Trickle-Round Signals:

When Low Status Is Mixed with High

SILVIA BELLEZZA

JONAH BERGER

Silvia Bellezza (corresponding author), Gantcher Associate Professor of Business at Columbia Business School, Uris Hall 508, 3022 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, sbellezza@gsb.columbia.edu. Jonah Berger, Associate Professor of Marketing at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 700 Jon M. Huntsman Hall, 3730 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, jberger@wharton.upenn.edu. The research was partially funded with a grant awarded to junior faculty who contribute to the diversity goals of Columbia University.

**ABSTRACT**

Trickle-down theories suggest that status symbols and fashion trends originate from the elites

and move downward, but some high-end restaurants serve lowbrow food (e.g., potato chips,

macaroni and cheese), and some high-status individuals wear downscale clothing (e.g., ripped

jeans, duct-taped shoes). Why would high-status actors adopt items traditionally associated with

low-status groups? Using a signaling perspective to explain this phenomenon, the authors

suggest that elites sometimes adopt items associated with low-status groups as a costly signal to

distinguish themselves from middle-status individuals. As a result, signals sometimes *trickle*

*round*, moving directly from the lower to the upper class, before diffusing to the middle class.

Furthermore, consistent with a signaling perspective, the presence of multiple signaling

dimensions facilitates this effect, enabling the highs to mix and match high and low signals and

differentiate themselves. These findings deepen the understanding of signaling dynamics,

support a trickle-round theory of fashion, and shed light on alternative status symbols.


*Keywords*: status signaling, conspicuous consumption, distinction

When cooking for a famous food critic, a chef's assistant at an expensive restaurant asks:
*"Just tell me what the rat wants to cook … Ratatouille?! It is a peasant dish!"*
—*Ratatouille*, the movie (2007)

Jeans are popular today, but this was not always the case. Denim was originally worn by working-class Italians. Troops then began wearing uniforms made of similar fabric, and in the 1800s, what are known today as jeans were adopted by miners and factory workers. It was not until 1930, however, when *Vogue* magazine ran an advertisement depicting two high-society women in tight-fitting jeans (a look termed "Western chic") that jeans became fashionable. Originally associated with traditionally "lower-status" groups,[1] celebrities such as James Dean and Grace Kelly soon adopted them, paving the way for mainstream popularity.

Similar dynamics have occurred for many other products. Caps with mesh backs, known as trucker hats or feed caps, originated as promotional giveaways from farming supply companies to truck drivers and other blue-collar workers. In the early 2000s, however, trucker hats became a mainstream fashion trend after Justin Timberlake and other celebrities wore them. Similarly, ripped or faded jeans used to be worn mainly by consumers who could not afford new pairs. However, when Gucci introduced a $3,000 pair, called Genius jeans, with intentional tears, distressed jeans caught on more broadly (YouGlamour.it 2014).

In these examples, items originally worn by traditionally low-status groups (e.g., miners, rural truck drivers) were adopted by high-status individuals and brands and soon afterward achieved mainstream popularity. The second of these steps is intuitive. Trickle-down and other theories of fashion (Durkheim 1887; Von Jhering 1883; Robinson 1961; Simmel 1957; Taylor 1974) have long argued that people's desire to be viewed as high status drives popularity. After

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[1] In the article, we use terms such as "low status," "downscale," and "lowbrow." Although these terms sometimes have a negative connotation, we use them merely to refer to how certain groups or trends are generally perceived by society at large.

the top strata of society adopt certain behaviors, lower strata begin emulating them. But the first step is, at least slightly, more counterintuitive. Why would celebrities or other high-status actors choose products linked to low-status groups?

To address this question, this article proposes a trickle-round theory. Across various domains (e.g., food, clothing), we show that high-status individuals adopt downscale tastes, in part, to distinguish themselves from middle-status individuals. Importantly, this strategy hinges on the presence of multiple signaling dimensions. Rather than trying to be viewed as low status, high-status individuals mix and match high and low signals (e.g., Lobster Mac 'n Cheese, wearing a trucker hat with Prada loafers) as a way of distinguishing themselves from middles.

This research makes several contributions. First, we deepen understanding of how tastes may originate in low-status groups. Building on prior work (Atik and Fırat 2013; Blumberg 1974; Field 1970) theorizing that practices may sometimes percolate upward from the marginal fringes of society to the elites (i.e., trickle up), we suggest that rather than trickling up, tastes often trickle round. Instead of going through the middle class, trends may move directly from lows to highs and only then diffuse to the middles. In addition, we enrich the literature on cultural omnivores (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Peterson and Kern 1996) by demonstrating that high-status individuals purposely select styles and trends clearly associated with low-status groups to distinguish themselves.

Second, we shed light on how multiple cues change signaling dynamics. Most signaling research (Berger and Heath 2008) focuses on a single cue or dimension. We consider how the number of multiple signaling dimensions allows the elites to mix and match signals across different social strata in a unique way that differentiates them from all subordinate tiers.

Finally, we contribute to the literature on alternative status signals. In the past, status research has focused on traditional markers, such as luxury watches, expensive cars, or exotic jewelry (Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Veblen 1899; Wang and Griskevicius 2014; Ward and Dahl 2014). In contrast with such conspicuous consumption, recent work has begun examining more unconventional status signals, such as subtly branded luxury goods (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010), lack of leisure (Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan 2017), or cool and unusual products (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Warren and Campbell 2014). We add to this emerging stream of research, demonstrating how seemingly downscale tastes can become new markers of superiority when mixed with high-status signals.

## STATUS SIGNALS AND THEORIES OF FASHION

Our conceptualization directly builds on prior work in sociology, economics, and marketing that identifies separate groups along the status continuum and examines their dynamics (Berger and Ward 2010; Bourdieu 1984; Bryson 1996; Feltovich, Harbaugh, and To 2002; Han et al. 2010; Holt 1998; Hu and Van den Bulte 2014; Mayzlin and Shin 2011; Phillips and Zuckerman 2001; Trigg 2001). In a social hierarchy, status reflects a higher position with respect to some valued dimensions, such as financial wealth (i.e., "economic capital") or domain-specific knowledge (i.e., "cultural capital"; Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu (1984), for example, proposes a threefold classification of society (i.e., working class, middle class, and upper class) depending on educational qualifications; Phillips and Zuckerman (2001) compare the behaviors of high-status, middle-status, and low-status analysts in the legal services and investment advice markets; Feltovich et al. (2002) examine high types, medium types, and low types among students.

Consumers adopt tastes (i.e., attitudes, choices, styles, and preferences) to signal status (Veblen 1899), and research has examined how such choices drive product and fashion diffusion across social hierarchies. The most prominent fashion theory is trickle-down (Durkheim 1887; Von Jhering 1883; Robinson 1961; Simmel 1957; Taylor 1974), which argues that trends diffuse downward from the upper to lower classes. Elites initiate fashions and subordinate groups follow, imitating their high-status peers in the hopes of enhancing their status and communicating desired identities (Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn 1999).

But while a top-down model explains many instances of diffusion, other examples seem to contradict the theory. Rather than starting at the top and trickling down, fashion trends and eventual status signals sometimes arise from the bottom of society. Several top chefs, for example, offer curiously lowbrow recipes. Cracco, a Michelin star–winning Italian chef, often uses commercial potato chips in his sophisticated dishes. Similarly, some celebrities and movie stars brag about being flea-market shoppers and loving used clothing (Flower 2016; Takyi 2014). Sarah Jessica Parker, for example, the protagonist of *Sex and the City*, has been spotted rummaging through the dusty clothes in Rome's Via Sannio flea market. And in fashion, luxury brands such as Balenciaga and Moschino have released a $2,000 version of IKEA's iconic blue $.99 bag, $600 duct-taped sneakers, and a high-end perfume made to look like a household cleaning bottle (see figure 1 for images of these products and web appendix for more examples).

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Insert figure 1 about here

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Furthermore, while these examples may seem consistent with trickle-up theories of fashion (Atik and Fırat 2013; Blumberg 1974; Field 1970), there are some important differences. These theories suggest the opposite pattern, arguing that some fashions percolate upward. Trends

start with lower-status groups and move up until they eventually become in vogue among the elites.[2] But while the starting point is potentially the same (i.e., low-status groups), the trajectory suggested by trickle-up theories is quite different. Duct-taped sneakers or potato chips are downscale, but it is not as though they were omnipresent in mainstream stores or in middle-tier restaurants before luxury brands or Chef Cracco adopted them. Thus, instead of percolating through the middle-class, some signals seem to leapfrog directly from low to high. What might explain this different trajectory?

## TRICKLE-ROUND SIGNALS

We take an alternate perspective based on identity signaling and distinction. We suggest that one reason high-status individuals adopt low-status tastes is because doing so provides distinction from subordinate groups. Choices with downscale connotations should be particularly unappealing to middle-status chefs and wannabe fashionistas, anxious about their social standing (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001). This, in turn, should make these options appealing to high-status individuals as new and alternative status signals. While trickle-up theories would argue that celebrities shop at flea markets because middle-status individuals have begun doing so, we argue the opposite—that celebrities are interested in shopping at flea markets specifically because middles are *unlikely* to do so. Thus, rather than simply trickling up or down, fashion in these cases trickles round.

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[2] A similar trickle-up dynamic may also emerge from subcultures and countercultural consumers (McCracken 1986; Warren and Campbell 2014; Warren et al. 2019), not necessarily low-status groups. Importantly, we focus on signals emerging from low-status groups, but in the General Discussion, we discuss how our work relates to subcultures.

Distinction Driving Taste Change

Consumers often make choices to distance or distinguish themselves from out-groups (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008; Wang and John 2018; White and Dahl 2006, 2007). Tastes can act as badges of social identity (Levy 1959). But when specific styles are co-opted by outsiders, their value as identity markers is compromised (Field 1970). As soon as outsiders begin imitating the styles of the upper class, crossing the line of demarcation the elites have drawn and thereby threatening their identity, the upper class turns away from these styles and adopts new ones, which again serve to differentiate them from the masses, and the cycle begins again (Simmel 1957). Wearing a high-end watch may suggest that someone is wealthy, but if many non-wealthy people also wear it, the watch ceases to function as a signal of wealth. As a result, wealthy indviduals may diverge, abandoning the watch and adopting a new product to distinguish themselves (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010; Wang and John 2018). Thus, distinction is a dynamic process of boundary making and maintenance (Bourdieu 1984). For an object to lose its meaning for the topmost class, it is only necessary for it to be taken up by the next-most class and so on down the line (Robinson 1961).

High-status groups persistently seek to create distinctions from subordinate tiers (Amaral and Loken 2016; Berger and Ward 2010; Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson 2016; Ghoshal and Belk 2019; Robinson 1961; Üstüner and Holt 2010). In particular, the strongest identity threat for high-status individuals comes from the middle status, the closest and most similar out-group to their in-group (Feltovich et al. 2002; White and Langer 1999). Accordingly, the upper strata avoid things associated with middle-class individuals (Bourdieu 1984; Seabrook 1999; Simmel 1957; Trigg 2001; Wolfe 1970) and have a high chronic desire for distinction from them (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010).

To further substantiate this notion, we conducted a pilot study (web appendix) with 203 wealthy respondents (i.e., income of $121,000 or more) recruited through Qualtrics. We measured social status through both economic (e.g., income) and cultural (e.g., educational level of one's family) capital as well as a desire for distinction from middle-status consumers (e.g., "When purchasing clothing and apparel, how important is it to you to choose items that differentiate you from middle-status consumers?"). Consistent with the notion that high-status individuals want to distinguish themselves from the middle status, social status was positively and significantly related to distinction ($b = .71$, SE $= .15$, $t(201) = 4.76$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .101$; figure W2). Moreover, we find that distinction constitutes its own construct, separate from need for uniqueness and authenticity.

But while prior work has examined distinction and the abandonment of current tastes, it has paid less attention to where people go after their old signals lose the original meaning. When middle-status individuals copy the elites, what do these high-status individuals adopt next?

