Scarcity, sex, and spending: Recession cues increase women's desire for men owning luxury products and men's desire to buy them

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ABSTRACT

Guided by insights from evolutionary models of women's mate preferences, we hypothesized resource scarcity cues will increase women's desire for men owning luxury products and men's desire to purchase them. We tested this hypothesis across three studies, using recession (versus control) cues to manipulate resource scarcity. The first study revealed that, after being primed with recession (versus control) cues, women (but not men) rated opposite-sex targets owning luxury brands as more attractive. The second study found recession cues increase men's, but not women's, desire for luxury, compared to budget, brand products. Finally, the third study demonstrated desire for luxury products under conditions of resource scarcity is driven by men highly motivated to attract short-term, sexual relationships. By showing how recessions influence women's mating psychology and men's consumer preferences, the current research provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between resource availability, mating psychology, and the consumption of luxury brands.

1. Introduction

During the peak of the Great Depression in 1933, the national unemployment rate was at 20% (Darby, 1976), and many Americans were struggling to make ends meet. However, Howard Hughes, a Hollywood producer and millionaire, turned heads by purchasing a conspicuous, luxury yacht, betraying the struggles faced by other Americans during this time (Lord Inchcape's Yacht Bought by American, 1933). Although seemingly irrational, Hughes' spending on such conspicuous products contributed to his reputation as an incorrigible Hollywood playboy who dated beautiful actresses such as Bette Davis, Ginger Rogers, and Ava Gardner (Brown & Broeske, 2004).

Although it's easy to dismiss such spending behavior as an anomaly—the sort of behavior that would only happen in Hollywood—this pattern of luxury spending occurs regularly during recessions. For example, during the most recent economic recession in 2007, BMW and Ralph Lauren, luxury brands favored by male consumers, experienced a boost in sales (BMW, 2011; Business Wire, 2008). Here, we use insights from evolutionarily-informed models of women's mate preferences and men's mate-attraction behaviors to test the hypotheses that cues to resource scarcity will (a) increase women's preference for potential mates who possess luxury brand products, and, in turn, (b) increase sexually-opportunistic men's desire to purchase such brands. According to our hypothesis, as conditions of resource scarcity increase women's preferences for partners with resource access (Hill, Rodeheffer, Griskevicius, Durante, & White, 2012; Lee & Zietsch, 2011; Lu, Zhu, & Chang, 2015), cues of economic scarcity should lead women to find men displaying luxury brand products—which are indicative of resource access—as more attractive. Further, given that men should adjust their mating strategies based on women's environmentally-contingent mate preferences, we should find that men—especially sexually opportunistic men—demonstrate an increased desire to exhibit resources via purchasing luxury brand products during times of economic scarcity.

We tested these hypotheses across three studies. Study 1 examined how recession cues influence people's preference for partners who own luxury brands. Specifically, we predicted that women would exhibit a greater preference for potential mates possessing luxury brands after exposure to economic recession cues compared to women in the control condition. Study 2 examined whether men's consumer behavior changes in ways that mirror women's increasing prioritization of resource access cues under conditions of resource scarcity, leading men to exhibit an increased desire to purchase luxury brands when primed with economic recession cues. Finally, Study 3 examined whether men's increased preference for luxury goods under conditions of resource scarcity varied as a function of their short-term mating motivation. Given past research showing that men's motivation to attract short-term mates predicts their interest in conspicuous, luxury products (Sundie...
et al., 2011), the effect of recession cues on men’s desire for luxury should be greatest for men who are motivated to attract short-term mates. By showing how recessions influence women’s mating psychology and men’s consumer preferences, the current research seeks to provide a better understanding of the relationship between economic recessions, mating psychology, and the consumption of luxury brands.

2. Literature

Across time and cultures, research has consistently shown that men desire financial resources in a mate roughly twice as much as women do (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Hudson & Henze, 1969; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990). For example, in one study, researchers asked men and women to report the lowest acceptable levels of potential partners’ earning capacity at varying levels of relationship involvement, ranging from a single date to a marriage partner (Kenrick et al., 1990). The results revealed that women desire higher levels of earning capacity in potential partners than do men at every level of relationship involvement. This heightened preference for partners with resources is believed to reflect the sex-differentiated adaptive problems inherent in reproduction (Trivers, 1972). Because women have historically undergone extended periods of limited mobility during pregnancy and early childrearing, one important way that women have been able to improve offspring survival chances is through the choice of male partners able to provide resources to her and her children (Buss, 2003). Contemporary women’s preference for resource access is therefore reasoned to be an adaptation passed down to them by their successful female ancestors to help solve the problem of resource access during pregnancy and early child-rearing (Buss, 1989, 2003).

