

Signaling Status by Acquiring Ownership (vs. Access)

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SUMMARY

As an alternative to ownership, **access-based consumption** allows consumers to use products by paying a usage fee (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012, 2017). Some scholars suggest that because such fees tend to be lower than purchase prices, **access-based consumption can reduce social inequality**.

We challenge this assumption by **highlighting the role of acquisition modes (owning vs. accessing)** as status signals. Because ownership maintains a premium in status signaling, access-based consumption can exacerbate rather than reduce perceived social inequality.

We find individuals have a higher subjective social rank when they own but their friend accesses similar products, compared to when acquisition modes are reversed (*experiment 1a and 1b*).

This effect is **robust** across luxury and non-luxury brands (*experiment 2*).

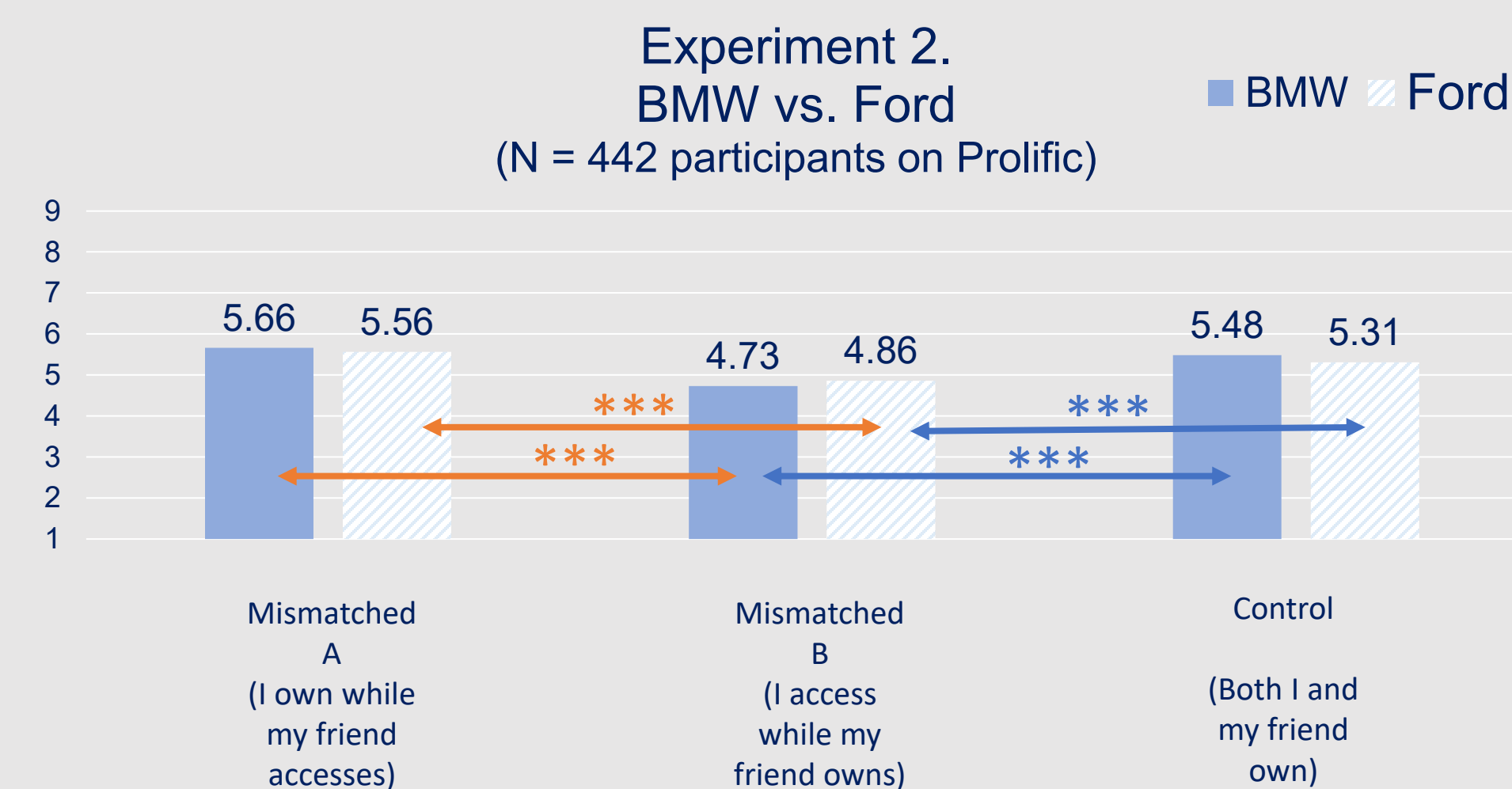
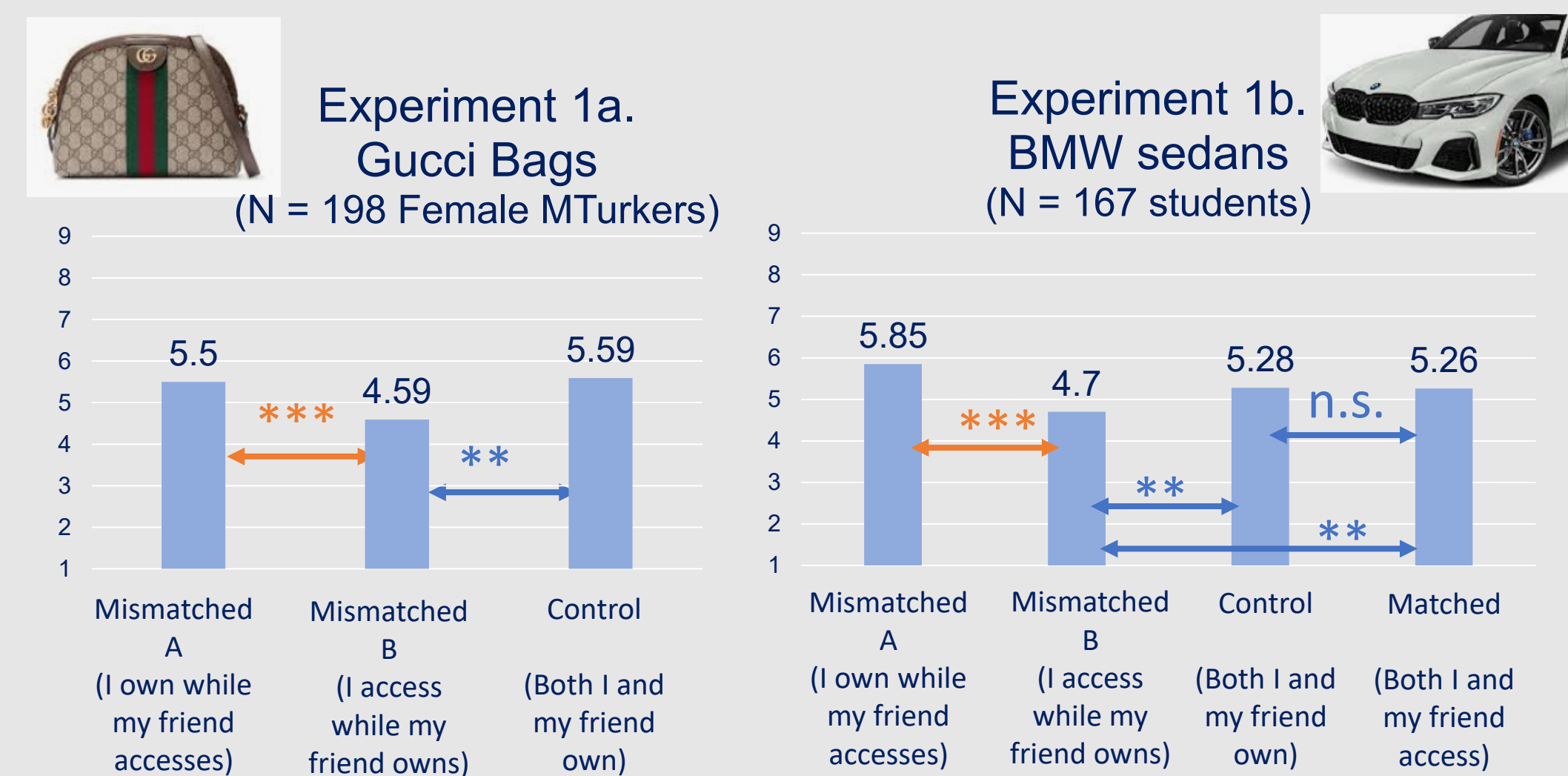
It is **mitigated**: (1) when ownership is achieved via **extended payments** rather than an immediate lump sum (*experiment 3*); and (2) when access-based acquisition is framed as a **rent-to-own** option, such that access is perceived as a way to try multiple goods en route to preference development (*experiment 4*).

