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# The Malleable Morality of Conspicuous Consumption

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Conspicuous consumption has often been decried as immoral by many philosophers and scholars, yet it is ubiquitous and widely embraced. This research sheds light on the apparent paradox by proposing that the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption is malleable, contingent upon how different moral lenses highlight the different characteristics embedded in the behavior. Utilizing the Moral Foundations Theory, we demonstrate that the *individualizing* values (i.e., equality and welfare) make people focus on the self-enhancing characteristics of conspicuous consumption, making it seem morally objectionable. However, the *binding* values (i.e., deference to authority, in-group loyalty, and purity) make people focus on the social identity signaling characteristic of conspicuous consumption, making it seem morally permissible. First, an archival dataset shows that the prevalence of the different moral values predicts per-capita spending on luxury goods across different countries. Then, 6 studies ( $N = 2903$ ) show that the trait endorsement and the momentary salience of the different moral foundations can influence the moral judgment of conspicuous consumption as well as the propensity to engage in conspicuous consumption. Further, analyses show that the effect of the binding values (individualizing values) is mediated by heightened sensitivity to the social identity signaling (self-enhancing) aspects of conspicuous consumption. Finally, the studies demonstrate that the effect is moderated by the extent of social visibility during consumption. Thus, this research suggests that some moral values can, somewhat paradoxically, increase conspicuous consumption.

**Keywords:** conspicuous consumption, consumption preferences, moral foundations theory, moral judgment

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*“The dissolution of morals is the necessary consequence of luxury.”*  
—Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1750)

Conspicuous consumption, the purchase and exhibition of costly items for social impression, has been decried as immoral by the scholars of society. Veblen (1899) argued that the very essence of conspicuous consumption lies in the element of wasting time and resources. Rousseau (1750) proclaimed that “a taste for ostentation is rarely associated in the same souls with a taste for honesty.” Benjamin Franklin (1758) also warned that “without frugality,

nothing will do.” Similarly, religious and spiritual texts have typically discouraged the purchase and exhibition of luxury products (Dalai Lama, 2009). Furthermore, opinion pieces in mainstream media frequently express moral outrage on the “explosion of elite ostentation” (Krugman, 2014). This notion has also trickled into contemporary pop-culture where characters engaging in conspicuous consumption are often portrayed with questionable morals. Moreover, research has shown that people typically ascribe negative personality traits to others engaging in conspicuous consumption (Belk, 1978; Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). Hence, at least in some sections of society, conspicuous consumption is considered morally suspect. That is, a moral person would not purchase products like Prada handbags and Rolex watches.

However, conspicuous consumption is quite rampant and has always been an integral aspect of human society (Mason, 1998; Page, 1992). Luxury goods consumption, most of which qualifies as conspicuous consumption, has been steadily growing. It is estimated that the worldwide value of luxury goods market has reached \$289 billion (Paton, 2017) and almost all individuals have purchased, or will purchase, at least one luxury product in their lifetime (Taylor, Harrison, & Kraus, 2008). Importantly, conspicuous consumption has existed in tandem with the moral fabric society. In some cases, reputed society leaders and even religious leaders have spearheaded the ostentatious consumption of luxury cars and designer outfits. For instance, televangelists in the United States are known to flaunt private jets and mansions (Chasmar, 2016). Even across the world, spiritual leaders and gurus in India unabashedly partake in ostentatious consumption like buying Rolls

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All survey materials, procedural details, and additional data analysis are available in the online supplemental materials. Raw data for Studies 2–6 are available on the open science framework website (<https://osf.io/z4qmk>). Note that the data use agreements do not permit us to share the data for Study 1.

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Royce cars and private islands (Urban, 2016; Worth, 2018). This begs the question—do all sections of society perceive conspicuous consumption to be morally objectionable? What psychological factors influence the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption?

We posit that the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption is malleable. Conspicuous consumption may not always be perceived to be immoral; rather, its morality is contingent upon how different moral lenses highlight the different characteristics embedded in the behavior. Some moral values can highlight the self-enhancing characteristics of conspicuous consumption such as wastefulness, vanity, and superiority (Belk, 1988). Unsurprisingly, when one attends to these aspects of conspicuous consumption, it is perceived to be morally objectionable. However, some moral values can highlight the group-focused characteristics of conspicuous consumption such as signaling of social identity, group values, and group membership (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). If one attends to these aspects, then conspicuous consumption can appear morally permissible. Consequentially, we argue that different moral lenses, which highlight these different characteristics of conspicuous consumption can alter its moral judgment. This proposition goes counter to the view that conspicuous consumption is always considered morally suspect. Instead, our argument is that certain moral values can make conspicuous consumption less morally objectionable, sometimes even making it desirable.

We utilize the Moral Foundations Theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham et al., 2011, 2013; Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2007) to demonstrate how the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption can be molded by the different systems of moral values. We predict that the *individualizing* moral foundations (i.e., care and fairness) increase moral objections to conspicuous consumption as they emphasize the importance of welfare and equality. However, the *binding* moral foundations (i.e., deference to authority, in-group loyalty, and purity) can reduce the moral objections to conspicuous consumption, as they emphasize the importance of social hierarchy, loyalty, and tradition. First, we analyze an archival dataset spanning 32 countries to examine how the prevalence of the two moral foundations impacts consumption of luxury goods across the different countries. Then, we report results from six studies ( $N = 2903$ ) designed to compare and contrast the effects of the two moral foundations on the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption as well as the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

Examining the malleable morality of conspicuous consumption produces important implications for understanding the antecedents of this widespread social behavior. First, it offers an explanation for why some sections of society engage in conspicuous consumption even when other groups consider it morally objectionable. Second, it augments the extant literature on moral foundations by identifying a hitherto unexamined effect of the individualizing and binding moral values. Although researchers in the past have examined how different moral foundations can produce downstream consequences for domains such as politics (Graham et al., 2009), social groups (Smith, Aquino, Koleva, & Graham, 2014), self-control (Mooijman et al., 2018), and prosocial behaviors (Kidwell, Farmer, & Hardesty, 2013), the extant research has not examined how they can influence consumption behaviors. Hence, the present research demonstrates a novel consequence of the distinct moral foundations, extending our understanding of when, why, and how

morality can impact consumption and economic activities in society.

### Moral Foundations Theory

The Moral Foundations Theory posits that moral values are composed of five different factors or foundations, including care/harm, fairness/cheating, authority/subversion, loyalty/betrayal, and purity/degradation (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007). The theory argues that in the first two moral foundations (care and fairness), the individual's welfare and well-being is the locus of the moral concern; therefore, these are called the *individualizing* foundations. These moral values emphasize equality and welfare to protect individuals and provide for individual rights in social settings. These values have functional relevance in some contexts; they protect people from being harmed, oppressed, or treated unfairly by other members of the group or by the institutional systems. On the other hand, in the latter three moral foundations (authority, loyalty, purity), the group's welfare is the locus of moral concern; therefore, these are called the *binding* foundations. These foundations focus on "limiting individual autonomy and self-expression to bind people into emergent social entities such as families, clans, and nations" (Graham & Haidt, 2010, p. 144). These values "preserve social institutions by promoting and celebrating those who support and sacrifice for the group (in-group loyalty), respect and obey traditions (authority), and rise above their base urges and exercise self-control (purity)" (Napier & Luguri, 2013, p. 754).

Extant research has examined how these two different types of foundations can motivate different preferences, attitudes, and behaviors in several domains. Most famously, differences in the adherence to these moral foundations can explain the different political views between liberals and conservatives (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Understanding how these different moral values guide political beliefs has allowed researchers to demonstrate how to frame more effective messages for climate change (Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016), recycling (Kidwell et al., 2013), prosocial behaviors (Winterich, Zhang, & Mittal, 2012), and social causes (Helzer & Pizarro, 2011; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2012; Wright & Baril, 2011). Aside from the political domain, the binding foundations has also been associated with religious beliefs (Graham & Haidt, 2010), moralization of self-control (Mooijman et al., 2018), and increased discrimination of out-groups (Smith et al., 2014; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009; van Leeuwen, Park, Koenig, & Graham, 2012).

In the present research, we suggest that the individualizing and binding foundations can also be used to predict when conspicuous consumption will be perceived to be morally objectionable or permissible. Specifically, because the two foundations prioritize different moral concerns (Graham et al., 2009), they can alter the moral lens through which a person evaluates conspicuous consumption. The individualizing values make one evaluate behaviors in the context of equality and welfare, but the binding values make one judge behaviors in the context of social hierarchy, loyalty, and tradition. We propose that these different moral lenses will highlight the different characteristics embedded in conspicuous consumption, making it appear morally acceptable or objectionable. The next section outlines these different characteristics of conspicuous consumption.

## Conspicuous Consumption

Conspicuous consumption is a signaling behavior intended to impress others through possessions and behaviors (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Veblen, 1899). The spectrum of conspicuous consumption includes all forms of signaling which serve the purposes of social impression, such as signaling of status, power, exclusive access, busyness, sexual fitness, and even prosociality via products and behavior (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014; Bellezza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2017; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Griskevicius et al., 2007; Sundie et al., 2011). The defining aspect of conspicuous consumption is a showy action, sending some signal to others present through products and behaviors. Thus, Louis Vuitton purses, country-club pins, blatant charity donations, and even Whole Foods grocery bags can all be forms of conspicuous consumption.

In this research, we focus on the consumption of luxury products, that is, expensive visible products that are used to signal wealth and status, as this the most common form of conspicuous consumption (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009; Veblen, 1899). Notably, luxury products are usually, though not always, used for such conspicuous consumption. Although most luxury products are costly and showy (e.g., designer bags, high-end watches), some luxury products are not socially visible and may be consumed privately (e.g., luxury bed sheets, luxury undergarments). Therefore, all conspicuous products are luxury products, but some luxury products may not be conspicuous. Despite these subtle distinctions, luxury products are apt stimuli for investigating how moral values influence conspicuous consumption.

### Is Conspicuous Consumption Immoral?

As discussed previously, conspicuous consumption has typically been considered an undesirable immoral behavior by philosophers and scholars (Dalai Lama, 2009; Franklin, 1758; Miller, 2001; Patty & Johnson, 1953). Importantly, researchers have also documented empirical evidence for the dysfunctional effects of conspicuous consumption. Crucially, conspicuous consumption violates social norms of modesty and fairness (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986). Consequentially, people who engage in conspicuous consumption and flaunt material pursuits are stigmatized as having undesirable personality traits and are considered less likable (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013; Scott, Mende, & Bolton, 2013; Van Boven et al., 2010). Further, when people engage in conspicuous consumption, they become less prosocial (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Shrum et al., 2014). Concurrently, a materialistic disposition can reduce personal well-being and life-satisfaction (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014; Kasser, 2003; Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004). And unsurprisingly, the wasteful expenditure on status-seeking luxury products increases debt for the economically vulnerable and entraps them in a cycle of poverty (Christen & Morgan, 2005; Frank, 1993). Because of all these reasons, it is widely perceived that conspicuous consumption is harmful and morally questionable. That is, moral individuals would eschew conspicuous consumption to avoid its negative consequences for the self and society.

