

Distance and Alternative Signals of Status: A Unifying Framework

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ABSTRACT

In the past decades, as traditional luxury goods and conspicuous consumption have become more mainstream and lost some of their signaling value, new alternative signals of status (e.g., vintage, inconspicuous consumption, ugly luxury) have progressively emerged. This research applies grounded theory method to establish a novel framework that systematically unifies existing conceptualizations, findings, and observations on alternative signals of status. The proposed framework organizes alternative signals in terms of their *distance* from traditional status symbols and categorizes them along six focal dimensions: time (new/old), quantity (many possessions/few possessions), conspicuousness (conspicuous/inconspicuous), aesthetics (beautiful/ugly), culture (highbrow/lowbrow), and pace of life (slow/fast). This parsimonious framework captures various consumption phenomena related to status signaling, unifies existing theories, and generates a fruitful agenda for future research.

Keywords: status signaling, conspicuous consumption, alternative status signals

The goods, brands, and preferences that convey status and grant distinction in a given moment constantly evolve. Typically, status signals tend to trickle down through society, from the upper classes to the lower ones (Simmel 1957). Elites adopt new signals, and other groups soon imitate them to enhance their social standing and communicate desired identities (Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn 1999). However, as once exclusive status markers become mainstream, the top strata abandon these consumption habits and move on to new and different signals, reestablishing distinction from others (Berger and Ward 2010; Bourdieu 1984). Thus, the processes of status signaling and distinction in consumption are characterized by the adoption of new and alternative signals that reinstate, at least temporarily, distance and symbolic boundaries between groups.

When high-status consumers abandon their previous status symbols, what do they adopt next? While the abandonment of products and the dissociation from previous tastes in the face of imitation are well-established (Berger and Heath 2008; Lieberman 2000; White and Dahl 2006), the understanding of new and alternative signals of status is fragmented and unorganized. Some research emphasizes that elites often reinstate distance by moving on to even higher-end signals, such as even more exclusive cars, jewelry, or vacations (Leibenstein 1950; Wang and John 2019). This “upgrading” strategy is indeed the default course of action for the elites, but it is not the only one. An increasing body of work documents alternative status-signaling strategies that depart from this model (Dubois, Jung, and Ordabayeva 2021). For example, rather than trickling down from the top, some new status signals arise from marginalized groups or subcultures (e.g., gamers, punks, bikers) (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2012; Field 1970). Rather than opting for the newest luxuries, vintage accessories from the past have gained momentum among high-end brands and celebrities (Amatulli et al. 2018). Instead of ostentatiously displaying their material

possessions, some high-status consumers opt for inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson 2015; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010).

While the literature so far has dealt with these nontraditional status signals in isolation, this research uses grounded theory method to establish a novel framework that unifies existing conceptualizations, findings, and observations on alternative signals of status into a single theoretical account (MacInnis 2011). Specifically, the proposed framework categorizes alternative signals in terms of their *distance* from traditional status symbols along the continua of six focal dimensions: time, quantity, conspicuousness, aesthetics, culture, and pace of life.

STATUS, DISTINCTION, AND LUXURY GOODS

In a social hierarchy, status (a Latin word deriving from *stare*, meaning “to stand”) refers to one’s position relative to others on a valued dimension, such as wealth, knowledge, or kinship (Nelissen and Meijers 2011). Thus, status evokes “the imagery of a hierarchy of positions” (Podolny 2005, 11), and the valued dimensions along which status is typically assessed are economic capital (e.g., money, properties), cultural capital (e.g., domain-specific knowledge, educational qualifications), and social capital (e.g., connections, social networks) (Bourdieu 1984). Social hierarchies and status differences are ubiquitous and emerge in all social environments (Davis and Moore 1945). A high rank on a valued dimension generates respect, esteem, and admiration in the eyes of others (Magee and Galinsky 2008) and comes with a plethora of material, psychophysical, and social benefits, such as better access to scarce resources, superior mating opportunities, better physical health, a higher sense of freedom and

control over life outcomes, greater compliance and influence over joint decisions, and favorable treatment in social interactions (Frank 1985; Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Podolny 2005).

Given all these upsides, it is no surprise that those occupying higher positions on the hierarchy want to distinguish and distance themselves from those occupying lower positions to enjoy the benefits of their ranks. Distinction refers to “the desire of people to be exclusive; to be different; to dissociate themselves from the common herd” (Leibenstein 1950, 189). The desire for distinction from subordinate tiers is an important motive, shaping intergroup dynamics and practices (Bourdieu 1984; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Johnston and Baumann 2007). But how can the top strata communicate a higher rank and distinguish themselves?

Throughout history, consumption (e.g., products, brands, experiences, lifestyles) has been recognized as a suitable means for people to signal their position in the social hierarchy and distinguish themselves from others (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). For example, Veblen’s (1899) classic conspicuous consumption operates as a credible signal of status through the visible usage of expensive luxury goods¹ that only the elites can afford. As previously indicated, status signaling through consumption is dynamic. When imitated by subordinate tiers, high-status consumers typically move on to even higher-end status markers; that is, they may opt for luxury goods and experiences that are even more expensive and more difficult to obtain than current ones. Although upgrading to higher-end status signals is the default strategy maintained by the well-known trickle-down theories, and indeed many high-status consumers still opt for it to this day (see WA1² for a discussion and examples), several economic and cultural changes have progressively diluted the signaling power of these traditional status markers.

¹ Luxury goods are products with a high degree of scarcity and desirability, often communicated through high prices, extreme quality, aesthetic design, heritage, reputation, and hedonism (Dubois 2020, 75).

² Throughout the article, “WA” denotes discussions and materials in the web appendix.

Ambitious growth targets and aggressive downward brand extension strategies; manufacturing methods transitioning to mass production instead of craftsmanship; a proliferation of distribution touchpoints, including discount outlets and online channels; an increase in the quality and reach of counterfeits; growing availability of platforms for renting and buying used luxury goods have all led to the so-called democratization of luxury goods and the widespread possibility to shop for luxury at all price points (Dion and Arnould 2011; Thomas 2009; Wang 2021). Moreover, traditional luxury goods are increasingly stigmatized and associated with some dark sides. For example, an appreciation for conventional conspicuous consumption is becoming a signal of inauthenticity (Goor, Ordabayeva, et al. 2020), selfishness (Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010), coldness (Cannon and Rucker 2019), undesirable ulterior motives (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013), and even immorality (Goenka and Thomas 2019). Accordingly, in the past decades, traditional conspicuous consumption and luxury goods have progressively lost much of their luster and become too mainstream to grant distinction to the top strata (Blumberg 1974; Currid-Halkett 2017; Thomas 2009).

ALTERNATIVE SIGNALS OF STATUS

In parallel to the dynamics of dilution of the traditional status symbols, several new, alternative status-signaling strategies have emerged. In addition to those mentioned previously, ugly luxury (Zanette, Pueschel, and Touzani 2022), voluntary simplicity (Currid-Halkett 2017), and busyness at work (Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan 2017) are all gaining popularity among the top strata. These emerging status signals are *alternative* in that they depart on at least one dimension from conventional forms of luxury consumption that emphasize upscale, vertically differentiated, and resource-intensive products (Dubois et al. 2021).

Importantly, for these nontraditional behaviors to operate as signals of status, and thus grant distinction from subordinate tiers, they also need to be *costly* (Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Spence 1973). The signal's costliness makes it credible and diagnostic of superior standing, as not everyone in a society can bear that cost. In the absence of some type of cost, a status signal is just "cheap talk"³ (Farrell and Rabin 1996). Because anyone can adopt a costless signal, its diagnostic power in conveying a high rank is close to nil.

Signaling costs may assume different forms. Investing economic capital and spending money are possibly the most intuitive forms of signaling costs. Indeed, a high price tag is the first association when consumers think of status-enhancing goods (Kapferer and Laurent 2016). However, even when signaling status through expensive luxuries, money is not the only cost; to buy some rare goods, such as a new Ferrari car or a Hermès Birkin bag, consumers also need a certain amount of social capital and connections to navigate the long waitlists. Furthermore, many luxury goods, such as the more subtly branded products, are costly because, in addition to money, they require a high level of knowledge (i.e., cultural capital) to be correctly identified and understood by their users (Berger and Ward 2010). Time represents another form of signaling cost. Attaining a specialized education, for example, requires concentrated attention over long periods and is only accessible to those who can afford not to work for a living (Currid-Halkett 2017; Spence 1973). Relatedly, in an increasingly liquid world (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), mobility, flexibility, and openness to change have emerged as a new type of signaling cost that only the new global, professional elites can trade (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Holt 1998). Signaling costs can also manifest in the form of misidentification risks. According to the countersignaling literature, nonconforming and omitting valuable information about oneself may

³ In economics, cheap talk is a costless, nonbinding, nonverifiable message that can affect the listener's beliefs.

operate as costly status signals because these behaviors involve significant misidentification (Feltovich, Harbaugh, and To 2002; Mayzlin and Shin 2011). Last, self-sacrifice and reduced product performance are relevant forms of costs in the case of signaling through sustainable luxury and green products (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010).

