PART TWO

Consumer Generated Visuals
How we Brag in Pictures:

Using Brand Status, Brand Prominence and Staging to Self-Present on Social Media

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Introductions

Social media have developed into important platforms for self-presentation (Dayter, 2014; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Van Dijck, 2013). This has become even more salient with the recent rise of more visually dominated social media like Snapchat and Instagram, on which individuals carefully manage their online impression by constructing, selecting, and editing the images they post (Chua & Chang, 2016; Fox & Vendemia, 2016).

In consumer research, recent studies have shown that consumers often use brands and branded products to self-present in social media, portraying themselves as rich, successful, or likeable, in the hopes of making a positive impression on others (Belk, 2013; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Park & Roedder John, 2018; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Building on the literatures on self-presentation and conspicuous consumption (e.g., Berger & Ward, 2010; Han, Nunes & Dreze, 2010), we argue that high status brands - which are associated with quality, luxury and prestige - are especially likely to be used for this (cf., Walasek, Bhatia & Brown, 2018).

However, these self-presentation efforts are not always successful, and the effects of self-presentation activities may even be counter-productive, especially when self-presentation is blatant (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Recent research has shown that exposure to the bragging and boasting of others on social media may be linked not only to disliking of the sharer, but also to anxiety and depression (Shakya & Christakis, 2017).

Building on these literatures, the present research examines the use of brands for self-presentation in visual social media. We study this phenomenon from the dual perspectives of posters and their audiences, focusing especially on the visual cues that are used for self-presentation. In Study 1, we conduct a content analysis of a sample of Instagram posts including both high-status and low-status brands. We investigate how consumers construct brand-related posts in social media, focusing on the use of visual self-presentation cues. Specifically, we examine the hypothesis that posts about high status brands are more likely to contain visual self-presentation cues such as a high brand prominence (Han et al., 2010), and more extensive staging of the visual image (as suggested in the seminal work of Goffman, 1959). In addition to this content analysis, we present these posts to a sample of consumers. In line with our theorizing, we expect that the use of self-presentation cues will be negatively related to evaluations of the person posting the images. Studies 2 and 3 further examine audience reactions to self-presentation cues in more controlled experiments. These studies confirm that self-presentation cues in posts about high-status brands trigger perceptions of bragging that negatively affect evaluations of the poster. This effect does not occur in posts follow-status brands.

Our research makes several contributions: first of all, it extends research on self-presentation and conspicuous consumption into the domain of social media, and particularly visual elements within social media. This contribution is further enhanced by studying the dual perspectives of posters and audiences, by combining insights from lab experiments with analyses of actual Instagram posts, and by the comparison of high-status versus low-status brands.

In doing so, this study addresses the paucity of research on visual consumption in general (Schroeder, 2002), and consumers’ visualizations of brands in social media in particular. To date, most studies regarding consumers’ social media activities has focused on text based content (e.g., online reviews, tweets), but the recent changes in the social media landscape seem to warrant a more thorough investigation of visual content.
Self-presentation using brands in social media

Self-presentation – i.e., engaging in behavior that aims to convey a favorable impression of the self to others, forms a major part of social behavior (Goffman, 1959), both offline and online. In fact, it has been estimated that about 70% of all communication content can be classified as self-presentation (Dayter, 2014; Sedikides & Strube, 1995). Self-presentation can take many forms, some of which are modest or even self-derogating, but often takes the form of self-enhancement; portraying the self in an overly favorable manner (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). In social media, self-enhancing presentation appears especially prevalent (Scholz et al., 2017), as illustrated by recent studies showing how consumers engage in self-enhancing communication about their busyness (to appear competent and successful – Bellezza, Paharia & Keinan, 2017) or about their prosocial behavior (to appear warm and kind – Berman, Levine, Barasch & Small, 2015).

Brands and branded products are often used in self-presentation efforts in social media (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Belk, 2013; Bernritter, Verlegh & Smit, 2016; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Park & Roedder John, 2018). Brands carry cultural and symbolic meanings, which can be leveraged to communicate desired information about the self to others (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Schroeder, 2002). The use of brands for self-presentation in social media has recently received attention in consumer research. Most of this research has focused on why and how consumers engage in such behavior, and what brands they use to do so. Kaikati and Hollenbeck (2012), for example, studied consumers’ motivations to embrace or avoid brands on Facebook. Their results showed that consumers use brands to express both their actual and ideal selves, based on the congruity of a brand with different aspects of their selves. Bernritter and colleagues (2016) focused on the type of brands consumers choose to endorse on social media, and demonstrated that consumers prefer to endorse brands that are perceived as warm, rather than competent. Together with related research on conspicuous consumption (e.g., Bellezza et al., 2017; Berman et al., 2015), and on bragging in (online) word of mouth (De Angelis et al., 2012; Packard, Gershoff & Wooten, 2016) these findings indicate that consumers use brands strategically for impression management in social media.

Literature on conspicuous brand usage suggests that high-status brands, which are associated with high quality, luxury or prestige are likely to reflect positively on their user. High status brands are more recognizable and more valuable to consumers, and, therefore, displaying ownership of such brands can be a way to signal one’s actual or desired status to others (e.g., Berger & Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010; Ferraro et al., 2013). Empirical research shows that consumers indeed often select high status brands to favorably present themselves to others self-enhance (McFerran, Aquino & Tracy, 2014; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Thus, we may expect that, in the context of our study, high status brands are more likely to be used in self-presentation attempts than low status brands. As such, we expect posts about high status brands to contain cues indicative of self-presentation, such as prominently displayed brand information, and a high level of staging (see relevant section below for a more detailed explanation of these concepts).