However, such a view only acknowledges the self-enhancing characteristics of conspicuous consumption and ignores another

important facet of the behavior: it can also be associated with group-focused characteristics (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). Crucially, conspicuous consumption can be associated with the group-focused characteristic of signaling social identity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). We contend that considering this aspect of conspicuous consumption can make the behavior seem morally acceptable.

### Conspicuous Consumption as a Social Identity Signal

Social identity signals indicate to others how a person sees himself with respect to cultures, communities, and groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, & Wetherell, 1989). Importantly, several researchers have outlined how brands and products can be utilized to signal social identity (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Kirmani, 2009; Muñoz & Schau, 2005). When a person adopts and displays a particular brand, he signals his endorsement of the shared social values and beliefs of the community (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001; Kates, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Concurrently, when individuals feel socially excluded they strategically consume and display brands that signal affiliation with the group (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011). In short, people infer social traits and social identities of others through the clothes and products that they consume publicly (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982).

For example, popular brands like Nike have come to reflect specific social identities (Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007). Wearing a Nike logo not only reflects that one has the resources to buy a high-quality product but also signals a health/fitness oriented social identity (Green, 2017). More broadly, wearing a Nike logo endorses the social identities of multiculturalism, equal opportunity, self-determination, and social mobility, ideals that Nike has come to represent through their advertisement campaigns (Boren, 2017; McNaney, 2013). Contrastingly, a person who conspicuously displays a Harley Davidson logo is signaling a social identity of counterculture rebellion (Schembri, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Therefore, when a person publicly displays a brand or product, it reinforces and strengthens his social identity, and signals this identity to others present.

In sum, we argue that conspicuous consumption is associated with two different sets of characteristics—self-enhancing versus group-focused. We propose that when the self-enhancing characteristics are highlighted, the behavior is perceived to be morally objectionable, but when the group-focused characteristics are highlighted the behavior is perceived to be morally acceptable. The next section outlines how the Moral Foundations Theory can be utilized to demonstrate this malleable morality of conspicuous consumption.

### Hypothesis Development

We bring together two streams of literature, the literature on the Moral Foundations Theory and conspicuous consumption, to propose that individualizing and binding foundations can alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption. Because the two foundations lend different moral outlooks, they can highlight the different characteristics embedded in conspicuous consumption, making it seem morally acceptable or objectionable and subse-

quently altering the propensity to engage in conspicuous consumption. Figure 1 depicts our proposed conceptual framework.

### Individualizing Values and Conspicuous Consumption

As depicted in Figure 1, we posit that the individualizing foundations make conspicuous consumption appear to be morally objectionable and reduce the propensity to engage in the behavior. This is because the individualizing moral values stress the reduction of self-aggrandization. They focus the person's attention on fairness and care in evaluating social behaviors (Haidt, 2007). These values highlight the self-enhancing aspects of conspicuous consumption—the signaling of power, extravagance, vanity, and superiority. Consequently, the individualizing values conflict with these self-enhancing characteristics, making the behavior seem morally objectionable. It is not surprising that when a person predominantly values equality and welfare, she would see conspicuous behaviors, like carrying a Louis Vuitton bag, as a manifestation of power, waste, and social inequality. Thus, a person with an individualizing moral lens would find conspicuous consumption contradictory to her values and judge it to be morally questionable.

Based on this theorization, we predict that the individualizing values will increase the sensitivity to the self-enhancing characteristics of conspicuous consumption. Second, we predict that the individualizing values will increase unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous behaviors. Finally, and most importantly, we predict that the individualizing values will reduce the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

### Binding Values and Conspicuous Consumption

In contrast, the binding foundations should make conspicuous consumption appear to be morally acceptable and increase the propensity to engage in the behavior. This is because the binding foundations direct a person's attention on deference to authority, in-group loyalty, and purity (Haidt, 2007). These values motivate people to view behaviors in the context of group dynamics and social communication. As a result, these values highlight the group-focused characteristics of conspicuous consumption—the signaling of social identity. Consequently, the binding values reinforce these group-focused characteristics of conspicuous consumption, making the behavior seem morally permissible.

Importantly, we propose that when binding values are salient, the act of partaking in conspicuous consumption would seem morally acceptable because it is perceived to be a means to

strengthen group fitness. This is because social identity signals serve an important function in strengthening group bonds, loyalty, and cohesion (Sherman, Hamilton, & Lewis, 1999; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). When group members are vocal about their social identity, it strengthens and facilitates the shared values of the community, aiding group harmony (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner et al., 1989). In addition, conspicuous consumption also promotes vertical differentiation and heterogeneity within a group (Dommer, Swaminathan, & Ahluwalia, 2013), which can play an important role in facilitating long-term group fitness and success (Halevy, Chou, & Galinsky, 2011; Ronay, Greenaway, Anicich, & Galinsky, 2012). Therefore, when a person predominantly values social hierarchy, loyalty, and tradition, she would see conspicuous behaviors, like carrying a Louis Vuitton bag, as a manifestation of social communication and social differentiation that is necessary for group functioning and success. Thus, a person with a binding moral lens would find conspicuous consumption congruent with her values and judge it to be morally acceptable.

Based on this theorization, we predict that the binding values increase the sensitivity to the social-identity signaling characteristics of conspicuous consumption. Second, we predict that the binding values will increase favorable moral judgments of conspicuous behaviors. Finally, and most importantly, we predict that the binding values will increase the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

### Boundary Condition

Our conceptualization also suggests one important boundary condition for the effect of binding values on conspicuous consumption—the extent of social visibility. This boundary condition not only has substantive importance but also validates the psychological mechanisms underpinning our theorization. Our theory predicts that people who endorse binding values utilize conspicuous consumption as a public signal to others who are observing them. If the products are indeed used for such signaling purposes, then the propensity to engage in conspicuous consumption should be contingent upon social visibility. Therefore, we predict that the effect of binding values on conspicuous consumption will reduce when social visibility is reduced.

Social visibility can be altered through social contexts as well as by the type of product. Some consumption contexts are more private than public. For example, social visibility would be lower when a person is exercising in the privacy of her home rather than in a public gymnasium. Therefore, the effect of binding values on conspicuous consumption should be weaker for such private con-

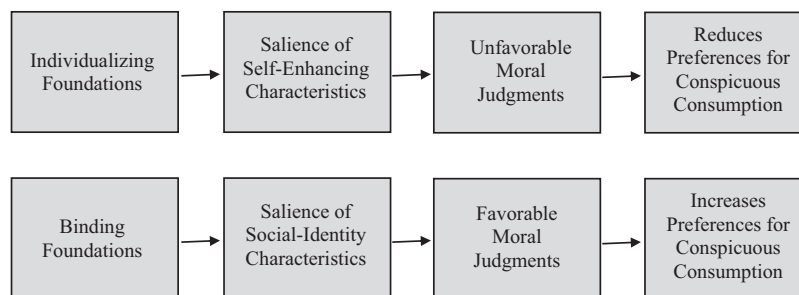


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework.



sumption scenarios. In a similar vein, social visibility can also depend on the type of product; some products are less socially visible than others (e.g., toothbrushes and toaster ovens are less socially visible than shirts and shoes). We predict that the effect of binding values will be moderated by the degree of the product's social visibility, such that the effect of binding values should reduce as the product's social visibility decreases.

### Overview of Studies

We conducted seven studies to compare the effects of the individualizing and binding moral values on conspicuous consumption. First, in Studies 1 and 2, we assessed how the endorsement of the two moral foundations can have a consequential impact on the propensity to engage in conspicuous consumption, producing economic and social implications. Study 1 analyzed country-level archival data to examine how the prevalence of individualizing and binding values can predict the per-capita consumption of luxury goods across countries. Study 2 examined how the trait endorsement of the two moral foundations can predict individuals' preferences for conspicuous consumption, producing implications for political and religious groups. Then, Study 3 assessed how the trait endorsement of the two moral foundations influences the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, demonstrating that the moral foundations can alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption.

In the next two studies, we causally tested for the theorized conceptual pathway (see Figure 1). Study 4 examined the first stage of the pathway. We manipulated the momentary salience of the individualizing and binding foundations and examined how the moral primes heighten sensitivity to the different characteristics of conspicuous consumption, which subsequently alter the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. Then, Study 5 examined the second stage of the pathway. We examined how priming the two moral foundations alters the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, which subsequently influences the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

Finally, we examined the social visibility boundary condition for the effect of moral values on preferences for conspicuous consumption. Study 6A examined how private versus public consumption context moderates the effect of the moral values on preferences for conspicuous consumption. Study 6B investigated how the effect of moral values on preferences for conspicuous consumption is moderated by the degree of the product's social visibility.

All data were collected after receiving an exemption status from the Institutional Review Board of Cornell University (Protocol ID#: 1709007433). We collected a standard sample of 500 participants in each study to ensure sufficient power and established a predetermined criterion for excluding participants. The analysis was performed only after data collection was completed. We report all experimental conditions and all measures collected. All survey materials, procedural details, and additional data analysis are available in the online supplemental materials. Raw data are available on the open science framework website (<https://osf.io/z4qmk>). Note, data use agreements do not permit us to share the secondary data used in Study 1.

### Study 1: Country-Level Consumption Data

This study was designed to examine the effect of moral values on conspicuous consumption in a consequential real-world context. We sought to examine whether the moral values could meaningfully impact conspicuous economic behaviors in a country. We acquired an economic dataset detailing luxury consumption<sup>1</sup> patterns across several countries and another survey dataset outlining the adherence to the moral foundations in these countries. We combined the two independent data sets to examine whether the prevalence of the moral foundations could predict the pattern of luxury consumption across the countries. Specifically, we hypothesized that a greater relative endorsement of binding values over individualizing values would predict higher per-capita luxury consumption.

### Data

**Luxury consumption.** The country-level consumption data were acquired from the Passport Database (© Euromonitor International). This privately maintained database provides category-level consumption data for countries across various industries. The data are compiled through a convergence of different methods including reviewing national government reports, trade association reports, corporate consulting papers, and market analysis. This database has been utilized extensively by industry experts to analyze and forecast market trends.

The database provided us with the annual per-capita consumption of luxury goods in 32 countries. All data were reported in U.S. dollars recorded at fixed 2016 exchange rates (e.g., \$1 = £0.781). The database categorized luxury goods to include all forms of high-end purchases such as designer clothes, luxury pens, premium watches, and luxury hotel stays. As expected, there was significant variation in the per-capita luxury consumption across the countries. For instance, in the year 2012, Hong Kong (\$1,333.81) and Switzerland (\$677.23) recorded the highest per-capita luxury consumption, whereas India (\$1.45) and Indonesia (\$2.67) recorded the lowest per-capita luxury consumption.

Because the consumption in a country can be influenced by absolute levels of income, we used annual per-capita GDP values of these countries as a control for income levels. Second, because luxury consumption can be influenced by overall spending on related categories, we also used the per-capita consumption of apparel as a control measure in the model.