As in the case of traditional luxuries, the superordinate motive for adopting alternative signals is a desire for distinction (Bellezza and Berger 2020; Bourdieu 1984); however, as discussed subsequently, each type of signal is also driven by specific additional motives, such as authenticity, uniqueness, sustainability, and openness (Friedman and Reeves 2020; Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim 2017; Johnston and Baumann 2007). So far, the literature has dealt with these nontraditional signals in isolation. By contrast, this article aims to establish a unifying framework based on the overarching construct of distance.

A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK BASED ON DISTANCE

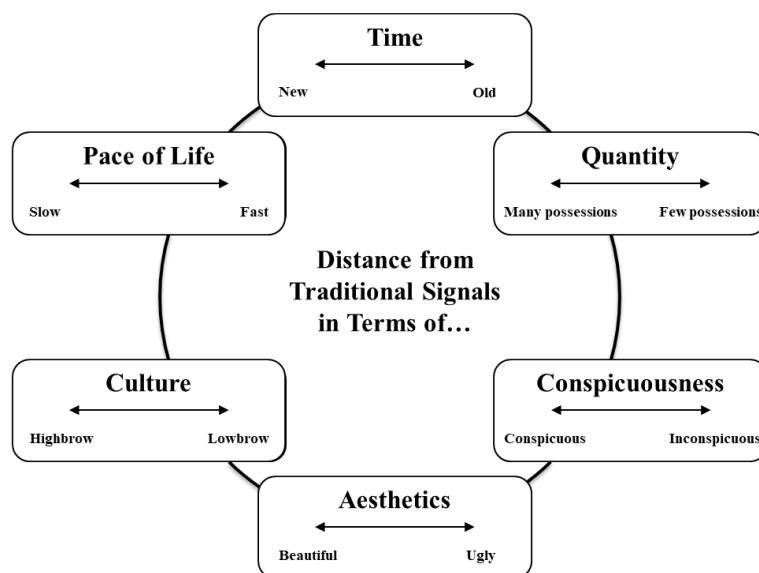
As the most common and countable meaning of the term, distance refers to the amount of space between two points. Importantly though, in addition to the spatial and physical, distance between two foci can be more abstract and psychological (Trope and Liberman 2010). For example, temporal distance refers to how much time separates the perceiver's present time and a target (Bar-Anan et al. 2007), and social distance refers to the degree of closeness an individual or group feels toward another individual or group in a society (Podolny 2005).

Given that the overarching motive driving status signaling is distinction, it follows that signals that are *distant* in some way from products, brands, and preferences that have become mainstream will deliver on the objective of dissociating the signaler from others. Indeed, some

scholars view the ontological function of status symbols as “recreating the distance, the gap” (Kapferer and Bastien 2009, 143), and others have examined different nuances of distance in relation to status signaling and luxury goods. For example, spatial distance among products’ display enhances perceived value (Sevilla and Townsend 2016), social distance among groups grants status to the top strata (Podolny 2005), and price distance of luxury goods versus ordinary products increases perceived prestige (Kapferer, Klippert, and Leproux 2014). WA3 provides a detailed review of this literature and an additional discussion of the contributions of this research in relation to each of these forms of distance.

Building on this literature and leveraging the multiple dimensions of distance (e.g., spatial, social, temporal), the proposed framework, depicted in figure 1, categorizes alternative signals of status in terms of distance from traditional status symbols that have become mainstream along six focal dimensions: (1) distance in terms of *time*, that is distance among

FIGURE 1
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:
THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF DISTANCE AND THE RELATED CONTINUA



signals in terms of age along the new/old continuum; (2) distance in terms of *quantity*, that is distance among signals in terms of number of possessions on the many/few possessions continuum; (3) distance in terms of *conspicuousness*, that is distance among signals in terms of visibility on the conspicuous/inconspicuous continuum; (4) distance in terms of *aesthetics*, that is distance among signals in terms of aesthetic appeal on the beautiful/ugly continuum; (5) distance in terms of *culture*, that is distance among signals in terms of cultural associations along the highbrow/lowbrow cultural continuum; and (6) distance in terms of *pace of life*, that is distance among signals in terms of rhythm of activities on the slow/fast continuum. The theoretical approach of categorizing status signals along a continuum with two extremes draws directly on conceptual research on ownership that has similarly located consumption at various positions on the liquid/solid spectrum (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). The dimensions progress from those where distance is more countable (e.g., distance in terms of number of years, number of possessions) to those where the nature of distance is more abstract and conceptual (e.g., distance in terms of aesthetic appeal, cultural associations of the signals).

Grounded Theory Method. I use grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Urquhart 2012) to systematically identify the six distance dimensions and generate the framework. This approach allows for deriving structured conceptualizations from qualitative data (Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002). The data included a large body of theoretical work and applied inputs related to status signaling, conspicuous consumption, and luxury: 260 articles in marketing and adjacent disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, economics, and management; 72 monographs and book chapters; 37 academic conference presentations and 6 industry conferences; 205 newspaper and magazine articles; 15 exhibitions (e.g., *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* MOMA, 2017); 17 documentaries and video material; and periodic visits to flagship

stores in New York City (e.g., Tiffany & Co.) and Milan (e.g., Prada). The full list of sources is available [online](#). As described in detail in WA2, I first analyzed the data using a bottom-up, *open coding* process, resulting in the identification of 705 initial open codes, which I then clustered into 255 unique open codes. Next, I engaged in *selective coding* and clustered the open codes around 20 higher-order concepts and overarching dimensions. Last, I engaged in *theoretical coding* to conceptually relate the identified higher-order concepts and dimensions to each other and generate the framework (figure 1). The work for these three steps is available [online](#).

The current research contributes to seminal work and to more recent reviews, conceptual articles, and books on status, conspicuous consumption, and luxury goods (e.g., Gurzki and Woisetschläger 2017; Morhart, Wilcox, and Czellar 2020; Wang 2021) by focusing on alternative signals of status (vs. traditional luxury goods) and by establishing a new, unifying framework based on distance to categorize these alternative signals along six focal dimensions. While scholars have considered some of the dimensions of distance in relation to status, luxury goods, and intergroup dynamics, typically focusing on one dimension at a time (e.g., social distance, spatial distance, price distance), no research has focused on the distance between the different status symbols themselves as the one overarching construct to systematically categorize alternative signals along different dimensions. Two sections in the web appendix (WA3 “Review of Distance in the Status and Luxury Goods Literature” and WA4 “Review of Conceptual and Review Papers on Status and Luxury Goods”) review one by one the references mentioned above, as well as several additional ones, and highlight in more detail the contributions of this work vis-à-vis prior research.

The next sections delve into the specificities of each dimension of distance and the related alternative status signals by (1) introducing the dimension and providing representative

manifestations in the market; (2) defining the dimension and discussing how it came to operate as a status symbol, with a focus on the benefits and costs; (3) delineating potential and testable extensions of the dimension (table 1). WA13 elaborates on what type of consumer is most likely to use alternative signals in general and each specific dimension (i.e., individual differences).

DISTANCE IN TERMS OF TIME

Keeping up with the changing styles and buying new items signal status by evidencing superior ability to pay (Veblen 1899). Luxury consumers are fascinated by the novel and hyper-current, and this appreciation for the new contributes to reshaping the cycles of the luxury market (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Samsioe 2020). Accordingly, up until recently, using accessories from the past, wearing previously worn outfits, or driving old cars was often frowned on and considered a form of necessity rather than desire (Cassidy and Bennett 2012). In recent years, however, an increasing number of high-status consumers and luxury brands have begun opting for signals coming from a distant past and clearly associated with earlier eras. For example, instead of going for the latest styles, several stars on the red carpet have recently embraced vintage, wearing old dresses from past collections. Instead of launching new, forward-looking designs, many luxury brands, such as Gucci and The Row, launched e-commerce sites featuring refurbished vintage pieces. Instead of showcasing futuristic interiors, style magazines celebrate the glamorousness of the décors of the 1970s. In all these cases, distance from mainstream signals is achieved by going back to the past (i.e., old) rather than projecting into the future (i.e., new).