H1: Posts about high status brands contain more self-presentation cues (brand prominence and staging) than posts about low status brands.

The audience perspective: Perceived bragging and evaluation of the sharer

In spite of their efforts to self-present, consumers struggle to correctly assess the effects of their self-presentation activities on others, and the audience often draws other inferences from a message than the sender intends (Gilovich, Kruger, & Husted Medvec, 2002; Scopelliti et al., 2015). Recent studies show that individuals tend to overestimate...
the positive effects, and underestimate the negative effects of their self-presentation efforts on the audience (Scopelliti et al., 2015). In particular, research has shown that audiences tend not to respond positively to blatant self-promotion or bragging. Individuals who engage in such behavior are often evaluated negatively by others (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1985; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Within the context of consumer behavior, empirical research also suggests that most people have an aversion to conspicuous use of brands and products by others (Ferraro et al., 2013; Sundie et al., 2009).

Building on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), Packard and colleagues (2016) recently demonstrated that persuasion knowledge, in the form of perceptions of ulterior motives, is activated when consumers boast about their expertise when they engage in word of mouth. These perceptions hurt the evaluation of the source, and decreased the persuasiveness of the product recommendation. Furthermore, Ferraro and colleagues (2013) showed that consumers who engage in conspicuous brand usage, for instance by flaunting a luxury brand’s shopping bag, are perceived as being driven by an ulterior motive of impression management by observers.

In social media, with its focus on self-presentation (Dayter, 2014), it is likely that consumers who encounter brand related posts are attuned to the possibility that posters are trying to self-present and communicate a specific (idealized) image of themselves. Because high status brands are recognizable, and have publicly shared associations attached to them, the presence of high-status brands is particularly likely to alert observers to the presence of ulterior motives (Ferraro et al., 2013; Han et al., 2010), in comparison to low-status brands that have less strong symbolic associations.

H2: Posts about high status brand will elicit higher perceptions of bragging than low status brand posts.

In addition, we expect that the status of a brand featured in a post may have negative consequences for evaluation of sharer. Research suggests that people tend to dislike those who show off or engage in self-presentation (Godfrey et al., 1985; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sundie et al., 2009). Indeed, Ferraro and colleagues (2013) showed that attitudes toward a person decreased when that person was perceived as using brands to brag. In line with these findings, we expect that individuals who share posts about high status brands to be evaluated less positively than individuals who post about low status brands.

H3: Posts about high status brand will negatively affect attitude towards the sharer.

The role of visual self-presentational cues: brand prominence and staging

Whether brand related social media posts activate persuasion knowledge may also depend on the way these images are constructed. Certain elements of brand-related posts contain cues may signal to the observer that the sharer is driven by self-presentational motives (see Kirmani and Zhu, 2007, for a similar argument with relation to advertising messages). In the present research, we focus on the visual execution of social media posts by looking at two specific characteristics, namely (1) brand prominence and (2) image staging.

Han and colleagues (2010) introduced the concept of brand prominence in the context of branded luxury products, to reflect “the extent to which a product has visible markings that help ensure observers recognize the brand”. In line with this, we define brand prominence as the extent to which a social media post contains recognizable visual or textual brand markings. Han and colleagues found that consumer preference for the “loudness” of branding information for luxury brands (e.g., the salience of logo’s, brand names, or other distinctive visual brand information) is related to consumers’ need for status. Others have referred to brand...
prominence as “brand conspicuousness,” and have shown that greater brand prominence enhances the ability to grab attention from other consumers (Morgan & Ward, 2010), which may have both favorable and unfavorable consequences for consumers displaying prominently branded products (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2013; Song, Huang & Li, 2016).

Even a cursory glance of Instagram content suggests that posts featuring brands can vary greatly in terms of how prominently the brand is displayed (see Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016 for a similar observation about brand-related Twitter postings). On the one extreme there are posts in which the brand is front and center, and clearly the main focus of the post, while the other end of the spectrum consists of posts where the brand is barely noticeable. To observers, the level of prominence may serve as a cue for the symbolic importance of the brand. In this context, prominence may be defined in a perceptual sense: prior research indicates that objects that appear larger in a visual frame are generally ascribed more importance than objects that appear smaller (Arnheim 1974; Larson, Luna, & Peracchio 2004). Especially for high-status brands, which are more closely associated with social signaling, a prominently displayed brand is therefore more likely to turn the observer’s attention to the possible motives of the sharer, signifying that the sharer is trying to draw attention to the brand and to the posters motives for displaying this brand in this manner (cf., Berger and Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010). We therefore hypothesize that:

H4: Higher levels of brand prominence in social media posts elicit stronger perceptions of bragging and less favorable attitudes towards the sharer, especially when these posts contain high (versus low) status brands.

Staging

In his seminal book, Goffman (1959) likened the presentation of the self in face-to-face social interactions to a theatrical performance. He proposed that individuals try to control the impression they make on others by carefully staging their appearance, manner, and surroundings, just like actors would dress the part, set the stage, and use props to perform a play for an audience. As noted by media scholars like Hogan (2010) and Van Dijck (2013), this notion of staging is perhaps even more applicable to social media, which allow individuals to carefully curate, edit and manipulate their postings.

