} = 3.07$ ) and the busy without agency condition ( $M_{\text{busy no agency}} = 3.35$ ;  $t(348) = 1.64$ ,  $p = .099$ ).

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*Discussion.* Consistent with our hypotheses, the results of study 1 demonstrate that an individual who is posting Facebook updates about his busy lifestyle at work is perceived as higher in status and conveys a more aspirational image than an individual whose updates reveal a more relaxed working schedule. Importantly, this study also explores the role of perceived agency over the decision to be busy. As expected, we find that when the busy lifestyle at work is depicted as needed and non-deliberate, the positive inferences associated with business are substantially weakened. In the next study, we further explore the role of agency over the decision to be busy by employing two different manipulations. We also examine perceived scarcity as the key mediating mechanism underlying status and aspirational image inferences.

## Study 2: Inferences from Busyness and Agency over the Decision to be Busy

In this study, we provide further evidence in support of the role of perceived agency over the decision to be busy by explicitly manipulating whether the busy lifestyle at work is framed as non-deliberate (i.e., “it was *not her decision* to have this lifestyle”). We expect that, when a busy lifestyle at work is framed as non-deliberate, busyness will no longer be associated with enhanced status and an aspirational image. Moreover, we test our proposed mediating mechanism of scarcity. We hypothesize that participants will infer enhanced status because they believe that the busy individual is a scarce and sought after resource, but only when the decision to be busy appears as deliberate.

*Method.* We recruited 161 participants through the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform who responded to a paid online survey (40% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 33$ , American). We randomly assigned participants to one of four between-subjects conditions in a 2 (busy lifestyle vs. non-busy lifestyle) x 2 (agency vs. no agency) design. All participants read a short paragraph about a 35 year old individual named Alexis. We manipulated busyness at work by telling participants that Alexis is *very* busy and that she works *many* hours per week (busy lifestyle condition) or that she typically is *not* very busy and that she works *few* hours per week (non-busy lifestyle condition). Participants read the following description: “Imagine Alexis, she is 35 years old. Alexis works many [a few] hours per week and she is [not] a very busy person.” In addition, we manipulated the agency over her lifestyle by depicting the lifestyle choice as deliberate (agency condition) or not (no agency condition). Specifically, participants read: “She feels that it was [not] her decision to have this lifestyle.”

After reading the description, participants answered the same battery of questions as in study 1 to rate Alexis' perceived status (3 items,  $\alpha = .85$ ) and aspirational image (4 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ). Next, participants answered three questions assessing Alexis's perceived scarcity (whether she is seen as a scarce resource in high demand): 1. Do you perceive Alexis as a "scarce resource"? (1 = Definitely no, 7 = Definitely yes); 2. Is Alexis an attractive, hard-to-recruit individual? (1 = Definitely no, 7 = Definitely yes); 3. Do you imagine Alexis is sought after in the job market by head-hunters? (1 = Not sought after at all, 7 = Very much sought after). We averaged the three items ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and used the resulting measure as mediator in our analyses. Lastly, a manipulation check measured Alexis's busyness level and the effectiveness of the agency manipulation using the same two items employed in study 1 ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

*Results.* The manipulation check confirmed that Alexis was perceived as busier in the busy condition than in the non-busy condition ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 6.19$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-busy}} = 1.50$ ,  $t(159) = 37.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, the analysis of the manipulation check for agency confirmed that Alexis's lifestyle was perceived as more deliberate in the agency condition than in the no agency condition ( $M_{\text{agency}} = 5.75$  vs.  $M_{\text{no agency}} = 3.04$ ,  $t(159) = 12.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We conducted a 2 (busy vs. non-busy) x 2 (agency vs. no agency) between-subjects ANOVA with status as the first dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for busyness ( $F(1, 157) = 99.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a significant main effect for agency ( $F(1, 157) = 5.30$ ,  $p = .023$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 157) = 7.17$ ,  $p = .008$ ).

As predicted, when the choice to work was portrayed as deliberate, the described individual was perceived as higher status when she was busy at work rather than when she was not busy ( $M_{\text{agency busy}} = 4.38$  vs.  $M_{\text{agency non-busy}} = 2.33$ ,  $t(78) = 10.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The busyness manipulation elicited a significant difference between conditions also when the lifestyle was

depicted as non-deliberate ( $M_{\text{no agency busy}} = 3.57$  vs.  $M_{\text{no agency non-busy}} = 2.39$ ,  $t(79) = 4.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, the comparison between the two busy conditions revealed that the status inference associated with conducting a busy lifestyle at work was significantly weakened when this busyness was depicted as non-deliberate ( $M_{\text{agency busy}} = 4.38$  vs.  $M_{\text{no agency busy}} = 3.57$ ,  $t(73) = 3.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as we expected.

Next, we conducted the same analysis using aspirational image as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for busyness ( $F(1, 157) = 42.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a significant main effect for agency ( $F(1, 157) = 19.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 157) = 3.89$ ,  $p = .050$ ), depicted in figure 3A. As predicted, when the lifestyle was perceived as deliberate, participants perceived the busy individual as more aspirational than the non-busy one ( $M_{\text{agency busy}} = 4.80$  vs.  $M_{\text{agency non-busy}} = 3.25$ ,  $t(78) = 5.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The busyness manipulation elicited a significant difference between conditions also when the lifestyle was depicted as non-deliberate ( $M_{\text{no agency busy}} = 3.65$  vs.  $M_{\text{no agency non-busy}} = 2.82$ ,  $t(79) = 3.40$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Moreover, the comparison between the two busy conditions revealed that the aspirational image associated with conducting a busy lifestyle at work was significantly weakened when this busyness was depicted as non-deliberate ( $M_{\text{agency busy}} = 4.80$  vs.  $M_{\text{no agency busy}} = 3.65$ ,  $t(73) = 5.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as we expected.

Finally, we conducted the same analysis using scarcity as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for busyness ( $F(1, 157) = 123.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a significant main effect for agency ( $F(1, 157) = 11.57$ ,  $p = .001$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 157) = 4.80$ ,  $p = .030$ ), shown in figure 3B. As predicted, when the individual was depicted as busy at work and her choice as deliberate, she was perceived as a more scarce resource ( $M_{\text{agency busy}} = 4.66$ ) relative to all the other three conditions ( $M_{\text{agency non-busy}} = 2.30$ ,  $t(78) = 10.11$ ,

$p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{no agency busy}} = 3.67$ ,  $t(73) = 3.64$ ,  $p = .001$ ; and  $M_{\text{no agency non-busy}} = 2.09$ ,  $t(80) = 10.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

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Insert figure 3 about here  
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*Mediated Moderation Analyses.* To test moderation by agency and mediation by perceived scarcity, we conducted two mediated moderation analyses (Edwards and Lambert 2007) examining whether perceived scarcity mediated the detected interaction between the manipulations of busyness and agency on the dependent variables.

As reported above, agency significantly moderated the relationship between busyness and both the first dependent variable (status) and the mediator (scarcity). In addition, when status was regressed on busyness, agency, their two-way interaction, and scarcity, the mediator was significant ( $b = .62$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(156) = 11.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the effect of the interaction between busyness and agency on status became non-significant (from  $b = .87$ ,  $SE = .32$ ,  $t(157) = 2.68$ ,  $p = .008$ , to  $b = .39$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $t(156) = 1.59$ , NS). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the overall size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .046 to .976), suggesting a significant indirect effect.

The same analysis performed on the second dependent variable, aspirational image, revealed an analogous pattern of results. As reported above, agency significantly moderated the relationship between busyness and both the second dependent variable (aspirational image) and the mediator (scarcity). Moreover, when aspirational image was regressed on busyness, agency, their two-way interaction, and scarcity, the mediator was significant ( $b = .58$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t(156) = 8.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the effect of the interaction between busyness and agency on aspirational image became non-significant (from  $b = .72$ ,  $SE = .36$ ,  $t(157) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .050$ , to  $b = .27$ ,  $SE =$

.31,  $t(156) = .88$ , NS). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the overall size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .058 to .944), suggesting a significant indirect effect of scarcity.

*Discussion.* Study 2 extends our findings on the role of perceived agency over the decision to be busy at work as a boundary condition. We find that when a busy lifestyle at work is not perceived to be the product of a voluntary and deliberate choice, the positive inferences associated with busyness are significantly weakened. In line with hypothesis 2, our results provide evidence in support of our proposed mediating mechanism of perceived scarcity. We demonstrate that participants ascribe a higher status and aspirational image to a busy individual because they believe that she is a scarce and highly-sought after resource, as long as the decision to work long hours is perceived as deliberate. In sum, these findings show that, in order for busyness to be an effective signal of status, aspirational image, and scarcity, it must also be accompanied by agency over the decision to be busy.