Although women’s preference for partners with resources is something that is most-often discussed in terms of women’s long-term mate preferences, women also exhibit a preference for resources in short-term sexual partners (Li & Kenrick, 2006). In particular, evolutionary theory suggests that one function served by women’s seeking out of short-term, sexual relationships with men is to obtain a short-term flow of economic resources (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Hrdy, 1999). Consistent with this reasoning, research finds that women find men who own conspicuous luxury products—given their ability to advertise expendable resource access—particularly desirable as short-term mating partners (Sundie et al., 2011). This preference—similar to what is observed in species in which the males must confer on females anuptial gift for sex to occur—has the benefit of giving the female access to important reproductively-relevant resources, just for a shorter period of time than what is observed in the context of long-term pair-bonding.

Given the degree to which women value cues to resource access in their mates, one effective means through which men can gain access to partners is by demonstrating this quality (Pawlowski & Koziel, 2002; Sundie et al., 2011). Indeed, women find men more desirable when they exhibit cues to resource access (Dunn & Hill, 2014; Dunn & Searle, 2010; Townsend & Levy, 1990; Wang et al., 2018). For instance, research conducted on personal advertisements find that men who report having a college education, which serves as a proxy for economic status, experience higher hit rates than men who report having a high school education (Pawlowski & Koziel, 2002). Others find that women rate the same man as more attractive when he is shown wearing a suit than a fast-food restaurant uniform (Townsend & Levy, 1990). Importantly, in both of these studies, no such effects were found for men evaluating women, demonstrating the sex-differentiated benefits available from mate-attraction tactics highlighting resource access.

Although there are several different strategies available to men wishing to showcase their resources to prospective mates, one of the most frequently used strategies involves the purchase and display of luxury products (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Janssens et al., 2011; Saad, 2007, 2011). This is particularly true in the context of short-term mating, which requires men to advertise their wealth in a way that can be quickly and easily picked up on by multiple female receivers. Consistent with this perspective, Sundie et al. (2011) found that men who were most motivated to attract short-term partners (but not those men motivated to attract long-term partners) exhibited an increased desire to purchase conspicuous products when mating goals were made active. Luxury products and brands convey information about men’s resource access, impacting the desirability of a man as both a long-term (Dunn & Searle, 2010) and short-term (Sundie et al., 2011) mate. Given the mate-attraction potential of owning luxury products, it follows that ecological cues that influence the preference that women place on resource access should have important implications for men’s consumer product preferences. In particular, ecological cues that increase the priority that women place on a prospective partner’s resource access should increase men’s desire for luxury products, particularly among those men pursuing a short-term mating strategy.

While there are likely numerous ecological conditions that impact women’s prioritization of resource access in partners, one context that has been shown to reliably increase women’s preference for this quality is resource scarcity (Hill et al., 2012; Lee & Zietsch, 2011; Lu et al., 2015). For example, Lee and Zietsch (2011) examined the emphasis that women placed on desirable mate characteristics after being primed with concerns regarding resource scarcity (as compared to unrelated concerns such as pathogen prevalence). Their results found that women who are primed with resource scarcity exhibit an increased preference for traits indicative of resource access, such as high earning potential.

Although economic recessions are a relatively recent phenomenon, periods of resource scarcity have occurred since the time of our distant ancestors (Chakravarthy & Booth, 2004). Since 1854, for example, the U.S. economy has gone through 33 cycles of economic expansion and contraction (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011). Economic recessions tend to be characterized by suffering housing, labor, and stock markets. In the most recent economic downturn of 2007, for example, as many as 40% of American households were affected by at least one of the following: unemployment, negative home equity, overdue mortgage payments, or foreclosure (Hurd & Rohwedder, 2010). Not surprisingly, recessions tend to prompt decreased spending on everything from homes to vacations (Bohlen, Carlotti, & Mibas, 2010; Dibaji, Powers, & Keswani, 2010; Hurd & Rohwedder, 2010). For example, recessions lead consumers to prefer and purchase less expensive detergent, moisturizer, and bottled water brands (Bohlen et al., 2010).

