

Consumers challenged by high status peers make a 'status pivot,' new study finds

December 21 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

When confronted with comparisons to high status friends and colleagues, consumers prefer to make a "status pivot" into another area where they can shine brighter than their successful peers, according to new research into how consumers respond to status competition, according to a new report in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

With a status pivot, [consumers](#) "change the game" when they buy and display products to showcase their accomplishments in other areas where they fare better, referred to as "alternative domains," than if they try to hold firm and buy products in the domain where their peers prevail, said Boston College Associate Professor of Marketing Nailya Ordabayeva, a co-author of the new paper.

On the one hand, when faced with a peer who displays the trappings of financial success and professional achievements, a consumer could entrench and purchase goods and services in the same area as the peer in an effort to reflect equal levels of success. Instead, the new research shows, individuals prefer to make a status pivot and excel in alternative domains—such as personal relationships, [social life](#), parenting, physical and mental health, and fitness.

The findings hold implications for marketers of premium and luxury brands who are trying to understand what kind of products consumers embrace to compete with others, and what kinds of products can help relieve consumers' stress about "upward comparison," according to Ordabayeva.

"We examined how people choose among different product options and consumption strategies to cope with such status threats and how effective these strategies are in alleviating the stress of upward comparisons," said Ordabayeva. "We show that comparison to more successful peers strengthens consumers' belief that success in one life domain, such as financial well-being, must come at the cost of failure in other life domains, such as personal life, which ultimately boosts consumers' preference to display success in these alternative domains where they believe their successful peers may be failing."

The researchers examined consumption choices in a variety of settings: runners at the Boston Marathon, golfers in Switzerland, residents and

visitors to glamorous Monaco, users of a social media platform, working parents, as well as hundreds of survey takers online. They looked for the ways in which consumers choose their status coping strategies—staying within domain, or pivoting to another area, an alternative domain.

In a number of the team's studies, the researchers examined consumers' choices in the form of which bumper sticker they would display on their car. When being compared to financially more successful peers, Boston Marathon runners, survey takers online, and owners of inexpensive cars at an elite Swiss golf club showed interest in displaying car bumper stickers that showcased their accomplishments in alternative domains such as family, spirituality, and volunteering.

In addition, being compared to successful peers led consumers to display pictures and messages about family, parenthood, and friendships, rather than professional accomplishments, on their coffee mugs and smartphone covers, according to Ordabayeva and co-authors Dafna Goor, of London Business School, and Anat Keinan, of Boston University.

"We found that pivoting to alternative domains is so appealing and effective because experiencing a status threat motivates consumers to focus on trade-offs and downsides associated with achieving high status," said Ordabayeva. "Importantly, we find that status pivoting is particularly prevalent when consumers do not believe they can attain a similar level of success in the domain of the threat as their successful peer."

Ordabayeva said the researchers were surprised to see how much more appealing status pivoting is for a broad range of consumer groups when compared to choosing to pursue status restoration within the same domain as a successful peer. Unlike previous studies that focused on within-domain status restoration, the project offered study participants

an alternative strategy to consider.

"The fact that simply giving people more options to cope with status threats can so dramatically shift their preferences away from within-domain restoration and toward status pivoting was surprising to us, and it highlighted that we have still much to learn about tactics that can increase consumers' resilience against status threats in the marketplace," Ordabayeva said.

She said the findings point to the need for further study of status pivoting, including how particular demographic groups embrace the strategy and whether or not seeking high [status](#) recognition in another aspect of life motivates consumers to put more time and effort into alternate domains like parenting, or personal relationships.

More information: Dafna Goor et al, Status Pivoting, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucaa057](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaa057)

Provided by Boston College

Citation: Consumers challenged by high status peers make a 'status pivot,' new study finds (2020, December 21) retrieved 18 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-12-consumers-high-status-peers-pivot.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.