Vintage is possibly the most representative market manifestation of these alternative signals (see WA5). The term “vintage” (derived from winemaking and characterizing the year

TABLE 1
THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF DISTANCE

	Time	Quantity	Conspicuousness	Aesthetics	Culture	Pace of Life
Definition	Distance among signals in terms of age along the new/old time continuum	Distance among signals in terms of number of possessions on the many/few continuum	Distance among signals in terms of visibility on the conspicuous/inconspicuous continuum	Distance among signals in terms of aesthetic appeal on the beautiful/ugly continuum	Distance among signals in terms of cultural associations on the highbrow/lowbrow cultural continuum	Distance among signals in terms of rhythm of activities on the slow/fast continuum
Representative Manifestations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vintage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary simplicity • Sustainable luxury • Minimalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconspicuous consumption • Stealth wealth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ugly luxury 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Omnivorousness • Mix and Match of High and Low 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Busyness at work • Active leisure
Distinction Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarity • Original from the past 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detachment from material possessions • Valuing sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to imitate • Defusing envy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Reduced imitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity • Coolness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-importance • Sense of accomplishment and progress
Main Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural capital • Misidentification risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity cost of not signaling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial cost • Cultural capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial cost • Misidentification risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misidentification risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Money and time to cultivate education and soft skills • Burnout
Individual Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nostalgia Proneness • Need for uniqueness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childhood SES • Millennials/Gen Z 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low need to show off 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fashion involvement • Need for uniqueness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counterculturalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Productivity orientation • Hyperopia
Extensions	Diminishing time distance	Dematerialization and digitalization	Value expressive functions	Ephemerality	Wealth distribution and Power distance belief	Reversal

and location in which a wine was made) typically describes clothing, furniture, cars, and other items more than 20 years old and reflective of an era (Sarial-Abi et al. 2017). Thus, whether an item is vintage is mainly determined by the age of the piece, not by whether it has been used before. Notably, this characteristic sets vintage apart from secondhand, or pieces that have been used before, regardless of age (Cervellon, Carey, and Harms 2012).

Definition and Foundations

Distance on the time dimension refers to the difference between traditional status symbols and alternative signals in terms of age along the new/old time continuum, and it has been measured and manipulated, for example, through the age of products (Hoff and Bellezza 2022; Sarial-Abi et al. 2017). Through a longitudinal analysis of baby names, Lieberman (2000) suggests that distance in time is often instrumental to the future revival of a specific signal. In other words, the temporary decline of a specific signal is necessary for its future resurgence in a different light. If enough time has passed since some clothing, watches, furniture, cars, and other products were first popular, their reappearance will not be confused with mere out-of-date usage. Not just any item that is 20 years or older, however, will reemerge; the term “vintage” is especially applicable to items deemed emblematic or representative of a particular period (Amatulli et al. 2018). In addition to age and reflectiveness of an era, other defining elements of vintage products include design (e.g., authentic, cool), quality (e.g., long-lasting material, craftsmanship), and availability (e.g., few pieces, hard to find) (Hoff and Bellezza 2022).

What might explain the emergence of signals from the past? In line with the central premise of this article, scholars propose that vintage has gained popularity in response to the

increasing dilution of modern luxury goods (Ward, Townsend, and Nowlan 2015) and the observation that “newness is kind of a commodity” (Mishan 2021).

Benefits. One of the main upsides of choosing signals from the past is their rarity. The fact that, unlike current mass-produced items, most vintage pieces are one-of-a-kind and out-of-production grants distinction (Amatulli et al. 2018; Ward et al. 2015). At vintage fairs and on vintage retailers’ websites, often only one piece per item is on sale. As such, these signals are difficult to copy, as duplicates or similar products may not even be available. Another prominent benefit of signals associated with the past is that they are authentic originals from the past (DeLong, Heinemann, and Reiley 2005). Vintage products are authentic products in that they were produced, often entirely by hand, decades ago and embody the values and culture of those times (Amatulli et al. 2018). Finally, recent work has highlighted additional positive psychological ramifications related to signals from the past. For example, vintage items—as existing and continuing symbols of bygone eras—mitigate the typical reactions to threats, such as death reminders (Sarial-Abi et al. 2017). Likewise, when consumers feel that their social system is threatened, they tend to gravitate toward products that are stable and unchanging, such as vintage, to compensate for the loss of equilibrium (Han and Newman 2018). Moreover, products from the past and traditional features are preferred when negative extrinsic rewards, such as the commercial motivations of luxury brands, are particularly prominent (Hahl 2016).

Costs. First, engaging in vintage consumption requires a high level of cultural capital and sophistication that is not necessarily needed when selecting more modern luxury goods; consumers cannot rely solely on brands or price to discern what is in, but need to incorporate their own tastes and judgments in the decisions (Ward et al. 2015). On the one hand, knowledge of good sources (e.g., the right markets, fairs, websites, auctions) for buying the pieces is an

important component to gain access to the right products (Jenss 2005). On the other, in the absence of adequate domain-specific knowledge, search costs can be high, and identifying valuable items among a plethora of potential options is demanding. Sophisticated shoppers will go straight to the best goods, leaving the other stuff behind for the less knowledgeable people (Jenss 2005). Second, selecting signals from a distant past is costly in that it involves some misidentification risks. Only insiders may appreciate pieces originating from different periods; these signals may look just old and out-of-date to most people (Veenstra and Kuipers 2013). A third consideration is that vintage products are by no means cheap. Indeed, the price of these pieces might sometimes exceed that of modern luxury pieces (Cervellon et al. 2012). An analysis of 400 vintage products scraped from online retailers (e.g., Vintage Couture, Farfetch, The Real Real) in 2020 revealed that the average prices were approximately \$1,400 for vintage bags and \$1,000 for vintage dresses (Hoff and Bellezza, 2020). And even when the base price of vintage is not as high as the modern equivalent, old goods often are functionally and technologically inferior to contemporary goods and require high maintenance costs. For example, a Jaguar E-Type from the 1960s may “only” cost \$60,000, but it will be more expensive to use and maintain than new Jaguar models.

Extensions: Diminishing Time Distance

As mentioned, roughly 20 years is the minimum time distance for signals from the past to be considered vintage (e.g., Sarial-Abi et al. 2017; Veenstra and Kuipers 2013). However, the pace of innovation and the cadence for introducing new collections and styles until a few decades ago were much slower than they are today. For example, the traditional seasonal

calendar for high-end couture featured new releases twice a year: the spring/summer collections and the autumn/winter drop six months later. Then, the industry moved to a schedule of four times a year. Recently, several players, such as Burberry, have begun releasing new items or offering “product drops” (i.e., releasing products or collections without much warning) continuously throughout the year (Stoy 2020). This incessant release schedule and “drop culture” appeal to younger consumers who expect constant novelty and are always looking for the latest products to post on social media (Elven 2018). A consequence of the continuous release schedule is that product life cycles are shortening, and items remain “cool and in” for a matter of a few weeks or months (Woor 2022). Given the faster pace of introduction of new styles and the shortening of product life cycles, it may take less for a luxury product to be a hit, vanish from the market, and then come back again in the form of vintage. Thus, moving forward, as innovation cycles continue shrinking and styles come in and out more quickly, the time distance for signals from the past to qualify as vintage may also diminish. In other words, it may take less than two decades for some of the “it” pieces of today to make a comeback on the scene as valid vintage items in the future. A way to test this possibility is to examine the average age of a representative sample of vintage pieces sold in different decades (e.g., 2000, 2010, 2020) and check whether the average age decreases and how old the “newest” vintage pieces are in each decade.

DISTANCE IN TERMS OF QUANTITY

The material abundance of scarce resources and precious goods has always been tied to prosperity and status. In classical antiquity, Pluto, the god of wealth, was usually depicted holding a *cornucopia*, literally the “horn of plenty,” a large horn-shaped container overflowing

with produce and grain (see WA6). Centuries later, by observing the status-signaling dynamics of the upper strata in the affluent American society of the late nineteenth century, Veblen (1899) also noted how the accumulation of expensive luxuries and the visible waste of resources conferred prestige; conversely, “the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit” (p. 36). Even the term “luxury” itself comes from the Latin word *luxus*, meaning “excess,” suggesting that the elements of abundance, opulence, and waste are at the heart of luxury consumption and status signaling.

Conspicuous consumption and the aspiration for material abundance continued to influence purchasing patterns throughout the twentieth century, as industrialization, mass production, and technology progressively enabled the acquisition and accumulation of goods to unprecedented levels (Schor 2004). The American Dream narrative itself evolved to justify people’s desire to purchase expensive cars, extravagant homes, and lavish consumer products and services, the must-haves of the so-called overspent American (Schor 1999). To this day, celebrities’ mansions filled with maximalist décor and ostentatious amenities, such as floor-to-ceiling gold mosaic tiles and huge walk-in closets full of luxuries, are prominent and celebrated in magazines, social media, and television shows.