Although recessions predict decreased spending on many categories of consumer products at the national aggregate level, at the level of the individual, the impact of recessions on consumer spending is more nuanced. For example, in one recent set of studies, researchers found that economic recession cues led women to experience a greater desire to buy beauty products (Hill et al., 2012). This desire to increase spending on beauty products during recessions was found to occur because financially stable, romantically desirable men are scarce during recessions. Accordingly, women—who place a high value on financial stability in their romantic partners—increase their mate-attraction efforts during recessions to increase their chances of securing one of these rare, desirable mates. This research suggests that, instead of unilaterally decreasing spending on all categories of consumer products, individuals may reallocate their spending priorities during recessions such that they decrease spending on some things, while continuing to spend or perhaps increasing spending on products whose benefits of ownership increase during economic recessions.

Guided by this body of research, the current research examines the impact of recession cues on (a) women’s preference for partners possessing luxury brands and (b) men’s desire to purchase them. Because resource-scarce conditions increase the emphasis that women place on resource access (Hill et al., 2012; Lee & Zietsch, 2011; Lu et al., 2015), we hypothesized that women who were exposed to recessionary (compared to control) cues would find men owning luxury brands as more desirable. Second, given that recessions are reasoned to increase...
the emphasis women place on wealth-holding cues—whether for short-term or long-term mates—we hypothesized that recession cues would also increase men’s desire to purchase luxury brand products. Third, because research finds that men’s desire to purchase luxury goods to attract mates is driven primarily by men looking to attract multiple, short-term sexual partners (Sundie et al., 2011), we hypothesized that this effect would be greatest for men who are motivated to attract short-term mates. We provide the results of three studies examining these hypotheses, lending new insights into women’s evolved mating psychology, men’s consumer behavior, and the relationship between the two.

3. Study 1

Given that past research finds that cues to economic recession increase women’s desire for partners with access to financial resources (Hill et al., 2012; Lee & Zietsch, 2011; Lu et al., 2015), Study 1 sought to examine whether cues to an economic recession would influence women’s perceptions of the attractiveness of men who own luxury (compared to budget) brand products. Specifically, Study 1 tested the hypothesis that, compared to women in the control condition, women primed with recession cues would rate men who display luxury brands—but not those who display non-luxury, budget brands—to be more attractive. Because men do not emphasize resource access in a romantic partner (e.g., Dunn & Searle, 2010; Townsend & Levy, 1990), recession cues were not predicted to affect men’s ratings of women who own luxury versus non-luxury brands.

3.1. Sample and procedures

Three hundred and thirty-five college-aged undergraduate psychology students (168 men) were recruited from the participant pool recruitment system at a mid-sized university. Participation partially fulfilled a course research requirement. The overall design was a 2 (prime: recession vs. control) × 2 (participant sex: male vs. female) × 2 (brand type: luxury vs. budget brands) between-subjects design. Participants came into the laboratory in small groups of 8 to 10 individuals to ostensibly participate in a study examining memory and comprehension for different forms of news media.

Upon arrival, participants were seated at individually-partitioned computer terminals running Qualtrics survey software. After obtaining consent, participants were randomly assigned to either the recession or control priming condition. In both conditions, participants viewed a slideshow purportedly modeled after a recent article in the New York Times. They were instructed to internalize and visualize the information presented in the slideshow because they were going to be given a memory test at a later point in the experiment. After viewing their condition-specific slideshow, participants were told that they were going to complete a short, unrelated study on consumer behavior as a filler task before taking the memory test. Participants were told the purpose of this task was to test if people can accurately assess personality characteristics based solely on the brands that people own. In reality, this task served as the dependent variable in the study.