Income, gender, and age won't impact the results.

METHODS

Participants imagine that they and their friend acquire similar products either via ownership or access. Our **focal comparisons** consider consumers subjective social rank when either their friend ("mismatched A") or they ("mismatched B") access while another consumer owns.

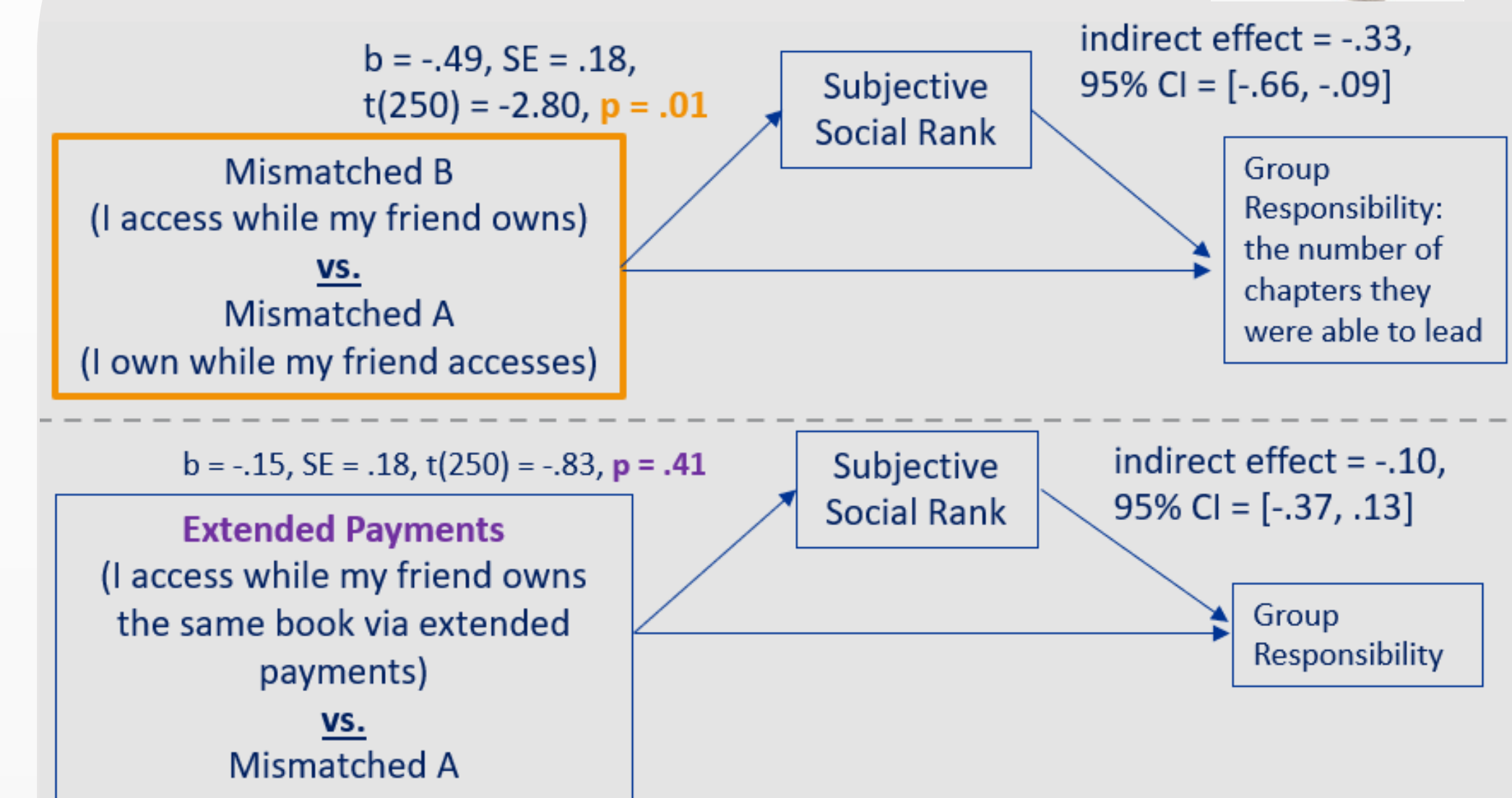
Dependent Measure: Subjective Social Rank (9-point; Allan and Gilbert 1995): "In relationship to this friend I generally feel _____" (inferior – superior; incompetent – competent; untalented – more talented; weaker – stronger).