**Moral values.** The country-level moral values data was acquired from the website YourMorals.org. Individuals from around the globe voluntarily complete various studies on this website and receive feedback about their morality, personality, and ideology. Data from this platform have been utilized in several academic papers examining moral values (e.g., Ditto & Mastrorarde, 2009; Graham et al., 2009; Inbar et al., 2012; Mooijman et al., 2018). However, no previous work has combined this dataset with the Passport Database (© Euromonitor International) to analyze the relationship between moral values and luxury consumption.

<sup>1</sup> Although luxury consumption is not always conspicuous consumption, national expenditure on these two types of consumption tend to be highly correlated. Importantly, in practice the industry does not record the data on conspicuous consumption separately, hence to examine conspicuous consumption in market data we use luxury consumption as a proxy.

Hence, the combined dataset that we employ for this article is unique and has not been utilized in extant research.

We only utilized the data from those participants who self-reported that their country of residence was one of the 32 countries in our consumption dataset. From those countries of interest, we had responses from 160,361 participants who had visited the website between the years 2008 and 2012. As expected the sample size varied across the countries. The largest sample of participants was from the United States ( $N = 134,331$ ), followed by Canada ( $N = 7,838$ ), and the smallest samples were from Ukraine ( $N = 28$ ) and Russia ( $N = 69$ ).

For each participant, we received the responses to the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011). This 30-item scale measures an individual's endorsement of the five moral foundations through various morality related statements (e.g., "One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal," "Chastity is an important and valuable virtue") on a 5-point scale (1: *strongly disagree*; 5: *strongly agree*). Therefore, for each participant, we were able to observe an individualizing values score and a binding values score. We then averaged the moral values scores of all the participants in a particular country by the year of survey completion. Therefore, for each country, we had one individualizing score and one binding score for each year. Given that our prediction focused on the differences between the two broad foundations, in that the extent to which people endorse binding foundations over the individualizing foundations, we then subtracted the scores of the individualizing scale from the binding scale to generate a moral differences score (Binding—Individualizing; see van Leeuwen & Park, 2009; Wright & Baril, 2011). Note, analysis with individual moral domain scales found a similar pattern of results (see online supplemental materials).

## Results

After combining the two databases, we had consumption data and moral value scores for 32 countries across five years ( $N =$

160). See online supplemental materials for the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the measures. We performed a linear mixed model regression analysis in SPSS. The natural logarithmic transformed values of the per-capita luxury consumption was the dependent variable. The standardized scores of the moral foundations difference measure (Binding – Individualizing) was the predictor variable. Standardized scores of per-capita GDP and per-capita apparel consumption values were also included in the model as predicting variables to control for differences in income and spending patterns in the countries. Year was included as a predicting variable to control for temporal variations in consumption patterns. Finally, country was treated as a random variable to control for unobserved heterogeneity across the countries. Table 1 provides the results of the regression analysis. As hypothesized, we find that the moral differences measure was a significant positive predictor of luxury consumption ( $B = .02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t = 2.21$ ,  $p = .029$ ).

To corroborate these results, we also performed a regression analysis using the individualizing and binding values as separate predictor variables. We find that the individualizing values is a negative predictor of luxury consumption, but the effect was just shy of significance ( $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .006$ ,  $t = -1.62$ ,  $p = .108$ ). However, the binding values is a marginally significant positive predictor of luxury consumption ( $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .007$ ,  $t = 1.68$ ,  $p = .096$ ). Note, to establish that these results are specific to luxury consumption we also performed a similar analysis using per-capita food consumption as the dependent variable. This analysis did not find a significant relationship between the prevalence of moral values and food consumption across the countries (see online supplemental materials).

## Discussion

These results suggest that the relationship between the moral foundations and conspicuous consumption can be observed in archival consumption data. Countries that show a greater relative endorsement of binding values over individualizing values are

Table 1  
Regression Using Moral Values to Predict Country-Level Luxury Consumption (Study 1)

| Measure                | Model 1  |           |          |          | Model 2  |           |          |          |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
|                        | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Intercept              | −49.64   | 8.29      | −5.99    | <.001    | −50.35   | 8.59      | −5.86    | <.001    |
| Moral differences      | .02      | .01       | 2.21     | .029     | —        | —         | —        | —        |
| Individualizing values | —        | —         | —        | —        | −.01     | .006      | −1.62    | .108     |
| Binding values         | —        | —         | —        | —        | .01      | .007      | 1.68     | .096     |
| GDP per-capita         | .09      | .05       | 1.84     | .069     | .09      | .05       | 1.80     | .074     |
| Apparel per-capita     | .49      | .05       | 9.24     | <.001    | .49      | .05       | 9.19     | <.001    |
| Year (2008–2012)       | .03      | .004      | 6.49     | <.001    | .03      | .004      | 6.34     | <.001    |
|                        |          |           | <i>Z</i> |          |          |           | <i>Z</i> |          |
| Covariance parameters  |          |           |          |          |          |           |          |          |
| Residuals              | .003     | .0004     | 7.83     | <.001    | .003     | .0004     | 7.79     | <.001    |
| Country variance       | 1.67     | .43       | 3.84     | <.001    | 1.66     | .43       | 3.83     | <.001    |

*Note.* The table above reports linear regression output for two linear mixed models with per-capita luxury consumption as the outcome variable. In Model 1, the difference between binding and individualizing values (moral differences) was the focal predictor, and per-capita GDP and per-capita apparel consumption were inputted as controls. The model shows that the moral differences measure is a positive predictor of luxury consumption. In Model 2, the individualizing and binding moral values were the focal predictors. The model suggests that individualizing moral values are a negative predictor of luxury consumption but binding moral values are a positive predictor of luxury consumption across countries.

more likely to engage in luxury consumption. However, we acknowledge that our data and analyses are limited in their scope. As noted previously, we utilized luxury consumption as a proxy for conspicuous consumption in this analysis. Further, more representative participant samples for the moral values and richer economic controls are needed to quantify the hypothesized relationship conclusively. Even so, we contend that the present analysis provides some indication that the relationship between moral values and conspicuous consumption exists in a meaningful context. That is, the prevalence of the different moral values in a country can influence the incidence of conspicuous consumption in the country, producing important economic implications. Subsequent studies will measure conspicuous consumption more directly and utilize additional control variables to address the limitations of this study.

## Study 2: Preferences for Conspicuous Logos

This study was designed to extend the results of the archival dataset by examining the effect of moral values on a more direct measure of conspicuous consumption. Specifically, we examined how people's trait endorsement of the moral foundations can predict their preferences for larger conspicuous logos relative to smaller inconspicuous logos. Preference for brand logo size has been shown to be a good measure to capture preferences for conspicuous consumption (see Rucker & Galinsky, 2009). We hypothesized that a greater relative endorsement of binding values over individualizing values would predict higher preferences for conspicuous consumption.

Further, to characterize the manifestation of this phenomenon for social groups, we also sought to examine how political and religious identities influence preferences for conspicuous consumption. Based on prior research examining correlates of moral foundations (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Graham et al., 2009), we predicted that political conservatives and religious individuals would show greater preferences for conspicuous consumption because of their adherence to the binding foundations.

## Method

**Participants.** Five hundred U.S. residents were recruited online through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for a small compensation ( $M_{\text{age}} = 38$  years; 58% female).

**Procedure.** Participants were first administered the Moral Foundations Sacredness Scale (Graham & Haidt, 2012). This scale measures the five moral foundations based on the amount of money it would require the participants to perform behaviors that violate the different moral values (e.g., "kick a dog in the head," "Make a disrespectful hand gesture to your boss, teacher, or professor"). Participants indicated the required amount of money it would take to perform the behavior on an 8-point scale: 1 = \$0 (*I'd do it for free*); 2 = \$10; 3 = \$100; 4 = \$1,000; 5 = \$10,000; 6 = \$100,000; 7 = a million dollars; 8 = never for any amount of money. The scale includes four behavior scenarios for each of the five moral foundations, resulting in a total of 20 items. The scale also includes four decoy items.

Next, participants were introduced to an ostensibly unrelated survey about product preferences. We adopted the measure for preferences for conspicuous consumption from Lee and Shrum

(2012). Participants were shown three pairs of Nike products (t-shirt, cap, shoes) in a randomized order. The two products shown in each pair were identical, except for the size of the Nike Swoosh logo (small vs. large). Thus, participants saw two versions of the same Nike t-shirt with a small logo (Product A) and a large logo (Product B) side-by-side (see online supplemental materials). Participants were asked to indicate their preference between the two products on a four-item scale ("Which one is most appealing to you, attractive to you, would you spend more on, would you choose right now") using a 9-point scale (1 = Product A, 9 = Product B). Hence, higher scores indicated a greater relative preference for the product with the larger logo, which formed our measure of preference. In addition, we also asked participants to indicate a willingness-to-pay (WTP) for each of the large logo products in an open-ended text box. This served as a more consequential measure of preference. Finally, basic demographics were collected along with participants' political ideology (1: *liberal*; 7: *conservative*) and religiosity ("I see myself as some who is very religious" 1: *disagree*; 7: *agree*). The online supplemental materials provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the measures.

## Results

**Preference measure.** We averaged the scores of the Care and Fairness values to form the individualizing scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and averaged the scores of the Loyalty, Authority, and Purity values to form the binding scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Then, as in the previous study, we subtracted the scores of the individualizing scale from the binding scale to generate a moral differences score (Binding – Individualizing). Note, again analysis performed with the five scales individually revealed a similar pattern of results (see online supplemental materials).

Next, the preference measures of all the three product pairs were averaged to form one composite score of preference ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $N = 12$ ). We performed a linear regression analysis with this preference measure as the dependent variable and the moral foundations difference measure as the predictor variable. The model also included some demographic control variables—age, gender (male = 0, female = 1), income, education level, and race (not white = 0, white = 1). The results of the regression analysis are depicted in Table 2. The analysis found that the moral differences measure positively predicts preferences for conspicuous logos ( $B = .33$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t = 3.21$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $r_{\text{sp}} = .14$ ).

Then, as in the previous study, to corroborate these results we performed another regression using the two moral foundation scales as the individual predictor variables. The analysis found that the individualizing values negatively predicted preference for conspicuous products ( $B = -.29$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t = -2.46$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $r_{\text{sp}} = -.11$ ) but the binding values positively predicted preference ( $B = .34$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t = 3.23$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $r_{\text{sp}} = .14$ ). Note that including political orientation and religiosity in the regression as control variables did not change the results. Similarly, performing the analysis with the WTP measure as the dependent variable revealed a convergent pattern of results (see online supplemental materials).