With the recent rise of digital photography, and of visually dominated social media like Snapchat and Instagram, visual images seem to have become the most preferred way to express the self in social media. Digital cameras, smartphones
and social media platforms offer various easily accessible image-editing options, allowing users to apply image filters, crop images, and apply image correction tools to improve the aesthetic quality of their pictures. Research shows that social media users tend to strategically select, create and edit their pictures before posting them (Chua & Chang, 2016; Fox & Vendemia, 2017). We hypothesize carefully posted images that are more staged (e.g., good quality lighting, the use of filters, a carefully arranged composition) are more likely to be recognized by observers as an overt effort on the part of the sharer to appear in a positive manner, and may negatively impact one’s attitude towards the sharer. On the other hand, snapshot-like images that seemingly capture spontaneous, slice-of-life type moments may be less likely to trigger perceptions of bragging in observers, and individuals who share them are more likely to be evaluated positively. Thus, we hypothesize that:

**H5:** A higher level of staging in social media posts will elicit stronger perceptions of bragging and less favorable attitudes towards the sharer, especially when posts contain high (versus low) status brands.

### Overview of Studies

In the remainder of this article, we present four studies that test our predictions. Study 1 consists of two parts that use different types of data: it focuses on the perspectives of (a) the poster and (b) the audience. The first part uses content analyses by trained coders to examine how real-life Instagram posts about either high and low status brands differ in terms of brand prominence and the level of staging of the posted image (H1). Secondly, study 1 will provide a first test of the viewer’s perspective, by investigating the relation between brand status, post content and post style and viewers’ perceptions of bragging (H2, H4, H5). Study 2 attempts to replicate the effects of brand status on sharer evaluations in a controlled experiment. Brand prominence will be added as a second post content characteristic, and its effects on bragging and attitudes towards the sharer will be tested (H4). Study 3 tests the combined effects of brand prominence and staging on perceived bragging and attitude towards the sharer (H4, H5).
To capture the phenomenon in the real world, we first conducted a study of actual posts on a visual social media platform. Instagram is an online mobile phone photo sharing, video-sharing, and social network site that enables users to take pictures and videos, edit them, and share them (Frommer, 2010). This platform was chosen as the target platform because it is predominantly focused on the creation and sharing of visuals (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). In this study we examine the hypothesis that posts related to high (versus low) status brands are more likely to contain cues related to self-presentation (i.e., brand prominence and staging) (H1). To test this premise, posts about high and low status brands were collected, and their content was analyzed and compared.

**Method**

From the list of the 100 best global brands of 2015, as compiled by Interbrand (Interbrand, 2015), a sub-set of 19 brands was selected and shown to a sample of participants in an online survey (N=50), recruited via the Prolific data collection platform, which is comparable to MTurk (Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti, 2017). The sample consisted of 31 women (62%) and 28 men (38%), with a mean age of 30.52 (SD = 9.40). Participants were shown a picture of each of the 19 brands, and asked to rate that brand on brand status. Based on the results, four pairs of brands (made up of high versus low status brands) were selected from four different product categories. These pairs were Louis Vuitton versus H&M (Fashion); Moët & Chandon versus Corona (Alcoholic Beverages); Harley Davidson versus Hyundai (Motorcycles), and Estee Lauder versus Avon (Cosmetics). For each brand, a random sample of 1000 posts was scraped from the pool of all Instagram posts containing that brand’s hashtag (e.g., #hm, #louisvuitton) that were posted between December 2014 and December 2015, with the use of a Python script that was written for this purpose. A sample of 8000 Instagram posts about 8 different target brands was collected. These 8 brands were chosen based on a pre-test.

Next, the scraped posts were filtered on relevance (i.e., whether the target brand actually appeared in the post), language (only posts with accompanying text that was (predominantly) in English were selected), and post source (posts from vendors, retailers and other commercial parties were excluded), which eliminated more than half of the 1000 posts for each brand. Since the coding of the posts was to be done manually, a smaller, more manageable sub-sample was drawn from the filtered pool of posts, using the random sample generator function in SPSS. This resulted in the final sample of 924 posts to be analyzed (Louis Vuitton, N=108; H&M, N=118; Harley Davidson, N=116; Hyundai, N=120; Moët & Chandon N=113; Corona, N=115; Estee Lauder, N=120; Avon, N=114). For each post, two independent, trained coders coded a number of content characteristics: Brand prominence was coded as the extent to which the target brand was featured in the posts image or text (0=brand not featured at all, 1=low brand prominence, 2=moderate brand prominence, 3=high brand prominence). Staging was coded as the degree to which the posted image appeared to be staged – as evidenced by the use of careful, good quality lighting, image filters, and carefully arranged composition (1=low staging, 2=moderate staging, 3=high staging). In addition, coders rated brand valence, ranging from -1 when the post was negative about the brand, 0 when the post was neutral, to 1 when the post was positive about the brand, and the sharer’s gender (male=0, female=1, or unclear=2). For all coded data, the scores of the

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3 Since the collection of the data for this study took place (December 2015 through February 2016), Instagram has severely limited third party access to their data by changing the API.
two coders were assessed using Cohen’s kappa. The ratings for brand prominence showed a moderate level of agreement ($\kappa = .629$), while staging showed strong agreement ($\kappa = .800$). The ratings for gender showed a perfect agreement, $\kappa = 1.000$, while valence showed moderate agreement, $\kappa = .596$. The cases where coding differed were discussed and resolved, resulting in a definitive score for each variable for every post.

