

# New Research Explains Why High-End Consumers Adopt Lowbrow, Low-End Tastes

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How did jeans and trucker hats, originally uniforms for the working class, become iconic fashion? Why does luxury brand Balenciaga sell a \$2,000 purse modeled after a \$1 blue Ikea shopping bag? What's behind the craze for lobster mac-n-cheese?

New research from [Columbia Business School Professor Silvia Bellezza](#) and Wharton School Professor Jonah Berger sheds light on when and why people appropriate low-end cultural items and mix them with high-end status symbols.

“Consumers are always looking for ways to signal their standing through the products they buy,” said Professor Bellezza, the Gantcher Associate Professor of Business. “While trends in fashion, food, art, and culture usually trickle down from elites to mainstream consumers, sometimes they travel in the other direction, ‘trickling round’ from the bottom straight to the top, bypassing the middle.”

Through a series of experiments, Bellezza and Berger demonstrate that high-status individuals, and the luxury brands that cater to them, mix and match high-end and low-end tastes to distinguish themselves from the middle class.

“As luxury goods have become more attainable, the wealthy need alternative ways to signal their status,” said Professor Berger. “Elites can experiment with lowbrow culture without fear of losing status, while middle class individuals whose position is more tenuous stick to clear-cut status symbols.”

When adopting low-end trends, elites combine them with high-end items to make sure the signal is still clear. In one of Bellezza and Berger’s experiments, high-status respondents were more likely than other groups to choose a catering menu that mixed upscale and downscale ingredients in dishes like tuna tartare tacos and burgers with foie gras.

In another experiment where respondents were asked to select accessories for an outfit, high-status individuals were more likely than others to choose upscale products that draw on low-end cultural symbols, like an \$850 pair of designer platform shoes inspired by Crocs. Middle class respondents, meanwhile, were more likely to favor purely upscale products with no mixed signals.

“For wealthy consumers, seemingly downscale tastes can become new markers of superiority when wisely mixed with high-end status signals,” said Bellezza. The phenomenon of mixing high- and low-brow culture was exemplified in the theme of this year’s prestigious Met Gala: camp.

The paper, “[Trickle-Round Signals: When Low Status is Mixed with High,](#)” is forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

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