3.2. Recession manipulation

To prime recession cues, participants viewed a slideshow suggesting that the current U.S. economy was failing, with jobs and resources being increasingly scarce, even for those with a college education (see Griskevicius et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2012; Rodeheffer, Hill, & Lord, 2012). This manipulation was chosen because past research has found that it causes people to perceive resources and jobs as being less available in their local environment (Hill et al., 2012). Participants in the academic failure condition viewed a slideshow suggesting that college courses will become much more difficult in the immediate future. This control was chosen because it has been shown to elicit comparable levels of unpleasant affect as economic recession cues, but is devoid of cues indicating a stagnant economy (Hill et al., 2012).

3.3. Luxury products manipulation and attractiveness judgments

After undergoing the priming procedure, participants were randomly assigned to view five consumer profiles of opposite-sex targets containing either luxury or budget (averagely-priced) brands. Each consumer profile had pictures and labels of 10 products that an opposite-sex member had ostensibly taken with them on a recent vacation. Six of the products were target items (i.e., luxury or budget brand versions of a product) and four of the products served as distracters (e.g., shampoo, playing cards) to mask the true purpose of the experiment. For example, the luxury / budget brands for one of the male target profiles were: Sperry / Payless shoes, Ralph Lauren / no brand hat, Ray Ban / Target sunglasses, Louis Vuitton / GAP bag, Ralph Lauren / American Eagle polo, and Rolex / Timex watch. The profiles also showed pictures of: Bicycle playing cards, Crest toothpaste, etc., which were the same in both the luxury / budget products condition. A pretest conducted on a separate sample of 24 undergraduates validated that the luxury products were perceived as being more expensive and luxurious than the control products (expensiveness: $M_{luxury} = 5.71, SD = 0.46; M_{budget} = 3.03, SD = 0.47; t(23) = 23.49, p ≤ .001; luxuriousness: $M_{luxury} = 5.59, SD = 0.49; M_{budget} = 2.77, SD = 0.46; t[23] = 23.03, p ≤ .001). Consumer profiles can be seen in the supplemental materials. Pictures of the “consumers” were not included to ensure that participants’ evaluations of the consumers were impacted exclusively by the products and not by other cues (e.g., hair color). To keep with the cover story, participants rated each target on a variety of personality characteristics (e.g., reserved, lazy, active imagination) using a 7-point scale (1: strongly disagree; 7: strongly agree). Attractiveness, the dependent variable, was embedded within these characteristics.

3.4. Results

To examine the impact of recession cues on men’s and women’s perceptions of opposite-sex targets as a function of luxury-brand ownership, we entered attractiveness ratings (averaged across targets: men owning luxury brands $α = 0.78$, men owning budget brands $α = 0.64$, women owning luxury brands $α = 0.71$, women owning budget brands $α = 0.75$) as the dependent variable in a 2 (prime: luxury vs. budget brands) × 2 (participant sex) × 2 (brand type) between-subjects ANOVA. Results revealed a significant main effect of brand type, $F(1, 327) = 31.25, p ≤ .001, η^2 = 0.08$, where both male and female participants rated targets with consumer profiles containing luxury brands as significantly more attractive ($M = 4.90, SD = 0.80$) than those containing budget brands ($M = 4.41, SD = 0.80$). The main effect of brand type was qualified by the predicted significant three-way interaction between priming condition, brand type, and participant sex, $F(1, 327) = 5.20, p = .023, η^2 = 0.01$ (see Fig. 1). Simple effects tests probing the three-way interaction revealed a significant condition-based difference in women’s attractiveness ratings for male targets owning luxury products, $F(1, 327) = 5.48, p = .020, η^2 = 0.02$. As predicted, women primed with recession cues rated male targets with consumer profiles containing luxury brands to be significantly more attractive ($M = 5.09, SD = 0.95$) than women in the control condition ($M = 4.68, SD = 0.79$). No such difference between priming conditions was found for women’s attractiveness ratings of the target profiles containing budget brands ($p = .49$). For men, no condition-based differences in attractiveness ratings emerged for targets owning luxury or budget products.

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1 There were no significant condition-based differences on any of the other personality characteristic ratings, nor were there any significant 3-way interactions, as was found for the dependent variable of attractiveness.
We predicted that recession cues would increase men’s desire to own luxury brand products. Accordingly, men may stand to gain a mating advantage if they choose to purchase and display luxury brand products during recessions. Study 2 was designed to test this possibility. To prime recession cues, participants viewed the same recession slideshow used in Study 1. In the control condition, participants viewed a similar slideshow detailing current trends in architecture. The title of the architecture slideshow was, “Banish the Bland: The Glass Box is so Last Century.” One slide, for example, had a picture of a tall glass building with the following caption: “The trademark glass-and-steel box design has dominated architecture since the early 20th Century.” Past research conducted on a similar sample has shown the recession (compared to the architecture) prime leads people to believe there are less people in their environment who have good jobs, a steady income, and a lot of money (Hill et al., 2012).