**Political ideology.** To examine the relationship between political ideology, moral values, and logo preferences, we performed a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 boot-



Table 2  
Regression Using Moral Values to Predict Preferences for Conspicuous Logos (Study 2)

| Measure                              | Model 1                  |           |          |          |                       | Model 2                  |           |          |          |                       |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|
|                                      | <i>B</i>                 | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>r<sub>sp</sub></i> | <i>B</i>                 | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>r<sub>sp</sub></i> |
| Intercept                            | 5.42                     | .39       | 13.7     | <.001    |                       | 5.17                     | .64       | 8.13     | <.001    |                       |
| Moral differences                    | .33                      | .10       | 3.21     | .001     | .14                   | —                        | —         | —        | —        | —                     |
| Individualizing values               | —                        | —         | —        | —        | —                     | -.29                     | .12       | -2.46    | .014     | -.11                  |
| Binding values                       | —                        | —         | —        | —        | —                     | .34                      | .11       | 3.23     | .001     | .14                   |
| Income                               | .03                      | .03       | 1.04     | .300     | .05                   | .03                      | .03       | 1.04     | .301     | .05                   |
| Gender (Female)                      | -.32                     | .18       | -1.78    | .076     | -.08                  | -.35                     | .19       | -1.84    | .066     | -.08                  |
| Age                                  | -.03                     | .01       | -3.75    | <.001    | -.17                  | -.03                     | .01       | -3.76    | <.001    | -.17                  |
| Education                            | -.01                     | .07       | -.14     | .886     | -.01                  | -.01                     | .07       | -.15     | .878     | -.01                  |
| Race (White)                         | -.29                     | .23       | -1.32    | .189     | -.06                  | -.29                     | .23       | -1.28    | .203     | -.06                  |
| <i>R</i> <sub>adj</sub> <sup>2</sup> |                          |           |          |          |                       |                          |           |          |          |                       |
| <i>F</i> value                       | <i>F</i> (6, 493) = 5.84 |           |          |          |                       | <i>F</i> (7, 492) = 5.03 |           |          |          |                       |
| Model sig.                           | <i>p</i> < .001          |           |          |          |                       | <i>p</i> < .001          |           |          |          |                       |

*Note.* The table above reports linear regression output for two models with relative preference for conspicuous logos as the outcome variable. In Model 1, the difference between binding and individualizing values (moral differences) was the focal predictor and income, age, gender, education, and race were inputted as controls. The model shows that the relative endorsement of binding values is a positive predictor of preference. In Model 2, the individualizing and binding moral values were the focal predictors. The model shows that individualizing moral values are a negative predictor of preference but binding moral values are a positive predictor of preference.

straps (Hayes, 2013). First, we find that conservative political ideology significantly increased endorsement of binding foundations over individualizing foundations ( $B = .16$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t = 7.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as demonstrated by previous research (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Importantly, conservative political ideology also significantly predicted greater preferences for conspicuous logos ( $B = .15$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = 3.08$ ,  $p = .002$ ). This effect of political ideology on preferences was mediated by the moral differences measure (standardized indirect effect = .04 [.01, .07]).

**Religiosity.** We performed another mediation analysis to examine the relationship between religiosity, moral values, and logo preferences. First, we see that religiosity significantly increased endorsement of binding foundations over individualizing foundations ( $B = .13$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t = 7.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as demonstrated by previous research (Graham & Haidt, 2010). Importantly, religiosity also significantly predicted greater preferences for conspicuous logos ( $B = .12$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t = 2.89$ ,  $p = .004$ ). This effect of religiosity on preferences was mediated by the moral differences measure (standardized indirect effect = .04 [.01, .07]).

## Discussion

The results of this study support the results of the archival dataset to demonstrate that the adherence to the moral foundations can predict preferences for conspicuous consumption. We find that the endorsement of the binding values over the individualizing values predicts higher preferences for large, conspicuous logos. Further, this study also demonstrates that people with conservative political ideology and high religiosity tend to endorse binding values, and this, in turn, increases their preferences for conspicuous consumption.

### Study 3: Moral Judgments of Conspicuous Consumption

The previous two studies demonstrated that the endorsement of the moral foundations can alter preferences for conspicuous con-

sumption and produce important economic and social implications. However, these studies examined behavioral measures of conspicuous consumption (i.e., purchase and preference), as opposed to the moral evaluations of conspicuous consumption. Therefore, these studies cannot speak to the notion whether moral concerns are central to the observed effect. In other words, do the moral values alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption?

Hence, in this study, we examine how the moral foundations influence the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. We assess this through two different measures—the moral judgment of conspicuous consumption and the moral judgment of people engaging in conspicuous consumption. We hypothesized that individuals who show a greater relative endorsement of binding values over individualizing values should make favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption.

Additionally, this study also sought to distinguish the effects of moral values from other social constructs. Because of the possible overlap between binding values, collectivism, and group-identification, the observed effects may be attributed to social norms as opposed to moral concerns. Therefore, we control for these variables in the analysis to establish the independent effects of moral values on conspicuous consumption.

## Method

**Participants.** Five hundred U.S. residents were recruited online through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for a small compensation ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.4$  years; 46% female).

**Procedure.** Participants were first administered the Moral Foundations Sacredness Scale (Graham & Haidt, 2012), similar to the previous study. Next, participants were introduced to an ostensibly unrelated survey about product preferences. They were told that researchers are interested in understanding how people choose to wear logos on their clothes. Below the prompt, participants were shown images of people wearing clothes with various conspicuous brand logos (i.e., a person wearing a shirt with prominent logos of Nike, Polo, Louis Vuitton, Calvin Klein, Gucci, and Harvard). Note that in this study we did not measure preferences.

These images were simply presented to strengthen the salience of conspicuous consumption.

On the next page, we administered two measures adapted from previous research examining moral judgments of behaviors (Gino & Desai, 2012; Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009). First, we administered a question designed to capture moral judgments of conspicuous consumption behavior – “I think wearing large prominently displayed logos on your clothes is wrong” (1: *strongly disagree*, 7: *strongly agree*). Then, we administered another question designed to capture moral judgments of people engaging in the behavior – “I think people who wear large prominently displayed logos on their clothes are immoral” (1: *strongly disagree*, 7: *strongly agree*). For both the measures, higher scores indicated unfavorable moral judgments.

Next, we administered a three-item group-identification scale (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999), a six-item vertical collectivism scale, and a six-item horizontal collectivism scale (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). Finally, basic demographics were collected. The online supplemental materials provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for these measures.

## Results

**Moral judgments of behavior.** We averaged the scores of the Care and Fairness values to form the individualizing scale ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and averaged the scores of the Loyalty, Authority, and Purity values to form the binding scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Then, as in the previous studies, we subtracted the scores of the individualizing scale from the binding scale to generate a moral differences score (Binding – Individualizing). Note that the analysis performed with the five scales individually revealed a similar pattern of results (see online supplemental materials).

We performed a linear regression analysis with the moral judgments of conspicuous behavior measure as the dependent variable and the moral foundations difference measure (Binding – Individualizing) as the predictor variable. The model also included demographic control variables—age, gender (male = 0, female = 1), income, education level, and race (not white = 0, white = 1). Importantly, the group-identification scale and the two subscales of collectivism were also included as controls. The results of the regression analysis are depicted in Table 3. The analysis found that the moral differences measure predicts favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption ( $B = -.21, SE = .07, t = -2.81, p = .005, r_{sp} = -.12$ ). Then, to corroborate these results, we performed an additional regression analysis using the two moral foundation scales as the predictor variables. The analysis found that the individualizing values predicts unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption ( $B = .27, SE = .08, t = 3.19, p = .001, r_{sp} = .13$ ) but the binding values predicts favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption ( $B = -.14, SE = .09, t = -1.62, p = .105, r_{sp} = -.07$ ).

**Moral judgments of people.** We performed another linear regression with the moral judgments of people who engage in conspicuous behaviors as the dependent variable. The model included the same control variables as above (see Table 4). The analysis found that the moral differences measure predicts favorable moral judgments of the people ( $B = -.31, SE = .08, t = -3.76, p < .001, r_{sp} = -.16$ ). Additional regression analysis using the two moral foundation scales as the predictor variables corroborated these results. The analysis found that the individualizing values predicts unfavorable moral judgments of the people ( $B = .38, SE = .09, t = 4.10, p < .001, r_{sp} = .17$ ) but the binding values predicted favorable moral judgments of the people ( $B = -.23, SE = .09, t = -2.37, p = .018, r_{sp} = -.09$ ).

Table 3  
Regression Using Moral Values to Predict Moral Judgments of Conspicuous Behaviors (Study 3)

| Measure                              | Model 1                  |           |          |          |                       | Model 2                   |           |          |          |                       |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|
|                                      | <i>B</i>                 | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>r<sub>sp</sub></i> | <i>B</i>                  | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>r<sub>sp</sub></i> |
| Intercept                            | 3.18                     | .62       | 5.14     | <.001    | —                     | 2.61                      | .72       | 3.61     | <.001    | —                     |
| Moral differences                    | -.21                     | .07       | -2.81    | .005     | -.12                  | —                         | —         | —        | —        | —                     |
| Individualizing values               | —                        | —         | —        | —        | —                     | .27                       | .08       | 3.19     | .001     | .13                   |
| Binding values                       | —                        | —         | —        | —        | —                     | -.14                      | .09       | -1.62    | .105     | -.07                  |
| Income                               | -.02                     | .03       | -.98     | .327     | -.04                  | -.03                      | .03       | -1.07    | .287     | -.05                  |
| Gender (Female)                      | -.17                     | .17       | -.96     | .340     | -.04                  | -.22                      | .18       | -1.23    | .220     | -.05                  |
| Age                                  | .01                      | .01       | 1.17     | .243     | .05                   | .01                       | .01       | .86      | .393     | .04                   |
| Education                            | .12                      | .06       | 1.92     | .055     | .08                   | .13                       | .06       | 2.09     | .037     | .09                   |
| Race (White)                         | -.87                     | .20       | -4.34    | <.001    | -.18                  | -.85                      | .20       | -4.27    | <.001    | -.18                  |
| Group identification                 | .07                      | .08       | .93      | .353     | .04                   | .06                       | .08       | .79      | .430     | .03                   |
| Vert. collectivism                   | -.29                     | .12       | -2.48    | .014     | -.10                  | -.32                      | .12       | -2.69    | .007     | -.11                  |
| Horiz. collectivism                  | .38                      | .09       | 4.39     | <.001    | .19                   | .39                       | .09       | 4.49     | <.001    | .19                   |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> <sub>adj</sub> | .12                      |           |          |          |                       | .12                       |           |          |          |                       |
| <i>F</i> value                       | <i>F</i> (9, 490) = 8.24 |           |          |          |                       | <i>F</i> (10, 489) = 7.67 |           |          |          |                       |
| Model sig.                           | <i>p</i> < .001          |           |          |          |                       | <i>p</i> < .001           |           |          |          |                       |

*Note.* The table above reports linear regression output for two models with moral judgment of conspicuous consumption as the outcome variable. In Model 1, the difference between binding and individualizing values (moral differences) was the focal predictor and income, age, gender, education, race, group identification, and collectivism were inputted as controls. The model shows that the relative endorsement of binding values predicts favorable moral judgments of conspicuous behaviors. In Model 2, the individualizing and binding moral values were the focal predictors. The model shows that individualizing moral values predicted unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous behaviors but binding moral values predict favorable moral judgments of conspicuous behaviors.