The next study further contributes to our understanding of the consequences of appearing busy by testing our propositions with an international sample of participants drawn from Europe and the U.S.

### Study 3: Cross-cultural Differences in Response to Busyness

While the previous two studies show that busyness leads to high inferences in terms of status and portrays an aspirational image, both studies were conducted with U.S. participants. In study 3, we compare the responses of Italian and American participants to busy and non-busy individuals. We predict that cultural differences will lead to opposing patterns of results such that

Americans will interpret busyness at work as a stronger signal of status than leisure time, whereas Europeans will interpret leisure time as a stronger signal of status than busyness.

*Method.* We recruited 203 participants (50% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 41$ ; 46% Italian citizens and 54% American citizens) through the Qualtrics market research panel. Participants responded to a paid online survey in their native language (i.e., either English or Italian). All participants read a short description of a 35 years old individual named Jeff (“Giovanni” for Italians). We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions: “busy lifestyle” or “leisurely lifestyle” condition. Participants in the busy lifestyle condition read, “Imagine Jeff, he is 35 years old. Jeff works. He has a busy lifestyle and his calendar is always full.” In contrast, participants in the leisurely lifestyle condition read, “Imagine Jeff, he is 35 years old. Jeff does not work and has a leisurely lifestyle.” After reading the description, participants answered the same battery of questions as in previous studies to rate Jeff’s perceived status (3 items,  $\alpha = .67$ ). In this study and in study 4B, we adapted the item measuring inferences regarding the “gross salary per year” to “earning potential” to fit the scenario where the non-busy individual is not working at all. We also expanded the item to a 7 point scale (i.e., “What do you think is Jeff’s earning potential per year?” 1 = \$20,000 or less, 2 = around \$40,000, 3 = around \$60,000, 4 = around \$80,000, 5 = around \$100,000, 6 = around \$120,000, 7 = \$140,000 or more).<sup>1</sup> Next, participants answered three questions as in study 2 to assess Jeff’s perceived scarcity (3 items,  $\alpha = .50$ ).<sup>2</sup> Two of the three items assessing scarcity of the individual were slightly adapted to fit the scenario where the non-busy individual is not working. Specifically, participants responded to the following questions: 1. Do you perceive Jeff as a “scarce resource”? (1 = Definitely no, 7 = Definitely yes); 2. Would Jeff be an attractive, hard-to-recruit individual? (1 = Definitely no, 7 = Definitely yes);

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<sup>1</sup> Amounts were expressed in Euros for the survey in Italian.

<sup>2</sup> Owing to the lower reliability of the scarcity measure in this study, we also performed all analyses on the three items separately. Our results hold when each item is evaluated separately.



3. Do you imagine Jeff would be sought after in the job market? (1 = Not sought after at all, 7 = Very much sought after). Lastly, a manipulation check measured Jeff's busyness level as in previous studies.

*Results.* The manipulation check confirmed that both Italian and American respondents perceived Jeff to be significantly busier in the busy condition than in the non-busy condition ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 6.11$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-busy}} = 2.85$ ,  $t(198) = 18.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To analyze respondents' status inferences, we conducted a 2 (busy vs. non-busy) x 2 (U.S. vs. Europe) between-subjects ANOVA with status as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a non-significant main effect for busyness ( $F(1, 199) = .53$ , NS), a significant main effect of country ( $F(1, 199) = 7.68$ ,  $p = .006$ ), and a significant cross-over interaction ( $F(1, 199) = 17.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) depicted in figure 4A. As predicted, Americans granted greater status to the busy individual than to the non-busy individual ( $M_{\text{busy US}} = 4.39$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-busy US}} = 3.79$ ,  $t(107) = 2.97$ ,  $p = .004$ ). In contrast, Italians granted less status to the busy individual than to the non-busy one ( $M_{\text{busy Europe}} = 4.15$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-busy Europe}} = 2.79$ ,  $t(92) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

Next, we conducted the same analysis using perceived scarcity as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for busyness ( $F(1, 199) = 21.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a non-significant main effect of country ( $F(1, 199) = .71$ , NS), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 199) = 52.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ) depicted in figure 4B. As expected, Americans perceived Jeff as a more scarce resource when the lifestyle was depicted as busy at work than when the lifestyle was depicted as leisurely ( $M_{\text{busy US}} = 4.58$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-busy US}} = 2.79$ ,  $t(107) = 7.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, Italians did not perceive the busy individual as a more scarce resource relative to the non-busy individual ( $M_{\text{busy Europe}} = 3.35$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-busy Europe}} = 3.76$ ,  $t(92) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .021$ ).

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Insert figure 4 about here

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*Mediated Moderation Analysis.* To test moderation by agency and mediation by perceived scarcity, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (Edwards and Lambert 2007) examining whether perceived scarcity mediated the detected interaction between the manipulations of busyness and country on the dependent variable.

As reported above, respondents' country of origin significantly moderated the relationship between busyness and both the first dependent variable (status) and the mediator (scarcity). In addition, when status was regressed on busyness, country, their two-way interaction, and scarcity, the mediator was significant ( $b = .33$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t(198) = 4.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the effect of the interaction between busyness and country on status was significantly reduced (from  $b = 1.45$ ,  $SE = .35$ ,  $t(199) = 4.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , to  $b = .73$ ,  $SE = .37$ ,  $t(198) = 1.95$ ,  $p = .052$ ). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the overall size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .380 to 1.166), suggesting a significant indirect effect.

*Discussion.* Findings from this study highlight that the positive associations in response to signals of busyness are culturally dependent. While busyness at work and lack of leisure time is associated with higher status among Americans, the effect is reversed in the eyes of Europeans who associate abundance of leisure time with higher status. In line with hypothesis 2 and with the results of study 2, our findings provide additional evidence in support of our proposed mediating mechanism and demonstrate that American participants infer higher status because they believe that the busy individual is a scarce and highly sought after.

Study 4: The Signaling Power of Brands and Products Associated with Busyness

In study 4, we explore the implications of our work for brands and products that indicate a busy lifestyle. While luxury brands and products have been shown to be an effective tool to communicate one's status, our aim was to determine whether the use of time-saving products/services could also be an effective signal of status in the eyes of others. Specifically, study 4A examines how a timesaving grocery service associated with a busy lifestyle (i.e., Peapod, online shopping and delivery) signals status as compared to food and grocery brands associated with a well-off lifestyle (i.e., Whole Foods) and with an average lifestyle (i.e., Trader Joe's). In addition, Study 4B examines the signaling power of a timesaving multitasking product associated with busyness (i.e., a hands-free Bluetooth cell phone headset) as compared to products associated with leisure and free time (i.e., a pair of headphones for music and leisure). Importantly, in study 4A we employ a more nuanced measure of social status. Research on status attribution (Foladare 1969) highlights the distinction between "ascribed/inherited" status (i.e., assigned from the moment of birth) and "achieved/earned" status (i.e., based on personal capabilities and achievements). Thus, in study 4A we examine specific inferences in terms of both inherited and earned status.

*Method (Study 4A).* We recruited 171 participants (50% female,  $M_{age} = 26$ , American) who responded to a series of unrelated lab studies in a city in the Northeastern United States. We randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions (Peapod – busy lifestyle vs. Whole Foods – expensive lifestyle vs. Trader Joe's – control lifestyle) between-subjects. Participants read a short paragraph about a grocery brand and a customer, Matthew. Based on a pre-test reported below, we selected two retail brands associated with busy (Peapod) versus expensive (Whole Foods) lifestyles and a control retail brand (Trader Joe's), associated with average scores

on both lifestyles. Participants in the Peapod – busy lifestyle condition read, “Peapod is an online grocery service in the United States. Peapod’s home delivery service allows consumers to shop online and receive groceries delivered right to their homes. Imagine Matthew; he is 35 years old. Matthew typically buys groceries from Peapod.” Participants in the expensive lifestyle condition read, “Whole Foods is a chain of supermarkets in the United States. Consumers can buy groceries at Whole Foods stores located throughout the country. Imagine Matthew; he is 35 years old. Matthew typically buys groceries at Whole Foods.” Finally, participants in the control condition read, “Trader Joe’s is a chain of supermarkets in the United States. Consumers can buy groceries at Trader Joe’s stores located throughout the country. Imagine Matthew; he is 35 years old. Matthew typically buys groceries at Trader Joe’s.”