As many scholars and social critics have noted, however, material abundance and waste are progressively losing their value as signifiers of status (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Holt 1998). Instead, some of the wealthy are actively reducing the number of their possessions, letting go of many of their belongings, and concentrating their resources on fewer goods, possibly more durable and sustainable (Sun, Bellezza, and Paharia 2021). Steve Job’s notoriously empty living room and Elon Musk’s tweets in 2020 on letting go of all of his assets (e.g., “I am selling almost all physical possessions. Will own no house”) are good illustrations of this determination to own

few things (see WA7). Along the quantity continuum, distance from traditional signals is achieved by willingly owning few rather than many possessions.

The moves toward reducing possessions among the wealthy have assumed different manifestations in the market. Some high-status consumers are reducing their spending on material possessions and relinquishing many of their physical belongings (Schor 1999; Wilson, Bellezza, and Norton 2020). For example, voluntary simplicity, which has gained traction among high-status consumers, refers to the willful choice⁴ to limit expenditures on goods and cultivate nonmaterialistic sources of satisfaction (Etzioni 2004). Consistent with this notion of detachment from possessions, decluttering (i.e., eliminating the many, superfluous objects that clutter well-to-do homes) has also recently gained momentum (Kondō 2014). As Kyle Chayka (2020), author of the book *The Longing for Less*, put it, “People who have it all now seem to prefer having nothing at all.” The de-emphasis on many belongings is also reflected in “minimalist luxury,” whereby wealthy people choose to stand out from mainstream consumers by deliberately limiting their consumption of luxury goods (Liu, Yildirim, and Zhang 2019). Often reducing possessions is paired with a desire to embrace a more sustainable lifestyle. For example, the initiatives inspired by the “buy less, buy better” principle, and the celebrity trend of wearing the same designer outfit at multiple ceremonies indicate a quest for more sustainable ways of consuming fewer luxury goods. Moreover, sustainable luxury products, emphasizing timelessness and often giving a second life to preexisting items, such as Prada’s Re-Nylon products made of regenerated nylon from previous goods, are on the rise (Sun et al. 2021). Although these manifestations emphasize slightly different aspects of reduced consumption, they all share the common pursuit of owning less.

⁴ A simpler lifestyle adopted in response to economic constraints is *not* voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton 1981).

Definition and Foundations

Distance on the dimension of quantity refers to the difference among signals in terms of number of possessions on the many/few continuum, and it has been measured and manipulated, for example, through the number of products in an environment (Sevilla and Townsend 2016; Wilson and Bellezza 2022). What accounts, at least in part, for the abandonment of the traditional paradigm for status signaling tied to the abundance of belongings? As previously mentioned, modern mass-production systems in developed economies have made once rare and unattainable luxuries ubiquitous commodities (Eckhardt et al. 2015; Holt 1998). As material goods spread downward in the class structure, abundance and the possession of many things, which once were a badge of distinction, no longer grant prestige as in the past (Blumberg 1974). In other words, in the past, when accessing and owning goods was more difficult, material abundance was a signal of status. However, because advanced stages of capitalism in many developed economies have made it easier for many consumers to accumulate many items, ownership of fewer possessions has progressively emerged as an alternative signal of status for the privileged (Dubois et al. 2021; Etzioni 2004; Liu et al. 2019). Thus, rampant consumerism has opened the door to a strategy of *conspicuous nonconsumption* as an alternative means of signaling social status (Wilson et al. 2020). When Steve Jobs sat on the floor of his living room, *not* owning a couch was the conspicuous signal; when Elon Musk publicly tweeted about letting go of his assets, *forgoing* properties was the visible signal.

Benefits. First, owning fewer high-end items is increasingly considered a virtuous behavior, immune to the stereotypical negative associations of wastefulness and materialism tied to traditional conspicuous consumption (Cannon and Rucker 2019). Second, with regard to

sustainable luxury, these signals allow their owners to visibly demonstrate that they care about the world and value sustainability (Griskevicius et al. 2010). Furthermore, insofar as the decision to own fewer things is not dictated by a lack of means, voluntary simplicity and consumer minimalism may lead to positive attributions of status and competence (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Wilson et al. 2020). Work in game theory has indeed demonstrated an equilibrium whereby some high-status consumers are better off limiting the showcasing of their assets and wealth (Feltovich et al. 2002). Finally, at a more concrete level, with fewer objects and less clutter, the products and environment itself become more valuable and prestigious because more empty space is devoted to them (Sevilla and Townsend 2016).

Costs. Reducing one's possessions means forgoing an important opportunity to signal through consumption and thus only high-status individuals, who feel secure about their position in the social hierarchy, may be open to letting this chance go (Bellezza et al. 2014; Feltovich et al. 2002). In addition, although reducing the number of possessions or decluttering may seem an effective consumption strategy moneywise, in reality, it is a privilege that can be enjoyed only by those who have a lifestyle that can be pared down (Pinsker 2016), the means to dispose of goods without fear of being unable to repurchase them if necessary (Chayka 2020), and the flexibility to adjust their lifestyles at will (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020). Lastly, in the case of sustainable luxury, high-end green goods are by no means cheaper than traditional luxury items, and their owners incur the cost of owning products that benefit the environment and society but may be inferior for personal use and performance (Griskevicius et al. 2010).

Extensions: Dematerialization and Digitalization

If wealthy individuals acquire fewer possessions, they will likely divert the saved resources elsewhere and use those new channels to convey who they are (Goor, Keinan, and Ordabayeva 2020). Indeed, eschewing the accumulation of physical and material goods, the rich are investing significantly more in high-end intangible services (e.g., concierge health care, personal coaches, private chefs, expensive child care) to make their lives easier and more efficient—all of which are immaterial but cost many times more than any fancy watch a middle-income consumer might buy (Currid-Halkett 2017; Pinsker 2016; Postrel 2008). Along the same lines, high-status consumers are progressively shifting from buying *things* to buying *experiences* (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020). Immaterial forms of luxury consumption, often referred to as “experiential luxury” (e.g., exotic travel and holidays), are booming (Wang 2021). Luxury brands are also rapidly embracing the metaverse by pioneering new virtual distribution models and launching products tied to nonfungible tokens (NFTs, digital certificates of ownership stored on blockchains). For example, Selfridges recently launched its first virtual flagship store in Decentraland for Metaverse Fashion Week (Hirschmiller 2022), and Dolce & Gabbana sold a nine-piece collection of digital NFTs alongside actual couture for \$6 millions (Thomas 2021). If these digitalization trends continue gaining traction, it is plausible that, in addition to curating their physical personas in the real world, consumers will curate their “digital selves” and virtual existences in the metaverse. Thus, moving forward, not only will high-status consumers accumulate fewer physical possessions, but distance on quantity may also involve the progressive dematerialization and digitalization of traditional luxury goods. To study all these new trends together, research could examine whether the high-status consumers actively reducing their physical possessions and assets are also contextually investing in immaterial services, experiential luxury, and digital luxury goods.

DISTANCE IN TERMS OF CONSPICUOUSNESS

A defining characteristic of traditional luxury goods is their level of visibility and conspicuousness. Easily noticeable markers, such as ostentatious products, recognizable shapes, or large logos, enable the signaling process and ease the communication of desired identities (Shao, Grace, and Ross 2019; Veblen 1899). While theories of status signaling suggest that more explicit markers facilitate communication, inconspicuous consumption, defined as the use of subtle and quiet status symbols that are not readily apparent to most consumers, is on the rise (Berger and Ward 2010; Currid-Halkett 2017; Eckhardt et al. 2015).

At the product level, the construct of “brand prominence” reflects the extent to which a product has visible markings that help ensure observers recognize the brand (Han et al. 2010). For example, manufacturers can produce a product with “loud” or conspicuous branding (e.g., a Louis Vuitton bag with the highly recognizable “LV” monogram pattern) or tone it down to “quiet” or subtle branding (e.g., a Louis Vuitton bag with no visible logo) (see WA8). Sometimes, items looking like ordinary, monochromatic, and unbranded pieces are the ultimate quiet status signals. For example, while Mark Zuckerberg’s outfits may seem quite casual and mundane, the Facebook founder’s signature T-shirts are custom-ordered from Brunello Cucinelli, and they cost more than \$300 apiece. Zuckerberg has also bought four homes surrounding his current residence near Palo Alto, Calif., for more than \$30 million, but instead of wanting to live in excess, the objective of this costly purchase is to protect his privacy and ensure that his residence is even less visible than before (Shontell 2013). Concealing one’s resources and assets from public view, rather than displaying them ostentatiously, or spending thousands of dollars on high-end items to be consumed privately, such as expensive mattresses (Postrel 2008), is another

manifestation of the so-called stealth wealth gaining momentum among the elites and is consistent with inconspicuous consumption.