Table 4  
Regression Using Moral Values to Predict Moral Judgments of People (Study 3)

| Measure                              | Model 1                  |           |          |          |                       | Model 2                   |           |          |          |                       |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|
|                                      | <i>B</i>                 | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>r<sub>sp</sub></i> | <i>B</i>                  | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>r<sub>sp</sub></i> |
| Intercept                            | 2.50                     | .68       | 3.67     | <.001    |                       | 1.82                      | .79       | 2.29     | .022     |                       |
| Moral differences                    | -.31                     | .08       | -3.76    | <.001    | -.16                  | —                         | —         | —        | —        | —                     |
| Individualizing values               | —                        | —         | —        | —        | —                     | .38                       | .09       | 4.10     | <.001    | .17                   |
| Binding values                       | —                        | —         | —        | —        | —                     | -.23                      | .09       | -2.37    | .018     | -.09                  |
| Income                               | -.05                     | .03       | -1.89    | .058     | -.08                  | -.05                      | .03       | -1.98    | .047     | -.08                  |
| Gender (Female)                      | -.53                     | .19       | -2.78    | .006     | -.12                  | -.59                      | .19       | -3.05    | .002     | -.13                  |
| Age                                  | .00                      | .01       | .35      | .728     | .02                   | .00                       | .01       | .02      | .981     | .00                   |
| Education                            | .09                      | .07       | 1.34     | .183     | .06                   | .11                       | .07       | 1.52     | .130     | .06                   |
| Race (White)                         | -.67                     | .22       | -3.05    | .002     | -.13                  | -.66                      | .22       | -2.98    | .003     | -.13                  |
| Group identification                 | .09                      | .09       | .96      | .338     | .04                   | .07                       | .09       | .81      | .419     | .03                   |
| Vert. collectivism                   | -.18                     | .13       | -1.36    | .176     | -.06                  | -.21                      | .13       | -1.60    | .109     | -.07                  |
| Horiz. collectivism                  | .39                      | .09       | 4.07     | <.001    | .17                   | .40                       | .09       | 4.18     | <.001    | .18                   |
| <i>R</i> <sub>adj</sub> <sup>2</sup> | .13                      |           |          |          |                       | .13                       |           |          |          |                       |
| <i>F</i> value                       | <i>F</i> (9, 490) = 8.97 |           |          |          |                       | <i>F</i> (10, 489) = 8.37 |           |          |          |                       |
| Model sig.                           | <i>p</i> < .001          |           |          |          |                       | <i>p</i> < .001           |           |          |          |                       |

*Note.* The table above reports linear regression output for two models with moral judgments of people who engage in conspicuous consumption as the outcome variable. In Model 1, the difference between binding and individualizing values (moral differences) was the focal predictor and income, age, gender, education, race, group identification, and collectivism were inputted as controls. The model shows that the relative endorsement of binding values predicts favorable moral judgments of the people. In Model 2, the individualizing and binding moral values were the focal predictors. The model shows that individualizing moral values predicts unfavorable moral judgments of the people but binding moral values predicts favorable moral judgment of the people.

## Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the moral values alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption. The endorsement of the individualizing values led to unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous behaviors and unfavorable moral judgments of people engaging in conspicuous consumption. In contrast, the endorsement of the binding values led to more favorable moral judgments of conspicuous behaviors and more favorable moral judgments of people engaging in conspicuous consumption. Importantly, in this study, we also controlled for related social constructs (group-identification, collectivism<sup>2</sup>) and found that the moral values can produce an independent effect on conspicuous consumption.

### Study 4: Testing Conceptual Framework – I

The previous three studies demonstrated that endorsement of the moral foundations can predict the propensity to engage in conspicuous consumption and alter the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. However, these studies were correlational in design; hence, they cannot conclusively establish that the effects were causally driven by the moral values. Therefore, in the next two studies, we sought to examine the effects of the moral values on conspicuous consumption using experimental methods and test for the proposed conceptual framework.

In this study, we examine the first stage of the framework depicted in Figure 1. That is, this study was designed to examine how the different moral values highlight the different characteristics (self-enhancing vs. social-identity) embedded in conspicuous consumption, subsequently altering its perceived morality. This study had a 2 (Moral Prime: Individualizing vs. Binding)-cell between-subjects design. We manipulated the momentary salience of the two moral foundations and assessed the impact of the primes

on the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. Further, we examined how the primes change the sensitivity to the different characteristics of conspicuous consumption. Importantly, we assessed how the sensitivity to these characteristics drives the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. We hypothesized that the individualizing values would increase the sensitivity to the self-enhancement characteristics of conspicuous consumption, leading to unfavorable moral judgments. However, the binding values would increase the sensitivity to the social-identity signaling characteristics of conspicuous consumption, leading to more favorable moral judgments.

## Method

**Participants.** A predetermined sample size of 500 U.S. residents was recruited online through MTurk in exchange for a small compensation ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34.7$  years; 51% female).

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two moral prime conditions. They were introduced to a supposed memory exercise through which the momentary salience of the moral values was manipulated in a procedure adapted from Mooijman et al. (2018). Participants read a paragraph about an ancient Sumerian warrior, Sostoras, who was heralded for his moral standing and good deeds. In the individualizing condition, participants

<sup>2</sup> Results show that vertical collectivism predicts favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, but horizontal collectivism predicts unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. These divergent effects of the two collectivism subscales are consistent with the conceptual distinctions between the two forms of collectivism (see Singelis et al., 1995). Further, these results are also consistent with extant research demonstrating that collectivism only motivates conspicuous consumption when social hierarchy is desired in the society (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998).

read about how Sostoras was known for his “compassion, fairness, and equality.” However, in the binding condition, participants read about how Sostoras was known for “purity, respect for tradition, and loyalty.”

Because our manipulation utilized a subtle reading prime, we deployed an attention check to screen out the participants who failed to read the assigned paragraph. These attention check questions were disguised to be part of the memory exercise. Two questions asked factual information about the paragraph in a multiple-choice format (“Where did Sostoras live?” and “What was Sostoras’s occupation?”). One question utilized an open-ended prompt (“What was Sostoras known for?”). We a priori decided to remove participants if they got anyone one of the multiple-choice questions incorrect or if they wrote less than one sentence in the open-ended text box (see Hauser & Schwarz, 2016).

Next, we administered a filler task, which consisted of a series of unrelated word completion questions. This filler task was included to reduce demand effects. Then, participants were introduced to an ostensibly unrelated survey about product preferences. They were told that researchers are interested in understanding how people choose to wear logos on their clothes. Below the prompt, we showed the same picture collage of logos as Study 3. On the next page, we measured participants’ moral judgments of conspicuous consumption using the same measure as the previous study – “I think wearing large prominently displayed logos on your clothes is wrong” (1: *strongly disagree*; 7: *strongly agree*).

Following this, we measured participants’ attentional sensitivity to the different aspects of conspicuous consumption. Participants were asked to respond to four items that measured sensitivity to self-enhancing characteristics (“I think logos show vanity/extravagance/inequality/wastefulness”; 1: *strongly disagree*; 7: *strongly agree*) and four items that measured sensitivity to social-identity signaling characteristics (“I think logos show sociability/belonging to some community/membership in a particular group/social affiliation”; 1: *strongly disagree*; 7: *strongly agree*). All eight items were presented in a randomized order. Finally, basic demographics were collected (See online supplemental materials for detailed stimuli).

## Results

**Attention check.** From the pool of recruited participants, 22 were excluded using the criteria outlined above, resulting in 478 participants in the final data analysis.

**Moral judgments.** We performed a univariate ANOVA with the moral judgment measure as the dependent variable and the moral prime condition as the independent factor. We found a significant main effect of moral condition on moral judgments,  $F(1, 476) = 6.58, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . Contrasts revealed that participants in the individualizing condition ( $M = 3.65, SD = 1.83$ ) reported more unfavorable moral judgments than participants in the binding condition ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.87; M_{diff} = .44, SE = .17, p = .011, 95\% CI [.10, .77]$ ). Hence, these results extend the results of the previous study to demonstrate that the moral values can causally alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption.

**Self-enhancing versus social-identity signaling.** We performed a factor analysis on the eight items using principal axis

factoring with unrestricted factors and Promax rotation (Costello & Osborne, 2005). Two factors emerged that explained 65.97% of the cumulative variance. The four social-identity signaling items all loaded on to Factor 1 (Eigenvalue = 2.82, all loading values > .60). Hence, these four items were averaged to form one composite scale ( $\alpha = .85; M = 4.36, SD = 1.33$ ). Similarly, the four self-enhancing items all loaded on to Factor 2 (Eigenvalue = 2.46, all loading values > .60). Hence, these four items were averaged to form one composite scale ( $\alpha = .79; M = 4.05, SD = 1.39$ ). The correlation between the two scales was not significant,  $r = -.02, p = .595$ . Therefore, this factor-analysis confirms that the eight items captured the attentional sensitivity to two distinct aspects of conspicuous consumption.

**Mediation analysis.** We examined how the moral primes altered the sensitivity to the different aspects of conspicuous consumption which mediate the effect on the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption (see Figure 2). A parallel mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 bootstraps (Hayes, 2013). The moral judgments measure was inputted as the dependent variable (higher values represents unfavorable moral judgments) and the moral prime condition as the independent variable (Binding = 1, Individualizing = 0). The social-identity signaling and self-enhancing composite scales were inputted as parallel mediators. First, we see that the binding values, compared with the individualizing values, led to more favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption ( $B = -.44, SE = .17, t = -2.57, p = .011$ ), replicating the results of the ANOVA. Next, we see that the binding values, compared with the individualizing values, significantly increased sensitivity to the social-identity signaling characteristics (4.50 vs. 4.22;  $B = .29, SE = .12, t = 2.38, p = .018$ ). Contrastingly, the binding values, compared with the individualizing values, significantly reduced the sensitivity to the self-enhancing characteristics (4.21 vs. 3.89;  $B = -.32, SE = .13, t = -2.55, p = .011$ ). Further, the social-identity signaling characteristics predicted favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption ( $B = -.34, SE = .05, t = -6.66, p < .001$ ). However, the self-enhancing characteristics predicted unfavorable moral judgment of conspicuous consumption ( $B = .73, SE = .05, t = 14.86, p < .001$ ). When both the mediators were included in the model, the effect of the moral primes on the moral judgments was no longer significant ( $B = -.10, SE = .14, t = -.73, p = .467$ ). The mediation pathway through the social-identity signaling characteristics was significant (standardized indirect effect =  $-.05 [-.10, -.01]$ ). Similarly, the mediation pathway through the self-enhancing characteristics was also significant (standardized indirect effect =  $-.13 [-.22, -.03]$ ).