Adoption of New Signals

One possibility is that the elites adopt another high-status signal (e.g., another luxury brand). Indeed, some work finds that in the face of imitation from the middle class, high-status consumers opt for more expensive and sophisticated luxuries (Berger and Ward 2010; Ghoshal and Belk 2019; Han et al. 2010; Wang and John 2018). This startegy of going higher or adopting new luxuries, however, is progressively losing its effectiveness. Mass-production systems and rising disposable income have made once rare and unattainable luxury products more ubiquitous and accessible (Eckhardt et al. 2016; Holt 1998). Consequently, traditional status markers are

progressively losing signaling value, leading some critics to argue that conspicuous consumption is over and alternative signals are on the rise (Blumberg 1974; Currid-Halkett 2017; Trigg 2001). Furthermore, conspicuous luxuries are increasingly considered inauthentic and driven by undesirable extrinsic motivation (Garcia, Weaver, and Chen 2018; Goor et al. 2018; Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim 2017).

Alternatively, high-status individuals could try to create a new signal, taking an item without any associations and making it their own. However, imbuing products with desired signal value is difficult and requires time and social coordination (Heath, Ho, and Berger 2006).

Rather than creating meaning from scratch, co-opting an existing signal allows consumers to bypass the challenge of meaning creation and provides a useful focal point around which to coordinate (Schelling 1960). However, if high-status individuals' goal is to distinguish themselves from middles, adopting items used by middle-status individuals will not work. So where can highs turn?

The Appeal of Low-Status Tastes

We suggest that emulating low-status groups on some dimensions may be a useful alternative. Low-status tastes may be particularly appealing because they provide differentiation from middles. Their initial association with lows does this to some degree, but even when highs adopt, the low-status connotation should slow middles' imitation because of the cost of misidentification.

To be effective, status signals must be costly (Spence 1973; Zahavi and Zahavi 1997). In our context, misidentification cost (Berger and Heath 2008) is particularly important. Adopting

tastes that are typically associated with low-status groups is costly in the sense that others may view the adopter as a low-status person. Being identified as a member of an undesired or low-status group can lead to social disapproval, exclusion, and many other negative consequences (Anderson et al. 2006; Anderson, Ames, and Gosling 2008; Miller and Anderson 1979); even just associating with low-status actors can lead to status loss (Podolny 2005).

Prior work demonstrates that misidentification costs are more pronounced for middle-status individuals (Feltovich et al. 2002). While high-status individuals can afford to depart from the norms without penalties because of their blanket social acceptance, middle-status individuals are more concerned because their position is less certain (Feshbach 1967; Hollander 1958; Rao, Monin, and Durand 2005). As such, middles tend to refrain from choosing any items that might compromise their already-tenuous standing and opt for clear status symbols (e.g., loudly branded products) to compensate for their insecurity (Rucker and Galinsky 2008).

Middles may also avoid items associated with lows because the likelihood of misidentification is higher. Indeed, more similar out-groups pose a greater threat to distinctiveness because they are more likely to be confused or associated with the in-group (White and Langer 1999). This, combined with the anxiety to demonstrate their social standing, leads middles to strongly avoid items associated with lower strata (Feltovich et al. 2002; Liberman 2004; Phillips and Zuckerman 2001).

Consistent with our propositions, game-theoretic work on countersignaling has argued that behaving like low-status groups can be an optimal strategy for high-status individuals (Feltovich et al. 2002; Mayzlin and Shin 2011). One group may behave similarly to a second to avoid imitation by a third. For example, Brooks (2001) suggests that, while the middles go after items the lower classes could never purchase (e.g., champagne and caviar), educated elites often

select the same items that the working class buys but in rarefied form (e.g., free-range chicken legs, heirloom potatoes from France). In doing so, the elites not only distinguish themselves from the middle status but do so in ways that middles, confused by how popular tastes are embraced, are unlikely to copy (Berger and Ward 2010; Trigg 2001).

In summary, avoidance by middles should make some low-status items particularly appealing for high-status individuals. Because emulating lows is costly and risky for middles, doing so provides an alternative way for highs to distinguish themselves. Rather than a linear percolation upward, we argue that tastes and styles may move directly from the bottom of society to the upper class, only then diffusing to the middle—that is, trickling round rather than trickling up. We do not suggest that selecting low-status items is the *only* way highs can differentiate themselves. Instead, we simply argue that this signaling strategy, which is gaining momentum in the marketplace, provides a valuable alternative that is not captured by prior theories on fashion and diffusion of status symbols.

Multiple Signaling Dimensions

Importantly, highs adopting downscale tastes hinges on the presence of multiple signaling dimensions. Most signaling research has focused on a single cue, item, or dimension, such as whether people abandon a wristband when the geeks adopt it (Berger and Heath 2008) and has tended to treat this single taste as the only signal available—that is, the only dimension through which observers can make inferences about a focal actor.

Obviously, however, the world is more complex and multidimensional. When making inferences about others, observers have access to more than just a single piece of information and

integrate many contextual inputs into their overall evaluations and inferences (Belk 1975; Herr 1989; Swait and Adamowicz 2001). They not only see whether someone is wearing a wristband but also observe whether that person dresses like a hipster or a preppy or wears flip-flops or dress shoes. Consequently, rather than relying on a single signal or dimension to make inferences about others, observers use multiple cues simultaneously to draw conclusions.

This multidimensionality has important implications for signaling dynamics. If observers only have access to a single cue, downscale items should simply signal low status. If all a person knows about a restaurant is that it serves potato chips, determining whether that restaurant is high or low status is difficult. Given that most places that serve potato chips are lower end, the person is most likely to infer that a potato chips–serving establishment is a low-status restaurant.

The presence of multiple cues, however, enables downscale items to provide distinction. When a second (or third or fourth) cue is present, it helps disambiguate the first. A restaurant that serves potato chips and hot dogs is probably lower end; however, if it serves potato chips and foie gras, the inference should differ. Chef Cracco may serve potato chips, but this junk food is accompanied by sophisticated delicacies in an exclusive atmosphere. Sarah Jessica Parker may wear a flea-market jacket, but she does so while wearing Manolo Blahnik heels. Consequently, mixing and matching downscale markers with traditional upscale tastes allows high-status individuals to more clearly communicate their social position.

Pilot Study: Restaurant Menus

As an initial test of mixing and matching, we analyzed restaurant menus from American food restaurants in New York City. This included 137,377 items offered by 1,309 restaurants, divided into price tiers (for all detailed procedures and results, see the web appendix). First, two

independent coders systematically identified lowbrow dishes (e.g., Hot Dogs, Mac 'n Cheese, Meatloaf).[3] Next, we examined whether, *when* offering lowbrow items, high-status restaurants do so in a way that combines high and low (e.g., Mac n' Cheese with Lobster vs. Cheddar, Fries with Caviar vs. Ketchup). Textual analysis of more than 33,000 words appearing in combination with the lowbrow food identified which other ingredients are used when lowbrow items are offered by high-end (+1SD price) versus other restaurants. Two coders rated how highbrow each pairing ingredient was (1 = extremely lowbrow, 7 = extremely highbrow), and we computed an average for ingredient "highbrowness" when lowbrow items were offered by high-end versus low-end restaurants.

Consistent with our mix-and-match hypothesis, when offering lowbrow items, high-end restaurants tend to mix them with more highbrow ingredients ($M_{High-End}$ = 4.45 vs. $M_{Other}$ = 3.93; $t(1, 5,903)$ = 11.58, $p < .001$, $d = .38$). Specifically, highbrow ingredients, such as truffle, Angus beef, lobster, or duck, are more than twice as likely to be paired with lowbrow items at high-end restaurants (8.4%) than at other restaurants (4.0%; $\chi^2(1)$ = 95.69, $p < .001$, $\varphi = .08$). This is not driven by expensive restaurants offering these highbrow items in general. For expensive restaurant menus more generally, the base rate of these highbrow items (5.5%) is lower than the detected percentage (8.4%; $\chi^2(1)$ = 37.47, $p < .001$, $\varphi = .04$).

As is often the case with field data, drawing conclusive evidence is difficult (though for analyses casting doubt on preferences for old-fashioned, popular, or exotic food, see the web appendix). That said, our results are at least consistent with the notion that when offering lowbrow items, high-end restaurants simultaneously mix and match high and low signals. Dishes

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[3] Lowbrow was defined as "The dish, or part of it, includes links to downscale, low-status, or working-class recipes, ingredients, or places. These dishes are the foods of common people, typically made from very accessible and inexpensive ingredients."

such as Truffled Mac 'n Cheese or Grits and Lobster imbue traditionally lowbrow items with highbrow elements. Thus, rather than simply adopting lowbrow items, high-status restaurants do so in a way that distinguishes them from subordinate tiers.

Moreover, these findings dovetail with several other perspectives on how distinction motives may lead to similar effects in the domain of food. In the constant pursuit of class distinction, for example, top French chefs and high-end restaurants have opened their offerings to different gastronomic influences, typically considered inferior (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Rao et al. 2005). Similarly, New York socialites have begun offering soul food (e.g., sweet potato pone instead of regular bread, molasses instead of honey) at their upscale receptions as a way to certify "their superiority over the middle-class" (Wolfe 1970, p. 37).

## OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

In sum, we suggest that high-status individuals may adopt seemingly downscale items and mix and match them with other signals because doing so helps distinguish themselves from middles. To test this theorizing, we both measure status (i.e., economic status and cultural capital) and manipulate it (i.e., assign people to status positions in an imaginary society). Studies 1 and 2 operationalize status through cultural capital in fashion, illustrating that consumers with high levels of cultural capital are more likely to mix and match tastes to distinguish themselves. Study 3 further demonstrates these effects by examining social status and menu choices. Studies 4 and 5 use a novel experimental paradigm to reproduce and examine signaling dynamics in the lab. Study 4 demonstrates that, when faced with imitation from subordinate tiers, high-status individuals diverge and adopt options that mix and match tastes to distinguish themselves. Study

5 illustrates the moderating effect of the number of signaling dimensions available. Finally, study 6 provides additional evidence in favor of our distinction account by experimentally manipulating this motive between-subjects.

For all studies employing a continuous measure of status (i.e., studies 1–3), we test both linear and quadratic models (both trends would support our hypotheses, so long as they demonstrate a significant relationship between status and the dependent variable at high levels of status). We report the more comprehensive quadratic models in the text and the linear models in the web appendix. For each study, we also report a table of all parameters' results and confidence intervals in the web appendix.

## STUDY 1: STATUS AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

Study 1 tests our hypotheses in the domain of fashion. Inspired by a "Spin the Fashion Wheel" board game once popular among Italian teens, respondents make choices in various apparel domains. We test whether, compared to other groups, high-status individuals are more likely to pick downscale accessories and mix and match them with other items.

Ample research suggests that, independent of wealth, cultural capital (i.e., domain-specific knowledge) is an increasingly important marker of status (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). Modern elites use knowledge, culture, and education as symbolic markers to re-create boundaries between groups (Bryson 1996; Currid-Halkett 2017; Erickson 1996; Ghoshal and Belk 2019; Johnston and Baumann 2007; Yoganarasimhan 2017). Accordingly, we operationalize status this way and, given this study's focus on fashion, use knowledge of fashion and luxury goods to measure cultural capital (for a similar approach examining respondents varying in cultural capital

while holding income and other demographics constant, see Berger and Ward 2010; Üstüner and

Holt 2010; Yoganarasimhan 2017). Moreover, as we empirically demonstrate in study 2 and as

shown by Berger and Ward (2010), fashion-savvy individuals are a particularly suitable

population to test our propositions because they have a high chronic desire for distinction from

the middle status.

Pretest for Product Selection

A pretest with 98 wealthy respondents recruited through Qualtrics (100% female, $M_{age}=$

49, American) identified pairs of products that were (and were not) perceived as differentially

downscale (web appendix). Respondents rated how upscale or downscale they perceived 24

products from four different categories (i.e., bags, hats, shoes, and sunglasses; figure W3). For

three categories (i.e., bags, hats, and shoes), we selected pairs of products where one item was

perceived significantly more downscale than the other. For the fourth category (i.e., sunglasses),

we selected two products that were perceived as equal on status. We purposely included more

choice pairs that varied on status because this was the focal type of choice in this study (figure

W4). Importantly, downscale products were not considered trendier, and fashion knowledge did

not moderate perceptions (i.e., consumers with high cultural capital did not view the selected

products in a fundamentally different way than others).