Definition and Foundations

Distance on conspicuousness refers to the difference between traditional status signals and alternative signals in terms of visibility and recognizability on the conspicuous/inconspicuous continuum, and it has been measured, for example, through questions (e.g., “How prominently does this bag display its trademark?”) and manipulated through the size of the logo on a product (Han et al. 2010). Why might consumers pay for luxury goods that are presumably less effective signals and hide their status symbols? The rise of subtle signals and inconspicuous consumption can be attributed to the progressive democratization of loud luxury goods and the increasing problem of high-end counterfeits. It is indeed the case that the more accessible luxury goods tend to be loud, conspicuously branded products (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010). Moreover, the increasing presence of high-quality counterfeits that look identical to the originals is posing tremendous challenges to the luxury industry (Wilcox and Zaichkowsky 2020). These high-quality counterfeits, often referred to as “super fakes” or “triple-A fakes,” are becoming so sophisticated that even manufacturers have trouble identifying them as fake (Liu et al. 2019). An analysis of fakes reveals that counterfeits tend to be copies of louder luxury goods because they are what consumers who want to show off, but do not have the means to pay for the real product, demand (Han et al. 2010). Thus, the more conspicuously branded an original product is, the more likely it is to be copied (Wilcox and Zaichkowsky 2020).

Research demonstrates that inconspicuous luxury goods send a more sophisticated type of signal to other like-minded individuals who can correctly decipher it as well (Han et al. 2010). Even when brands do not use obvious logos or blatant patterns, and even when wealth is rather concealed from sight, those in the know, with the right cultural and social capital, use the design or shape of products or other less visible aspects to recognize these signals and understand their real value and price (Berger and Ward 2010). Moreover, at the upper echelons of society, luxury has become less a tool for public status competition and more a means to private pleasure (Postrel 2008). The richer a society or peer group, the less important visible spending is (Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov 2009), and the more members of the top strata hide their possessions and enjoy them in privacy (Bauer, Wallpach, and Hemetsberger 2011). As Eckhardt et al. (2015, p. 812) put it, “inconspicuousness is the new conspicuousness” for the elites.

It is important to note that inconspicuous consumption is not the mere aversion to brands or logos or the abandonment of luxury goods altogether. In all these examples, high-status consumers still opt for goods from top luxury brands, and they may prefer options with logos in some cases, as long as these logos are not readily understood by mainstream consumers (Berger and Ward 2010). This strategy is also not the same as voluntary simplicity or downgrading of one’s consumption lifestyle, as these consumers are still opting for very expensive products, even when consumed in private.

Benefits. The first benefit is that inconspicuous consumption is difficult to imitate if one does not know what to look for in high-end goods other than the obvious branding marks and ostentatious behaviors. Indeed, subtle signals and out-of-sight consumption can be a deliberate strategy to restrict imitation by lower social groups by making preferences and tastes complex and hard to follow (Berger and Ward 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2015). Some scholars even propose

that subtle signals may be a solution to counterfeiting, given that consumers may be less inclined to purchase replicas that do not grant visibility (Wilcox and Zaichkowsky 2020). Moreover, inconspicuous consumption and subtle signals defuse potential feelings of envy and hostility (Eastman, Iyer, and Babin 2022). Indeed, many practice stealth wealth and try to fly below the radar to better enjoy their money in private and face less scrutiny and jealousy (Botticello 2019).. Furthermore, concealing one's advantages and privileges shows sensibility to the mounting debates about inequality and helps managing the discomfort with these social issues (Ordabayeva and Lisjak 2022). Last, these subtle status signals grant distinction from the over-the-top conspicuous consumption of the nouveaux riches and help high-status consumers avoid being misconstrued as those who use mainstream luxury products to show off (Eckhardt et al. 2015; Han et al. 2010).

Costs. Two studies demonstrate that as the prominence of the brand on the product goes down, the price of high-end goods goes up (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010). Thus, consumers typically pay a premium for pieces that display the brand name less conspicuously and use discreet signals in their designs. Moreover, learning to recognize the subtle details and complexities that denote high quality (e.g., extra buttons, special stitching) and indicate status even in the absence of blatant signs is also a cost and the result of a prolonged process of refinement and knowledge accumulation (Berger and Ward 2010). Finally, inconspicuous products and private consumption entail the opportunity cost of not sending clearer signals; only high-status actors will be open to bearing this cost and forgoing opportunities to signal (Bellezza et al. 2014; Mayzlin and Shin 2011).

Extensions: Value-Expressive Functions

Signaling is not only a social phenomenon; individuals also engage in certain behaviors to signal a favorable identity to themselves (Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). Consistent with this notion, luxury goods serve two contextual functions: *social-adjustive* functions, which help consumers with presentation and signaling to others (e.g., buying a Louis Vuitton bag because it is a status symbol in the eyes of others), and *value-expressive* functions, which help consumers with self-expression and signaling to the self (e.g., buying a Louis Vuitton bag because the brand reflects one's personality) (Wilcox, Kim, and Sen 2009). In the case of subtle signals and private consumption, the signal to the self is more straightforward and unambiguous because it is less conspicuous by definition and not diluted by social presentation motives (Savary and Goldsmith 2020; Shao et al. 2019). Therefore, distance on the conspicuousness dimension should be more appealing to those who consume luxury goods relatively more for value-expressive rather than social-adjustive functions. Consumers who are willing to depart from traditional status symbols but are interested in sending visible signals to others (i.e., social-adjustive functions matter relatively more to them) are more likely to choose distance on different dimensions, such as time or aesthetics. To test this idea, future research could recruit representative samples of users of different alternative signals (e.g., users of subtle luxury goods, consumers of vintage, ugly luxury buyers) and examine the underlying motives for engaging in these signaling strategies.

DISTANCE IN TERMS OF AESTHETICS

Throughout history, beautiful objects and highly refined products have had the capacity to generate positive responses among consumers. As Veblen (1899, 59–60) notes, “It frequently happens that an article which serves the honorific purpose of conspicuous waste is at the same

time a beautiful object.” In his view, luxury products gratify “our sense of the beautiful” more than ordinary products. Indeed, beauty, refinement, and aesthetic pleasantness are of particular importance in the domain of luxury goods (Venkatesh et al. 2010). When integrated into products, beautiful and artistic images infuse prestige and confer luxuriousness to the goods (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008).

Thus, on the aesthetics continuum, conventional luxury goods tend to be beautiful, refined, and aesthetically pleasing. Nevertheless, the past decades have witnessed the rise of consumer trends, such as ugly luxury, precisely at the other end of the aesthetic spectrum—that is, alternative signals that are distant from the traditional canons in terms of beauty and refinement (see WA9). Simmel (1957, 544) even commented on this anomaly early on: “Judging from the ugly and repugnant things that are sometimes in vogue, it would seem as though fashion were desirous of exhibiting its power by getting us to adopt the most atrocious things for its sake alone.” Miuccia Prada in the 1990s is considered a forerunner of the deliberate quest for ugliness and the rejection of conventional ideas of beauty in luxury goods (Marchetti 2015). In her words, “If I have done anything, it is to make ugly appealing” (Indvik 2020). More recently, the terms “ugly luxury” and “ugly chic” have come to refer to expensive apparel that does not conform to the ideals of beauty, niceness, or sex appeal and typically entails unflattering shapes, odd color combinations, and outrageous patterns (Cesareo, Townsend, and Pavlov 2022). Balenciaga’s Triple S shoes, a \$900 pair of “ostentatiously unlovely” sneakers, and Rick Owens’s furry Birkenstocks are the poster child of this new generation of status symbols (Trebay 2018). Yet these ugly signals are meeting the tastes of high-end consumers; the Triple S sold out in 30 minutes in Balenciaga’s boutique on Madison Avenue (Gallagher 2017), and Birkenstock more

than doubled its production in just five years to the point that the luxury conglomerate LVMH recently acquired a majority stake in the company.

Definition and Foundations

Distance on the aesthetic dimension refers to the difference among signals in terms of beauty along the beautiful/ugly continuum, and it has been measured, for example, with hashtags on Instagram (e.g., #uglyshoes; Zanette et al. 2022) and manipulated by characterizing products as “good looking” or “ugly” (Cesareo et al. 2022). The progressive rise of ugliness in luxury goods can be understood in the context of the gradual changes in aesthetics in fine arts and other cultural domains taking place over the past century. The supremacy of one beauty standard, a notion widely accepted until the beginning of the twentieth century, was challenged by the new artistic and philosophical avant-gardes of the 1900s, looking for newer forms of expression and less consecrated principles (Friedman and Reeves 2020; Peterson and Kern 1996). In this context, some artists and connoisseurs began taking advantage of unrefined and hideous objects that, if wisely immersed in sophisticated environments, would acquire the opposite valence (Bellezza and Berger 2020; Dorfles 1969). This process of sublimation is also related to the emergence of the Kitsch and Camp genres, two aesthetic styles and sensibilities that regard certain items as appealing precisely because of their ugliness, lack of refinement, and bad taste (Eco 2007; Sontag 1964).