Regardless of brand: $M_{\text{mismatched A}} = 5.61 > M_{\text{mismatched B}} = 4.80, p < .001$
 $M_{\text{control}} = 5.39 > M_{\text{mismatched B}} = 4.80, p < .001$

MECHANISM (Experiment 3)

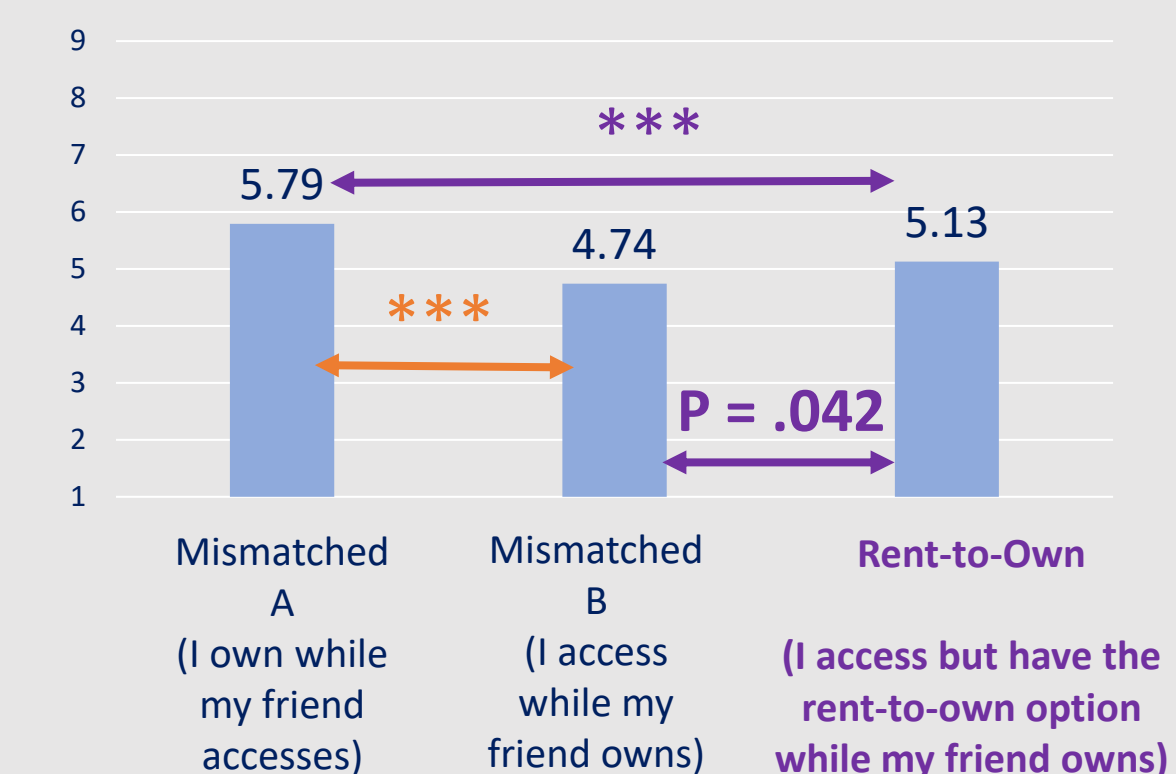
(N = 254 Participants on Prolific)



Hayes (2013)'s PROCESS Model 4 Mediation Analysis (**Mismatched A is the baseline**)

RENT-TO-OWN AS A MODERATOR (Exp. 4)

(N = 240 Participants on Prolific)



In experiment 4, the **rent-to-own** option can mitigate the effect of acquisition modes on social status but **cannot fully mitigate** the status signaling difference between owning and accessing.

CONTRIBUTIONS

- ❖ Ownership (vs. access) is a robust status signal.
- ❖ Providing people with access-based consumption options may not effectively combat perceived social inequality.
- ❖ The status signaling effectiveness of acquisition modes, however, changes as a function of payment structure and the framing given to the access-based alternative.

Please scan the QR code for study details, references and pre-registration links.