Method

To detect potentially small to medium effects and to provide a fair test of the interaction between product type and cultural capital, we decided in advance to recruit approximately 400 participants. Respondents ($N = 410$, 73% female[4], $M_{age} = 27$) completed an online study. To recruit both regular respondents and those with high cultural capital in fashion, we collected respondents through the mailing list of the Retail and Luxury Club at an American university, the behavioral lab of the same university, and Qualtrics. The last group was purposely recruited with similar demographics in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic status to those of the first two groups (see the web appendix for more details on each subsample and for all results controlling for age, gender, socioeconomic status, and respondents' pool).

All respondents were introduced to a dressing game. Specifically, they were asked to imagine going to an event and to pick an avatar to represent themselves (appendix A). Respondents were shown their avatar in a simple, solid white color dress and were asked to choose their accessories to complement the outfit. Next, we measured the dependent variable. Respondents were shown the four pairs of pretested products, one at the time and in randomized order, and asked which option in each pair they would wear to the event (appendix A). Based on the pretest results, three choice pairs included one upscale and one downscale item, and one included two items equal on status (i.e., the "neutral" pair). After each selection, respondents could comment on their choices (open-ended).

Finally, we measured the independent variable, cultural capital in fashion. We z-scored and averaged self-reported knowledge about fashion and luxury goods ("How knowledgeable are you in fashion and luxury goods?" 1 = not knowledgeable at all, 7 = extremely knowledgeable) and objective knowledge (four multiple-choice questions about fashion and luxury goods; e.g.,

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[4] Although we originally advertised the study for women, a few male respondents participated and had no problems completing the task or dressing a female avatar; results are the same when controlling for gender (web appendix).

"Which designer has been the creative director of Christian Dior during his career?" Jean Paul Gautier, Karl Lagerfeld, Tom Ford, John Galliano; appendix A). As expected, members of the Retail and Luxury Club considered themselves more fashion-savvy ($M_{Ret\&Lux}$ = 5.16, SD = 1.34, vs. $M_{Others}$ = 4.04, SD = 1.71; $t(408)$ = 6.19, $p < .001$, $d = .69$) and got more questions right in the fashion test than the other respondents ($M_{Ret\&Lux}$ = 2.90, SD = 1.08, vs. $M_{Others}$ = 1.56, SD = 1.10; $t(407)$ = 10.96, $p < .001$, $d = 1.22$), indicating the known-groups validity of the cultural capital measure ($r = .35$, $p < .001$).

Given that each participant made four binary choices, we ran a repeated-measures logistic regression with the following independent variables: product type (coded as 1 for pairs with one upscale and one downscale item and 0 for the neutral pair), cultural capital (continuous), squared cultural capital, and an interaction term between product type and cultural capital. We coded the dependent variable for choice pairs where one option was more downscale (i.e., bags, hats, and shoes) as 1 for choice of downscale option and as 0 for choice of upscale option. We coded the dependent variable for the neutral pair (i.e., sunglasses) as 1 for the first pair of sunglasses and as 0 for the second pair (coding the two neutral products in the reverse order does not change the results).

Results

In addition to linear ($b = .33$, SE = .08, $\chi^2(1)$ = 17.98, $p < .001$) and quadratic ($b = .16$, SE = .08, $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.46, $p = .035$) effects of cultural capital, the analysis revealed the predicted product type $\times$ cultural capital interaction ($b = -.39$, SE = .14, $\chi^2(1)$ = 8.09, $p = .004$). As expected, among choice pairs where one option was downscale (i.e., bags, hats, and shoes),

respondents with high cultural capital (+1SD) were more likely to choose downscale products ($M_{High}$ = 46.6%) than those with midlevel ($M_{Middle}$ = 36.8%) and low ($M_{Low}$ = 31.1%) cultural capital (figure 2, left panel). A two-lines test for curvilinear trends (Simonsohn 2017) confirmed a significant, positive relationship between cultural capital and choice of downscale products after the minimum of the curve ($b$ = .32, SE = .08, $\chi^2(1)$ = 15.68, $p < .001$, $\varphi$ = .11; web appendix). For choice pairs where the options were equivalent on status (i.e., sunglasses), however, there was no effect of cultural capital or its squared term on choice (all $p$s > .1; figure 2, right panel).

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Insert figure 2 about here

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To test mixing and matching in choice pairs where one option was more downscale (i.e., bags, hats, and shoes), we also ran a multinomial logistic regression with the probability of picking either (1) all upscale items, (2) mixing and matching, or (3) all downscale items (all upscale as the reference category) as a function of cultural capital (continuous) and its square. As expected, the analysis revealed linear ($b$ = .35, SE = .15, $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.42, $p$ = .020; $\varphi$ = .11) and quadratic ($b$ = .29, SE = .17, $\chi^2(1)$ = 3.12, $p$ = .077; $\varphi$ = .09) effects of cultural capital on the probability of mixing and matching. While high cultural capital individuals (+1SD) were more likely to choose downscale products, only 14.8% of them selected such products every time. Instead, most of these respondents ($M_{High}$ = 65.7%) mixed and matched by picking at least one upscale and at least one downscale option.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial support for our theorizing. Compared with other groups, high-status individuals are more likely to choose downscale accessories. High-status individuals do not choose any differently, however, when the choice is between products that are equal on status. Moreover, we find preliminary support for mixing and matching, a notion that we test more directly in the following studies.

One question is whether the results are driven by impression management. For example, people might mix and match high and low items to mollify negative impressions often tied to conspicuous consumption of luxury goods (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013). However, ancillary data cast preliminary doubt on this possibility. Less than 5% of respondents mentioned anything about impression management in open-ended comments. We rule out this point more directly in study 2, by not including any type of public display in the instructions.

## STUDY 2: MIXING AND MATCHING HIGH AND LOW

Study 2 has six objectives. First, it examines the underlying process. We measure desire for distinction and examine whether it mediates the effect.

Second, it tests our mix-and-match prediction more directly. Rather than examining mixing and matching across items (as in study 1), we give respondents the chance to select options that themselves mix and match high and low. That is, in addition to an upscale and downscale option, each choice set includes a mix-and-match option (i.e., a real luxury product that mixes high and low taste, such as Helmut Lang's Trash Bag). Compared with other people, we expect high-status respondents to prefer products that mix and match high and low taste. Though not our focus, prior work posits that luxuries will be most popular among middle-status

respondents (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010) and that purely downscale items will be chosen most by low-status respondents (Bourdieu 1984).

Third, while the results of study 1 are supportive, a possible question is whether the downscale products used were truly low status. Although the pretest data collected indicates that those accessories were more downscale than the upscale options (all $ps < .001$), and their status ratings ($M = 3.55$, SD = 1.25) were lower than the scale midpoint ($t(97) = 3.51$, $p < .001$), it could be argued that these ratings are not particularly low. To address this point, study 2 uses items that are extremely downscale (e.g., polyester bag, $.99 IKEA shopping bag).

Fourth, while we tried to strike a balance between branded versus nonbranded options in study 1, most upscale products were conspicuously branded luxury goods (e.g., Gucci patterned hat), which high-status consumers may be reluctant to choose (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010). To avoid this concern, all upscale options in study 2 are subtle luxury goods, with no prominent logos. Because high-status consumers appreciate inconspicuous and sophisticated luxuries (Berger and Ward 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2016; Han et al. 2010), they should find these products particularly desirable. Thus, their choosing mix-and-match items in the presence of these luxuries will be a particularly strong and conservative test of our effect.

Fifth, to control for other aspects of aesthetic appearance, we ensure that the options in each set look as similar as possible (e.g., all rectangular-shaped red bags; appendix B).

Sixth, it could be argued that the results of study 1 hold only because we explicitly encouraged respondents to think about signaling. Study 2 omits any such mention.

Method

We decided in advance to recruit approximately 250 people for a study with no manipulated factor and four repeated choices. Respondents ($N = 259$, 100% female, $M_{age} = 29$) completed an online study. As in study 1, to recruit both regular respondents and those with high cultural capital in fashion, we collected responses through the Retail and Luxury Club at an American university and Qualtrics. The latter group was purposely recruited with similar age, gender, and socioeconomic status to those of the first group (see the web appendix for more details on subsamples and for all results controlling for demographics and respondents' pool).

First, we measured our proposed mediator, desire for distinction. We used two items from prior work (Berger and Ward 2010): "When purchasing clothing and apparel, how important is it to you to choose items that differentiate you from mainstream consumers?" and "How important is it for you to avoid items that typical mainstream consumers would buy?" (1 = not important at all, 7 = extremely important, $r = .76$, $p < .001$). To avoid potential order effects, we counterbalanced the distinction measures, so that they appeared either before the product choice tasks or after. Order of appearance had no effect and therefore is not discussed further.

Second, respondents made product choices. Specifically, they were shown four sets of items, one at the time, each including three products: an upscale option, a mix-and-match option, and a downscale option (appendix B). The order of these three items varied by choice set. In contrast with study 1, the four choices were independent, and participants were not asked to think of a single outfit. A pretest with 142 wealthy respondents recruited through Qualtrics (100% female, $M_{age} = 29$, American), reported in the web appendix, confirmed that the upscale options were indeed considered higher status and that the mix-and-match options had downscale associations. Importantly, mix-and-match products were not considered trendier or more original, and fashion knowledge did not moderate perceptions. To capture the dependent

variable, respondents chose one option from each set ("Imagine you are going out and can borrow one of these three products for the day, which one would you pick?").

Finally, we measured cultural capital using the measures from study 1 ($r = .38$, $p < .001$). As in study 1, members of the Retail and Luxury Club considered themselves more fashion-savvy ($M_{Ret\&Lux} = 4.93$, SD $= 1.49$, vs. $M_{Others} = 4.52$, SD $= 1.47$; $t(257) = 2.25$, $p = .025$, $d = .28$) and got more questions right in the fashion test ($M_{Ret\&Lux} = 2.91$, SD $= 1.12$, vs. $M_{Others} = 1.78$, SD $= 1.19$; $t(256) = 7.85$, $p < .001$, $d = .98$).

We ran a repeated-measures multinomial logistic regression with product choice as the dependent variable (one of three options; downscale products as the reference category) and with cultural capital (continuous) and squared cultural capital as the independent variables.

Results

In addition to linear ($b = .31$, SE $= .13$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.72$, $p = .018$) and quadratic ($b = .26$, SE $= .14$, $\chi^2(1) = 3.28$, $p = .070$) effects of cultural capital, the analysis revealed that cultural capital had different effects on mix-and-match ($b = 3.53$, SE $= .39$, $\chi^2(1) = 77.39$, $p < .001$) and upscale ($b = 1.69$, SE $= .21$, $\chi^2(1) = 70.61$, $p < .001$) products than on downscale products. To provide deeper insight into these results, we ran three separate repeated-measures logistic regressions examining the relationship between cultural capital and choice of each of the options (i.e., mix-and-match, upscale, downscale; figure 3). For each choice, we tested linear and quadratic models and report the one capturing the highest variance.

Confirming our hypothesis for mix-and-match options, there was a positive, linear effect of cultural capital ($b = .64$, SE $= .17$, $\chi^2(1) = 14.86$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = .12$). As predicted, high cultural

capital respondents (+1SD) chose mix-and-match products ($M_{High}$ = 14.4%) more than other respondents ($M_{Middle}$ = 9.9%, $M_{Low}$ = 5.1%). Moreover, the percentage opting for the mix-and-match products did not vary across product sets ($\chi^2(3)$ = 4.54, NS), suggesting no order effect.

For upscale and downscale products, however, the effects differed. For upscale items, the analysis revealed a significant, negative quadratic trend ($b$ = –.27, SE = .10, $\chi^2(1)$ = 6.86, $p$ = .009, $\varphi$ = .08). Respondents with midlevel cultural capital chose upscale items ($M_{Middle}$ = 83.5%) more than other respondents ($M_{High}$ = 79.2%, $M_{Low}$ = 77.2%).