As with many consumer phenomena (McCracken 1986), these new aesthetic paradigms progressively leaked from the visual arts into luxury and consumer goods, helped along at times by the artists themselves or by creative directors recognized as artists (Crane 2000; Dion and

Arnould 2011). Acknowledging these influences from the art world, Miuccia Prada openly tied her rejection of the enduring cliché of beauty and willful pursuit of ugliness to analogous paradigm shifts in visual arts, cinema, and literature (Marchetti 2015). Similarly, Louis Vuitton recently launched a cobranded collection with the artist Jeff Koons, known for his models of kitsch objects. The collection of handbags and accessories features a classic trope of the Kitsch genre, in which serial reproductions of masterpieces, such as Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa, are printed on everyday objects (Dorfles 1969).

Benefits. First, by diverging from the beauty paradigm of the moment and choosing ugly products, high-status consumers can distinguish themselves from mainstream looks and signal fashion-forwardness to others in the know (Cesareo et al. 2022; Zanette et al. 2022). Second, choosing ugly items is also a strategy to restrict imitation by outsiders by making signals difficult to copy. Given that most people prefer to consume attractive products, choosing ugly items discourages others from poaching the signal (Seabrook 1999). Finally, showcasing ugly luxury products is an effective means to catch people's attention on social media when scrolling online feeds (Gallagher 2017). Thus, these items have become particularly attractive to celebrities and influencers eager to gain popularity and encourage likes online (Trebay 2018).

Costs. First, ugly luxury goods are as expensive as beautiful ones. An empirical analysis of prices charged by well-known luxury brands (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Dolce & Gabbana, Balenciaga) for their apparel reveals that these firms charge the same price for unattractive products as attractive ones (Cesareo et al. 2022). Second, it takes much confidence to wear something that is jarring and that most other people will not understand (Mahlich 2020). While everyone should be able to make reasonably correct inferences about aesthetically pleasing goods, ugly products are more likely to be misperceived by the general population. By choosing

items that are more likely to be misidentified or unrecognized, high-status consumers forgo the upsides of showcasing fine luxury goods and thus incur potential social interaction costs (Berger and Ward 2010). Finally, ugly signals are ideationally complex. Coming to appreciate the sophisticated aesthetics of ugliness, kitsch, or camp requires a substantial amount of domain-specific knowledge and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2010).

Extensions: Ephemerality

The aesthetic dimension or, more specifically, what embodies beauty or ugliness is in continuous evolution (Eco 2007). In particular, objects deemed aesthetically ugly when first encountered may progressively become more attractive. Research shows that the liking of complex visual stimuli, such as ugly luxury, increases as the stimuli become less novel and more familiar (Berlyne 1970; Zajonc 1968). Thus, repeated exposure may make some ugly luxury products progressively less hideous and more appealing to the market. For example, after being ridiculed and derided, Balenciaga's chunky and deformed Triple S sneakers were imitated by everyone, from top luxury brands to mainstream players (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Off-White, Nike, Adidas), and contributed to reshaping modern footwear (Gallagher 2017).

Thus, ugly luxuries may be more temporary and transient than other alternative status signals (e.g., vintage products, inconspicuous luxuries) because consumers get used rather quickly to this nonconforming aesthetic through repeated exposition. In other words, the perceived distance of specific instantiations of ugliness in luxury will be more transitory and ephemeral than the perceived distance of alternative signals on other dimensions. This notion is in line with research suggesting that *ephemeral* luxuries, representing the brand's cutting-edge aesthetics, are introduced more often than *iconic* luxuries, representing the brand's traditional

design and legacy (Desmichel, Ordabayeva, and Kocher 2020). To test this empirically, future research could examine whether the rate at which newer forms of ugly luxury are introduced and trickle down in the market is faster than for other alternative status symbols.

DISTANCE IN TERMS OF CULTURE

Highbrow culture and sophisticated cultural references in products and communication have always permeated the world of luxury goods. Examples are Dior's 2021 campaign featuring models portrayed as in Caravaggio's and other Renaissance paintings and Rolex's sponsorships of prestigious cultural institutions (e.g., Teatro alla Scala, Royal Opera House) and other highbrow leisure activities (e.g., horse riding, sailing, golf) (see WA10).

In contrast with this long-standing association between luxury and highbrow, dominant culture, some emerging status signals have clear lowbrow cultural connotations or arise from marginalized groups and subcultures (Crane 2000; Field 1970). Several top chefs, for example, offer curiously lowbrow recipes, such as hot dogs, mac 'n cheese, and junk food, on their high-end menus (Bellezza and Berger 2020). Notable examples of appropriation from subcultures include Louis Vuitton's collaboration with the artist Takeshi Murakami, known for his work directly inspired by the otaku subculture (Japanese fanatics of comics), or the brand's street-style collection in collaboration with Supreme, an American skateboard brand (see WA11). In the same vein, Marc Jacobs's 2018 collection contains a "Grunge Manifesto," and Gucci's creative director likes "being a bit punk in an unexpected place, like the lining of a jacket" (Zaben 2018).

As many scholars have noted, what eventually becomes cool and trendy sometimes starts with lowbrow culture and outsiders on the fringes of society (Warren and Campbell 2014). These

groups hold the potential to invent a radical and innovative kind of cultural meaning, even when they are devoted to overturning the established order or determined to prevent their culture from being appropriated (e.g., hippies, punks; McCracken 1986). In sociology, “omnivorousness” refers to elites’ broadening of the repertoire of consumption beyond highbrow culture (Peterson and Kern 1996). In addition to these examples from food and clothing, various fields such as music, movies, and home décor have documented this progressive shift away from cultural snobbery (Hahl et al. 2017). Given that embracing lowbrow tastes and marginalized groups’ signals on behalf of the top strata is always partial,⁵ scholars have also referred to this mixture of different cultural elements as a “mix and match” of high and low (Bellezza and Berger 2020).

Definition and Foundations

Distance on the culture dimension refers to the difference between traditional status symbols and alternative signals in terms of cultural associations along the highbrow/lowbrow cultural continuum, and it has been measured, for example, through the coappearance of different words in texts (Herman 2021) and manipulated via products with clear highbrow or lowbrow connotations (Bellezza and Berger 2020). Why would high-status actors move to the other end of the cultural spectrum? The countersigning literature sheds light on the adequacy of these peculiar signaling strategies and explains how the partial appropriation of marginalized groups’ expressions by high-status consumers and luxury brands is a costly signal of status (Feltovich et al. 2002; Mayzlin and Shin 2011). When multiple signaling dimensions are available, high types

⁵ Consistent with the notion that status signaling is multidimensional (Jasso 2001), top chefs may offer junk food, but it will usually be accompanied by delicacies in an exclusive atmosphere; Louis Vuitton may print otaku motifs on its goods or sell skateboards, but the manufacturing, quality, and price of these items will always be high.

(i.e., those high in wealth or some other valued attribute) sometimes behave like low types and purposely avoid obvious signals because they are concerned about separating themselves from medium types who use such signals (Feltovich et al. 2002). By broadening their cultural boundaries and opting for this sophisticated alternative signaling strategy, the elites not only distinguish themselves from the mainstream but also do so in ways that other consumers, confused by how lowbrow signals are embraced, are unlikely to copy (Berger and Ward 2010; Goldberg, Hannan, and Kovács 2016). Notably, while lowbrow signals may convey low status on their own, the presence of multiple signaling dimensions in the environment allows for embracing these signals only partially (i.e., mix and match), disambiguating their meaning for others in the know, while remaining unrecognizable to most (Bellezza and Berger 2020; Hahl et al. 2017; Holt 1998). For this reason, these signals are ideationally complex and require a high level of sophistication to be accurately decoded by others (Bourdieu 1984).

In many ways, the sociocultural changes that progressively led to appreciating the mixing and matching of high and low tastes have similar roots in the avant-garde and postmodern sensibilities as the ones discussed for the aesthetic dimension (McCoy and Scarborough 2014). For example, the surrealist artist Salvador Dalí and designer Elsa Schiaparelli created the very first dress with intentional tears in 1938, thus violating the norm of perfection inherent in designer clothing and suggesting associations between expensive dresses and the worn clothing of the poor (Crane 2000). This dress is considered the precursor of the so-called “pauperist style” and the ensuing celebration of distressed materials, holes, and tears in luxury by high-end designers and brands such as Rei Kawakubo, Martin Margiela, and Golden Goose.

