

# Photo Engagement Induces Present Focus

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## ABSTRACT

People frequently reflect on the past, which can bring to mind both long-term and short-term goals and motivations. Today, past reflection is increasingly aided by one's personal photographs (e.g., on social media; on one's smartphone). Three studies reveal that photo-aided past reflection activates **impulsive, short-term goals** and suppresses long-term, **future-oriented goals**. Photo engagement consequently shifts individuals' behavioral intentions in line with these goals.

## INTRODUCTION

- Modern technology makes photos increasingly accessible; an estimated 2 billion photos are shared on Facebook alone every day (Facebook.com).
- Photographs provide salient reminders of our past selves, and could lead individuals to perceive higher (or lower) connectedness between their current and future identities and bolster future-oriented choices (Bartels & Urminsky 2011).
- At the same time, photos often capture in-the-moment feelings and experiences, which may shift one's focus towards instant feelings and away from delayed future rewards.

## REFERENCES

Bartels, D. M., & Urminsky, O. (2011), On intertemporal selfishness: how the perceived instability of identity underlies impatient consumption, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38 (1), 182-198.

Facebook (2015), Under the hood: Facebook's cold storage system, <https://code.facebook.com/posts/1433093613662262/-under-the-hood-facebook-s-cold-storage-system/>.

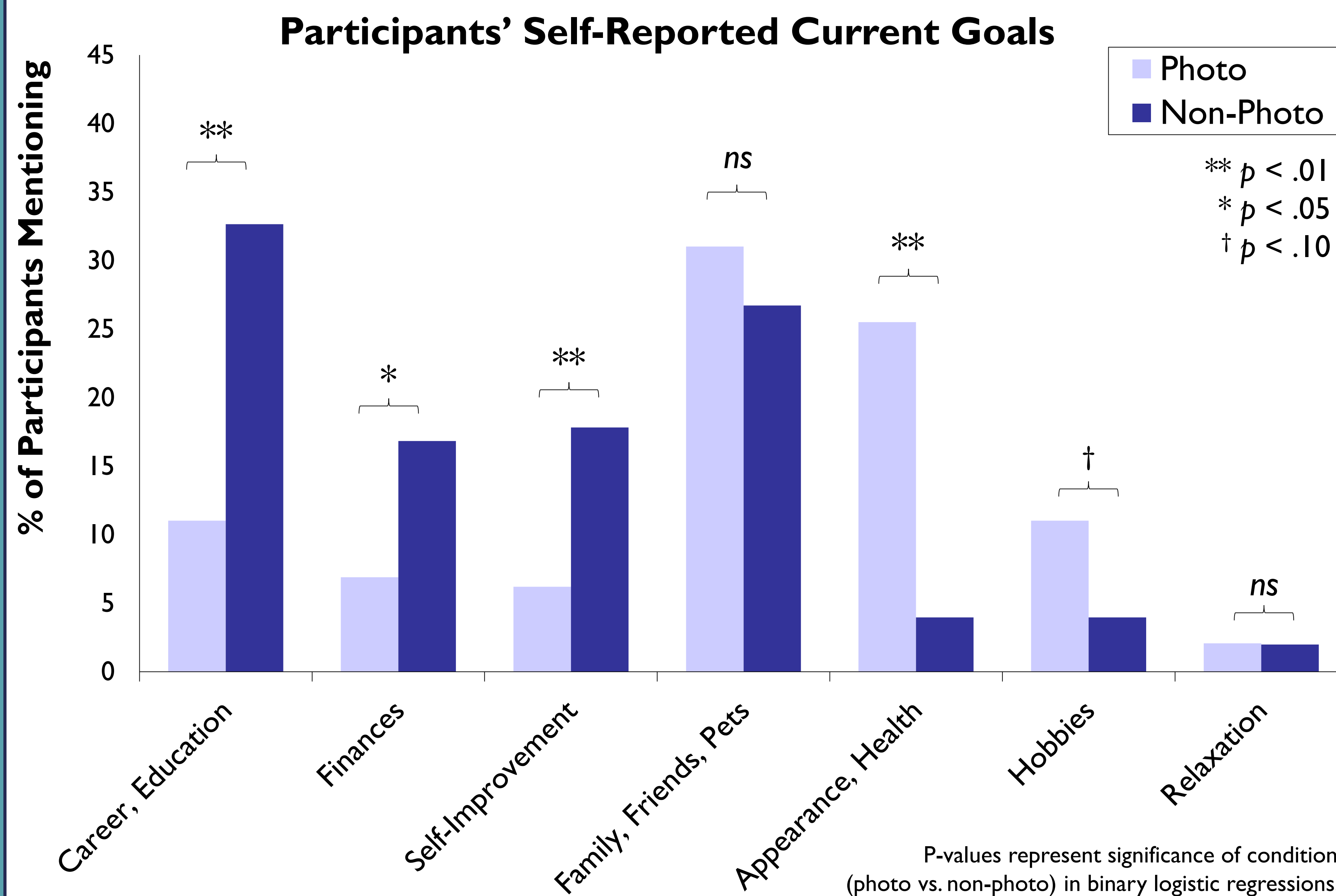
Hershfield, H. E., Goldstein, D. G., Sharpe, W. F., Fox, J., Yeykelis, L., Carstensen, L. L., & Bailenson, J. N. (2011), Increasing saving behavior through age-progressed renderings of the future self, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48 (SPL), S23-S37.