4.3. Purchasing desire for luxury and non-luxury brands

The brands chosen for the experiment were carefully selected from the brands used in Study 1. The men’s luxury / budget brands were Southern Tide / GAP khaki shorts, Ralph Lauren / American Eagle polo, Patagonia / GAP fleece Jacket, Rolex / Timex watch, Ray Ban / Target sunglasses, Sperry’s / Payless shoes, Vineyard Vines / Men’s Wearhouse ties, and Ralph Lauren / American Eagle hat. The women’s luxury / budget products were Louis Vuitton / Forever 21 purse, Ray Ban / Target sunglasses, Ralph Lauren / American Eagle polo, Rolex / Timex watch, Patagonia / American Eagle fleece jacket, Sperry’s / Payless shoes, John Hart / Jansport backpack, and Ralph Lauren / American Eagle hat. To measure desire to purchase each product, participants used a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale to respond to the following items: “I would like to purchase this product or a similar version of this product (i.e., same brand but different color or style);” “Money spent on purchasing this product would be money well spent;” and “I plan on buying this product or a similar version of this product...
revealed a significant main effect of product type on purchasing desire, \( F(1, 130) = 4.06, p = .046, \eta^2 = 0.01 \) (see Fig. 2). As predicted, for men, simple effects tests revealed a significant difference between condition on purchasing desire for luxury, \( F(1, 130) = 5.56, p = .019, \eta^2 = 0.04 \), but not budget \( (p = .24) \), products. Men in the recession condition reported greater desire to purchase luxury brands \( (M = 4.62, SD = 1.08) \) than men in the control condition \( (M = 4.00, SD = 1.27) \). Moreover, for women, no significant condition-based differences emerged \( (p \geq 0.89) \). The main effects of priming condition and participant sex were also non-significant \( (p \geq 0.39) \).

4.5. Discussion

Study 2 found support for the hypothesis that men primed with economic-recession cues would report a greater desire to buy luxury brand products compared to men in the control condition. There were no differences in men’s desire to purchase the budget versions of these products in response to recession cues, indicating that this shift is specific to luxury brands. Additionally, women’s reported desire to purchase either budget or luxury brands, respectively, was not affected by priming condition. Together, these results are consistent with the hypothesis that men may adjust their consumer preferences to capitalize on this shift in women’s mating preferences, making them more inclined to purchase luxury products when primed with resource scarcity than in the absence of such cues.

5. Study 3

Study 3 was designed to extend the results of the previous two studies by examining whether men’s short-term mating motivation moderates the relationship between recession cues and men’s preference for luxury goods. Past research shows that men’s motivation to attract short-term mates predicts their interest in conspicuous, luxury products \( (\text{Sundie et al., 2011}) \). Given that men’s desire for luxury goods is related to their preferred mating strategy, we should find men’s desire for luxury goods under conditions of economic scarcity is driven primarily by sexually-opportunistic men who are motivated to attract short-term partners. These men should be the ones who are most inclined to capitalize on women’s increased attunement to resource access cues in recessions.

5.1. Sample and procedure

We recruited 121 male undergraduate psychology students from the participant pool recruitment system at mid-sized university. The general procedure and cover story were identical to that used in Study 2, with two exceptions. Before completing the recession \( (n = 62) \) or control prime manipulation \( (n = 59) \), participants responded to the following item assessing their short-term mating motivation, “I am currently motivated to attract short-term, casual sexual partners” \( (1: \text{strongly disagree}; 7: \text{strongly agree}) \). After completing the prime, participants then indicated their desire to purchase luxury brand products using the same items and products as in the previous study \( (\alpha = 0.85) \).