Benefits. Compared with opting for traditional highbrow signals, the first benefit of selecting lowbrow items or tastes associated with subcultures is that they provide distinction

without being perceived as snobby or motivated by impression management (Johnston and Baumann 2007). In other words, these status signals grant authenticity, which is particularly appealing for the elites, as it helps them address the insecurity and discomfort evoked by the attainment of wealth and extrinsic rewards (Goor, Ordabayeva, et al. 2020; Hahl 2016; Hahl et al. 2017). In addition to authenticity, under the right circumstances, these nonconforming behaviors can be more beneficial than efforts to conform to highbrow culture by signaling higher levels of coolness, autonomy, innovativeness, and even irony (Bellezza et al. 2014; McCoy and Scarborough 2014; Warren and Campbell 2014).

Costs. Embracing lowbrow or subcultural signals carries significant misidentification risks. Indeed, mixing different cultural elements is more often than not misunderstood and received with reproach rather than enthusiasm (Goldberg et al. 2016). Being associated with an undesired or marginalized group can lead to social disapproval, exclusion, or a host of other negative consequences (Miller and Anderson 1979). History is full of examples of high-profile people and luxury brands denigrated because of their nonconforming choices. For example, Tom Ford's stylistic decision to mix and match high and low styles in his 2018 ready-to-wear collection was deemed goofy, costing him "his cool" (Friedman 2018). The reputation of Carlo Cracco, a Michelin star-winning Italian chef, has paid a heavy toll for his endorsing of packaged potato chips (Di Piazza 2017). While some high-status consumers and top luxury brands can afford to deviate from conventional highbrow markers and poach signals from the low end of the cultural spectrum (Bellezza and Berger 2020), others will refrain from these risky choices because they are more anxious and insecure about their social standing (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001; Rucker and Galinsky 2008).

Extensions: Wealth Distribution and Power Distance Belief

Wealth Distribution. How do wealth distribution and power distance beliefs influence the emergence and adoption of these alternative status signals? I propose that equality in terms of wealth should increase the likelihood of poaching signals from lowbrow culture and marginalized groups. First, reducing wealth gaps across tiers increases status spending because stacking tiers closer together increases the number of others one can surpass by investing in status (Frank 1985; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011). This is especially true in large societies when there is a plurality of different status-signaling goods (Jasso 2001). Second, when resources are more equally distributed, more people have access to traditional status symbols, thus triggering trickle-down dynamics. By contrast, when only the top strata can afford traditional luxuries, the signaling value of these symbols will not be diluted.

To start, future work could examine measures of inequality at the country level, such as the Gini index, and the penetration of alternative status signals that are distant on the cultural continuum in that specific country. Where inequality and concentration of resources are high (i.e., countries with high Gini index, such as South Africa or Brazil), alternative signals with lowbrow cultural connotations should be less widespread than in areas with lower inequality (e.g., countries with low Gini index, such as Japan or Belgium).

Power Distance Belief. Future research may also consider individual-level differences related to distance. For example, the construct of power distance belief captures the extent to which people accept that power and wealth are distributed unequally and respect the social hierarchy (Hofstede 1980; Oyserman 2006). Consumers endorsing the legitimacy of power distance and hierarchies (i.e., at high levels of power distance belief) will likely prefer luxuries

that send clear signals of vertical differentiation; by contrast, consumers challenging the legitimacy of power distance and hierarchies (i.e., at low levels of power distance belief) will favor nonhierarchical differentiation and appreciate alternative signals with lowbrow inflections.

DISTANCE IN TERMS OF PACE OF LIFE

Otium, the Latin word signifying freedom from work and leisure time dedicated to rest, conviviality, and intellectual endeavors, was a dear activity to the wealthy Patricians in ancient Rome. Consistent with this idealization of abstention from work, centuries later, in his theory of the leisure class, Veblen (1899, 19) proposed that “conspicuous abstention from labor ... becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement,” whereas “labor is a mark of poverty and subjection, inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community.” In line with this portrayal and the undesirable aura surrounding work, countess Violet Crawley in the series *Downton Abbey* asks with a curious tone, “What is a weekend?” A British countess in the early 1900s was too aristocratic even to recognize the concept of a week divided by work and leisure.

Over the course of the past decades, however, a shift has occurred in how the elites allocate time between work and leisure and how they choose to spend their discretionary free time (Keinan, Bellezza, and Paharia 2019). The meaning attached to observing different lifestyles (i.e., the conspicuous spending of time) has also evolved accordingly. While in the past conspicuous abstention from work and leisure conveyed prestige, today, an overworked lifestyle and products that showcase one’s level of busyness have become status symbols and badges of honor (Bellezza et al. 2017). In the United States, for example, a common adjective used to praise the modern rock-star chief executive officer is “workaholic” (Headlee 2020). Similarly,

while in the past a slow and idle pace of life characterized the free time of the upper strata, today, a hectic agenda, filled with productive endeavors and edifying activities, is the most aspirational lifestyle of the so-called harried leisure class (Linder 1970; Phelan 2015). Today, the elites are busy at work, and their leisure time is active, not passive or sedentary, often using physical or mental energy to pursue wellness, health, and personal development (Chen, Keinan, and Paharia 2020). “Athleisure” apparel (e.g., expensive leggings, sweatshirts, and sneakers; see WA12), timesaving services, and other products that enable multitasking (e.g., walking workstation) are the ultimate status symbols of the new, dynamic elites who do not have a minute to lose (Phelan 2015).

Definition and Foundations

Distance on the pace-of-life dimension refers to the difference in rhythm of activities on the slow/fast continuum, and it has been measured and manipulated, for example, through the number of events in a period or the extent to which one’s brands and possessions speak to a busy versus leisurely lifestyle (Bellezza et al. 2017; Tonietto and Malkoc 2016). To explain the shift on this continuum and the related changes in status attributions, some researchers have argued that an accelerated lifestyle and busyness at work have come to operate as an alternative type of conspicuous consumption that shifts the focus from the preciousness and scarcity of goods to the preciousness and scarcity of individuals (Bellezza et al. 2017). In knowledge-based economies, having no time means possessing desired human capital characteristics (e.g., competence, ambition) and being in high demand in the job market (Keinan et al. 2019). As the economist Juliet Shor put it, “we have become walking résumés” (Headlee 2020, 88).

This accelerated pace of life and résumé-building mindset have leaked into how people manage and leverage (not just spend) their leisure time. Holidays are no longer a time to relax but an occasion to build one's "experiential résumé" and cross off items from ambitious to-do lists of activities (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). In his analysis of the harried leisure class, Linder (1970) observed that as productivity develops in an economy, so must output consumption. However, as consumption takes time, if leisure time does not increase correspondingly, the pace of life of the "work-rich, but time-poor" consumers must increase instead. Further contributing to this general hastening of the pace of life, instead of allowing new technology products to free up time and streamline their lives, people have used these advancements to compress more work, travel, and activities into the same allotted timespan (Robinson and Godbey 2005).

Benefits. Adopting an accelerated and busy lifestyle increases individuals' sense of self-importance by making them feel that their time is valuable and that they themselves are scarce and in demand (Kreider 2012). Furthermore, by collecting diverse experiences and edifying activities, consumers obtain a sense of accomplishment and progress, increase the appeal of their professional background, and address psychological needs, such as purity and moral superiority, traditionally satisfied by religion (Chen et al. 2020; Keinan et al. 2019). Lastly, the public use of products and brands associated with an overworked lifestyle (e.g., multitasking Bluetooth headsets, timesaving grocery brands) conveys status in the eyes of others (Bellezza et al. 2017).

Costs. In advanced economies, being in demand on the job market and collecting many diverse experiences typically require years of education, expensive diplomas at top institutions, and other learned soft skills (e.g., language proficiency, knowing how to travel independently) (Chen and Nelson 2020). Indeed, the rich are increasingly cementing their competitive advantage by investing in their offspring's intellectual cultivation from a young age and giving them a head

start in life (Currid-Halkett 2017). During the last 25 years, the cost of an undergraduate degree alone in the United States has increased nearly eight times faster than wages (Maldonado 2018). Moreover, burnout and threats to mental health from exhaustion are potential costs associated with a workaholic pace of life as well. Finally, the type of active leisure that keeps the upper strata busy during their free time (e.g., boutique yoga classes, Equinox memberships) and the goods surrounding these activities (e.g., Lululemon gear, Goop creams, cold-pressed juices) are far from affordable (Phelan 2015).