For downscale options, there were negative, linear ($b$ = –.51, SE = .14, $\chi^2(1)$ = 12.86, $p$ < .001, $\varphi$ = .11) and quadratic ($b$ = .23, SE = .13, $\chi^2(1)$ = 2.86, $p$ = .091, $\varphi$ = .05) effects of cultural capital. Specifically, respondents with low cultural capital (–1SD) were more likely to choose downscale products ($M_{Low}$ = 17.6%) than other respondents ($M_{Middle}$ = 6.6%; $M_{High}$ = 6.4%).

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Insert figure 3 about here

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*Mediation*. Cultural capital was positively related to distinction ($b$ = .65, SE = .11, $t(256)$ = 5.85, $p$ < .001, $R^2$ = .118), and distinction mediated the effect of cultural capital on choice of mix and match[5] (indirect effect = .062; 95% CI = .016 to .112). Distinction did not mediate choice of either upscale (95% CI = –.077 to .021) or downscale (95% CI = –.083 to .005) options.

Discussion

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[5] Average probability of mix-and-match across 4 choices; mediation with dichotomous D.V. in web appendix.

Study 2 further supports our trickle-round dynamic and provides evidence for the underlying process. Compared with others, high-status consumers prefer items that mix and match high and low taste. Further, this preference is mediated by a desire for distinction.

A question is why the choice of mix-and-match options was low overall, even among high-status individuals. It is worth noting that we tested the effect in the presence of subtle luxuries that high-status individuals greatly appreciate (Berger and Ward 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2016; Han et al. 2010). Consequently, it is not surprising that these luxury products would be highly chosen. That said, consistent with our theory, mix-and-match options are systematically more popular among respondents with high cultural capital than others. Although high-status respondents *could* choose higher-end luxury items, a substantial proportion selected products that mix and match high and low taste instead.

Data from the pretest (web appendix) cast doubt on several alternative explanations. One may wonder whether people picked mix-and-match items to be original. This is not the case, however, as when respondents rated the products on originality, they viewed upscale products as the most original. Another question is whether respondents grasped that mix-and-match items entailed downscale elements. While only 23% of respondents thought the upscale items had downscale or low-status associations, the number was more than twice as high for mix-and-match options (52%, all $ps < .001$), which was equivalent to perceptions of the downscale options (49%). This confirms that the selected mix-and-match options successfully combined low (e.g., trash bag) and high (i.e., luxury brands) tastes. Finally, fashion knowledge in the pretest did not moderate these product perceptions, casting doubt on the possibility that the effects are driven by high- and low-knowledge respondents viewing these products differently.

**STUDY 3: MIXING AND MATCHING HIGH AND LOW IN FOOD**

Study 3 further tests the selection of options that mix and match high and low. Inspired by the menu data, we create menus associated with different social strata. As with high-end restaurants mixing high- and low-brow ingredients, we expect high-status respondents to prefer menus that mix and match signals.

To demonstrate the generalizability of our findings, we examine social status. Consistent with our conceptualization of status and prior work measuring social status (Adler et al. 2000; Holt 1998; Jain 1975; Kraus and Keltner 2009), we collect a series of measures tapping into both economic (e.g., income) and cultural (e.g., educational level of one's family) capital.

Moreover, we further examine the mediating role of desire for distinction. Given that social status is the quintessential formative construct, i.e., determined by a combination of indicators (Bollen and Lennox 1991), the proposed direction of the path from status to distinction in this study is more conclusive (e.g., it is unlikely that one's desire for distinction leads to higher parents' occupational status).

Finally, we measure alternative explanations, such as need for uniqueness and authenticity, to test whether they can explain the effects.

Method

We aimed at collecting approximately 600 people to provide enough power to detect small sized effects. We conducted the study twice. The first time, we recruited 601 respondents (45% female, $M_{age} = 37$, American) for a paid online survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The second time, to ensure high social status respondents would be represented in the

sample, we recruited 531 respondents (53% female, $M_{age} = 41$, American) also on Amazon MTurk, but this time half of the sample had to meet a high-income (i.e., $90,000 or above) screener for participation through Prime Panels (for more details on procedures and each subsample, see the web appendix). We collapsed the data ($N = 1,132$)[6] and report the overall findings below (see web appendix for results controlling for collection round, gender, and age and figure for each collection round). All respondents were told, "Imagine you are hosting a party and hired a chef to prepare the food. You can choose among 4 different menus, with varying style and inspirations." Four options, varying in the status they were associated with, were presented in random order:

1. High-Brow menu: This menu includes upscale, high-status recipes, ingredients, or places. Examples might include oysters, lobster tail salad, steak tartare, crab cake, selection of caviar, sacher torte.

2. Mix-and-Match Menu: This menu includes options that mix and match highbrow and lowbrow ingredients within the same dish. Examples might include truffled mac 'n cheese, grits and lobster, tuna tartare tacos, burger with foie gras, crab tater tots, s'mores with Modica chocolate.

3. Middle-Brow Menu: This menu includes options that are typically seen as mainstream and standard. Examples might include Caesar salad, fettuccini Alfredo, hamburger, clam chowder, chicken noodle soup, southern Cobb salad, cheesecake.

4. Low-Brow Menu: This menu includes options linked to downscale, low-status, or working-class recipes, ingredients, or places. Examples might include hot dogs, fried chicken, corn dogs, onion rings, chips, waffles, toasted marshmallow.

Next, we measured the dependent variables. We asked respondents to rank the options ("How would you rank order them? The first one is your favorite one") and to rate their liking ("Rate from 1 to 7 how much you like each option" 1 = I do not like it at all, 7 = I like it a lot).

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[6] For all Amazon MTurk data in the article and web appendix, we used an algorithm detecting bots based on IP address and GPS coordinates (https://itaysisso.shinyapps.io/Bots/). In this case, 43 responses were flagged as suspicious, leaving us with a final sample size of 1,089 (keeping these responses does not affect the following results and significance of the effects).

Given space constraints, we focus on the continuous liking results and report the ranking results in the web appendix (both outcomes lead to equivalent conclusions).

We then measured desire for distinction with the same two questions as in study 2 ($r =$ .65, $p < .001$) and also measured alternative explanations: need for uniqueness (3 items, $\alpha = .91$; e.g., "Often when buying merchandise, an important goal is to find something that communicates my uniqueness"; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001) and authenticity (3 items, $\alpha = .89$; e.g., "I actively seek to develop my personal authenticity by buying genuine products or brands"). The order of appearance of the items measuring distinction, need for uniqueness, and authenticity was randomized (for a list of all items, see web appendix).

As in the pilot study, we measured status through a series of established questions tapping into both economic and cultural capital (Adler et al. 2000; Holt 1998; Jain 1975; Kraus and Keltner 2009): "How would you rate the socioeconomic background of your family?" (1 = not wealthy at all, 7 = extremely wealthy); "What is your household gross income per year?" ($10,000 or less; from $11,000 to $30,000; from $31,000 to $50,000; from $51,000 to $120,000; $121,000 or more; Prefer not to answer)[7]; the ladder of socioeconomic status (1 = 1st step – bottom of the ladder, 10 = 10th step – top of the ladder; figure W1 in web appendix); "Select the occupation of your mother, your father, you, and your spouse/partner (if you have one)" (Blue collar or service; Clerical or self-employed; Professional or managerial; Other, e.g., student, homemaker[8]); and "Select the highest level of education of your mother, your father, you, and your spouse/partner (if you have one)" (High school degree; College degree; Master's degree; Higher degree, including doctorate and law degree). To avoid potential order effects, we

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[7] As in Adler et al. (2000), we ordinally coded this variable (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5); the results are robust to alternative coding approaches (e.g., midpoints of each bracket, endpoints). No value was assigned for "Prefer not to answer."
[8] As in Adler et al. (2000), no value was assigned for "Other."

counterbalanced the survey such that the status measures appeared either before the menus'

evaluation or after. Order of appearance had no effect and therefore is not discussed further.

We created an overall composite measure of social status by standardizing each variable

and taking their mean.[9] Though not a requirement for formative indicators such as social status

(Bollen and Lennox 1991), all status measures were positively correlated with each other (all $r$

varying from .26 to .72, $p < .001$). We conducted a series of regressions examining liking of each

menu option as a function of social status (continuous) and its square.

Results

For the mix-and-match menu (figure 4 left), our focus, the analysis revealed effects of

both social status ($b = .28$, SE $= .06$, $t(1,084) = 4.84$, $p < .001$) and its square ($b = .12$, SE $= .06$,

$t(1,084) = 1.93$, $p = .054$, $R^2 = .023$). As expected, high-status individuals (+1SD) liked the mix-

and-match menu ($M_{High} = 5.89$, SD $= 1.23$) more than respondents with midlevel ($M_{Middle} = 5.39$,

SD $= 1.49$) and low ($M_{Low} = 5.33$, SD $= 1.55$) status. A two-lines test for curvilinear trends

(Simonsohn 2017) confirmed the positive relationship between status and choice after the

minimum of the curve (see analysis and figure W7 in web appendix).

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Insert figure 4 about here

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We performed the same analysis for the other menus. For each choice, we tested linear

and quadratic models and report below the one capturing the highest variance. For the high-brow

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[9] We also conducted the analyses with economic capital (first three measures) and cultural capital (last two measures) separately and found similar results when examining these constructs in isolation.

menu, the analysis revealed a significant linear effect of social status ($b = .39$, SE $= .07$, $t(1,084)$ $= 5.83$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .030$). Specifically, high-status individuals (+1SD) expressed higher liking for the high-brow menu ($M_{High} = 4.99$, SD $= 1.59$) than other respondents ($M_{Middle} = 4.54$, SD $= 1.68$; $M_{Low} = 4.25$, SD $= 1.87$). The results for the mid-brow and low-brow menus were different. In the case of mid-brow menu, social status and its square were not significantly related to liking and, in the case of the low-brow menu, only social status squared ($b = .22$, SE $= .07$, $t(1,084) = 3.08$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = .009$) significantly influenced liking (figure 4).

*Mediation*. As predicted, distinction mediated the relationship between status and liking of the mix-and-match menu. Because the relationship between status and liking was curvilinear, we relied on the approach specifically developed for testing nonlinear mediation (Hayes and Preacher 2010). First, status ($b = .28$, SE $= .06$, $t(1,084) = 4.49$, $p < .001$) and its square ($b = .25$, SE $= .07$, $t(1,084) = 3.77$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .028$) were positively related to distinction. Second, as expected, for high-status respondents (+1SD), distinction mediated the effect of status on liking of the mix-and-match menu (instantaneous indirect effect $= .078$; 95% CI $= .038$ to $.131$; figure W8). Neither uniqueness (95% CI $= -.005$ to $.021$) nor authenticity (95% CI $= -.005$ to $.029$) mediated the effect of status on liking.

Discussion

Study 3 further demonstrates that high-status individuals prefer items that mix and match high and low taste. In addition, this study extends the generalizability of our results, demonstrating our proposed trickle-round dynamic of taste with social status. As hypothesized,

these effects are driven by a desire for distinction. Neither need for uniqueness nor authenticity mediate the effect, casting doubt on these potential alternative explanations.

## STUDY 4: STATUS-SIGNALING GAME

To further test the role of distinction, studies 4–6 manipulate it directly. We suggest that high-status individuals mix and match different types of signals partly to distinguish themselves from lower social strata. If our theorizing is correct, this effect should be particularly pronounced when lower social strata begin imitating the upper class. To test this possibility, we create a stylized signaling game with monetary rewards. The design is inspired by minimalistic paradigms and ultimatum games examining complex phenomena, such as overearning (Hsee et al. 2013) and competition (Hsee et al. 2012), in controlled lab settings.

Participants are asked to imagine a society with three types of people (highs, middles, and lows), in which signaling occurs exclusively through the type of watch owned. Watches vary on two dimensions (shape and color), and certain watches are associated with each status group (e.g., highs wearing yellow-triangle watches). Also included are neutral-shape and color watches (e.g., green-rectangular watches) that are not associated with any group. All participants imagine being high status and play multiple rounds of a signaling game. In each round, they choose one of 16 watches as a signal to send to observers. If observers correctly identify their high status, choosers win additional compensation.

To test distinction, we manipulate whether high-status signals are co-opted by middles. The first round examines participants' choices in the absence of imitation. In the second round, participants are informed that the middles have begun copying the highs. Participants again

choose signals. We expect that highs will diverge and adopt low-status-associated watches to distinguish themselves from middles in response to this imitation threat.