## Discussion

This study provides causal evidence for our central assertion that the moral values can alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption. Priming binding values, compared with individualizing values, led to more favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. Further, this study also provides support for our proposed theorization that the different moral values highlight the different characteristics of conspicuous consumption, altering its perceived morality. Priming binding values, compared with individualizing values, increased the sensitivity to social-identity signaling characteristics of conspicuous consumption.



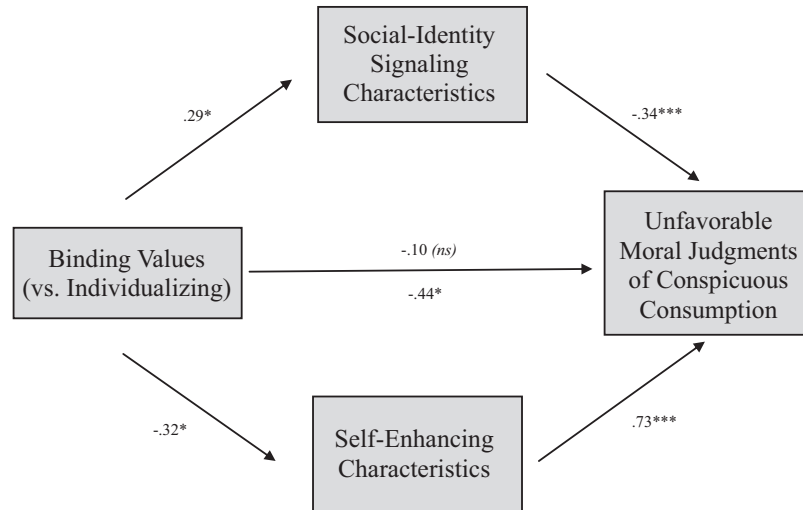


Figure 2. Mediation pathway (Study 4). Analysis shows that the binding values (relative to individualizing values) increases sensitivity to social-identity signaling characteristics but decreases sensitivity to the self-enhancing characteristics of conspicuous consumption. These characteristics mediate the effect of the moral primes on the moral judgment of conspicuous consumption. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

However, priming binding values, compared with individualizing values, reduced the sensitivity to the self-enhancing characteristics of conspicuous consumption. Further, the social-identity signaling characteristics led to more favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, but the self-enhancing characteristics led to more unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. Hence, this study provides causal evidence that the different moral values can alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption by highlighting its different characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

### Study 5: Testing Conceptual Framework – II

In this study, we examine the second stage of the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1. That is, whereas the previous study demonstrated that the moral values can causally alter the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption by highlighting its different characteristics, in this study we examine how the moral judgments subsequently influence the preferences for conspicuous consumption. This study had a 3 (Moral Prime: Control vs. Individualizing vs. Binding)-cell between-subjects design. We manipulated the momentary salience of the two moral foundations as in the previous study and included a control condition as well for comparison purposes.

We assessed the impact of the moral primes on the preferences for conspicuous consumption as well as the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. Importantly, we assessed how the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption drive the preferences for conspicuous consumption. We hypothesized that the individualizing values would lead to unfavorable moral judgments, reducing the preferences for conspicuous consumption. However, the binding values would lead to more favorable moral judgments, increasing the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

### Method

**Participants.** A predetermined sample size of 500 U.S. residents was recruited online through MTurk in exchange for a small compensation ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.2$  years; 44% female).

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three moral prime conditions. They were introduced to a supposed memory exercise through which the momentary salience of the individualizing and binding moral values was manipulated using the same Sostoras reading task as Study 4. In the newly added control condition, participants read that Sostoras was a pottery producer in Sumer, with no mention of moral values. Then, we deployed the same attention check as before.

Next, participants were introduced to an ostensibly unrelated survey about product evaluation. First, we measured participants' preferences for conspicuous logos using the same Nike product pair stimuli as Study 2. Again, participants indicated their preferences between the small and large logos to indicate their preference for conspicuous consumption. Subsequently, we measured participants' moral judgments of conspicuous consumption using the same measure as previous studies – “I think wearing large prominently displayed logos on your clothes is wrong” (1: *strongly disagree*; 7: *strongly agree*).

Then, basic demographics were collected. Finally, we administered an open-ended suspicion check to probe for demand effects (“what did you think this study was about?”). Analysis of the responses demonstrates that participants did not make a connection between the “reading memory task” and the “product preference task.”

<sup>3</sup> One possible limitation of this study is how the different characteristics are measured. The self-enhancing items are negatively framed but the social-identity signaling items are positively framed.

## Results

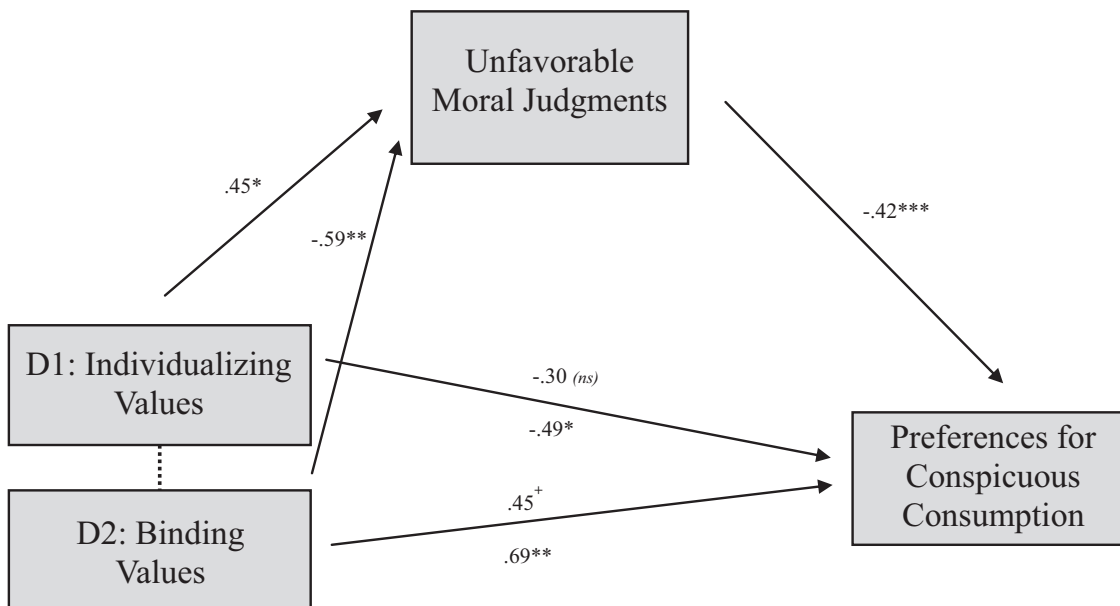
**Attention check.** From the pool of recruited participants, 35 were excluded using the criteria described above, resulting in 465 participants in the final data analysis.

**Preference measure.** As before, the preference measures for the three product pairs were averaged to form one composite score of preference ( $\alpha = .95$ ,  $N = 12$ ). We performed a univariate ANOVA with this preference measure as the dependent variable and the moral prime condition as the independent factor. We found a significant main effect of moral condition on preferences for conspicuous logos,  $F(2, 462) = 11.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . Planned contrasts revealed that participants in the individualizing condition ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) reported significantly lower preference than participants in the control condition ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ;  $M_{diff} = -.48$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $p = .049$ , 95% CI  $[-.98, -.001]$ ). Contrastingly, participants in the binding condition ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ) reported a higher preference than participants in the control condition ( $M_{diff} = .69$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $p = .006$ , 95% CI  $[.20, 1.19]$ ). Additionally, participants in the binding condition reported a significantly higher preference for conspicuous logos than participants in the individualizing condition ( $M_{diff} = 1.18$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[.69, 1.67]$ ). Hence, these results extend the results of Study 2 to show that the moral values can causally alter the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

**Moral judgments.** We performed another univariate ANOVA with the moral judgment measure as the dependent variable and the moral prime condition as the independent factor. We found a significant main effect of moral condition on moral judgments ( $F(2, 462) = 11.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that partici-

pants in the individualizing condition ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) reported more unfavorable moral judgments than participants in the control condition ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ;  $M_{diff} = .45$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p = .037$ , 95% CI  $[.03, .86]$ ). Contrastingly, participants in the binding condition ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) reported more favorable moral judgments than participants in the control condition ( $M_{diff} = -.59$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p = .007$ , 95% CI  $[-1.01, -.17]$ ). Participants in the individualizing condition reported significantly more unfavorable moral judgments than participants in the binding condition ( $M_{diff} = 1.03$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[.61, 1.45]$ ). Hence, these results replicate the results of Study 4, again showing that the moral values causally alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption.

**Mediation analysis.** Next, we examined how the moral judgments drive the preferences for conspicuous logos (see Figure 3). We performed a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 bootstraps (Hayes, 2013). The preference measure was inputted as the dependent variable and the moral judgments measure (higher scores indicate unfavorable moral judgments) was inputted as the mediator. Two dummy variables for the moral conditions were created to identify the individualizing (D1: Individualizing = 1, 0 otherwise) and binding (D2: Binding = 1, 0 otherwise) conditions. First, we see that priming individualizing values significantly increased unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption ( $B = .45$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $t = 2.09$ ,  $p = .037$ ). On the other hand, the priming binding values reduced unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption ( $B = -.59$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $t = -2.73$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Further, unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption reduced preferences for conspicuous logos ( $B = -.42$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -8.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The negative effect of individualizing values on preferences was mediated by



*Figure 3.* Mediation pathway (Study 5). Analysis shows that the individualizing values (vs. binding and control) leads to unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, but the binding values (vs. individualizing and control) leads to favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. The moral judgments of conspicuous consumption mediates the effect on preferences for conspicuous consumption. *ns* = non significant.  $^+ p < .01$ .  $^* p < .05$ .  $^{**} p < .01$ .  $^{***} p < .001$ .

the moral judgments (standardized relative indirect effect =  $-.08$  [ $-.17, -.002$ ]). Similarly, the positive effect of binding values on preferences was mediated by the moral judgments (standardized relative indirect effect =  $.11$  [ $.03, .19$ ]).

## Discussion

This study provides causal evidence for our proposition that the moral values can alter the preferences for conspicuous consumption. Priming binding values, compared with individualizing values, led to greater preferences for conspicuous consumption. Further, this study also provides support for the proposed theorization that the different moral values alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption, resulting in different preferences for conspicuous consumption. Priming individualizing values led to unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, which subsequently reduced preferences for conspicuous consumption. However, priming binding values led to more favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, subsequently increasing preferences for conspicuous consumption. Hence, taken together, Study 4 and 5 provide causal evidence that the different moral lenses increase sensitivity to the different characteristics of conspicuous consumption, altering its perceived morality, and subsequently changing the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

To ensure that our effects are not peculiar to the method of moral value priming utilized, we also ran the study using a different method of priming the moral values. The analysis shows a convergent pattern of results (see online supplemental materials).