**Results**

To determine whether content characteristics differed between high and low status brands, we performed a series of chi-squared tests. First, we observed a significant association between brand status and brand prominence, $\chi^2(3) = 10.18, p < .05$, in which high status brands were associated with more brand prominence (See Table 1).

A second test showed a significant association between brand status and the level of staging ($\chi^2(2) = 44.65, p < .001$). Low staging was more prevalent for low status brands (30.9%) than for high status brands (17.3%), while high and medium staging were more prevalent for high status brands than for low status brands (high: 17.7% vs. 6.0%; medium: 65.0% vs. 63.1%, see Table 2).

Together, these results offer support for Hypothesis 1, which postulated that self-presentation (in the form of brand prominence and staging) was higher in Instagram posts related to high status brands than in posts related to status brands. In addition to our main analyses, we examined the association between brand status an brand valence, observing a marginally significant association $\chi^2(2) = 7.04, p = .09$. Interestingly, positive posts tended to be more likely for high status brands (20.1%) than for low status brands (14.3%). Conversely, neutral posts somewhat more likely for low status brands (83.3%) than for high status brands (78.7%). Negative posts were rare (high status: 1.5%; low status: 1.6%). Also, no significant association between brand status and sharer gender was found, $\chi^2(2) = 0.52, p = .76$.

**Table 1**: Contingency table for brand status by level of brand prominence; Numbers in parentheses refer to the total number of posts in a category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand prominence</th>
<th>No (Low)</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Brand Status</td>
<td>54.0% (252)</td>
<td>23.8% (111)</td>
<td>12.8% (60)</td>
<td>9.4% (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Brand Status</td>
<td>44.2% (202)</td>
<td>25.8% (118)</td>
<td>17.7% (81)</td>
<td>12.3% (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49.1% (454)</td>
<td>24.8% (229)</td>
<td>15.3% (141)</td>
<td>10.8% (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**: Contingency table for brand status by level of staging; Numbers in parentheses refer to the total number of posts in a category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staging</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Brand Status</td>
<td>30.9% (144)</td>
<td>63.1% (294)</td>
<td>6.0% (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Brand Status</td>
<td>17.3% (79)</td>
<td>65.0% (297)</td>
<td>17.7% (81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24.4% (223)</td>
<td>64.0% (591)</td>
<td>11.8% (109)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study 1b
Viewer responses to Instagram posts

Method
To measure viewers’ responses to the posts, we presented random subsamples of the posts collected in study 1a, to participants (N=40) recruited via the Prolific Academic data collection platform, which is comparable to MTurk (Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti, 2017). Participants were asked to each rate a random sub sample of 94 posts on bragging on a 7-point Likert scale (“The person who shared this was trying to impress others” 1=strongly disagree – 7=strongly agree). This approach resulted in four ratings of perceived bragging for each post. These scores were compiled into an average bragging score per post (M=4.76, SD=1.09), and analyzed at the level of individual posts (N=924).

Results
To test the relationships between the coded post content elements (brand status, brand prominence, and staging) and viewers’ perceptions of bragging, a regression analysis was conducted, using Model 2 in the PROCESS macro by Hayes (Hayes, 2012). Brand status was entered as the independent variable, brand prominence and staging were entered as moderators, and perceived bragging was entered as the dependent variable. The results showed effects of brand status (b=.294, t(917)=4.14, p<.001) and staging (b=.288, t(917)=4.75, p<.001) on bragging, and a marginally significant main effect of brand prominence (b=.064, t(917)=1.88, p=.06). Interestingly, but beyond our current theorizing, we also found a significant interaction between brand status and brand prominence (b=.268, t(917)=3.97, p<.001), and a weaker, marginal negative interaction between brand status and staging (b=-.236, t(917)=-1.948, p=.05).

To examine our hypothesis that the effects of brand prominence and staging were strongest for high (versus low) status brands, we conducted two separate process analyses using model 1 (cf., Hayes, 2013, chapter 6).

First, a model was estimated with prominence as IV, brand status as moderator and staging as covariate. Although the main effect of prominence was not significant (b=.057, t(917)=1.69, p=.092), the interaction between prominence and status was significant (b=.269, t(917)=3.98, p<.001). Inspection of conditional effects revealed that the effect of prominence was significant for high status brands (b = 0.192, t(918) = 4.12, p<.001), but not for low status brands (b = -0.050, t(918) = 1.57, p=.12). The main effects of brand staging (b=.280, t(918)=4.63, p<.001) and status (b=.296, t(917)=4.17, p<.001) were also significant.

Second, a model was estimated with staging as IV, brand status as moderator and prominence as covariate. The main effect of staging was significant (b=.312, t(917)=5.14, p<.001). This effect was qualified by a marginal interaction between staging and status (b=-.240, t(917)=1.96, p=.05). Inspection of conditional effects revealed that the effect of staging was significant and positive for both high status brands (b = 0.191, t(918) = 2.30,
and low status brands ($b = -.431, t(918) = 4.87, p < .001$), with the effect being somewhat stronger for the latter. The main effects of brand prominence ($b = .071, t(918) = 2.08, p = .038$) and status ($b = .287, t(917) = 4.01, p < .001$) were also significant.

This content analysis rendered two main results. Firstly, it provided insights on how posters in social media use brands to self-present. The results showed that posters created more brand-focused posts about high status brands than for low status brands. Images featuring high status brands were also more staged, indicating that individuals who posts about high status brands make more of an effort to make their posts appear attractive. Furthermore, posts about high status brands tended to be more positive about the brand than low status brand posts. Together, these findings indicate that high status brands were used more for self-presentation than low status brands, thereby providing support for our first hypothesis. Secondly, study 1 provided a first test of the relationship between post content and the audience’s evaluation of the sharer. The results showed that high brand status increased perceived bragging, especially for posts with higher brand prominence, and for posts with higher levels of staging. As such, the first study provided a first indication of a relation between the content and form of brand related social media posts on the one hand, and the audience’s evaluations of the person who shared it on the other.