Note that we specifically include two signaling dimensions (shape and color) to examine our mix-and-match hypothesis. If participants simply wanted to signal low status, they could pick an option that has *only* those associations. Instead, our theorizing suggests that they will chose options that combine downscale tastes on one dimension and upscale tastes on another (e.g., high-status color/low-status shape). This grants distinction from the middles, while not being completely identical to the lows.

Method

We aimed to collect as many participants as possible during a lab session at an American university, but at least 200 in total. Participants ($N = 210$, 61% female, $M_{age} = 26$) completed a two-round game with the possibility of winning up to $2 additional compensation.

First, we introduced participants to a game in which "observers" make inferences about them.[10] Participants were told, "Imagine you live in a society that has three types of people: highs, middles, and lows. In this society, the type of watch one wears signals one's identity to others. Specifically, watches vary on two dimensions: shape and color. The highs wear watches that are triangular and yellow; middles wear watches that are square and red; and lows wear watches that are pentagon and blue. Rectangular and green watches are not associated with any group (there is no meaning attached to this shape or color)." Figure 5 provides a graphical depiction of the watches. We purposely selected all polygon shapes and did not include a round

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[10] A pretest with observers ($N = 603$; reported in the web appendix) determined the payoff for participants in the main study. Participants did not know the payoffs of the game a priori.

watch, leaving out the most common watch shape, which may potentially drive participants' choice.

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Insert figure 5 about here

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All participants were assigned to the high-status group and asked to choose a watch for the first round, "You can pick whichever option you like, but your objective is to signal to others that you are a high type and you will receive $1 if others correctly guess your type." All the possible combinations were visually displayed in a graph (figure 6), and participants selected their option from a randomized drop-down list. Consistent with the observer pretest, participants were awarded $1 after the first round if they chose the watch associated with highs (i.e., yellow-triangle watch). If they picked any other watch, they learned that they did not earn $1. Note that positively reinforcing people who chose the original watch should encourage them to pick it again, providing a conservative test of our effect.

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Insert figure 6 about here

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Before making their second-round choice, participants were told that others were imitating them and shown a graph (figure 7). Specifically, they were told, "Before starting the second round, it is important to note a change in the dynamics of the society: People are imitating the choices of the group above them. Accordingly, many middles have started to copy the watches of the highs. Some of them switched to triangular shape, some of them switched to yellow color, and some of them switched to both triangular shape and yellow color. As a result, it is unclear whether yellow and triangle signal high or middle." To ensure that the specific

description of the shock would not influence participants' choices, we randomly assigned them to the imitation scenario described (i.e., middle imitating) or a scenario with imitation stemming from both middles and lows (see web appendix for this variation). This factor does not change the results (suggesting that imitation from the middles is the necessary and sufficient condition to trigger the effect) and analyses controlling for shock descriptions lead to the same conclusions.

Then, participants chose a shape and color for the second round. We were particularly interested in whether they would deviate from the high-status watch (i.e., yellow-triangle), and if so, which of the 15 possible alternatives they would choose—specifically, whether they would opt for watches that mix and match high and low (i.e., yellow-pentagon and blue-triangle).

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Insert figure 7 about here

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Finally, participants commented on their choice (open-ended) and then, on a separate page, rated how well (1 = not well at all, 7 = extremely well) the following five statements described their thought processes when making their second-round selection: "I wanted to … (1) be authentic, (2) differentiate myself from middles, (3) differentiate myself from lows, (4) fit in, (5) stand out." Participants answered these questions before learning whether they earned the $1 in the second round. To lessen demand effects, we randomized the order of appearance of the items and included non-focal motives (e.g., "fit in"). Given each participant made two choices (one per round), we ran a series of repeated-measures logistic regressions with choice of specific watches as the dependent variable.

Results

As expected, in the first round almost all participants selected the original high-status watch (i.e., yellow-triangle, $M$ = 94.8%; figure 8). When faced with imitation in the second round, however, the percentage selecting the high-status watch decreased substantially ($M$ = 61.4%; $\chi^2(1)$ = 56.03, $p$ < .001, $\varphi$ = .37), with many highs diverging to a different option.

When selecting a different option, however, participants did not select randomly; instead, they converged to an option combining high and low associations. As figure 8 shows, the most popular option among divergent participants was the yellow-pentagon watch ($M$ = 14.8%), which mixed high-status color and low-status shape, and this choice significantly increased between rounds ($M_{1st}$ = 1.4% vs. $M_{2nd}$ = 14.8%; $\chi^2(1)$ = 15.89, $p$ < .001, $\varphi$ = .19). Moreover, of the 15 alternatives to yellow-triangle, the yellow-pentagon was the option chosen most often ($M_{Yellow\ Rectangle}$ = 9.0%; $\chi^2(1)$ = 3.27, $p$ = .071, $\varphi$ = .09; $M_{Green\ Triangle}$ = 5.7%; $\chi^2(1)$ = 9.35, $p$ = .002, $\varphi$ = .15) and it was the only option chosen significantly above chance (chance = 6.25%; $\chi^2(1)$ = 8.23, $p$ = .004, $\varphi$ = .14).[11]

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Insert figure 8 about here

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*Distinction.* As predicted, the choice to diverge and select the high/low combination was linked to a desire for distinction from the middles. Compared with those sticking with the high-status watch, participants selecting the mix-and-match combination reported greater interest in distinguishing themselves from middles ($M_{Yellow\ Pentagon}$ = 6.19, SD = .87, vs. $M_{Yellow\ Triangle}$ = 4.33, SD = 2.11; $t(158)$ = 4.79, $p$ < .001, $d$ = .96). Moreover, these participants indicated that distinction from the middles best described what drove their choice. This motive was

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[11] Of note, 96% of participants across rounds selected options from the first rows. This layout sets a conservative test of our effect, as it may favor picking the high or no-association options (i.e., yellow-rectangle and green-triangle) given that they are the only choices with two options in that row.

significantly higher than any other motives, including generic need for uniqueness ($M = 5.0$, SD $= 2.07$; $t(30) = 3.07$, $p = .005$, $d = .56$) and authenticity ($M = 4.23$, SD $= 1.98$; $t(30) = 5.35$, $p < .001$, $d = .93$).

Though not directly related to our theory, authenticity was the highest-rated motive ($M = 5.22$, SD $= 2.01$; all $p$s $< .001$) for those who stayed with the high-status watch (i.e., yellow-triangle). This suggests that while authenticity can lead people to stay with the same choice when others imitate them, it cannot explain our pattern of results. A qualitative analysis of the open comments participants wrote after the second round helped shed light on their thought processes. Specifically, the comments of participants who chose the mix-and-match combination (i.e., yellow-pentagon) revealed that the majority (58%) sought distinction from middles, with some (25%) even noting that they chose to mix and match strategically so that the middles would not want to imitate them (e.g., "Because middles and lows could not choose this watch, I chose it"; "Since the mid-level would not wear a low shape or color, one way to differentiate high level would be to wear a high color and a low shape or a low color and a high shape"). The web appendix also reports some of the open comments of participants opting for the high-status watch (i.e., yellow-triangle) or the no-association options (e.g., yellow-rectangle).

*Follow-up Study.* To replicate these results with higher power and examine the distinction threat even more directly, we conducted the same study online ($N = 526$; web appendix) and manipulated imitation between conditions (not only between rounds). This follow-up study replicated the results of study 4 and further revealed that imitation moderated the effect. As predicted, highs adopted mix-and-match options only when imitated. In the absence of imitation from the middles, we found no evidence of signals trickling round.

Discussion

Results of study 4 further support to our theorizing. First, high-status individuals selected low-status-associated options only when traditional markers of superiority were threatened.

Second, when highs diverged, they did not pick randomly; instead, they chose items that mixed and matched high and low associations. Similar to high-end restaurants blending upscale and downscale items in a single dish (e.g., Lobster Mac 'n Cheese), rather than adopting low-status tastes throughout, imitation by middles leads high-status individuals to select products that mix and match high and low taste. Third, consistent with our theorizing, this behavior is positively linked to distinction from the middles. Need for uniqueness, authenticity, and other factors do not show the same pattern, casting doubt on these potential alternative explanations.

Finally, while highs could pick any novel item to differentiate themselves from middles, even when such options are available, some highs still prefer to mix and match. That is, even when highs could select items with no existing association (i.e., green-rectangular watches) or novel items associated with highs (i.e., yellow-rectangular watches), a significant number still chose mix-and-match options. While we do not mean to suggest that highs never choose novel items to distinguish themselves, these findings provide some evidence that even when such options are available, mix and match is still a desirable strategy. We discuss this point further in the General Discussion section.

While choices of the other mix-and-match option (blue-triangle watch) did not increase in the second round, this is likely because of the specific layout of the game. Across rounds, most participants picked from the top row (96%), and the same pattern appears in subsequent studies. The top row may receive more visual attention, or it may get attention because it is associated

with the highest rank, and participants were thinking of themselves as high status. Regardless, this cannot explain our effect. Rather than choosing *any* item in the top row, participants were only more likely to choose the one that mixed and matched high and low taste.

## STUDY 5: NUMBER OF SIGNALING DIMENSIONS

Study 5 tests the role of multiple signaling dimensions. Rather than simply trying to imitate lows, we have argued that high-status individuals adopt some, but not all, aspects of low-status signals as a way of distinguishing themselves from middles. If this trickle-round dynamic is correct, the number of signaling dimensions should moderate this effect. When multiple dimensions are available, highs can mix and match, adopting items that combine high- and low-status dimensions. When only a single signaling dimension is available, however, such a combination is no longer possible, and highs should be less likely to imitate lows because it will make them indistinguishable from lows.

Study 5 examines this possibility. We adapt the paradigm from study 4 and manipulate the number of status-signaling dimensions available. Half the participants were assigned to the same society as study 4, in which two dimensions (i.e., shape and color of the watch) are available. The other half were assigned to a simpler society, in which signaling occurs only on one dimension (i.e., watch shape). Our theorizing posits that the adoption of low-status-associated guises will decrease when the ability to express status is confined to one signaling dimension. Finally, we again measure distinction to determine whether this motive drives the effect in the context of our game.

Method

We aimed to collect as many participants as possible during a lab session at an American university, but at least 200 in total. Participants ($N = 211$, 69% female, $M_{age} = 21$) completed a two-round game with the possibility of winning up to $2 additional compensation. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: two-dimension or one-dimension.

The only difference between the conditions was the number of available signaling dimensions. The procedure for the two-dimension condition was identical to that in study 4, with watches varying on both color and shape. The one-dimension condition was similar, but all colors were removed (figure 9), so the only signaling dimension was the shape of the watch. To ensure that the study 4 results were not somehow driven by some shapes and colors being more natural for watches, we changed the links between specific groups and particular colors and shapes from what we used study 4. We also gathered additional data for the observers to establish payoffs in the one-dimension condition ($N = 160$; web appendix).

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Insert figure 9 about here

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As in study 4, participants made a first-round choice and then entered a second round in which they were informed of middle-status imitation (see figure W12 in web appendix).[12] Next, they completed the second-round choice, our key dependent variable. Finally, participants rated the same statements as in study 4 describing their thoughts when making the second-round selection.

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[12] As in study 4, in the second round we randomly assigned people to imitation stemming from middles or imitation stemming from both middles and lows. Again, this variation did not influence the results.

We focused on whether people chose watches with low-status associations (i.e., in the two-dimension condition: any combination including rectangular shape or green color, or both; in the one-dimension condition: rectangular shape). Given the repeated measures design of the study (i.e., each participant made two choices, one per round) and the binary dependent variable (coded as 1 for choosing a watch with low-status associations and 0 for other choices), we ran a repeated-measures logistic regression with round, condition, and an interaction term between round and condition as independent variables.