After reading the paragraph, participants assessed Matthew through four items presented in randomized order. To rate Matthew’s *earned* status, participants rated their level of agreement with the following two statements (2 items,  $\alpha = .65$ ): 1. This person has earned social status; 2. This person has a high income level (both items measured on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree, to 7 = Strongly agree). To rate Matthew’s *inherited* status, participants rated their level of agreement with the following two statements (2 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ): 1. This person has inherited social status; 2. This person has much inherited wealth” (both items measured on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree, to 7 = Strongly agree). Additionally, a manipulation check measured Matthew’s busyness: How busy is Matthew? (1 = Not busy at all, 7 = Extremely busy).

*Pre-test for Retail Brands (Study 4A).* We first confirmed that the two retail brands Peapod and Whole Foods were respectively highly associated with busy and expensive lifestyles in a pre-test with an independent sample of 64 participants (50% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 23$ ; American),

recruited from the same subject pool as the main study respondents. We selected a list of retail brands (Star Market, Costco, Peapod online grocery shopping, Trader Joe's, Walmart, Whole Foods, and Safeway) that have outlets in Massachusetts, the region where the pre-test took place. We measured the extent to which these retail brands were associated with busy and expensive lifestyles. For each retail brand, participants rated the level of association with a randomized list of lifestyles: In your opinion, to what degree is [retail brand] associated with the following lifestyles? (a) Busy at work, (b) Working long hours, (c) Expensive, (d) Rich (1 = Not associated at all, 7 = Extremely associated). As expected, Peapod's level of association with the two items tapping into busyness ( $\alpha = .86$ ) was higher than the other focal brand, Whole Foods ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.71$  vs.  $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 3.79$ ,  $t(61) = 3.21$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and it was the highest level of association with a busy lifestyle among all pretested brands. Moreover, Whole Foods's level of association with the two items tapping into an expensive lifestyle ( $\alpha = .90$ ) was higher than the other focal brand, Peapod ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 5.94$  vs.  $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.05$ ,  $t(61) = 8.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and it was the highest expensiveness rating among all brands. Trader Joe's was picked as the control brand since its rating in terms of association with a busy lifestyle ( $M_{\text{trader joe}} = 3.96$ ) was similar to Whole Foods ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 3.79$ ,  $t(62) = 1.43$ , NS), but significantly lower than Peapod ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.71$ ,  $t(60) = 2.43$ ,  $p = .018$ ) and its association with an expensive lifestyle ( $M_{\text{trader joe}} = 4.28$ ) was similar to Peapod ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.05$ ,  $t(60) = .98$ , NS), but significantly lower than Whole Foods ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 5.94$ ,  $t(62) = 8.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Results (Study 4A).* The analysis of the manipulation check confirmed that Matthew was perceived as busier when shopping through Peapod ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 5.20$ ) rather than at Whole Foods ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 4.25$ ,  $t(168) = 4.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or at Trader Joe's ( $M_{\text{trader joe}} = 4.31$ ,  $t(168) = 4.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The analyses of the two dependent variables yielded the hypothesized pattern of results. A one-way ANOVA analysis of earned status revealed a significant effect of condition ( $F(2, 168) = 7.72, p = .001$ ). As illustrated by figure 5A, planned contrasts revealed that participants rated Matthew's earned status as higher in the Whole Foods – expensive lifestyle ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 4.36$ ) and Peapod – busy lifestyle ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.29$ ) conditions than in the Trader Joe's – control condition ( $M_{\text{trader joe}} = 3.66$ , both  $p$ -values = .001). Importantly, there was no significant difference between the Whole Foods – expensive lifestyle ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 4.36$ ) and Peapod – busy lifestyle ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.29$ ;  $t(168) = .38$ , NS) conditions.

Second, a one-way ANOVA analysis of inherited status revealed a similar pattern of results with a significant effect of condition ( $F(2, 168) = 10.18, p < .001$ ). As shown in figure 5B, planned contrasts revealed that participants rated Matthew's inherited status as higher in the Whole Foods – expensive lifestyle ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 4.19$ ) and Peapod – busy lifestyle ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.05$ ) conditions than in the Trader Joe's – control condition ( $M_{\text{trader joe}} = 3.25$ , both  $p$ -values < .001). Even in this case, there was no significant difference between the Whole Foods – expensive lifestyle ( $M_{\text{whole foods}} = 4.19$ ) and Peapod – busy lifestyle ( $M_{\text{peapod}} = 4.05$ ;  $t(168) = .68$ , NS) conditions. Although Whole Foods is perceived to be a more expensive brand, Peapod has the same signaling power in terms of both earned and inherited status by virtue of its association with a busy lifestyle.

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*Method (Study 4B).* The objective of this study was to compare the signaling power of a timesaving multitasking product associated with busyness (i.e., a hands-free Bluetooth cell phone headset) as compared to products associated with leisure and free time (i.e., a pair of headphones

for music and leisure). We recruited 130 participants through the Qualtrics market research panel who responded to a paid online survey (49% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 48$ , American). Given the huge variability in terms of product aesthetics and design for existing Bluetooth headsets on the market, we selected two different Bluetooth models (a technical model and a high-design model). As a stronger test of our hypotheses, we also examined two conditions for the music headphones using the same picture of the product and emphasized the expensiveness of the device in one of them. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four following conditions: (a) Bluetooth 1 (busy lifestyle); (b) Bluetooth 2 (busy lifestyle); (c) headphones for music (leisure lifestyle); and (d) expensive headphones for music (leisure lifestyle). Participants read a short paragraph about an individual named Anne and saw a picture of her using a product (see Appendix B for the stimuli). In the Bluetooth conditions, participants read the following description, “Imagine Anne, a 35 years old woman. She is wearing a hands-free Bluetooth headset for her cell phone. It seems that she is always wearing her hands-free headset.” In the headphones conditions, participants read the following description, “Imagine Anne, a 35 years old woman. She is wearing a pair of [expensive] headphones for music and leisure. It seems that she is always wearing her headphones.”

Next, participants rated the perceived status (3 items,  $\alpha = .63$ ) and scarcity (3 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ) of the described individual using the measures from study 3. Additionally, a series of manipulation check questions asked participants to estimate the price of the product and to rate Anne’s busyness (as in all the previous studies).

*Results (Study 4B).* As expected, the expensive headphones were perceived as the most expensive product (\$140.3) followed by the Bluetooth 2 (\$95.5), the regular headphones (\$72.6), and the Bluetooth 1 (\$67.5). Moreover, Anne was perceived as busier in both the Bluetooth

conditions ( $M_{\text{bluetooth } 2} = 4.85$ ;  $M_{\text{bluetooth } 1} = 4.79$ ) than in both the headphones conditions ( $M_{\text{headphones}} = 3.53$ ;  $M_{\text{expensive headphones}} = 3.25$ , all  $p$ -values  $< .001$ ).

A one-way ANOVA analysis of perceived status revealed a significant effect of condition ( $F(3, 126) = 4.93$ ,  $p = .003$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that participants saw Anne as higher status when she was wearing a Bluetooth ( $M_{\text{bluetooth } 2} = 4.15$ ;  $M_{\text{bluetooth } 1} = 3.93$ ) than when she was wearing the headphones for leisure ( $M_{\text{headphones}} = 3.49$ ;  $M_{\text{expensive headphones}} = 3.49$ , all  $p$ -values  $< .05$ ). A similar one-way ANOVA analysis of perceived scarcity revealed a similar pattern of result with a significant effect of condition ( $F(3, 126) = 6.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that participants saw Anne as a more scarce resource when she was wearing a Bluetooth ( $M_{\text{bluetooth } 2} = 3.42$ ;  $M_{\text{bluetooth } 1} = 3.39$ ) than when she was wearing the headphones for leisure ( $M_{\text{headphones}} = 2.73$ ;  $M_{\text{expensive headphones}} = 2.28$ , all  $p$ -values  $< .05$ ).

We then conducted a mediation analysis to determine whether scarcity mediated the relationship between the busyness manipulation (busy lifestyle vs. leisure lifestyle) and perceptions of Anne's status. Since there were no significant differences in the patterns of results between the two "busy lifestyle" conditions and between the two "leisure lifestyle" conditions, the data per condition were collapsed and analyzed jointly (i.e., the Bluetooth 1 and Bluetooth 2 results were merged, and the "expensive headphones" and "headphones" results were merged). As predicted, the effect of busyness on status was significantly reduced (from  $b = 0.57$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $t(128) = 3.89$ ,  $p = .001$ , to  $b = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $t(127) = 1.268$ ,  $p = .095$ ) when scarcity was included in the model, whereas scarcity was a significant predictor ( $b = 0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(127) = 8.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the overall size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .165 to .627), suggesting a significant indirect effect.