The second study will build on these results by testing the effects of brand status and brand prominence in a controlled lab environment. Specifically, we expected that posts about high status brands generate higher perceived bragging than low status brand posts (H2), and negatively affect attitude towards the sharer (H3). Brand prominence is expected to increase bragging (H4a), and decrease attitudes toward the sharer (H5a), especially for high status brand posts (H4b and H5b).
Study 2
The effects of brand status and brand prominence

Study 2 examined effects of brand status and prominence in a controlled experiment with a 2 (Status: low vs. high) by 2 (Prominence: low vs. high) between participants design, with 288 participants (152 female, average age 36.4 years (SD=12.28)), recruited through Prolific, and receiving a small compensation for participating.

Procedure and manipulations

Based on the design, we constructed four versions of an Instagram post, consisting of a picture, a caption and several hashtags (see Appendix 2). The target brands for this study were Louis Vuitton (high status), and H&M (low status), which were also included in Study 1. The post consisted of an image of a branded shopping bag, an unbranded leather bag, and several (unbranded) accessories placed on a side table. The shopping bag was branded Louis Vuitton in the high status condition, and H&M in the low status condition.

Brand prominence was manipulated by the placement of a branded shopping bag in the posted image. The high brand prominence posts showed the branded shopping bag front and center of the image, with the brand name and logo clearly visible. In the low brand prominence posts the branded shopping bag was placed more in the background, and the brand name and logo was partially covered by a garment. To reinforce this manipulation we also manipulated the accompanying text (tagline). For the high brand prominence posts, the tagline was: “Home from a long day of shopping! #newbag #shopping #[brand] #score #shoppingday.” In the taglines, [brand] was replaced by the brand name, which varied between conditions.

After viewing the Instagram post, participants were asked to describe what they saw before answering the measures for the mediators and dependent variables. The open-ended answers were coded and used in an auxiliary analysis that corroborated our main findings reported below (see appendix c for details). Perceived bragging was measured with four items from Ferraro et al. (2013) and O’Cass & McEwen (2006) - e.g., “The person who shared this post is trying to impress other people;” measured on 7-point Likert scales (1=strongly disagree - 7=strongly agree; M=5.53, SD=1.01, α=.86). Attitude towards the sharer was measured using three 7-point semantic differential scales (Ferraro et al., 2013; e.g., “bad-good”, M=4.53, SD=1.10, α=.89).

As control variables, attitude towards the brand was measured using a three item semantic differential (e.g., “bad-good”, α=.98, M=4.35, SD=1.34), and brand ownership was measured with a single item (“Do you currently own, or have you previously owned any [brand] product(s)? - H&M: 66.2 %; LV: 13.2 %). The brand status manipulation was checked on a 7-point semantic differential scale (“[brand] has a very low - very high status”). The brand prominence manipulation was checked with a 7-point Likert item (“How prominent was [brand] in the post?” 1= not prominent at all – 7= very prominent).

Means on these items indicated that the manipulations worked as intended: For brand status, a two-way ANOVA showed that participants


in the high status brand (Louis Vuitton) condition rated the brand in the post as having a significantly higher brand status ($M=5.74, SD=1.23$), than those in the low status brand (H&M) condition ($M=4.25, SD=0.94, F(1, 284)=126.97, p<.001$). Brand prominence did not affect perceived brand status ($F(3, 284)=0.89, p=.345$) and there was no interaction between status and prominence ($F(3, 284)=0.99, p=.320$).

For brand prominence, a two-way ANOVA showed that perceived brand prominence was higher in high brand prominence conditions ($M=4.62, SD=1.21$) than in the low brand prominence conditions ($M=6.54, SD=1.43, F(1, 284)=127.34, p<.001$). Unexpectedly, brand status also had a small significant effect on perceived brand prominence; perceived brand prominence was slightly higher in high status conditions ($M=5.76, SD=1.19$) than in the low status conditions ($M=5.41, SD=1.26, F(1, 286)=5.34, p=.022$). There was no significant interaction between brand status and brand prominence ($F(1, 284)=1.26, p=.722$). Despite the small effect of brand status on perceived brand prominence, the strong main effect of brand status leads us to conclude that the manipulation of brand prominence was successful enough to proceed with the analyses.

**Results**

Our hypotheses were tested in two ANCOVAs with **bragging** and **attitude towards the sharer** as dependent variables, and **attitude towards the brand** as covariate, in order to account for a priori difference in this variableootnote{The analysis were also conducted without this covariate, which did not alter the results.}. For bragging, this analysis showed a significant main effect of brand status, $F(1, 283)=30.11, p<.001$. Bragging was higher for participants who were exposed to the high status ($M=5.94, SD=0.93$) versus low status brand ($M=5.28, SD=1.07$), replicating the results of Study 1b and providing additional support for Hypothesis 2.

We also found a significant main effect of brand prominence on bragging ($F(1, 283)=4.27, p<.040$); perceived bragging was significantly higher for high ($M=5.73, SD=1.11$) versus low ($M=5.49, SD=1.01$) brand prominence posts. There was no interaction effect between status and prominence ($F(1, 283)=.19, p=.662$), so that these results provide only partial support for H4.