5.2. Results and discussion

To examine whether men’s short-term mating motivation moderated their desire to purchase luxury products under conditions of resource scarcity, we conducted a multiple regression analysis in which desire for luxury products was regressed on condition (dummy-coded), men’s short-term mating motivation score (centered), and the interaction between these two factors. Unexpectedly, no significant main effect of condition on men’s desire to purchase luxury products emerged \( (p = .661) \). Although not conventionally significant \( (p < .05) \), results revealed a main effect of short-term mating motivation on desire to purchase luxury products, where men’s motivation to pursue short-term mates positively predicted increased desire to purchase luxury products, \( b = 0.12 (SE = 0.06), t = 1.96, p = .052, \text{sempartial } r^2 = 0.03 \).

Most importantly, however, this analysis revealed a significant interaction between condition and men’s short-term mating motivation on desire to purchase luxury products, \( b = -0.36 (SE = 0.12), t = -3.05, p = .003, \text{sempartial } r^2 = 0.07 \) (see Fig. 3). Simple slopes tests revealed that, in the resource scarcity condition, increased motivation to attract a short-term mate was positively related to desire to purchase luxury products, \( b = 0.30 (SE = 0.08), t = 3.59, p \leq .001, \text{sempartial } r^2 = 0.10 \). No such relationship was observed for men in the control condition \( (p = .655) \).

To further elucidate this interaction, we used the Johnson-Neyman technique to examine the points on the short-term mating
motivation measure at which participants’ preference for luxury brand products began to differ based on testing condition. This test revealed that being in the recession prime condition began to predict significantly greater preference for luxury brand products at 1.98 SD above the mean (13.22% of the sample) on short-term mating motivation, $b = -0.61 (SE = 0.31)$, $t = -1.98, p = .05$ (CI: $-1.23, 0.00$) and began to predict significantly lesser preference for luxury brand products at −1.08 SD below the mean (44.63% of the sample) on short-term mating motivation, $b = -0.48 (SE = 0.24)$, $t = 1.98, p = .05$ (CI: $0.00, 0.96$).

Together, these results suggest that men’s desire to buy luxury products under conditions of resource scarcity is rooted in their mating psychology, varying as a function of their motivation to attract short-term mating partners. That is, the increased preference for luxury brand products was exhibited by men who were most motivated to attract short-term partners. This pattern of results lends further support for the idea that an increased desire for luxury products in response to recession cues may reflect a short-term, mate-attraction strategy of men who are seeking to capitalize on women’s ecologically-contingent mate preferences. Further, these results demonstrated that men who are least motivated to attract short-term partners exhibited a decreased desire for these products in response to recession cues. This is a typical spending pattern exhibited by consumers in recessions (Bohlen et al., 2010; Dibaji et al., 2010; Hurd & Rohwedder, 2010), suggesting that men who are disinterested in short-term mating may choose to save during economic downturns, rather than devoting resources to products that could serve short-term mate-attraction purposes.

Although the results of the current study found evidence that men who are highly motivated to attract short-term mates report increased desire to purchase luxury products when primed with resource scarcity, there was no overall main effect of resource scarcity condition on men’s desire to purchase luxury products, as was found in Study 2. One potential explanation for this inconsistency is that it may have emerged as the result of randomly-occurring differences in the composition of the samples used in Study 2 and 3. Given that men with low motivation to attract short-term partners exhibit a diminished desire to purchase luxury products in response to recession cues, if the men in Study 3 were less oriented toward short-term mating than the men in Study 2, their decreased preference for luxury products may have offset the increased preference for these products observed in short-term motivated men. Although speculative (we did not measure short-term mating motivation in Study 2), the relative majority of men’s short-term mating motivation scores in Study 3 fell at the low end of the scale, and the average score was below the midpoint ($M = 3.25; SD = 1.77$ on a 7-point scale), suggesting that a population more skewed toward short-term mating may have replicated the main effect found in Study 2. Regardless, the lack of main effect in Study 3 suggests that caution is warranted in interpreting the results of Studies 2 and 3. Future research is needed to more deeply examine the interplay between resource scarcity and mating motivations on men’s consumer behavior.