## STUDY 1: Photo-Driven Goal Shifts

### METHOD

- 246 MTurk participants either reflected on the past or viewed their personal photos.
- **DV:** Participants reported their current thoughts, feelings, and active goals.
- 3 coders blind to hypotheses developed a catalog of themes in participants' free responses and coded these responses accordingly.
- *We predicted that photo engagement would suppress goals linked with future-oriented success.*

### RESULTS



Viewing photos primed more goals associated with appearance and health, but fewer goals associated with long-term success (in domains of career and education, finances, and self-improvement).

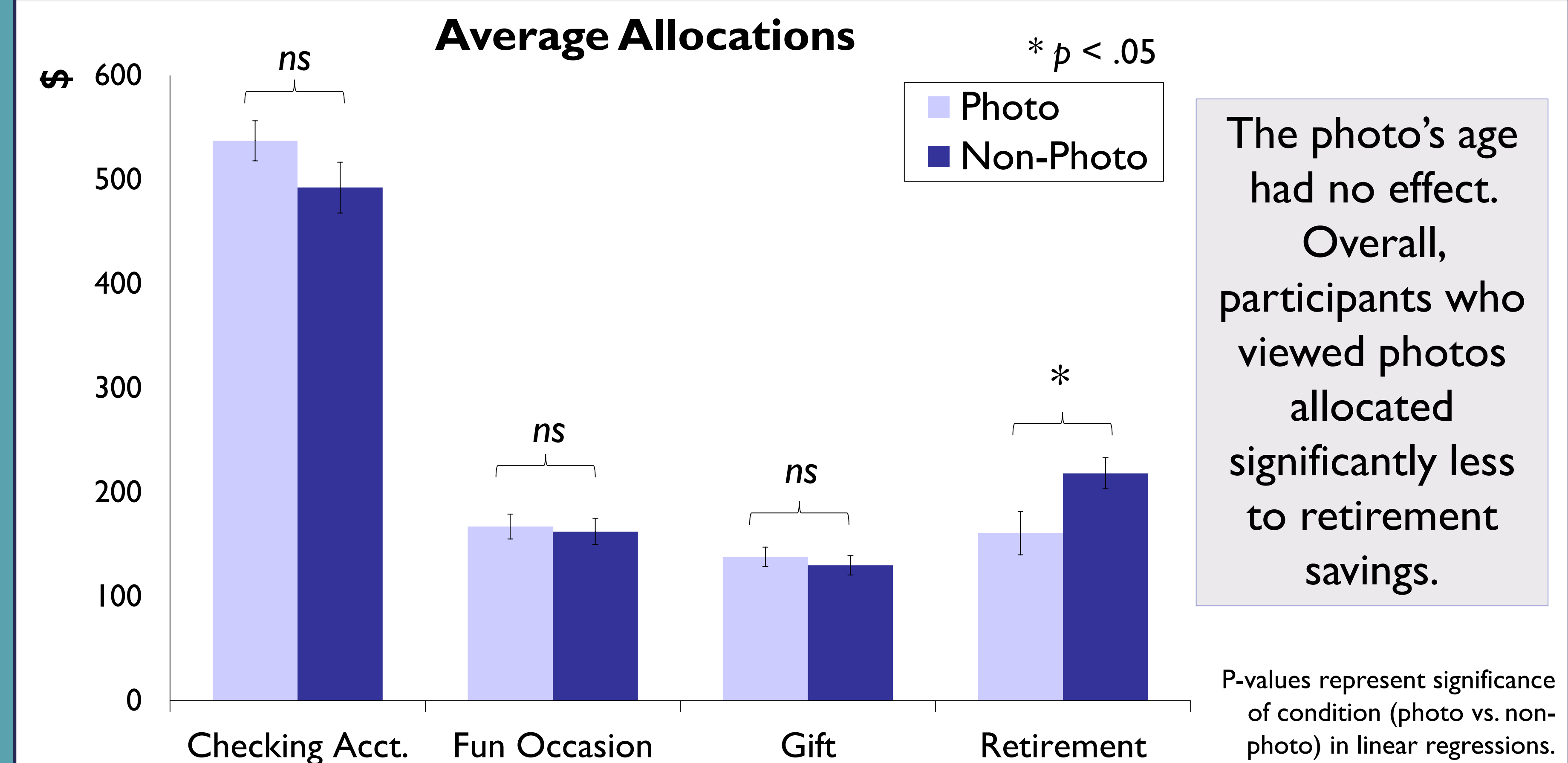
## STUDY 2: Retirement Savings

### METHOD

- 422 lab participants either: (1) proceeded immediately to the DV, (2) spent 3 minutes thinking about who they were 5 years ago, (3) used Facebook to find and view a photo from 5 years ago, or (4) used Facebook to find and view their most recent photo.
- **DV:** Allocate a hypothetical \$1,000 windfall gain across 4 purposes: buy a gift for someone, invest in a retirement fund, spend on a fun occasion, and deposit in a checking account (Hershfield et al. 2011)
- *We predicted that photo engagement would reduce allocations to retirement savings, a goal tied to future (vs. present) benefits.*