For attitude towards the sharer, the analysis showed a significant main effect of brand status ($F(1, 283)=6.85, p=.009$), with less favorable attitudes scores in the high ($M=3.57, SD=1.22$), compared to the low ($M=3.92, SD=1.37$) status brand conditions. Brand prominence also had a significant main effect, $F(2, 282)=6.68, p=.010$, with less favorable scores in the high brand prominence condition ($M=3.58, SD=1.34$), compared to the low prominence condition ($M=3.92, SD=1.30$). Again, we found no significant interaction ($F(1, 283)=0.54 p=.463$), so that our results provide only partial support for Hypothesis 4.

**Study 2 discussion**

Study 2 shows that participants were more likely to perceive posters as bragging when their Instagram posts contained a high (versus) status brand, and when posts where featuring the brand highly (versus lowly) prominent. These perceptions were paired with less favorable attitudes toward the poster. Contrary to our expectations, we found no significant interactions between brand status and brand prominence. A possible explanation for this difference is the fact that both brands (Louis Vuitton and H&M) were scored relatively high on the perceived bragging scale, and that the H&M brand also scored above the midpoint on the perceived bragging scale, so that the prominent display of an H&M bag might still be perceived as bragging.

To further explore the effects of the visual characteristics of brand related posts, a third study was conducted. Since the previous studies have shown a consistent effect of brand status, with high status brand posts more likely to be seen as self-presentation efforts, the third study focused solely on posts about high status brands. It aimed to assess the direct effects of brand prominence and staging on bragging and attitude towards the sharer, and the combined effects of these factors. To increase the generalizability of our study, a different high status brand was selected for this study.

4 The analysis were also conducted without this covariate, which did not alter the results.
Study 3
The effects of brand prominence and staging

Method

Study 3 examined effects of brand prominence and staging for high status brands in a controlled experiment with a 2 (Prominence: low vs. high) by 2 (Staging: low vs. high) between participants design, with 286 participants (162 female, average age 33.4 years (SD=11.56), recruited through Prolific, and receiving a small compensation for participating.

Based on the design, we constructed four versions of an Instagram post, consisting of a picture, a caption and several hashtags (see Appendix 3) of a high status brand product. The image showed the forearm of a man, holding a coffee cup, and wearing a Rolex watch.

Brand prominence was manipulated in the picture and the text, by either having the camera focus on the watch (high brand prominence) or on the coffee cup (low brand prominence). Depending on condition, the accompanying text focused more on the brand (high brand prominence: Rolex and morning coffee #rolex #luxurywatch #sundaymorning #coffee #caffeineplease) or on the situation (low brand prominence: Morning coffee! #coffee #caffeineplease #sundaymorning #watch #rolex).

Staging was manipulated in the image. In the highly staged conditions, the image of the hand holding the coffee cup was carefully lighted, and had a beautiful foam design on top. The composition was well thought out and cropped, and there were no messy elements. The image in the low staging conditions was similar (taken by the same photographer, containing the same elements), but the overall composition was less clean, the lighting more washed out, and the table was cluttered with a dirty napkin and coffee stains. The coffee cup was half empty, and there was no foam design (see Appendix B).

After viewing the Instagram post, participants were asked to describe what they saw before answering the measures for the mediators and dependent variables. The open-ended answers were coded and used in an auxiliary analysis that corroborated our main findings reported below (see appendix d for details).

Measures were the same as in Study 2: perceived bragging (α=.81, M=5.88, SD=1.01), and attitude towards the sharer (α=.95, M=3.22, SD=1.42). As control variables, attitude towards the brand was measured using a three item semantic differential scale (α=.97, M=4.21, SD=1.32). Furthermore, brand ownership, and brand familiarity were again measured with single items.

Results

As in Study 2, our hypotheses were tested in two ANCOVAs with bragging and attitude towards the sharer as dependent variables, and attitude towards the brand as covariate. For bragging, the results showed the main effect of brand prominence on bragging proposed in H4, F(1, 281)=48.44, p<.001. Bragging was significantly
higher for participants who were exposed to the high \( (M=6.25, \ SD=0.72) \) compared to the low brand prominence posts \( (M=5.51, \ SD=1.10) \). We also found a significant main effect of staging on bragging proposed in H5, \( F(2, \ 280)=5.77, \ p=.017 \), with higher scores in the high \( (M=6.01, \ SD=0.90) \), versus low staging condition \( (M=5.75, \ SD=1.10) \). There was no interaction between brand prominence and staging \( (F(1, \ 281)=1.66, \ p=.684) \).

For attitude toward the sharer, the analysis also showed a significant main effect of brand prominence \( (F(1, \ 281)=14.03, \ p<.001) \), with less favorable attitudes in the high \( (M=2.95, \ SD=1.37) \), compared to the low \( (M=3.48, \ SD=1.39) \) brand prominence condition. Staging had a marginal effect \( (F(1, \ 281)=2.86, \ p=.092) \), and attitudes were somewhat less favorable in the high \( (M=3.10, \ SD=1.39) \), versus low staging conditions \( (M=3.32, \ SD=1.44) \). Interestingly, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction \( (F(1, \ 281)=6.58, \ p=.011) \). Post-hoc tests showed that the impact of prominence on attitude toward the sharer was significant only in the high staged conditions, where high prominence lead to less favorable attitudes \( (M=2.66, \ SD=1.27) \) than low prominence \( (M=3.53, \ SD=1.31) \). In the low staging conditions, no significant difference was found – see Table 3 for means.