Results

In addition to an effect of round ($\chi^2(1) = 8.56$, $p = .003$) and number of signaling dimensions ($\chi^2(1) = 9.79$, $p = .002$), the results revealed the predicted interaction ($\chi^2(1) = 4.40$, $p = .036$; figure 10). When two signaling dimensions were available, the effects mirrored study 4: co-option led a significant proportion of high-status individuals to abandon the purely high-status option ($M_{first\text{-}round} = 96.2\%$ vs. $M_{second\text{-}round} = 48.6\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 38.65$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = .43$) and pick options associated with low-status groups instead ($M_{first\text{-}round} = 1.0\%$ vs. $M_{second\text{-}round} = 17.1\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 8.56$, $p = .003$, $\varphi = .2$). When the number of signaling dimensions was restricted to one, however, this effect disappeared, and the percentage of participants opting for low status was identical between rounds ($M_{first\text{-}round} = 1.9\%$ vs. $M_{second\text{-}round} = 1.9\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 0$, NS). Furthermore, participants in the second round were more likely to pick low-status-associated options in the two- than one-dimension condition ($M_{2\text{-}dim} = 17.1\%$ vs. $M_{1\text{-}dim} = 1.9\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 9.79$, $p = .002$, $\varphi = .22$).

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Insert figure 10 about here

As in study 4, the results in the two-dimension condition lend support to our hypotheses. As noted previously, the high-status watch (i.e., red-square) was the most recurring option in the second round ($M = 48.6\%$). A more granular analysis of the 15 alternatives to the high-status watch shows that the most popular choice was the product that mixed and matched high color and low shape (i.e., red-rectangular watch, $M = 15.2\%$). This high-low combination was the top chosen alternative option in the second round and the only one occurring significantly above chance (chance $= 6.25\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 3.95$, $p = .046$, $\varphi = .14$). By contrast, in the one-dimension condition, the majority stuck with the high-status watch ($M_{Square} = 78.3\%$), and none of the alternatives emerged over chance (25% in this case).

*Distinction.* As in study 4, the choice to diverge and select the high/low combination in the two-dimension condition was linked to gaining distinction from the middles. Compared with participants who stuck with the high-status watch, participants who picked the mix-and-match combination in the second round reported greater interest in distinguishing themselves from middles ($M_{Red\ Rectangle} = 5.81$, SD $= 1.42$, vs. $M_{Red\ Square} = 4.04$, SD $= 2.24$; $t(65) = 2.98$, $p = .004$, $d = .89$). These participants also said that this desire for distinction best described what drove their choice. This was significantly higher than any other motives, including need for uniqueness ($M = 4.69$, SD $= 1.78$; $t(15) = 2.52$, $p = .023$, $d = .63$) and authenticity ($M = 4.25$, SD $= 1.92$; $t(15) = 2.55$, $p = .022$, $d = .69$).

Discussion

Consistent with our theorizing, study 5 further demonstrates that the number of signaling dimensions available moderates the effect observed in study 4. When multiple status-signaling dimensions are available, and thus highs can use the second dimension to distinguish themselves from subordinate tiers, they mix and match high and low elements. When only one dimension is present, however, and adopting the low-status-associated option would lead the highs to be indistinguishable from lows, the effect is mitigated.

## STUDY 6: MANIPULATING DISTINCTION

Study 6 further tests the underlying role of distinction in a consumer domain. We use study 1's dressing game and, building on prior work experimentally priming distinction (Berger and Shiv 2011; Brewer and Pickett 1999), manipulate desire for distinction between conditions.

In contrast to studies 1 and 2 examining consumers with varying degrees of cultural capital in the domain of fashion and luxury goods, this study examines a low-cultural-capital sample. We predict that encouraging some of these respondents to distinguish themselves from the middle-status will lead them to choose more downscale products and mix and match them with other types of signals than a control condition. In other words, respondents in the distinction condition will chose more similarly to how the high-status consumers, with high chronic levels of distinction, naturally do.

Method

We used the effect size observed in study 1 to determine that a sample of approximately 600 to 700 respondents (i.e., more than 300 per condition) would guarantee between 80% and

90% power (see web appendix for power analysis and sample size). We recruited 718 respondents (100% female, $M_{age} = 41$, American) for a paid online survey through Amazon MTurk. The same online tool used in study 3 flagged 67 responses as suspicious, leaving us with a final sample size of 651 (keeping these responses in does not affect the following results and significance of the effects). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions: control or distinction. All were introduced to the same dressing game as in study 1 and picked their favorite avatar (appendix A). In the control condition, the procedure was identical to study 1. In the distinction condition, the instructions included an additional sentence manipulating distinction at the end: "As you are choosing what to wear, imagine that you are really trying to distinguish yourself from other middle-status attendees at the event." Pretest results ($N = 208$; web appendix) confirmed that the manipulation boosted a desire for distinction from the middles ($M_{Dist} = 4.05$, SD = 2.19, vs. $M_{Control} = 2.24$, SD = 1.49; $t(206) = 6.99$, $p < .001$, $d = .97$) in a sample drawn from the same population of respondents with low levels of cultural capital in fashion and luxury goods.

The dependent variable (i.e., four binary product choices) was the same as in study 1 and was coded in the same way for analyses. We ran a repeated-measures logistic regression with the following independent variables: product type (coded as 1 for pairs including one upscale and one downscale item and 0 for the neutral pair), distinction condition (coded as 0 for control and 1 for distinction), and an interaction term between product type and distinction.

Results

In addition to an effect of condition ($\chi^2(1) = 8.23$, $p = .004$), the results revealed the predicted interaction ($\chi^2(1) = 3.99$, $p = .046$; see figure 11). As expected, for choice pairs where one option was more downscale (i.e., bags, hats, and shoes), boosting a desire for distinction led respondents to pick more downscale products ($M_{Dist} = 43.5\%$ vs. $M_{Control} = 35.7\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 8.23$, $p = .004$, $\varphi = .07$). There was no such effect, however, for choice pairs where the options were status equivalent (i.e., sunglasses) ($M_{Dist} = 49.8\%$ vs. $M_{Control} = 51.5\%$; $\chi^2(1) = .18$, NS).

To test mixing and matching in choice pairs where one option was more downscale (i.e., bags, hats, and shoes), we conducted a multinomial logistic regression examining the probability of picking (1) all upscale items, (2) mixing and matching, or (3) all downscale items (all upscale as the reference category) as a function of condition. As expected, the analysis revealed a significant effect of condition ($\chi^2(2) = 8.95$, $p = .011$, $\varphi = .12$). While respondents in the distinction condition were more likely to choose downscale products, only 16.9% of them selected such products every time. As in study 1, most respondents in this condition (55.9%) picked at least one upscale and at least one downscale option, whereas respondents in the control mixed and matched to a lesser extent (50.3%).

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Insert figure 11 about here

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Discussion

Study 6 provides further evidence for the underlying role of distinction in a consumer-relevant context. Boosting a desire for distinction from the middle status leads people to select downscale products more often and mix and match them with other signals.

# GENERAL DISCUSSION

Conspicuous consumption suggests that people often buy expensive goods to signal wealth and status. Trickle-down theories indicate that fashions typically start with high-status individuals and move their way downward. Many examples, however, seem to contradict these approaches: jeans were originally worn by miners and factory workers before celebrities adopted them, and famous chefs often use commercial junk food in their sophisticated dishes. When and why do high-status individuals sometimes adopt tastes associated with low-status groups?

We adopt a signaling perspective to explain this phenomenon and propose that some signals trickle round, moving directly from the lower to the upper class, before diffusing to the middle class. Emulating low-status groups is too risky and costly for middles, and, as a result, adopting some low-status items grants distinction to the highs. Consistent with our distinction-based account, a series of studies demonstrates that high-status individuals mix and match traditionally low-status items with other types of signals (studies 1–6). These effects are triggered by imitation from middle-status others (studies 3–4) and driven by a desire for distinction (studies 2–6). Furthermore, the number of communication dimensions available plays an important moderating role (study 5). While low-status items signal low status on their own, the presence of multiple signaling dimensions allows them to be mixed and matched with high-status tastes (e.g., lobster tacos), disambiguating their meaning.

Related Mechanisms and Complementary Perspectives

We demonstrate that highs mix and match high and low items partly to distinguish themselves from middles. We do not suggest that this is the only driver of the effect, as other factors may also encourage high-status adoption of lowbrow tastes. For example, chefs may choose the cheapest ingredients to cook a fancy meal to flaunt their competence. In the face of prejudice against or exclusion of low-status groups, highs may adopt low-status items to signal empathy and their belief in diversity. Alternatively, cultural eclecticism or omnivorousness (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Peterson and Kern 1996), voluntary simplicity (Etzioni 2004), uniqueness and exoticness (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Tian et al. 2001), authenticity (Hahl et al. 2017), impression management (Ferraro et al. 2013), comparison-driven self-evaluation and restoration (Shalev and Morwitz 2012), and horizontal signaling (Han et al. 2010) could all play a role. For example, recent work indicates that in lowbrow genres such as outsider art, elites prefer more authentic options (e.g., a self-promoted outsider artist) to address feelings of insecurity linked to belonging to the upper class (Hahl et al. 2017).

Although these mechanisms cannot fully explain our findings,[13] they provide a broader perspective on the trickle-round phenomenon and its likely multiply determined nature. Indeed, elites choosing lowbrow culture may pursue different motives at once. For example, distinction-seeking and authenticity-seeking motives can work in tandem and are not mutually exclusive (for a discussion, see Hahl et al. 2017). Similarly, some consumers broaden their consumption to simultaneously combine an inclusionary ideology of democratic consumption and an exclusionary ideology of distinction (Johnston and Baumann 2007).

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[13] In the pilot study, the results hold even in the absence of retro and exotic items (as omnivorousness would suggest). In studies 2 and 3, highs do not downgrade to the lowest options (as voluntary simplicity would suggest) but opt for options that mix and match high and low. In studies 4 and 5, respondents chose to mix and match only when imitated by middles; this choice is not related to authenticity or mere uniqueness.

Our work also dovetails with research exploring the inferences people make when an individual deviates from the norm (Bellezza et al. 2014; Warren and Campbell 2014; Warren and Mohr 2018). Rather than focusing on observers, however, we focus on the actors and their adoption of low-status styles and tastes. Future research could explore more directly whether observers truly make different inferences when a person adopts a mix-and-match strategy. In line with extant work, we would predict that observers may be more likely to reward this signaling strategy when they have a closer relationship with the person (Warren and Mohr 2018), when they have high levels of need for uniqueness (Bellezza et al. 2014), and when they view social norms as being overly repressive (Warren and Campbell 2014).

Historical Changes in Aesthetics

A brief analysis of twentieth-century taste changes and aesthetics sheds light on the context in which elites began abandoning traditional status signals to appropriate low-status items. Since the Industrial Revolution, a wealthier middle class has increased demand for luxury goods, and mass-production has enabled significant increases in supply. As a consequence, the signal value of consuming luxuries has progressively decreased, and these goods are no longer reliable status indicators (Blumberg 1974; Eckhardt et al. 2016; Holt 1998).

Furthermore, paradigm shifts in culture gradually laid the groundwork for the rise of alternative signals from the bottom (Peterson and Kern 1996). Until the beginning of the twentieth century, it was widely accepted that the beautiful (the aesthetic) belonged to the essence of fine (Horvath 2013). Elitist theorists of the Royal Academies of music, painting, drama, and dance argued among themselves but stood united in their belief that there was one

aesthetic standard and that all other art expressions were vulgarities (White and White 1965). By contrast, the new artistic and philosophical avant-gardes of the twentieth century fundamentally questioned these archetypes and began seeking newer and more exotic forms of expression.

Precisely in this context some artists and connoisseurs began taking advantage of tasteless objects that, if wisely immersed in refined environments, would acquire the opposite valence (the so-called good taste of the bad taste; Dorfles 1970). This process of sublimation is often referred to as "kitsch" or "camp," an aesthetic style and sensibility that regards an item as appealing because of its bad taste and ironic value (Sontag 1964). In the cultural sphere, being camp is being committed to the trash aesthetic or to a sort of "cultural slumming" (Booth 1983).

This paradigm shift throughout the course of the century was enacted in all fields of consumption, including food, interior décor, clothing, popular culture, hobbies, and sport (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). Importantly though, only some individuals, equipped with the right knowledge or cultural capital (Booth 1983; Bourdieu 1984), can decode these newer, more sophisticated signals. Thus, rather than accruing distinction from luxury goods and pecuniary rarity, high-status individuals consume objects that are ideationally difficult and can only be appreciated by the few who have acquired the ability to do so (Holt 1998).

