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This research shows that contagion can serve an underlying defensive function. We find that people respond to self-esteem threat by augmenting preference for objects that have come into contact with a celebrity who is unrelated to the threatened domain--an effect we call compensatory contagion.

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Compensatory Contagion: A Psychological Defense Against Threat

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that people are able to respond to psychological threat with interchangeable defenses, a phenomenon broadly referred to as fluid compensation (Baumeister and Jones 1978; Sobol and Darke 2013; Heine et al. 2006; Steele 1988; Tesser 2000). Drawing on this work, we find that self-esteem threat augments preference for objects that have come into contact with a celebrity who is unrelated to the threatened domain—an effect we call compensatory contagion. Across four experiments, we make several theoretical contributions. First, we provide the first evidence, to our knowledge, that contagion can serve a defensive function. Second, we extend prior work by demonstrating a coping strategy that is unrelated to social signaling (cf. Lee and Shrum 2013; Rucker and Galinsky 2013). We also find that this response is not an avoidance of products related to threat (White and Argo 2009), but rather an approach motivation directed towards positive contagion. Third, we provide process evidence that contagion is the underlying mechanism driving these effects. Fourth, we identify two key moderators—self-affirmation and constrained cognitive resources—to further isolate the role of threat and contagion, respectively. Lastly, we find that compensatory contagion is not explained by positive or negative affect and, similar to other compensatory responses (Rucker et al. 2011), it is dominantly exhibited by consumers who feel connected to the celebrity's domain.

Research suggests preferences for celebrity memorabilia are largely due to seeking an essence—the underlying or unobservable qualities in an object (Newman et al. 2011). In the face of discomfort, many people seek relief in retail therapy as a means of boosting various aspects of the self (Gao et al 2009). Yet another response to threat is to compensate through self-enhancement by emphasizing desirable traits which are not currently under threat (Baumeister and Jones, 1978; Greenberg and Pyszczynski 1985). Bringing these two methods of coping together, we propose that people can compensate from threats to self-esteem by purchasing their desirable traits. If the purchase of celebrity objects is ultimately driven by the desire to acquire the essence of positive figures, can contaminated products act as a compensatory vehicle?

In study 1, participants ($N = 218$) were randomly assigned to a 3 (threat: athletic vs. business vs. control) \times 2 (celebrity: Bill Gates vs. LeBron James) between-subjects design. Participants first wrote about a time when they failed in an athletic or business context. Then in an ostensibly separate study, participants viewed a product from an online auction on celebrity memorabilia. Participants reported their valuations for an unbranded cotton sweater that was described as being previously *owned and worn* by Bill Gates or LeBron James. Results showed that valuations varied by celebrity in the athletic threat and business threat conditions but not in the control condition. Consistent with our theorizing, when the sweater was owned by LeBron James, participants in the business threat condition were willing to pay more compared to participants in either the athletic threat condition or the control condition. Critically, the athletic threat was no lower than the control. Conversely, when the sweater was owned by Bill Gates, participants in the athletic threat condition were willing to pay more compared to participants

in either the business threat condition or the control condition.

These results provided initial evidence to suggest that people compensate for ego-threat by paying more for celebrity-contaminated memorabilia from domains outside that of the initial threat.

Study 2 directly investigated the role of contagion by (1) manipulating contact, and by (2) demonstrating the underlying intuitive nature of the phenomenon (Kramer and Block 2011). Participants ($N = 159$) were randomly assigned to a 2 (threat: athletic vs. business) \times 2 (contagion: no contact vs. contact) \times 2 (cognitive load: high load vs. no load) between-subjects design (procedures similar to study 1). Participants viewed a sweater supposedly worn by Sidney Crosby. Consistent with Study 1, when the celebrity had physical contact with the object, valuations in the business threat condition were significantly elevated compared to the athletic threat condition. As predicted, when the celebrity touched the product, valuations in the business threat condition were even further elevated under load (vs. no load). This suggests that the observed effects are automatic and not being driven by a cognitive association.

Study 3 conceptually replicated our findings, isolated the role of threat by manipulating self-affirmation, and further confirmed the role of contagion using statistical mediation. Participants ($N = 121$) were randomly assigned to a 2 (threat: volunteer vs. business) \times 2 (self-affirmation: yes vs. no) between-subjects design. Participants evaluated a sweater owned by Mark Zuckerberg. As predicted, contagion (e.g., wanting to shake hands with Zuckerberg) only mediated the relationship between threat and valuations when participants did not self-affirm. Hence, without the shield of self-affirmation (Steele 1988), participants sought compensatory contagion. Together, these results suggest that compensatory contagion is a defensive response.

Study 4 assessed the connection to the compensatory domain, included a negative control condition, and examined the role of affect in our compensatory contagion effect. Participants ($N = 132$) were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions in a 2 (threat: dental pain vs. business) \times domain connectedness (measured trait) design. Participants then evaluated a sweater owned by LeBron James. As predicted, simple slopes revealed that when participants had high levels of domain connectedness, valuations were elevated for those who experienced a business domain threat compared to dental pain threat. These findings suggest that, on some level, people must value the traits imbued in the celebrity contaminated object for them to hold compensatory value. That is, threat leads to compensation in other important domains, not just any domain.

In sum, we contribute to the literature by showing positive contagion can serve a defensive psychological function. Although the desirability of positive contagion is thought to be universal and stable—George Clooney's sweater will be desired by many and for the foreseeable future—the current research suggests that threat can alter preference for an otherwise desirable essence.

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