The results of study 3 showed that both brand prominence and staging increased perceptions of bragging, and lead to less favorable attitudes towards the sharer. They thus provide support for H4 and H5. In addition, we found a significant interaction between brand prominence and staging on attitude towards the sharer, showing that for highly staged posts, high brand prominence significantly decreased attitude towards the brand. For posts with low staging, brand prominence did not significantly affect attitude towards the sharer. Similar to the results of study 1b, this result suggests that the effects of different visual elements may be reinforcing each other.

Table 3: Means (SD) for perceived bragging and attitude towards the sharer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental condition</th>
<th>Low brand prominence/ low staging</th>
<th>Low brand prominence/ high staging</th>
<th>High brand prominence/ low staging</th>
<th>High brand prominence/ high staging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived bragging</td>
<td>5.36 (1.22)</td>
<td>5.66 (0.96)</td>
<td>6.15 (0.78)</td>
<td>6.36 (0.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards the sharer</td>
<td>3.41 (1.47)</td>
<td>3.53 (1.31)</td>
<td>3.25 (1.39)</td>
<td>2.66 (1.27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The objective of this research article was to investigate how consumers create brands to self-present on social media, and how such posts affect the audience’s perceptions of the sharer. The first study analyzed the content of Instagram posts about various brands, and found that posts about high and low status brands differed significantly in terms of self-presentation cues. In line with our expectations, posts about high status brands were more focused on the brand, more staged, and more often positive about the brand, thus indicating that high status brands are more likely to be used to self-present by social media users.

Following up on this, study 1b investigated audience perceptions of these posts. The results showed that there was a significant relation between brand status and self-presentation cues in a post, and other consumers’ evaluations of the person who shared it. High brand status and high staging were associated with higher levels of perceived bragging, which indicates that these factors activate persuasion knowledge in viewers.

Two experiments were conducted to further examine audience responses to brand related social media posts, and to determine the conditions under which social media posts about brands may increase perceptions of bragging, and affect evaluations of the sharer. Study 2 confirmed the effects of brand status and brand prominence, showing that both brand status and brand prominence increased perceptions of bragging, while also decreasing participants’ attitude towards the sharer. Study 4 demonstrated that staging triggers perceptions of bragging in a similar manner as brand status and brand prominence: highly staged posts were more likely to be interpreted as bragging, and decreased attitudes towards the person who shared them. Study 3 also suggests that brand prominence and staging may reinforce each other to create perceptions of bragging, and less favorable attitudes toward sharers, although the results were only directional for some measures.

**Contributions and implications**

The present study makes two main contributions to existing streams of literature. Firstly, our study contributes to self-presentation and status consumption literature by showing that both the status of brands displayed in social media, as well as the visual execution of such posts may hinder rather than help making a favorable impression on others. This result is indicative of a gap between sharers intentions of online self-presentation, and the effect of these efforts on audiences. Although consumers who post about high status brands seem to do so with the intention to leverage the positive symbolic and cultural connotations associated with these brands, high status brands actually seem to lead to less favorable impressions of the sharer. Furthermore, if the intention is to come across in a positive light, the visual placement of brands, as well as making an effort to create a stylish visual, may equally backfire. This discrepancy has previously been suggested in studies on impression management and self-presentation, which have shown that individuals have trouble correctly assessing the impact of their self-presentation activities (Gilovich et al., 2002;
Scopelliti et al., 2015). Our study extends these findings to the domain of brand-related social media posts.

Secondly, the present study contributes to research on visual consumption by focusing on the impact of visual aspects of brand-related social media posts. Although prior research on the impact of self-presentation in social media exists, most of it dealt with predominantly text-based information, such as product reviews and tweets. The present study is the first to specifically focus on visuals, and the results indicate that overtly displayed brand information, as well as images that are noticeably styled, may serve as cues of the self-presentation intentions of the consumer who shares this information. This shows that consumers do not only pick up on what others choose to share in social media, but also how they choose to visualize it. With (consumer generated) visuals becoming increasingly important online it is paramount to increase our understanding of their potential role and influence.

The results of our study hold implications for marketing practitioners as well. Although general consensus among marketers seems to be that consumer-to-consumer sharing of their brands on social media is something to be desired and stimulated (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), the present study highlights a potential down side of such behavior, especially for individuals who share about high status brands. Since previous studies suggest that the negative effects of bragging on sharer evaluations can, under certain conditions, carry over to the brand (Ferraro et al., 2013), high status brand may want to exercise caution when encouraging customers to post about their brand online.

**Limitations and future research**

A first limitation of this study is related to the measurement of perceived self-presentation. Across all conditions, and in all studies, perceptions of self-presentation were above the midpoint of the measurement scale, which means that the differences that were found between the various conditions were a case of high and higher perceived self-presentation, rather than between low and high perceived self-presentation. It is therefore likely that the lack of interaction effects on perceived self-presentation in our study can be contributed to a ceiling effect. Our findings indicate that, in line with literature on persuasion knowledge, individuals tend to be highly aware of self-presentation motives driving social media posts. However, these results may also have been the consequence of overly strong manipulations. Future research could therefore investigate the impact of subtler brand mentions, to see whether there are conditions under which brand mentions do not trigger persuasion knowledge.