Directions for Future Research

One question for future research is why elites adopt certain lowbrow items. Among all types of possible working-class clothes, why did jeans, in particular, emerge? Why did Mac 'n Cheese become in vogue among expensive restaurants rather than other, equally lowbrow food?

While this may just be random, do certain lowbrow items have characteristics that make them more likely than others to be adopted by high-status groups?

Perceived authenticity may be one key feature (Hahl et al. 2017). The ability to mix and match with high-status components may also play a role. Certain lowbrow ingredients, for example, may lend themselves to being easily combined with more expensive ones. Potato chips, for example, may pair well in terms of taste and shape with other highbrow delicacies, while other junk food options may not be as versatile. Similarly, certain flea-market clothing items may pair well with expensive garments, while others may not.

Another question is the longevity of alternative status signals. One possibility is that because middle-status individuals may hesitate to copy them, status signals originating from the bottom of society stay in vogue for a longer period. Compared with items that trickle down from the top, middles may be more tentative about poaching originally low-status signals. As a result, the fashion cycles of these alternative signals might be slower. For example, ripped jeans might take longer to become mainstream than other similar items devoid of low-status connotation.

While we focused on high-status groups adopting tastes associated with low-status groups, similar dynamics may also occur with marginalized groups or countercultural communities that exist on the fringe of society. Some trends and styles adopted by high-status consumers and luxury brands do indeed come from marginalized groups or countercultures, such as hippies, bikers, or goths (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2012; McCracken 1986; Warren and Campbell 2014; Warren et al. 2019). 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 (e.g., hippies) or determined to prevent their culture from being appropriated (e.g., punks; McCracken 1986). Consider Louis Vuitton's collaboration with Takeshi Murakami, an artist

inspired by the otaku subculture (i.e., Japanese comic fanatics). This collaboration mixes and matches mundane cartoon characters (e.g., smiling flowers, skulls) and high-priced leather goods (web appendix). Similarly, Gucci's recent campaign and collection "Gucci in the Streets" (#GucciDansLesRues; web appendix) seize inspiration from students' counterculture and the May 1968 protests in Paris. Future research might more directly examine tastes emerging from subcultures and marginalized groups (not just low-status groups) and test their role in granting distinction to high-status adopters.

Research might also examine which high-status individuals are more likely to adopt trickle-round signals. These signals are riskier than traditional status symbols, and thus not all high-status individuals may feel comfortable adopting them. Studies might examine whether certain factors differentiate the highs who are willing to take such risks from those who are not. While this extends beyond our empirical results, one possibility is that mixing and matching is also a way to signal a specific subtype within high-status individuals.

Managerial Implications

If low-status items trickle round and become high, what implications does this have for managers and brands? High-end brands can stay relevant by incorporating select downscale styles and trends in their collections. Indeed, some luxury brands already use this strategy, and we included some of these as stimuli for study 2. Brands such as Prada and Gucci have produced luxury versions of traditionally low-key or unremarkable items, such as pool slides and legwarmers. In an interview, Miuccia Prada, the head designer of the luxury brand of the same name, declared that she is constantly fighting established beauty clichés and working to

introduce ugliness in her designs (Marchetti 2015). This choice will certainly alienate some consumers, but our results suggest that the sophisticated consumers may appreciate this move.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on how status symbols evolve in a world where more consumers can afford luxury goods. As the traditional markers of superiority lose their signaling value, high-status individuals may purposefully choose to mix and match different types of signals as an alternative signaling strategy to distinguish themselves.

**APPENDIX A**

**Study 1: Stimuli**

In this study we are going to play a dressing game. Imagine you are about to attend a catwalk during fashion week in New York. Pick your favorite avatar which will be your alter ego for the event.
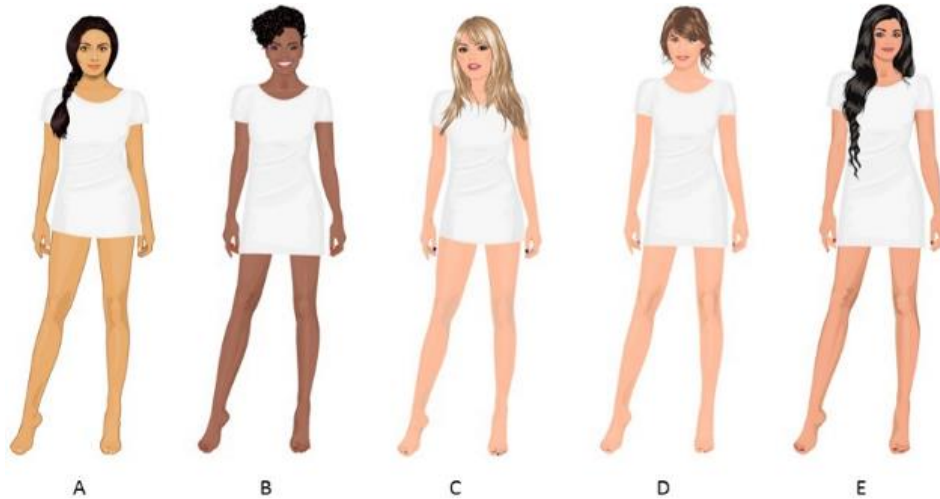


Although you are wearing a very simple, white solid color dress, what really matters is your choice of accessories. People at this event will really value and make inferences about you based on your choice of these accessories.

**Pretest and Study 1: Product Stimuli**

1. Set of Bags (in order: upscale and downscale option)



2. Set of Hats (in order: downscale and upscale option)

3. Set of Shoes (in order: downscale and upscale option)
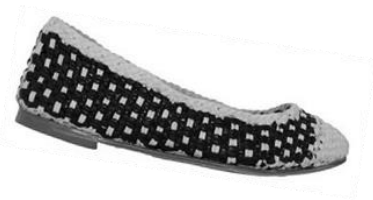


4. Set of Glasses (options perceived as equally upscale/downscale)



NOTE. — Products' pictures in the study were black and white, as above, to make images more homogeneous.

**Study 1: Fashion Knowledge Questions**

Respondents answered a brief fashion quiz with four questions that test their objective fashion knowledge (correct answer bold): (1) "Which designer has created a collection for Louis Vuitton?" (**Takashi Murakami**, Yohji Yamamoto, Renzo Piano, Philippe Starck); (2) "What is the name of one of the iconic Hermès bags?" (Lafayette, **Birkin**, Jaqueline, Mademoiselle); (3) "Which designer has been the creative director of Christian Dior during his career?" (Jean Paul Gautier, Karl Lagerfeld, Tom Ford, **John Galliano**); and (4) "Which brand is known for its *intrecciato* technique?" (**Bottega Veneta**, Prada, Fendi, Louis Vuitton).

## APPENDIX B

**Study 2: Product Stimuli**

1. Set of Blue Bags (in order: upscale, downscale, and mix-and-match option)



Bottega Veneta Tote bag

Ikea Shopping bag

Balenciaga Tote bag

2. Set of Shoes (in order: downscale, mix-and-match, and upscale option)



Crocs

Balenciaga Foam shoes

Prada wedges

3. Set of Red Bags (in order: mix-and-match, upscale, and downscale option)



Helmut Lang "trash bag"

Prada Vela bag

Polyester shopping bag
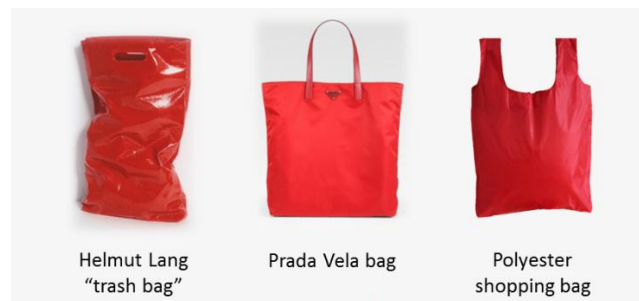
4. Set of Perfumes (in order: upscale, downscale, and mix-and-match option)



"Gabrielle" perfume by Chanel

"W" perfume by Banana Republic

"Fresh" perfume by Moschino (an Italian luxury brand)

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**FIGURES**

FIGURE 1: PRODUCTS MIXING AND MATCHING HIGH AND LOW TASTE



FIGURE 2: PRODUCT CHOICE AS A FUNCTION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL
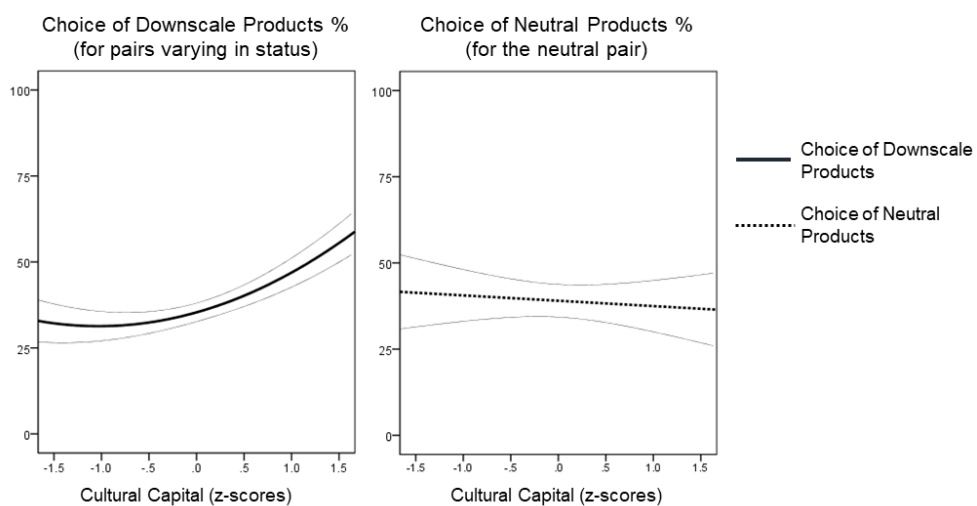


NOTE.— Lines around means represent 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE 3: PRODUCT CHOICE AS A FUNCTION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL
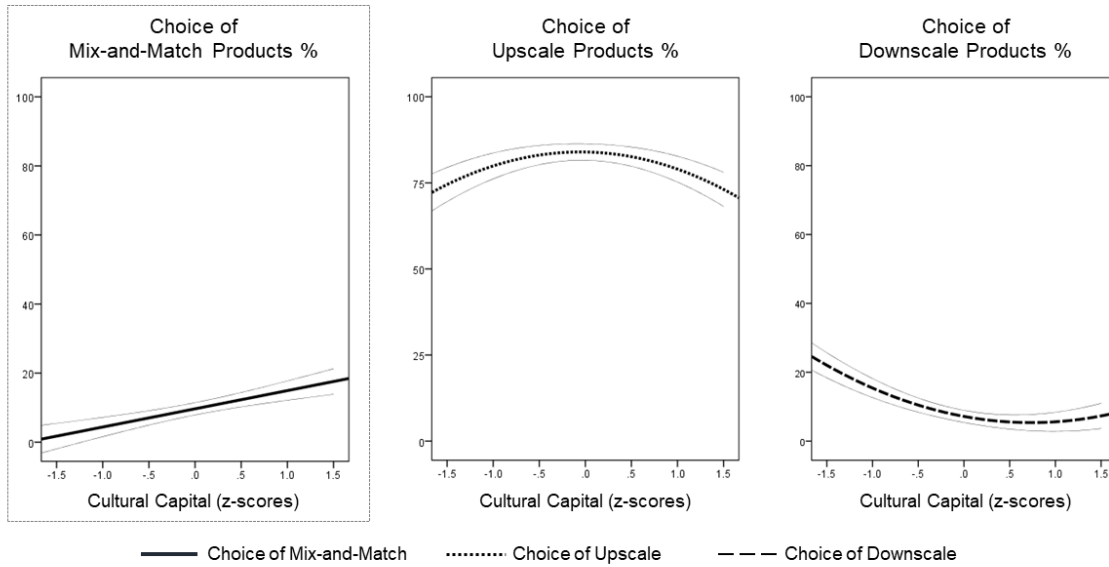


NOTE.— Lines around means represent 95% confidence intervals. The box highlights the predicted result for choice of mix-and-match products.