6. General discussion

This research uses insights from evolutionary biology to predict that recessions might increase women’s preference for men who own luxury products and increase men’s desire to purchase them. Although economic recessions are generally associated with decreased consumer spending on most product categories, researchers have demonstrated that there may be instances in which such environmental conditions prompt consumers to spend more money, especially when doing so would provide a mating advantage (e.g., Griskevičius et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2012). Study 1 extends this research by showing that in response to scarcity, women, but not men, find opposite-sex targets that own luxury brands to be more attractive. This is reasoned to occur because women’s preference for mates with resource access increases under conditions of resource scarcity (Hill et al., 2012; Lee & Zietsch, 2011; Lu et al., 2012).

Given that women exhibit an increased desire for men displaying luxury products during times of economic recession, Study 2 examined whether this preference shift would be reflected in men’s consumer behavior preferences. Results supported this hypothesis, finding that men, but not women, have a greater desire to purchase luxury brand products after being prompted with recessionary cues. Finally, Study 3 demonstrated that this effect was specific to men who reported high motivation to attract short-term mating partners. Specifically, this study found that after exposure to recessionary cues men who reported being most motivated to attract short-term sexual partners reported a greater desire to purchase luxury brand products, but that men who were least motivated to attract such partners desired them less. Taken together, these findings suggest that recessions may have important implications for women’s mating psychology, men’s consumer behavior, and the relationship between the two: Women find men that display luxury brands to be even more attractive, potentially increasing sexually-opportunistic men’s desire to purchase such brands.

Because women value wealth in both long- (Dunn & Searle, 2010) and short-term (Sundie et al., 2011) mates, it may seem that men’s desire to purchase luxury products under conditions of resource scarcity should not be specific to those who are highly motivated to attract short-term mates. That is, men who are more interested in long-term mating should also benefit from signaling wealth when resources are scarce. However, although owning and displaying luxury brands provides a signal of wealth (Lee, Ko, & Meghee, 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011), they do not solely signal wealth. Luxury brands also provide a signal of men’s mating strategy, where men who own conspicuous luxury products are perceived to be more invested in short-term mating (Sundie et al., 2011) and less desirable to women for long-term partnerships (Kruger & Kruger, 2018). Accordingly, the men who seek to own and display luxury products under contexts of resource scarcity should be those who are most motivated to attract short-term mates, as was found in the current research.

Although not predicted in advance, Study 3 also found that men who were least motivated to attract short-term partners exhibited a
decreased desire to purchase luxury products when primed with resource scarcity cues. Given that past research shows a negative relationship between men's desire for short- and long-term relationships (i.e., men who are more interested in long-term relationships are less interested in short-term relationships and vice versa; Beall & Schaller, 2019; Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007), one possibility is that men who are least motivated to attract short-term partners (i.e., those who are more interested in long-term mating) may instead respond to resource scarcity cues by choosing to conserve resources in a manner consistent with a more restricted sexual strategy. That is, given that long-term mating strategies are characteristic of those following slower life history strategies (Chisholm et al., 1993; Strouts, Brase, & Dillon, 2017), it is possible that these men may be responding to cues of economic resource scarcity by making tradeoffs that prioritize investment in their continued growth and educational attainment at the expense of mating effort. Indeed, previous research finds that men following slower life history strategies respond to cues of ecological harshness, such as resource scarcity, by delaying mating goals (Griskevicius et al., Delton, Robertson, & Tybur, 2011) and desiring to save rather than spend money (Griskevicius et al., 2013). Such resource-allocation shifts increase one's ability to compete for resources (something that is more necessary in a harsh economy) before settling down with a long-term romantic partner. However, because Study 3 did not measure men's long-term mating motivation or their desire to save rather than spend the money that would be spent on luxury brand products, this explanation is speculative and should be treated cautiously. These are important limitations that should be examined in future work on this topic.

Given that women perceive men who own conspicuous luxury products as more oriented toward meeting short-term mating goals than men who do not possess conspicuous luxury products (Sundie et al., 2011), this raises questions regarding why women are receptive to this signal. Past research finds that women value resource access in both long- and short-term mating contexts (Li & Kenrick, 2006), and evolutionary theory suggests that women use both long- and short-term mating as means of acquiring resources (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Hrdy, 1999). Accordingly, one possibility is that women perceive men displaying luxury products as likely to be short-term mates, but are nevertheless receptive to these men because women need to be creative about their resource-acquisition strategies when resources (and desirable mates with resources) are scarce. While somewhat beyond the scope of the current investigation, future research would benefit from examining this possibility and related research questions, such as whether recessionary cues impact the sexual strategies of men and women.