## STUDY 2 continued: Retirement Savings

### RESULTS



The photo's age had no effect. Overall, participants who viewed photos allocated significantly less to retirement savings.

P-values represent significance of condition (photo vs. non-photo) in linear regressions.

## STUDY 3: Spending Versus Saving

### METHOD

- 273 MTurk participants either viewed Facebook photos for 3 minutes, browsed Facebook for 2 minutes and then wrote a post, or wrote about their day for 3 minutes (control).
- **DV:** Indicate how much of a \$500 tax rebate they would use to treat themselves.
- *We predicted that photo engagement would reduce concerns about saving for the future, thus increasing present spending.*

### RESULTS

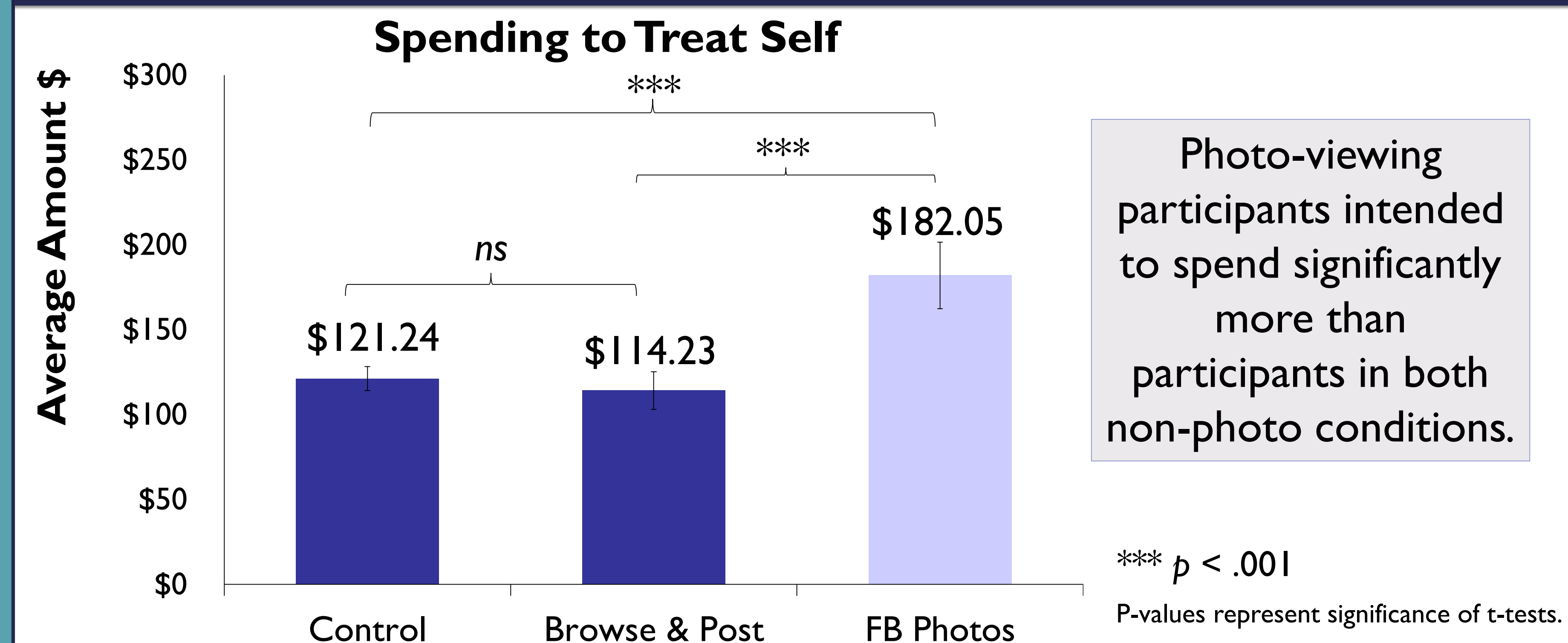


Photo-viewing participants intended to spend significantly more than participants in both non-photo conditions.

\*\*\* p < .001  
P-values represent significance of t-tests.

## FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Do these results occur because (a) photos freeze (and thus prime importance of) "the present moment," masking thoughts of the future, or (b) photos tend to capture instantly gratifying, emotional (and social) experiences rather than less immediately gratifying but more instrumental steps toward long-term goals? Do the photos need to be personal?