FIGURE 4: MENU LIKING AS A FUNCTION OF SOCIAL STATUS
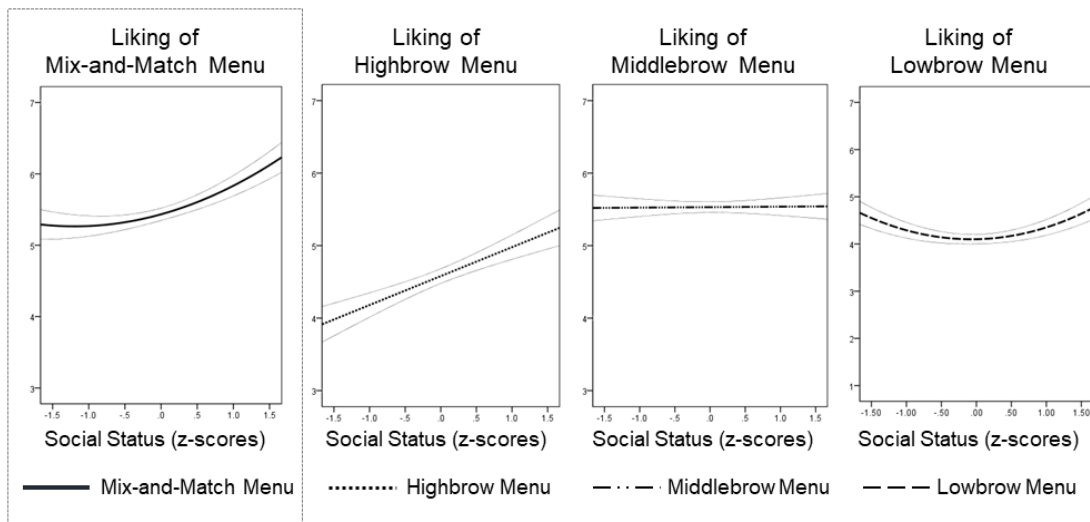


NOTE.— Lines around means represent 95% confidence intervals. The box highlights the predicted result for liking of the mix-and-match menu.

FIGURE 5: WATCHES OF THE SOCIETY
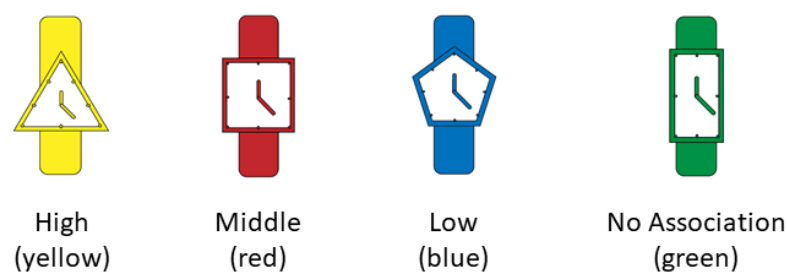


FIGURE 6: FIRST-ROUND OPTIONS

FIGURE 7: SECOND-ROUND DYNAMICS
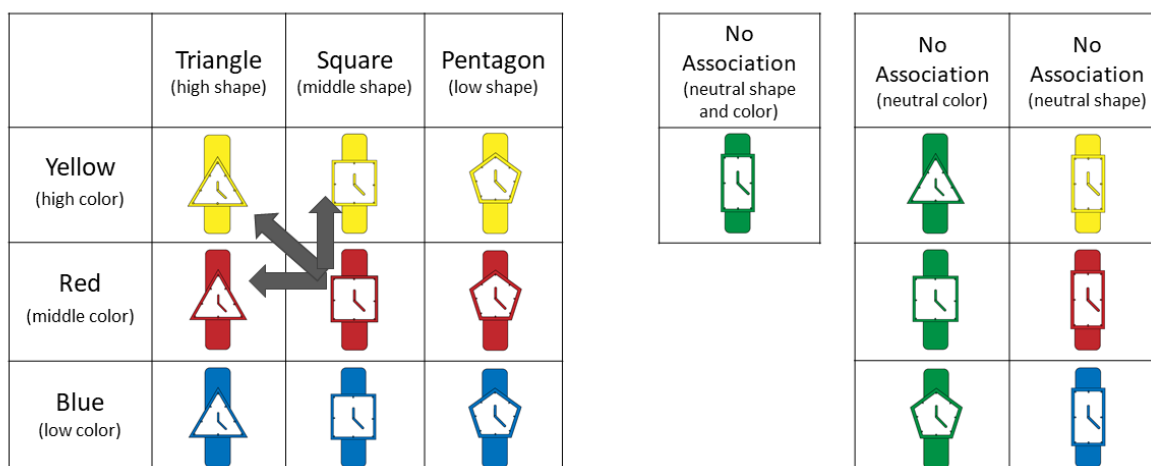


FIGURE 8: CHOICE OF WATCHES ACROSS ROUNDS OF THE GAME
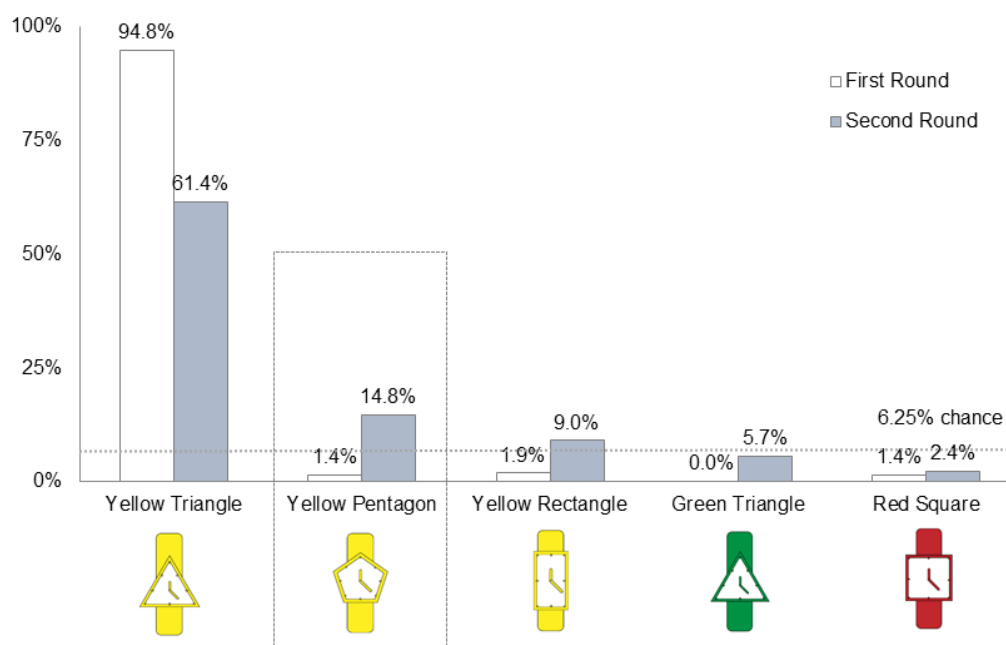


NOTE.—Options picked less than 2% of the time are not represented (see web appendix for graph with all options). Dotted line represents chance level (6.25% = 100%/16 options). The box highlights the result for the predicted high/low combination (i.e., yellow-pentagon watch).

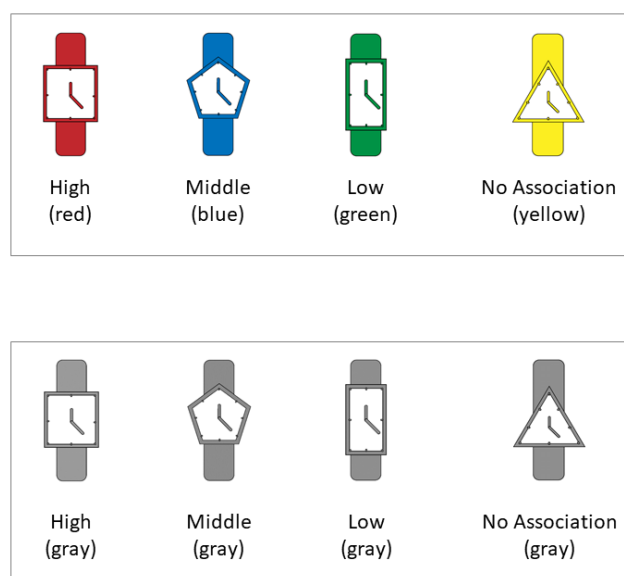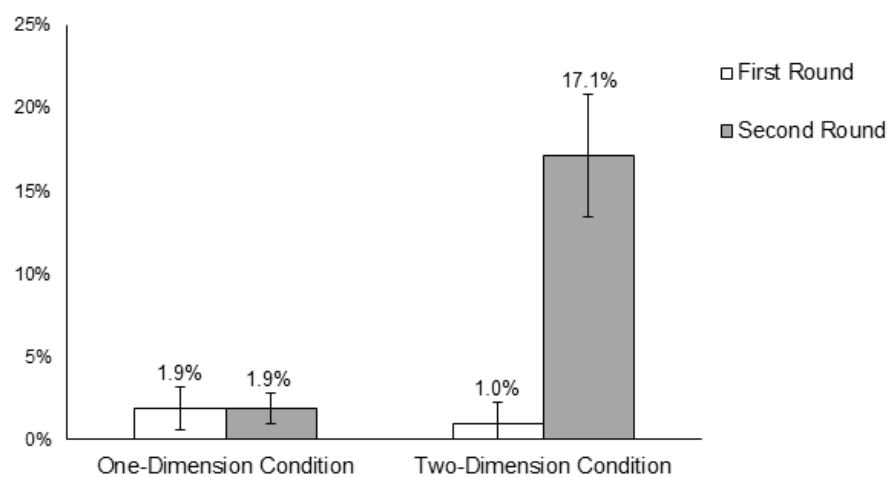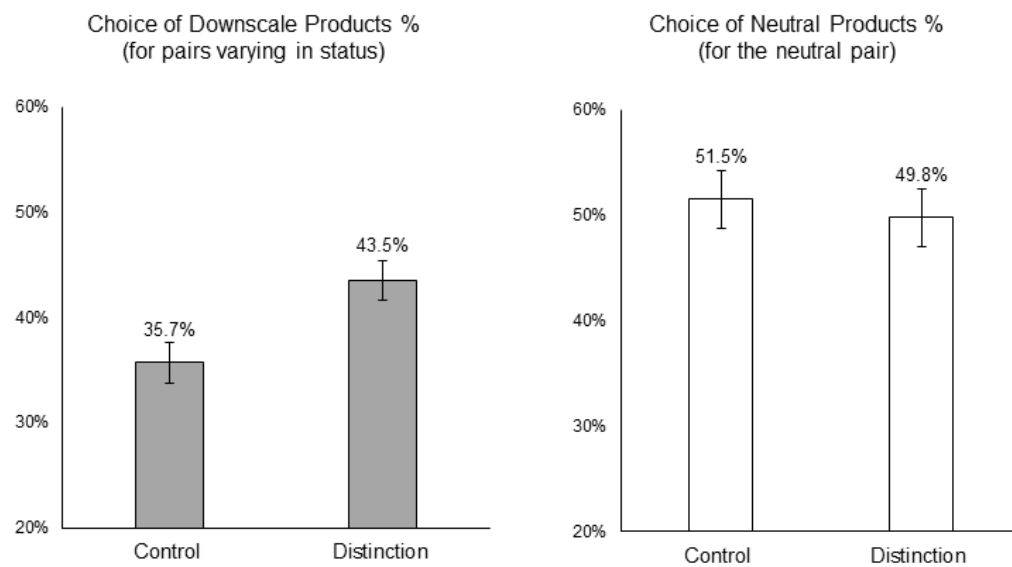FIGURE 9: VISUALS FOR TWO-DIMENSION CONDITION (TOP) AND ONE-DIMENSION CONDITION (BOTTOM)



FIGURE 10: CHOICE OF LOW-STATUS-ASSOCIATED WATCHES



NOTE.—Error bars represent standard errors.

FIGURE 11: PRODUCT CHOICE PER CONDITION



NOTE.—Error bars represent standard errors.