*Discussion.* Findings from study 4 demonstrate that, as compared to more expensive brands and products not associated with busyness, brands and products associated with a busy lifestyle, such as a timesaving grocery service or a multitasking Bluetooth headset, can lead to higher inferences of status in the eyes of others. These findings are consistent with popular blogs and magazine articles providing suggestions on how to look busy. For example, a recent humorous blog ([www.thefacultylounge.org](http://www.thefacultylounge.org)) providing “tips on how to make sure you convey to others the full extent of your busyness and importance” suggests “...Talk on one of those Bluetooth ear thingies for your cell phone at all times while in the building. The exception to this is faculty meetings or workshops, when it is acceptable not to talk on the phone, though you should continue to wear the earpiece. If anyone asks, say that you didn’t even notice – you spend so much time wearing it ‘for conference calls’ that it’s like a part of your body.”

#### Study 5: Portraying a Busy Lifestyle in Advertising

A recent ad associates the Cadillac brand with a glorified busy and hectic lifestyle. The ad features a Cadillac owner proudly bragging about his limited leisure and vacation time. Thus, rather than communicating an aspirational image and status solely through luxury consumption, this ad emphasizes busyness as an aspiration in itself. In the next study, we consider how busyness can be used in advertisements to generate an aspirational and high-status image as compared to other types of product positioning. The study is inspired by a recent trend of substituting regular office chairs with exercise balls, treadmill desks, or standing work stations. Indeed, these active work stations are gaining popularity and have been associated with fashion and status signaling in the office (e.g., “treadmill desks are becoming an office status symbol

cooler than a juice bar,” Dvorak 2013). In this study, participants viewed an ad for an exercise ball that was either positioned for a busy lifestyle or a fashionable lifestyle, and were then asked to consider an individual who uses the ball. We again measured perceptions of status, admiration, and scarcity as a mediator.

*Method.* We recruited 140 participants through the Amazon Mechanical Turk online panel (53% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 37$ , American). We randomly assigned participants to one of two advertisement conditions (busy lifestyle positioning vs. fashionable lifestyle positioning). Participants viewed a hypothetical advertisement for an exercise ball. In both conditions participants viewed a woman sitting on an exercise ball at her desk. In the busyness condition the text in the ad said “The wellness ball fits the pace of your busy lifestyle! A chair that is also an exercise ball, what a great way to multitask and use your valuable time efficiently.” In the fashion condition the text said “The wellness ball fits the level of your fashionable life style! A chair that is also an exercise ball, what a great way to create a stylish and fashionable image at work.” In both conditions participants then read “The wellness ball costs \$150” (see Appendix C for a representation of the stimuli). After viewing the ad, all participants were then told “Now imagine Lisa, she is 35 years old. She owns a wellness ball and uses it at work.” Participants then answered questions regarding their perceptions of Lisa using the same dependent variables from previous studies regarding her perceived status (3 items,  $\alpha = .78$ ), aspirational image (4 items,  $\alpha = .84$ ), and perceived scarcity (3 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ). Finally, a manipulation check measured Lisa’s busyness: How busy is Lisa? (1 = Not busy at all, 7 = Extremely busy).

*Results.* The analysis of the manipulation check confirmed that Lisa was perceived as busier in the busyness condition than in the fashion condition ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 5.34$  vs.  $M_{\text{fashion}} = 4.88$ ,  $t(135) = 2.24$ ,  $p = .027$ ). Furthermore, compared to participants in the fashion condition,

participants in the busyness condition perceived Lisa to have greater status ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 4.61$  vs.  $M_{\text{fashion}} = 4.14$ ,  $t(137) = 2.52$ ,  $p = .013$ ), higher levels of aspiration ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 4.55$  vs.  $M_{\text{fashion}} = 4.03$ ,  $t(138) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .024$ ), and perceived her to be more scarce ( $M_{\text{busy}} = 4.54$  vs.  $M_{\text{fashion}} = 4.04$ ,  $t(137) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .021$ ).

We then conducted a mediation analysis to determine whether scarcity mediated the relationship between advertisement (busy lifestyle positioning vs. fashionable lifestyle positioning) and perceptions of Lisa's status. As predicted, the effect of the advertisement on status was significantly reduced (from  $b = 0.46$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $t(138) = 2.52$ ,  $p = .013$ , to  $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t(137) = 1.29$ , NS) when scarcity was included in the model, whereas scarcity was a significant predictor ( $b = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(137) = 9.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the overall size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .052 to .533), suggesting a significant indirect effect.

Finally, we conducted a similar mediation analysis to determine whether scarcity would also mediate the aspirational image conveyed by Lisa. As predicted, the effect of the advertisement on aspirational image was significantly reduced (from  $b = 0.58$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $t(138) = 2.60$ ,  $p = .010$ , to  $b = 0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $t(137) = 1.57$ , NS) when scarcity was included in the model, whereas scarcity was a significant predictor ( $b = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t(137) = 7.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the overall size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .045 to .533), indicating a significant indirect effect.

*Discussion.* In study 5, we find that participants made stronger inferences of status, aspirational image, and scarcity for an individual using an exercise ball, when having viewed an ad portraying a busy lifestyle versus a fashionable lifestyle positioning. Participants granted

more status, and expressed higher aspiration for an individual who used an exercise ball to save time, than one who used that same exercise ball to appear trendy. As predicted, such inferences were mediated through perceived scarcity of the individual. The results of study 5 suggest that advertisers can effectively use busyness as a way to associate their brands with an aspirational image and enhanced status in their campaigns.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

While research on conspicuous consumption has typically analyzed how people spend *money* on products that signal status, in this research we investigate conspicuous consumption in relation to *time*. In contrast to the predictions of the classical theory of the leisure class (Veblen, 1899/2007), we demonstrate the conditions under which displaying one's busyness in productive activities can lead to inferences of status and admiration in the eyes of others.

Across a series of studies we find that the positive effect of busyness is driven by the perception that a busy person is both scarce and in demand. We show a theoretically relevant moderator, whether busyness is perceived as a choice, and find that, in order for busyness to be an effective signal, it must also be accompanied by agency over the decision to be busy. We further examine cross-cultural differences among Western cultures (i.e., North America vs. Europe) and demonstrate a reversal of the effect such that busyness at work leads to lower rather than higher inferences of status in the eyes of Europeans. Finally, we show how social media can be strategically used to signal social status by revealing information about one's level of busyness, in addition to considering how the use of time-saving services (Peapod) and products (Bluetooth headset) can signal status and project an aspirational image.

Our theoretical framework (figure 1) and findings deepen our understanding of how busyness is perceived by others, particularly in regards to inferences of status and aspirational image that are made by third party observers. This research highlights the value of being perceived as busy and contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we contribute to work on the decline of leisure time (Gershuny 2005; Hamermesh and Lee 2007; Hochschild 1997; Rutherford 2001; Schor 1992; Southerton and Tomlinson 2005) by uncovering the conditions under which busyness and lack of leisure time operate as a status symbol. Second, while past research on status signaling has primarily focused on the conspicuous spending of money (Bellezza and Keinan 2014; Berger and Ward 2010; Griskevicius et al. 2007; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010; Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Wang and Griskevicius 2014; Ward and Dahl 2014), our work considers the conspicuous spending of time. Third, our investigation contributes to previous research on product scarcity (Brehm 1966; Cialdini 1993; Lynn 1991; Snyder and Fromkin 1980) by demonstrating that busyness at work can be associated with scarcity of individuals. Instead of associating oneself with scarce resources (e.g., diamonds, jewelry, or expensive real-estate), consumers can signal status by portraying themselves as a scarce resource through the conspicuous display of busyness. In order for busyness to be an effective signal of scarcity, we also show that busyness must also be accompanied by agency over the decision to be busy. If a busy person is perceived to have no choice over having a busy schedule, they may be viewed as less scarce. Finally, we contribute to recent consumer behavior research analyzing more subtle and nuanced signals of status by showing how busyness at work and the lack of leisure time can be a status symbol (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Berger and Ward 2010; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010).

## Directions for Future Research

Our research could be further applied to examine other consumption phenomena and to explore additional potential moderators of the signaling power of busyness. Our work examines a potentially more socially acceptable and efficient way for people to signal their social status that goes beyond spending financial resources to obtain luxury products. Though past research has found an association between inferences of status for people who use expensive luxury products, such inferences may be tainted by views that those same people are extrinsically motivated and less likeable (Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010). However, by using busyness to signal one's status, we surmise that one can avoid these negative side effects. Future research should determine whether this is indeed the case. In addition to being more socially acceptable, signaling one's status through busyness may also be more cost effective. For example, rather than spending money on expensive jewelry, as study 4b demonstrated, one can display one's status through the use of multitasking and time saving products, complaining about one's level of busyness, or simply by appearing busy. To that end, some may even go as far as making fake cell phone calls to appear busy. Research has found that 13% of cell phone calls made in public have no one on the other end of the line (Smith 2011).