### Study 6A: Boundary Condition – Social Visibility

Having demonstrated the effects of the moral values on conspicuous consumption along with the underlying theorization, we now examine the boundary condition of the effects. This study was designed to examine how social visibility moderates the effect of the binding values on conspicuous consumption. Our theorization predicts that the binding values heighten sensitivity to social-identity signaling characteristics of conspicuous consumption. However, this characteristic should be less relevant for situations that have low social visibility. This study had 2 (Moral Prime: Individualizing vs. Binding)  $\times$  2 (Social Visibility: Low vs. High) fully between-subjects design. We manipulated the salience of the moral foundations and the salience of social visibility and then examined the impact of the manipulations on preferences for conspicuous consumption. We predicted that the effect of binding values on preferences for conspicuous consumption would attenuate when social visibility is reduced.

Further, this study also examined one important alternate explanation that could be driving the observed effects, namely self-image threat. Research has shown that social contexts can also be a source of threat to the self-image (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Therefore, one could theorize that when participants read the manipulation primes, the social contexts described in them induce self-image threat. This threat, in turn, might make people want to acquire goods and possessions that express their self-image. Specifically, when people's self-image is threatened, they turn to conspicuous consumption as a means of expressing their personalities (Hogg, 2007). This theorization would posit that our observed effects are not driven by the

salience of binding moral values, but rather by the sense of self-image threat induced by our manipulation. We tested this alternative account in this study.

## Method

**Participants.** Five hundred U.S. residents were recruited online through MTurk in exchange for a small compensation ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.73$  years; 56.9% female).

**Procedure.** We randomly assigned participants to one of the two moral prime conditions and manipulated the salience of each foundation using the same reading task as before. Subsequently, the same attention check procedure was deployed. Next, participants were introduced to an ostensibly unrelated product evaluation study and told they would be evaluating products to wear to the gym. We asked participants to imagine a scenario about going to the gym, which was framed to be either Low or High in social visibility. In the Low visibility condition, participants were asked to imagine that they were going to the gym at 6 a.m. before work and that they will not meet anyone they know. In the High visibility condition, participants were asked to imagine that they were going to the gym at 6 p.m. after work and that they would meet many friends and colleagues. After imagining one these scenarios, participants were asked to evaluate products that they would wear to the gym in that particular scenario. We presented the same set of Nike product pairs with the small and large logos used in previous studies. Therefore, the relative preference for the larger logo served as our measure of preferences for conspicuous consumption again.

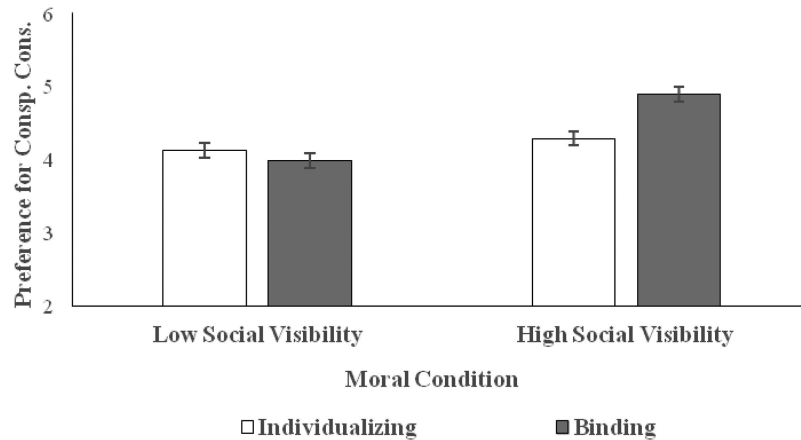
Next, participants were presented with three items designed to capture the extent to which their clothes preferences were an expression of their self-image ("It is important to me that my clothes reflect who I am," "My clothes should reflect my preferences," "People should not hide their preferences") on a 9-point scale (1: *strongly disagree*; 9: *strongly agree*). Finally, basic demographics were collected. See online supplemental materials for all stimuli.

## Results

**Attention check.** From the pool of recruited participants, 20 were excluded using the same criteria as before, resulting in 480 participants in the final data analysis.

**Preference.** The preference measures for all the three product pairs were averaged to form one composite score of preference ( $\alpha = .91, N = 12$ ). We performed a univariate ANOVA with this preference measure as the dependent variable and the moral condition and the social visibility condition as two independent factors. We found a significant main effect of social visibility condition on preference,  $F(1, 476) = 8.28, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .02$ , but no main effect of moral condition,  $F(1, 476) = 1.73, p = .189, \eta_p^2 = .00$ . Importantly we found a significant interaction between the two factors,  $F(1, 476) = 4.19, p = .041, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . We explored this interaction through planned contrasts (see Figure 4).

In the Low social visibility condition, there was no difference in preferences between the two moral prime conditions,  $F(1, 476) = .267, p = .605, \eta_p^2 = .00$ . Preference for the larger conspicuous logos were similar in the individualizing condition ( $M = 4.13, SD = 2.11$ ) and binding condition ( $M = 3.99, SD = 1.81; M_{\text{diff}} =$



*Figure 4.* Preferences for conspicuous products as a function of moral condition and social visibility (Study 6A). Values on vertical axis represent the relative preference for products with larger logo over smaller logo, with greater values representing a greater preference for the large logo. The horizontal axis represents the different moral conditions. Error bars represent  $\pm 1 SE$ . The data show that participants in the binding condition demonstrate greater preferences for conspicuous consumption, but the effect is attenuated when social visibility is reduced.

.13,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p = .605$ , 95% CI  $[-.38, .64]$ ). However, in the High social visibility condition, there was a significant difference in preferences for larger conspicuous logos between the two moral prime conditions,  $F(1, 476) = 5.66$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . Participants in the individualizing condition ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ) reported a lower level of preference compared with participants in the binding condition ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ;  $M_{diff} = -.62$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p = .018$ , 95% CI  $[-1.13, -.11]$ ). Concurrently, in the individualizing condition, there was no difference in preference scores between the two social visibility conditions ( $M_{diff} = .15$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p = .562$ , 95% CI  $[-.36, .67]$ ). However, in the binding condition, preference scores were higher in the High visibility condition compared with the Low visibility condition ( $M_{diff} = .90$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[.39, 1.41]$ ). Hence, the effects of the binding values on the preferences for conspicuous consumption were attenuated when social visibility was reduced.

**Self-image expression.** The three items were averaged to form one composite scale ( $\alpha = .72$ ). We performed a univariate ANOVA with this self-image expression measure as the dependent variable and the moral condition and the social visibility conditions as the independent factors. We found no effect of moral condition on self-image expression,  $F(1, 476) = .42$ ,  $p = .518$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ , and no main effect of social visibility condition,  $F(1, 476) = 1.43$ ,  $p = .233$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ . The interaction between the two factors was also not significant,  $F(1, 476) = .00$ ,  $p = .990$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ . Hence, these results do not support the account that the effects of the moral values are driven by self-image threat.

### Study 6B: Boundary Condition – Social Visibility

In this study, we operationalize social visibility in another way—the degree of social visibility of products. Our theory predicts that the binding values heighten sensitivity to the social-identity signaling characteristics of conspicuous products. This characteristic should be less relevant for products that are less

socially visible in nature; therefore, the effects of the binding values should weaken for products with lower social visibility.

We manipulated the momentary salience of the two moral foundations and assessed the impact of the primes on the propensity to purchase a variety of products. The study had a 3 (Moral Prime: Control vs. Individualizing vs. Binding)-cell between-subjects design with 36 consumption items (i.e., products) that varied in level of social visibility as a within-subjects factor. We predicted that the individualizing values would reduce the preference for conspicuous products, but the binding values would increase the preference for conspicuous products. Further, we predicted that the effect of the moral primes would be moderated by the level of product's social visibility, such that products with a higher degree of visibility would be influenced to a greater extent by the moral primes.

### Method

**Participants.** Five hundred U.S. residents were recruited online through MTurk in exchange for a small compensation ( $M_{age} = 37.89$  years; 60.4% female).

**Procedure.** We randomly assigned participants to one of the three moral prime conditions (control, binding, individualizing) and manipulated the salience of each foundation using the same reading task as previous studies. Following this, the same attention check was deployed. Next participants were introduced to an ostensibly unrelated product evaluation task. They were presented with 36 products and services with their respective prices, adapted from Sundie et al. (2011). Participants saw all products in randomized order and below each product indicated their likelihood of purchasing of the product (1: *not at all*; 9: *extremely*). Finally, basic demographics were collected.

**Pretest of social visibility.** A separate pool of participants from MTurk ( $N = 100$ ) was recruited to rate the social visibility of these products. We presented participants with all 36 products



randomly and asked them to rate each product on the extent of social visibility (1: *not at all visible*; 9: *definitely visible*). Thus, we were able to obtain a social visibility rating for each product. Products that scored the lowest were private consumption items like grocery voucher ( $M = 5.21$ ) and Maytag washer ( $M = 5.44$ ). Products that received the highest scores were showy public products like Ralph Lauren shirt ( $M = 6.89$ ) and Nike shoes ( $M = 6.94$ ). See online supplemental materials for the complete list of items and their visibility ratings.

## Results

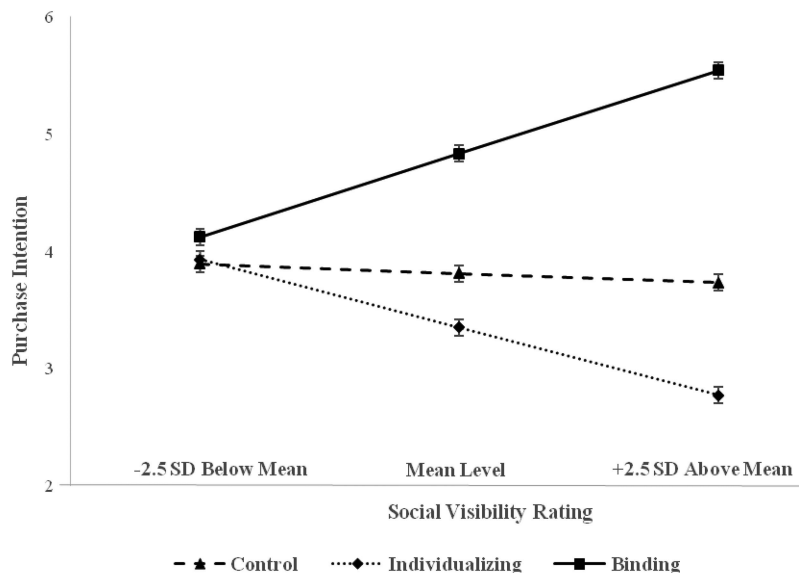
**Attention check.** From the pool of recruited participants, 20 were excluded using the same criteria as before, resulting in 480 participants in the final data analysis.

**Moderation analysis.** We performed a moderation analysis using linear mixed models in SPSS to test how the purchase intention of the products was influenced by the moral condition and the social visibility of the product (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991). Purchase intention was the dependent variable. Two dummy variables for the moral conditions were created to identify the individualizing (D1: Individualizing = 1, 0 otherwise) and binding (D2: Binding = 1, 0 otherwise) conditions. Standardized scores of the social visibility ratings of the items obtained from the pretest was a continuous moderator in this analysis.