Secondly, this research focused on reactions to posts from individuals unknown to the participants, leaving the effects of self-presentation behavior of friends and other offline connections unaddressed. Being exposed to posts from strangers is not uncommon on social media, especially on platforms like Instagram, where, unlike on Facebook, users can follow others without the other person’s consent. Research shows that about half of the connections on such platforms tend to consist of individuals the user does not know personally, in the offline world (Marwick, 2015). However, since a large portion of social media connections do consist of friends and personal acquaintances, future research could build on the current findings by studying how brand related posts from personal relations might differ in their effects. Research by Packard and colleagues (2016) suggests that knowledge about the individual sharing a post may enhance perceived trust, giving them more leeway to present themselves in a positive light.

Lastly, although the results of the present study clearly demonstrate a negative relation between self-presentation efforts and sharer and brand evaluations, there are reasons to assume that not all who brag on social media are universally despised. Many lifestyle and fashion bloggers acquire massive followings by posting stylized images of high status products and possessions as an important part of their successful business model (Arvidsson & Calliandro, 2016). This highlights interesting an interesting question for future research: under what conditions, or for who does bragging lead to admiration rather than resentment and distaste?
References


Appendix A:
Experimental materials for Study 2

Figure 1: Low status brand, low brand prominence

Figure 2: Low status brand, high brand prominence

Figure 3: High status brand, low brand prominence

Figure 4: High status brand, high brand prominence
Appendix B:
Experimental materials for Study 3

Figure 5: Low brand prominence, low staging

Figure 6: Low brand prominence, high staging

Figure 7: High brand prominence, low staging

Figure 8: High brand prominence, high staging
Appendix C:
Additional analyses of answers to open-ended question in study 2

Directly after exposure to the stimulus material, participants were asked: “Can you please describe the content of the Instagram post you just saw in one or two sentences?”. The answers to this open-ended question were coded for the number of references to bragging behavior. For example: the answer “A picture of a new black leather handbag, along with an H&M shopping bag, sunglasses, keys and a bottle of water” was coded as 0, whereas the answer “There is a Louis Vuitton bag surrounded by some decorations. The post itself is bragging about going shopping” was coded as 1. The scores for this perceived bragging measure for each condition are displayed in Table 1. For further analyses, the count data were averaged and log transformed, to address the right skew and normalize the distribution of this variable.

Table 1: Count scores for bragging per experimental condition in study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bragging count score</th>
<th>Experimental condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>low brand status/low brand prominence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A two (Brand status: low vs. high) by two (Brand prominence: low vs. high) ANOVA on the log transformed count of references to bragging in the open-ended question about the post content. The results showed significant main effects for brand status ($F(1, 284)=4.80, p = .029$) and brand prominence ($F(1, 284)=16.58, p < .001$). More references to bragging were made by participants exposed to high ($M=0.28, SD=0.64$) versus low ($M=0.15, SD=0.39$) status brand posts, and by participants exposed to a post with high ($M=0.33, SE=0.34$) versus low ($M=0.10$) brand prominence. In addition, we found a marginally significant interaction ($F(3, 284)=2.87, p = .091$). Simple slopes analysis showed that there was a significant difference between high and low brand prominence in the high brand status conditions ($p < .001$), with a combination of high brand status and high brand prominence eliciting more references to bragging ($M=0.28, SD=0.43$) than the high status low brand prominence condition ($M=0.07, SD=0.22$). There was only a marginally significant effect of brand prominence in the low brand status conditions ($p = .09$), with high brand prominence ($M=0.14, SD=0.29$) eliciting more references to bragging than low brand prominence ($M=0.05, SD=0.20$). This finding is in line with H4b.
Appendix D:
Additional analyses of answers to open ended question in study 3

Directly after exposure to the stimulus material, participants were asked: “Can you please describe the content of the Instagram post you just saw in one or two sentences?”. The answers to this open-ended question were coded for the number of references to bragging behavior. For example: the following answer was coded as 0: “A person’s arm wearing a plaid shirt and a Rolex watch near a coffee cup”, whereas the answer: “Jamie is posting a picture of his morning coffee and his Rolex watch. He is posting about his coffee, but he is really showing off his expensive watch.” Was counted as 1, since it contains one explicit reference to bragging. Count scores for bragging in each condition are given in Table 1. For further analyses, the count data were averaged and log transformed, to address the right skew and normalize the distribution of this variable.

Table 1: Count scores for bragging per experimental condition in Study 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bragging count score</th>
<th>Experimental condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>low brand prominence/low staging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A two (Brand status: low vs. high) by two (Brand prominence: low vs. high) ANOVA on the log transformed count of references to bragging in the open-ended question about the post content. In line with study 2 (see Appendix C), the results showed significant main effects for brand prominence ($F(3, 282)=21.28, p<.001$). More references to bragging were made by individuals exposed to a post with high ($M=.30, SE=0.03$) versus low brand prominence ($M=0.11, SE=0.03$).

We also found a main effect of staging ($F(1, 281)=5.81, p=.020$, with more references to bragging made by individuals exposed to a post with high staging ($M=0.25, SE=0.03$) versus low staging ($M=0.15, SE=0.03$). These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 281)=5.33, p=.026$. Simple slope analysis showed that there was a significant effect of prominence in the high staging conditions, where high prominence posts ($M=.39, SD=.43$) elicited a significantly higher number of references to bragging than did low brand prominence posts ($M=11, SD=.27$), $p<.001$. In the low staging condition, there was no significant difference between high brand prominence posts ($M=.20, SD=.40$) and low brand prominence posts ($M=.11, SD=.25$), $p=.140$. 

106