Extensions: Reversal

Some scholars have recently noted that the pace of life has become so fast and accelerated for everyone that actively seeking out oases of deceleration, where one can choose to be time-rich rather than time-poor, is possibly reemerging as a signal of distinction (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, many professionals, especially younger ones, are also looking for deceleration at work, questioning the pre-pandemic workaholic lifestyles and carving out more leisure time for themselves (Malesic 2021). Along the same lines, in recent trends dubbed the “great resignation” and “the leisure renaissance,” Gen Zers are bragging about quitting their jobs on social media rather than celebrating promotions (Cost 2021). These emerging preferences for slowing down and working less may be the beginning of the reversal on the dimension of pace of life; that is, a change in direction for this dimension may occur, with a progressive return to praising slowness, though in slightly different forms (Bardhi et al. 2020). Note that a reversal on a specific dimension is not inconsistent with the long-term evolution of signals and trends; however, these reversals happen rarely and in long

cycles (Lieberson 2000). Research could empirically test this notion by directly building on prior work on busyness and long hours of work. For example, an analysis of holiday letters indicated that the frequency of phrases such as “way too fast,” “on the run,” and “crazy schedule” dramatically increased since the 1960s (Schulte 2014). Emulating this approach, future research could track the frequency of references and mentions of a busy versus leisurely lifestyle over the following years on social media and check whether the relative occurrence of the two is shifting. Similarly, in a few years or decades, research could test whether busyness and long hours of work, which served as status symbols in 2017 (Bellezza et al. 2017), still hold or whether a reversal has occurred.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the past decades, as classic conspicuous consumption and conventional luxury goods have progressively lost their edge as a means of status signaling, various alternative signals of status, such as inconspicuous consumption, ugly luxury, and vintage, have emerged. Providing a high-level perspective on these and additional alternative signals of status, this research establishes a unifying framework based on the notion of *distance* from traditional signals along the continua of six focal dimensions: time, quantity, conspicuousness, aesthetics, culture, and pace of life. This framework sets the stage for future work examining additional theoretical aspects and empirical questions related to alternative signals and the framework itself.

Optimal Distance. Conceptualizing signals on the continua of different dimensions implies that there are various points along those spectra. Thus, an important question is whether there is an optimal distance point from traditional signals on the continua. Is farther away always

preferable, or is there a limit? Some work on uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001) suggests that manifestations of deviance from the norm vary in their level of disruptiveness, from mildly original options (i.e., “creative choice nonconformity”) to options that strongly violate the norms of proper conduct (i.e., “unpopular choice nonconformity”). This last type of deviance risks social disapproval (Tian et al. 2001) and thus may not operate as an alternative status marker. Similarly, research on coolness and appropriate autonomy suggests that nonconforming behaviors vary from fairly similar to the norm to radically different. Nonconformity is deemed cool and appropriately autonomous when the deviance from the norm is not too extreme or drastic (Warren and Campbell 2014). Likewise, Lieberman (2000, 97) argues that styles and trends (e.g., hemlines) cannot indefinitely extend in one direction because otherwise, they will “violate social mores” and become offensive. Accordingly, alternative signals might lie within a “range of acceptable distance” from traditional signals, such that distance within the range is optimal, but beyond that range, signals may be too distant because they violate norms of suitable demeanor. Building on work on coolness and nonconformity (Bellezza et al. 2014; Warren and Campbell 2014), future research could test this idea by selecting a sample of alternative status symbols with varying levels of divergence from traditional luxury products and examining corresponding attributions of status and coolness.

Longevity. With time, the specific alternative signals that caught on at a certain moment will inevitably trickle down and possibly lose the unconventionality that set them apart at the start. In many social contexts, behaviors that were originally deemed radical and nonconforming (e.g., getting body piercings or tattoos, wearing ripped jeans) are now deemed ordinary (Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca 1997). Thus, an important question pertains to how many people need to adopt a particular alternative signal before it loses its signaling value in the eyes of the

early adopters. More specifically, is it a matter of number, thus establishing a specific diffusion threshold (i.e., after a specific signal reaches a certain penetration in the population), or a matter of identity, thus recognizing who adopts the alternative signal (i.e., after a specific signal is adopted by some type of consumers)? Given that distinction entails separation from undesired, not just neutral, outgroups (Berger and Heath 2008; White and Dahl 2006), high-status adopters may regard a given alternative signal as compromised as soon as it spreads among a segment of consumers from whom they want to dissociate.

Characteristics. Another question worthy of future investigation is whether certain alternative signals have some systematic characteristics that make them more likely than others to be adopted by high-status groups in a specific context. All else being equal, alternative signals consistent with a particular culture's dominant values are more likely to emerge than signals inconsistent with such values (Davis and Moore 1945). For example, inconspicuous consumption is more likely to thrive in France, where nonostentation and understatement are highly valued, than in Italy, where trendiness and visibility are cherished (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). Similarly, in the United States, driving a Tesla or riding a bicycle is more likely to signal status in a state that values sustainability and green initiatives than elsewhere. In line with these predictions, familiarity with the environment and its system of values is also critical in verifying and correctly understanding alternative status signals (Bellezza et al. 2014; Hollander 1958).

Interactions between Dimensions. The proposed framework outlines the six dimensions of distance individually. However, it is possible to envision overlaps and interactions between dimensions. For example, prior research shows that different forms of distance (i.e., social and temporal) are interchangeable to some extent and may even interact as consumers evaluate products (Pronin, Olivola, and Kennedy 2008). In the context of alternative signals of status, for

example, high-end brands such as Moschino or Balenciaga have released ready-to-wear collections and products inspired by garbage that are both tied to trash culture and ugly (i.e., distance in terms of culture and aesthetics). Tesla cars are green (i.e., distance in terms of quantity) and subtly branded on the streets (i.e., distance in terms of conspicuousness). Similarly, consumer minimalism refers to “the mindful acquisition and ownership of few curated possessions, with a preference for a sparse aesthetic” (Wilson and Bellezza 2022, 801-802) and thus may involve distance in terms of both quantity and conspicuousness. Future research could systematically examine the interplay between the different dimensions of the framework. Do certain dimensions tend to overlap more often than others? The answer may depend on the nature of the costs connected with the alternative signals. When the nature of the cost is similar, the dimensions will overlap more often than when the costs are different. In the cases noted previously, distance in terms of culture and aesthetics involves misidentification risks, and distance in terms of quantity and conspicuousness involves the opportunity cost of not signaling.

Expanding the Framework. While the framework captures many new alternative signals of status along the six dimensions of distance, other potential aspects of status signaling and other dimensions emerged from the data such as morality (i.e., distance on the immoral/moral continuum), gender expression (i.e., distance on the binary/fluid continuum), and space (i.e., distance on the far/close continuum). Evidence for these signals in the data was not as substantial as for the other dimensions; however, some of these additional dimensions may gain more prominence in the near future. WA14 discusses these potential dimensions in more detail.

Potential Limitations and Conclusions

In analyzing status-signaling dynamics, this article embraces a decidedly Western-centric perspective. While this could be a potential limitation, it generates the opportunity to examine whether the framework and the six dimensions of distance apply more broadly. An influential stream of literature has analyzed existing status-signaling theories at the global level and across different environments (e.g., global trickle-down model, luxury consumption in emerging economies) (Üstüner and Holt 2010). Second, while the proposed framework unpacks the general characteristics of alternative signals that are likely to emerge, another potential limitation is that it does not predict which specific instantiation will gain popularity next among the top strata. In other words, the framework may not predict that regenerated nylon will follow recycled plastic in sustainable luxury products or that street style will follow punk in inspiring haute couture designers, but it provides insight into the characteristics of these new, alternative signals in terms of distance from traditional signals along the dimensions of quantity and culture. Lastly, the current research adopts a consumer-centric focus and does not delve into managerial implications and prescriptions as deeply.

In conclusion, this framework, based on the notion of distance from mainstream signals along six focal dimensions, establishes a unifying perspective on alternative status signals and broadens the understanding of how status symbols evolve in contemporary markets.

DATA COLLECTION

The data included a large body of theoretical research and applied inputs related to status signaling, conspicuous consumption, and luxury: 260 academic articles in marketing (e.g., *Journal of Consumer Research*) and adjacent disciplines, such as sociology (e.g., *American Sociological Review*), psychology (e.g., *Psychological Review*), economics (e.g., *Quarterly Journal of Economics*), and management (e.g., *Management Science*); 72 monographs and book chapters; 37 conference presentations (e.g., *ACR North American Conference*); 205 newspaper and magazine articles, primarily from *Sundays Style* and *T* of *The New York Times*; 15 exhibitions in the U.S. (e.g., *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* MOMA, 2017); 6 industry conferences (e.g., 15th Annual Retail & Luxury Goods conference, 2021); 17 documentaries and other video material; and periodic visits to flagship stores in New York City (e.g., Tiffany & Co., 5th Avenue) and Milan (e.g., Prada, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II). The author collected and analyzed all these sources by herself. The complete list of references and the grounded theory work are available online at the following links: <https://osf.io/fz6c4> and <https://osf.io/y57fp>.

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