Social media has also opened up a new way to communicate one's level of busyness to a large number of people through status updates and tweets. The emergence of such communication media may have even enhanced the efficacy of busyness as a credible status signal. While having a BMW may be appreciated or envied from the street, tweeting about owning one may be viewed as less appropriate because it does not offer consumers the alibi of

simultaneously using the product for functional reasons (Keinan, Kivetz, and Netzer 2009). Thus, signaling one's busyness may be a more appropriate and disguised way to signal one's status on social media compared to traditional forms of luxury consumption, which may be more appropriate in a physical setting. Future research should consider more carefully the relationship between social media and methods of status signaling.

Another fruitful direction for further research pertains to the specific kind of work activity associated with the setting described. In the majority of our studies, the busy individuals are employed in white-collar type of jobs, suggesting that they are plausibly performing a professional, managerial, or administrative kind of work in an office environment. It would be interesting to examine settings hinting at busyness in blue-collar activities, requiring more manual, rather than intellectual, labor performed at a manufacturing site. Because there is typically higher supply for and relatively lower specialization associated with blue-collar labor, busyness and long hours in these working environments should not lead to inferences of scarcity and status. To begin an exploration, we conducted an online study, and found that long hours at work did not lead to higher inferences of status when the occupation was qualified as blue-collar.

In addition, future research should consider efficiency as a boundary condition. We would expect that if an individual is busy simply because they are not efficient and are unable to perform their tasks in due time, positive status inferences may be diminished. As suggested in the popular office and t-shirt quote "Of course I don't look busy. I did it right the first time." Interestingly, some argue that employees' efficiency might actually decrease *because* of the signaling power of busyness. In her interviews of busy managers, Hochschild (1997) found that although workload pressure was given as the main reason for long hours, some interviewees

acknowledged that “face time” was expected in the evenings and that they could have done the job in fewer hours if they wanted to.

Are there any costs associated with conspicuously displaying busyness and lack of leisure time to others? Like any type of status signal, displaying busyness may potentially backfire when seen as a deliberate attempt to manipulate perceptions and demonstrate superiority (Fineman 2013; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010), or just as a general tendency to complain (Hamermesh and Lee 2007). When busyness signals seem insincere or too strategic they could lead to ridicule rather than admiration, as in the “Humblebrag” book (Wittels 2012) and in blogs with tips like the one discussed at the end of study 4 on displaying one’s busyness and importance. Another potential drawback of displaying busyness is that it may raise performance expectations and one might be seen as less efficient if future delivery and performance are not satisfactory relative to the perceived time invested.

Although busy people, who always work, presumably have little time off, it would be interesting to examine how the short leisure time available to them is spent and whether it impacts perceptions of status in the eyes of others. Analyses of leisure time in contemporary society suggest that the consumption of free time is increasingly “harried” and characterized by an acceleration of the pace at which leisure is enjoyed (Linder 1970; Robinson and Godbey 2005). We predict that observers will attribute even higher status to those people who, besides being busy, are also able to enjoy and live their lives to the maximum (i.e., “work hard and play hard”). Inspired by Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* (1883/1961) concept, individuals who both work hard and play hard could be labelled the “*superman*.” Since today’s consumers are striving to “have it all” and aspire for achievements in multiple domains even when engaging in leisure



activities (Keinan and Kivetz 2011), the superman—who embodies both hard work and a propensity to enjoy life—should represent the most aspirational and highly regarded lifestyle.

### Managerial Implications

A deeper understanding of the conspicuous consumption of time and the role of busyness as a status symbol has interesting implications for marketers of both time-saving and symbolic products. Our findings offer a different perspective on how to promote and advertise time-saving and multitasking benefits of specific products. New technologies and innovations often allow consumers to reduce the time it takes to perform specific tasks (voice recognition and remote control technologies, etc.). Rather than focusing on time saving in an abstract sense, communication campaigns might emphasize how well such products integrate with a busy lifestyle. For example, notable author Michael Pollan (2013) argues that marketing messages by the processed food industry flatter consumers' sense of busyness, implicitly telling them, "You don't have time to cook, you're too important, you're a loser if you have time to cook." Other time saving services like Peapod, should consider ways to make their offerings more conspicuous, allowing people to signal their status and enhance the value of their products.

Even symbolic luxury brands and products that do not necessarily offer time saving benefits may try to associate the brand with an aspirational and glorified busy lifestyle. Rather than flattering consumers' purchase ability and financial wealth, brands can flatter consumers' busyness and lack of valuable time to waste, as discussed in study 5 and exemplified in a recent Samsung Gear 2 ad. This ad tells readers "your life moves fast" and offers them advance technology that can keep up with their busy lifestyle. Similarly, an advertising campaign by the

Audi brand suggests “Then again, maybe you don’t even have one minute,” and a Cadillac commercial glorifies a busy, overworked lifestyle. Our findings suggest that appealing to consumers’ lack of time could be a form of flattery, making consumers feel their time is very valuable. Feeling busy may make us feel scarce and in demand, and therefore more valuable and important. The consequences of such feelings may have important marketing, and even health and public policy implications related to our own well-being.

In conclusion, this research examines the conspicuous consumption of time and it uncovers the conditions under which busyness becomes a status symbol. Instead of associating oneself with scarce resources, this research demonstrates that consumers can signal status and convey an aspirational image in the eyes of others by portraying themselves as a scarce resource through the conspicuous display of busyness and lack of leisure time.

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FIGURE 1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