First, we see that the effect of social visibility rating on purchase intention is not significant ( $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t = -.90$ ,  $p = .366$ ). This indicates that in the control condition the purchase intention did not vary as the social visibility rating of the product increased. Next, we see that the effect of D1, the

individualizing condition, was negative ( $B = -.46$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -9.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, the interaction term between this dummy variable and social visibility ratings was negative ( $B = -.19$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -3.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that in the individualizing condition the purchase intention decreased as the social visibility rating of the product increased. Next, we see that the effect of D2, the binding condition, was also significant ( $B = 1.02$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = 20.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, the interaction term between this dummy variable and social visibility ratings was positive ( $B = .32$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = 6.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that in the binding condition the purchase intention increased as the social visibility rating of the product increased.

We assessed the model estimated means of purchase intention at varying levels of the social visibility rating (see Figure 5). At 2.5 *SD* below the mean level of social visibility rating values, we see no significant differences between the purchase intentions in the control condition ( $M = 3.89$ ), individualizing condition ( $M = 3.93$ ) and the binding condition ( $M = 4.12$ ). At the mean level of the social visibility rating, we see that the moral conditions had different effects on purchase intention. The purchase intention in the individualizing condition ( $M = 3.35$ ) was significantly lower than the control condition ( $M = 3.81$ ), but the purchase intention in the binding condition was significantly higher ( $M = 4.83$ ). Moreover, we see that at 2.5 *SD* above the mean level of social visibility rating values, the effect of the moral values on purchase intention increased. The purchase intention in the individualizing condition ( $M = 2.77$ ) was again significantly lower than the control condition ( $M =$



*Figure 5.* Purchase intention of products as a function of moral condition and social visibility rating of product (Study 6B). Values on vertical axis represent the likelihood of purchasing the product, with greater values representing higher purchase intention. The horizontal axis represents different values of the social visibility rating of the product. Plot points represent model estimated means at different values of social visibility rating. Error bars represent  $\pm 1 SE$ . The data show that purchase intention in the individualizing condition reduces as social visibility rating increases, but purchase intention in the binding condition increases as social visibility rating increases.

3.73), but the purchase intention in the binding condition was significantly higher ( $M = 5.54$ ).

### Discussion for Study 6A and 6B

The results of Study 6A and Study 6B converge with the previous results to show that priming the two moral foundations can have systematically different effects on the preferences for conspicuous consumption. Making individualizing values salient can reduce the preferences for conspicuous consumption. However, making binding values salient can increase the preferences for conspicuous consumption. Moreover, we find that the effect is contingent upon social visibility. In Study 6A, we manipulated social visibility by changing the consumption context and found that the binding values did not increase preferences when the products were to be utilized in private consumption scenarios. In Study 6B, we manipulated social visibility by using different types of products that innately vary on this dimension and found that the effect of the moral values weakens as the social visibility of the product decreases. That is, the binding values increase preferences for products that are typically socially visible and showy (e.g., designer clothing, luxury watches). However, the binding values should not increase preferences for products that are privately consumed (e.g., toothbrush, toaster). Hence, altogether these results demonstrate that social visibility is an important boundary condition for the effects of the binding values on preferences for conspicuous consumption.

## General Discussion

### Summary

Across seven studies we find convergent evidence that the different moral foundations alter the perceived morality of conspicuous consumption and influence the propensity to engage in the behavior. First, Study 1 found that the prevalence of the moral foundations can predict the consumption of luxury goods across countries. Specifically, we find that countries which report a higher prevalence of binding values relative to individualizing values are more likely to consume luxury goods. Study 2 found that individual differences in endorsement of the moral foundations can predict preferences for conspicuous consumption. This study also demonstrated that political conservatives and religious individuals are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption due to their adherence to the binding foundations. Next, Study 3 found that the moral values can predict the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. The individualizing values predict unfavorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption, but the binding values predict favorable moral judgments of conspicuous consumption.

The next two studies causally demonstrated the proposed conceptual pathway. Study 4 demonstrated that priming the moral values can increase sensitivity to the different characteristics (self-enhancing vs. social-identity signaling) of conspicuous consumption. The sensitivity to the different characteristics subsequently alters the moral judgments of conspicuous consumption. Next, Study 5 demonstrated that priming the two moral foundations can alter the moral judgment of conspicuous consumption, which

subsequently changes the preferences for conspicuous consumption.

Finally, the last two studies demonstrated the role of social visibility as an important boundary condition for the effect of the moral values on conspicuous consumption. Study 6A demonstrated that the effects of binding values on preferences for conspicuous consumption attenuated in private consumption contexts. Study 6B demonstrated that the effects of moral values are weaker for products that are less socially visible in nature.

### Theoretical Contributions

The present research, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to examine the relationship between moral values and conspicuous consumption. We demonstrate that the morality of conspicuous consumption is malleable, in that different moral values can increase or decrease the moral objections to the behavior and alter the propensity to engage in conspicuous consumption. This finding contradicts the notion that conspicuous consumption is always morally questionable. Rather, we assert that under certain contexts, moral values can be compatible with conspicuous consumption and even motivate the behavior. Therefore, our findings produce several implications for understanding the prevalence of this widespread social behavior.

First, our results offer an explanation for why many people, especially political, social, and religious leaders, engage in conspicuous consumption even when other sections of society consider it morally questionable. In that, this research suggests that the individuals and social groups who espouse the individualizing values of caring and fairness would be likely to shun conspicuous consumption and find it morally suspect. We can see examples of this notion in leaders like Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama who preach equality and compassion while practicing austerity (Dalai Lama, 2012). Similarly, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, who devote their time and money to fighting diseases, hunger, and income inequality, are known to maintain nonconspicuous spending habits (Elkins, 2017; Matthews, 2014).

On the other hand, our results suggest that individuals and social groups who adhere to the binding values of tradition, respect, and loyalty may embrace conspicuous consumption and find it morally permissible. Again, we can see several such instances of this in society. Most noticeably, members of royal dynasties fundamentally represent tradition and hierarchy and also epitomize conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, this phenomenon can also be seen among religious leaders who preach the values of sanctity, loyalty, and respect. As outlined before, televangelists in the United States and spiritual gurus in India unabashedly partake in conspicuous consumption (Chasmar, 2016; Urban, 2016). Hence, the present research proposes a framework for understanding how these conspicuous behaviors could be compatible with the moral outlook of such individuals.

Relatedly, our research contributes to the literature examining the antecedents of conspicuous consumption (see Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015 for a review). Extant research has explored how conspicuous consumption can be influenced many factors such as power (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009), self-threats (Lee & Shrum, 2012), mating goals (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Sundie et al., 2011; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014), mortality salience (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004), social influences

(Berger & Heath, 2008; Griskevicius et al., 2012; Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010; Mandel, Petrova, & Cialdini, 2006), and economic variables (Ivanic, Overbeck, & Nunes, 2011; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011). However, no work has directly explored the moral antecedents of conspicuous consumption.

Even so, our findings do converge with the previous literature on self-construal and political ideologies, in that past research has shown that an interdependent (vs. independent) construal can increase luxury consumption when hierarchy is acceptable in the society (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Moreover, recent work shows that conservative political ideology can increase endorsement in the belief of dominance-based hierarchical social structures, motivating preferences for products that afford vertical differentiation (Kim, Park, & Dubois, 2018; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018). Our findings are consistent with these papers as the binding values are associated with conservative political attitudes and with cultures predisposed to an interdependent construal (Haidt, 2012). Therefore, we increase the theoretical understanding of conspicuous consumption by demonstrating a novel, distinct, and meaningful motivator of this behavior.

Furthermore, this research extends our understanding of morality by demonstrating a novel consequence of the distinct moral foundations. As discussed previously, there is a burgeoning stream of work examining how the moral foundations influence political attitudes (e.g., Davis et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2011, 2009; Helzer & Pizarro, 2011) and social attitudes (e.g., Frimer, Biesanz, Walker, & MacKinlay, 2013; Inbar et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2014). However, the extant research has not examined how the moral foundations can influence consumption behaviors. Hence, this research, extending our understanding of when, why, and how morality can impact consumption patterns and economic activities in society.

### Limitations and Future Research

The present research is an initial step toward understanding the relationship between morality and consumption behaviors; therefore, these findings bring to light several unanswered questions ripe for future investigation. First, this research has explored only one boundary condition—social visibility—for the relationship between the moral values and conspicuous consumption. It is conceivable that the relationship will be contingent upon several other factors not considered in the present research. For instance, if people who adhere to the binding values utilize conspicuous consumption as a means to signal social identity, then the effect must depend on the group one is a part of and whether that particular social group endorses the product. Similarly, the effect of the binding values on conspicuous consumption might also be contingent upon various socioeconomic factors. For instance, extant research has shown that there is variability in how individuals across different income groups engage in conspicuous consumption (Christen & Morgan, 2005; Moav & Neeman, 2012; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011). Therefore, future work can explore how various economic, social, and psychological factors play a role in influencing the relationship between the moral values and conspicuous consumption.

Second, we have only examined the morality of conspicuous consumption through the Moral Foundations framework. As such, the moral judgment of this behavior would undoubtedly be influenced by other related constructs such as the moral identity of the individual (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and the strength of the moral conviction (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Relatedly, we have not demonstrated *how* the moral values alter the preferences for conspicuous consumption. Therefore, future work can explore how implicit attitudes (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Bloom, 2003), reasoning (Paxton, Ungar, & Greene, 2012; Wright & Baril, 2011), emotions (Horberg, Oveis, & Keltner, 2011; Pizarro, 2000), construal level (Napier & Luguri, 2013), and memory (Gino & Desai, 2012; Moore, Clark, & Kane, 2008) play a role in driving the effects of morality on consumption preferences.

Moreover, we have explored the influence of moral values on only one specific kind of consumption—status-oriented showy products. The different moral values would surely influence prosocial consumption (see Campbell & Winterich, 2018; Mazar & Zhong, 2010), but could also influence food consumption (Rozin, 1999; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997), preferences for horizontally differentiated products (Berger & Heath, 2008; Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012; Dommer et al., 2013), and preferences for experiential goods (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, 2014). Importantly, by exploring other forms of consumption, we could establish what kind of consumption behaviors may be motivated by the individualizing values as opposed to the binding values. This would allow us to obtain a richer understanding of how moral values shape consumption behaviors and economic activities.

### Conclusion

In summary, whereas several scholars have decried conspicuous consumption as immoral, we demonstrate that its perceived morality is malleable. Specifically, we utilize archival, correlational, and experimental procedures to demonstrate that the individualizing values can increase the moral objections to conspicuous consumption and reduce the propensity to engage in the behavior. However, the binding values can make the behavior appear morally acceptable and increase the propensity to engage in the behavior. These findings counter the view that conspicuous consumption is always considered morally suspect. Instead, we demonstrate that certain moral values can make conspicuous consumption less morally objectionable, even making it desirable. Altogether, these results can help us understand why some groups embrace conspicuous consumption even when other groups consider it morally objectionable.

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