This research adds to the growing body of literature utilizing an evolutionary framework to understand how cycling conditions of scarcity have shaped human psychology over the course of evolutionary history and how individuals adjust their psychology and behavior in response to changing ecological conditions (e.g., Durante, Griskevicius, Redden, & Edward White, 2015; Griskevicius et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2012; Hill, DelPriore, Rodeheffer, & Butterfield, 2014; Hill, Rodeheffer, DelPriore, & Butterfield, 2013; Li, Kenrick, Griskevicius, & Neuberg, 2012; Mittal & Griskevicius, 2016; Rodeheffer et al., 2012). By demonstrating how recessionary cues influence women's mating preferences and men's consumer preferences, these findings provide new information about the complex relationship between the economy, mating psychology, and consumer behavior. More specifically, this research suggests that the puzzling stability of the luxury goods market during recessions may in part be driven by the benefit men receive on the mating market from purchasing and displaying such products and brands during harsh economic times.

In addition to lending new insights into existing theory and research on human mating and consumer behavior, the current results also have practical implications for businesses and retailers during economic recessions. For example, the current research suggests that men's luxury retailers, when deciding how to best market their products, may benefit from advertisements highlighting the conspicuousness or romantic appeal of their products—especially in recessions. One potential way to accomplish this could be to add price displays, as this has been shown to increase consumer's perceptions of luxury brand's conspicuousness (Parguel, Delécotte, & Valette-Florence, 2016). Further, since luxury brands are associated with expensiveness (Hennigs et al., 2012), it is possible that reducing the price or advertising discounted prices of luxury brands may devalue the brand's symbol of wealth or resource access, thus decreasing their desirability. While it may seem counterintuitive, luxury retailers could even potentially consider raising prices, as this has been shown to be an effective way of increasing preference for luxury brands, particularly for consumers valuing conspicuousness (Hwang, Ko, & Megehee, 2014).

Additionally, the current research may also have practical significance for understanding factors that impede successful financial planning. The results suggest that recessions may prompt college-aged, sexually unrestricted men to make unwise financial decisions that could have potential long-term consequences for their financial wellbeing as older adults. Financial organizations and advisors stress the importance of saving money early in life to ensure financial security during retirement. Failing to invest during the first five years of one's career, for example, can lead to tens of thousands of dollars difference in savings over just a 30-year period (Financial Services Institute, 2012). During tough economic times, when saving money is even more difficult, a stronger drive to purchase luxury products may prevent young men from saving money for retirement during this critical time period.

An important next step would be to examine the processes that underlie consumer preferences and attitudes toward luxury products in response to recessionary cues. An attempt should also be made to verify these findings in real-world spending patterns. Reliable indicators of economic growth and decline, such as the stock market (Levine & Zervos, 1998) and unemployment rate (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), could be compared with consumer spending data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics or financial reports from luxury product manufacturers (i.e., Ralph Lauren, BMW) to see if our results from the lab translate into how consumers actually spend their money during tough economic times. Such archival research would provide converging evidence to support the idea that recessions may prompt men to spend more on luxury products during recessions.

Although the results of these studies provide initial insight into how recessions affect consumer's perceptions of luxury products, an important limitation is that we did not explicitly test mediating factors that drive this relationship. Future research is needed to identify the precise underlying psychological mechanisms driving these changes in women's mating psychology and men's consumer preferences. Future research may also benefit from examining how individual differences, such as life history strategies, moderate responses to economic threats. That is, some men may perceive themselves to be less vulnerable to an economic threat, which would attenuate their desire to purchase luxury products.

As the economy follows a predictable cycle of economic expansion and contraction, it is important to continue striving for a better understanding of how economic scarcity influences human behavior and cognition. Although the economy has steadily improved since the Great Recession began in 2007, those who predicted that recession have recently predicted a seventy-percent chance of the next recession hitting before 2020 (Egan, 2018; Herbst-Bayliss, 2018). Even though intuition suggests that luxury products should be the first stricken from the budget, the current research indicates that for men who are interested in short-term relationships, tough economic times may do exactly the opposite—make luxury brand purchases a priority.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.