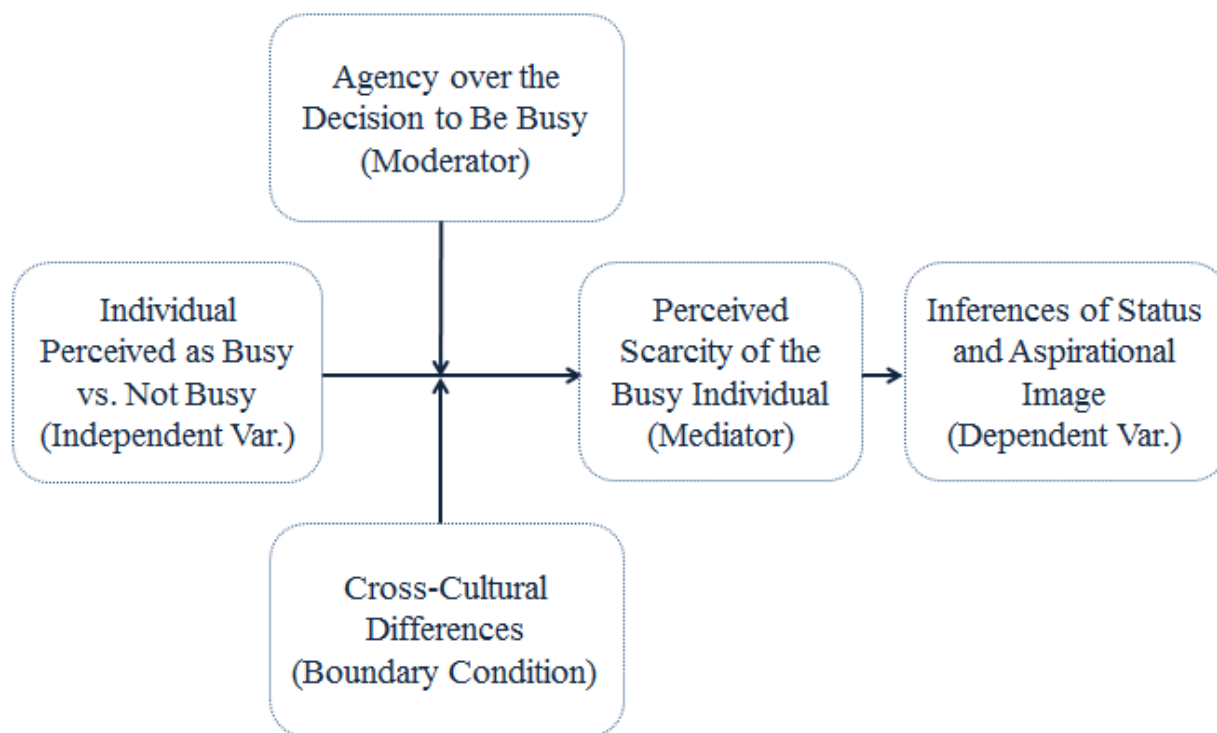
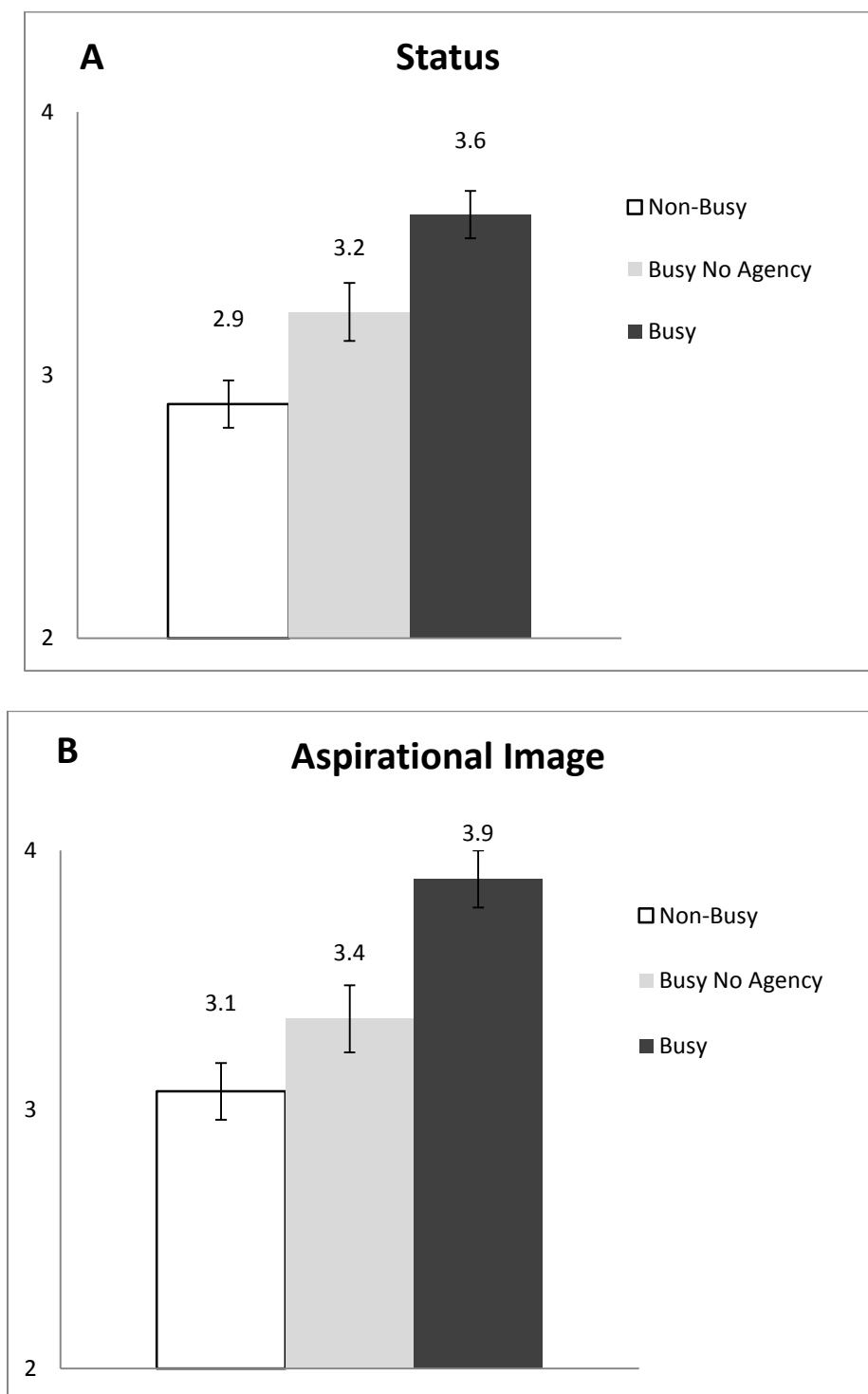


FIGURE 2: STUDY 1 RESULTS – (A) STATUS, AND (B) ASPIRATIONAL IMAGE AS A FUNCTION OF BUSYNESS AND AGENCY



Note. Error bars denote standard errors.



FIGURE 3: STUDY 2 RESULTS – ASPIRATIONAL IMAGE (A) AND PERCEIVED SCARCITY (B) AS A FUNCTION OF BUSYNESS AND AGENCY

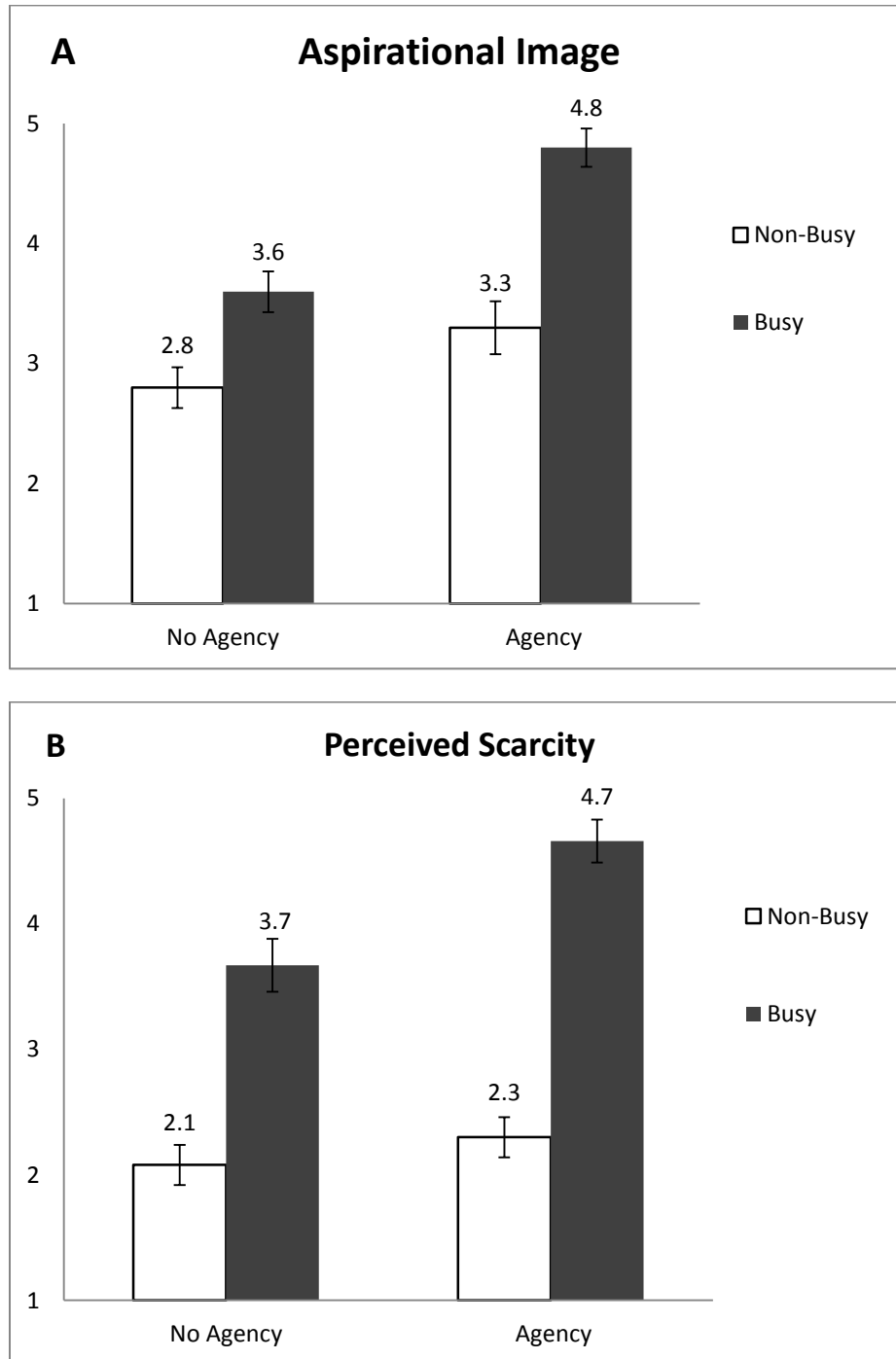
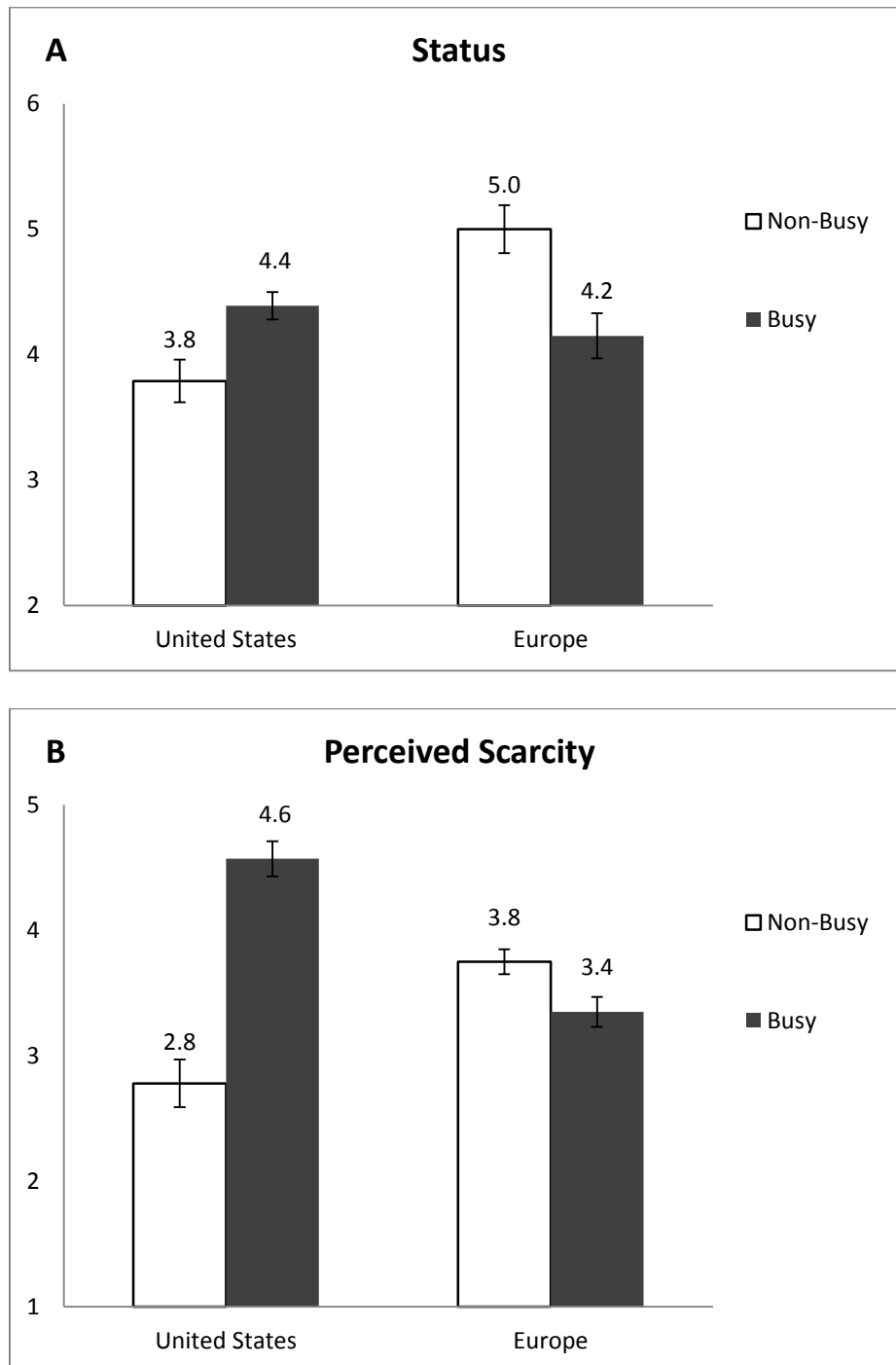
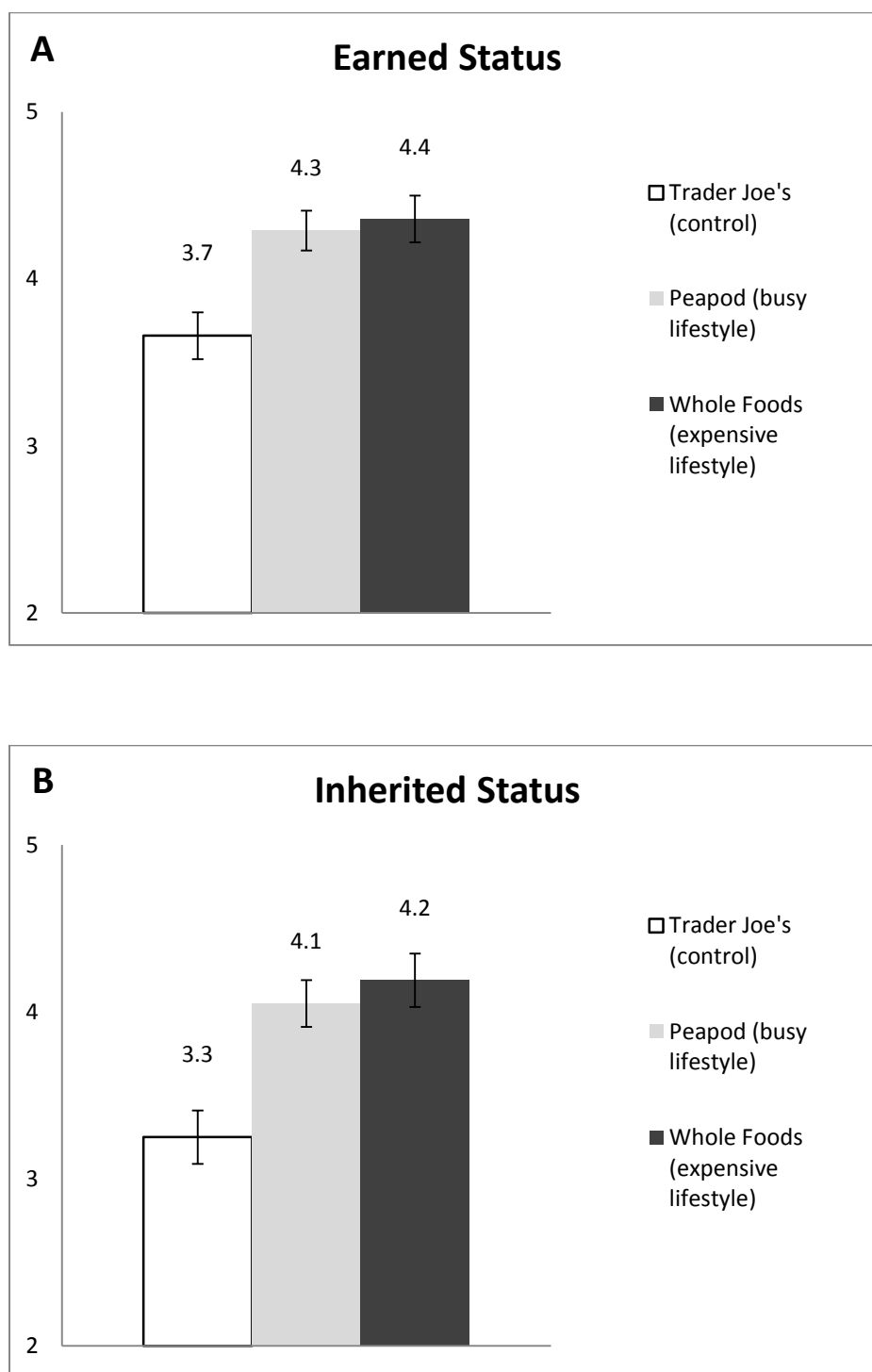


FIGURE 4: STUDY 3 RESULTS –STATUS (A) AND PERCEIVED SCARCITY (B) AS A FUNCTION OF BUSYNESS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN PERCEPTION OF TIME



Note. Error bars denote standard errors.

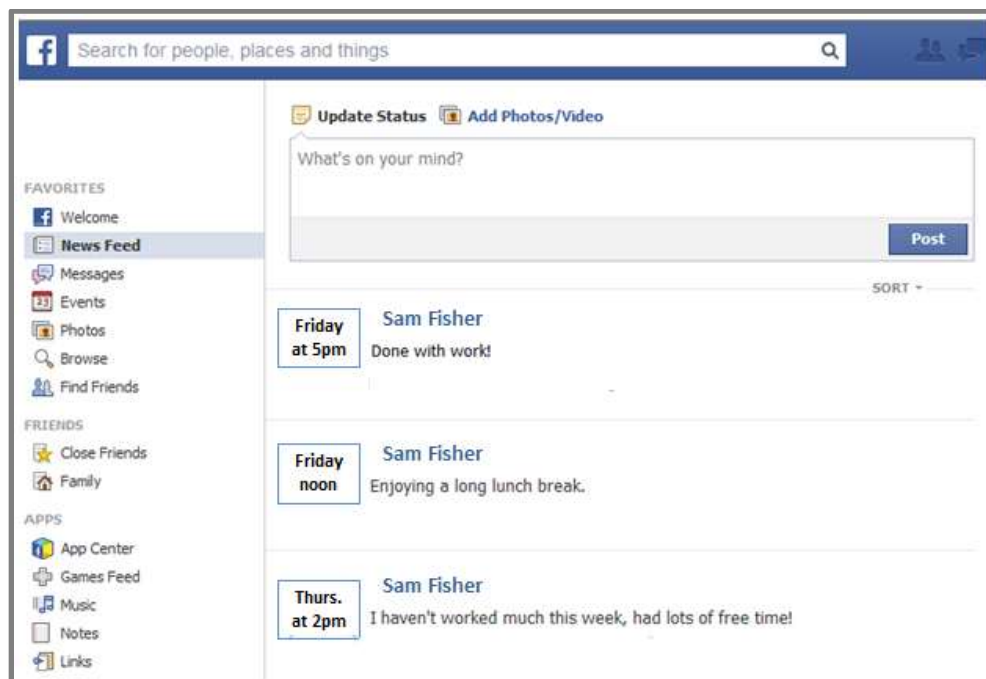
FIGURE 5: STUDY 4 RESULTS – EARNED STATUS (A) AND INHERITED STATUS (B)  
AS A FUNCTION OF LIFESTYLE ASSOCIATIONS



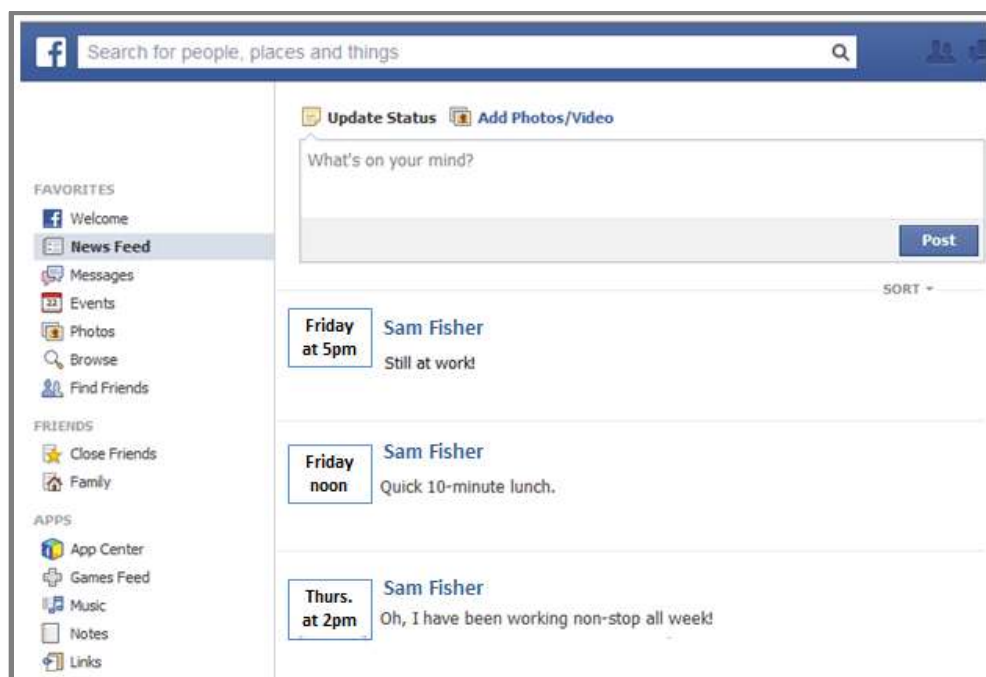
## APPENDIX A

### STUDY 1: VISUAL STIMULI

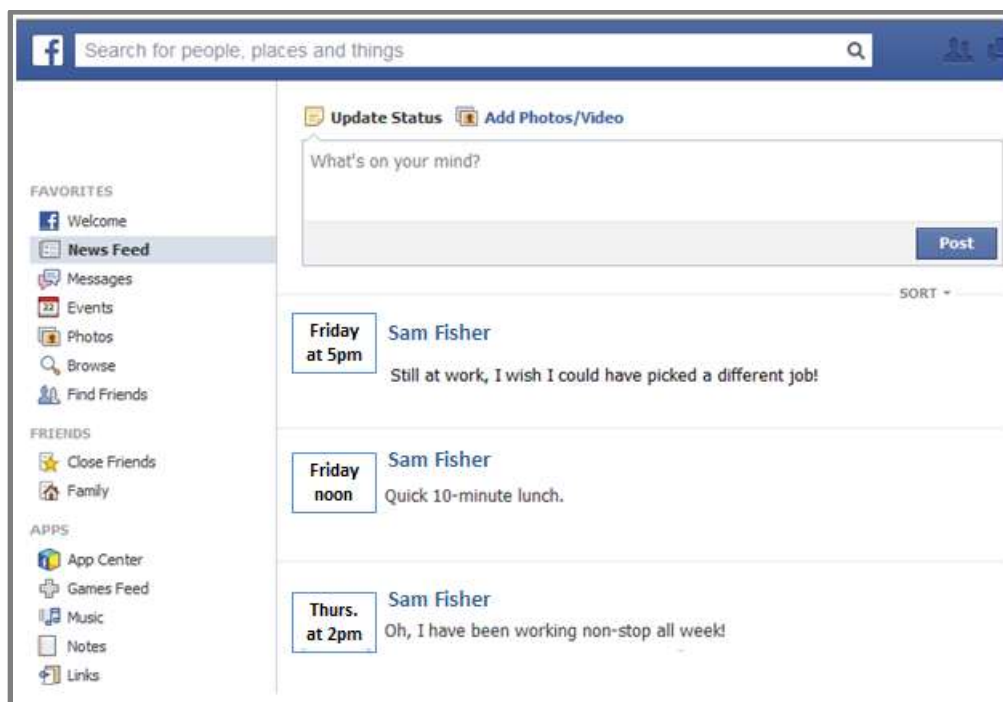
#### A: Non-busy brags condition



#### B: Busy brags condition



## C: Busy brags without agency condition



## APPENDIX B

## STUDY 4B: VISUAL STIMULI

## A: Bluetooth 1 (busy lifestyle)

***Imagine Anne, a 35 years old woman.***

***Anne is wearing a hands-free Bluetooth headset for her cell phone.  
It seems that she is always wearing her hands-free headset.***



## B: Bluetooth 2 (busy lifestyle)

***Imagine Anne, a 35 years old woman.***

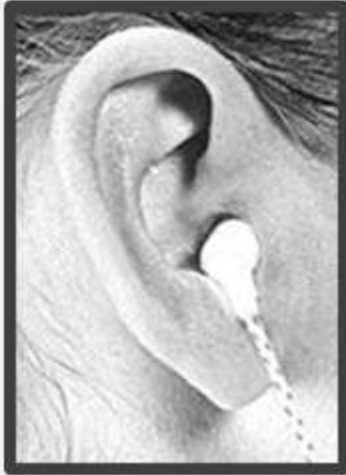
***Anne is wearing a hands free Bluetooth headset for her cell phone.  
It seems that she is always wearing her hands free headset.***



C: Headphones for music (leisure lifestyle)

***Imagine Anne, a 35 years old woman.***

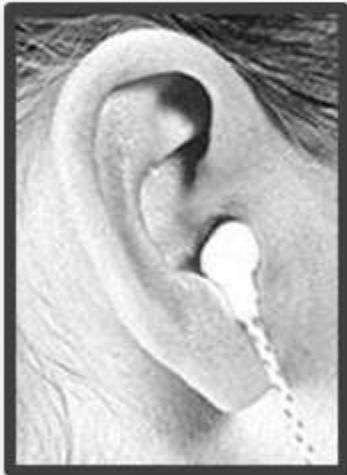
***She is wearing a pair of headphones for music and leisure.  
It seems that she is always wearing her headphones.***



D: Expensive headphones for music (leisure lifestyle)

***Imagine Anne, a 35 years old woman.***


***She is wearing a pair of expensive headphones for music and leisure.  
It seems that she is always wearing her headphones.***



## APPENDIX C

## STUDY 5: VISUAL STIMULI

## A: Time-saving (Busy) condition



**The wellness ball fits the pace of your busy life style!**

A chair that is also an exercise ball, what a great way to multitask and use your valuable time efficiently.

The wellness ball costs \$150.

## B: Stylish (Non-Busy) condition



**The wellness ball fits the level of your fashionable life style!**

A chair that is also an exercise ball, what a great way to create a stylish and fashionable image at work.

The wellness ball costs \$150.