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THE VALUE OF LUXURY POSEURS

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In the mid-aughts, Burberry faced an unusual problem: too many people were wearing its signature pattern. B-list actors, hooligans—they were all [going around](#) in the company's iconic beige, red, and black check, sometimes in counterfeit form. This diminished the pattern's status in the eyes of high-end shoppers. "It was so successful that everyone had it, and if everyone has it then the people who normally can afford luxury items don't buy it," Ketty Maisonrouge, a marketing professor at Columbia University, told me. Burberry executives decided that something had to change.

It's the perpetual dilemma of the luxury brand: How do you sell more stuff without desecrating your name? Samsung, Pepsi, and Tide presumably prefer their products in the hands, mouths, and washing machines, respectively, of every person on the planet. But high-end goods require exclusivity. Last year, Kelefa Sanneh [profiled](#) the Harlem haberdasher Dapper Dan, who copied luxury brands' logos onto his own styles and, in return, "was raided and sometimes sued by virtually all the companies whose logos he used."

A [report](#) scheduled for publication in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, however, suggests that luxury brands can have both a secure reputation and mass appeal. Silvia Bellezza, a doctoral candidate at Harvard Business School, and Anat Keinan, a marketing professor there, introduced three types of hypothetical consumers: the Brand Citizen, someone widely perceived as belonging to a distinct group of people who use the same brand; the Brand Immigrant, someone who doesn't belong to the clique despite claiming that he or she does; and the Brand Tourist, someone who admires the brand without any pretense of membership.

In one study, the authors surveyed sixty-four female owners of either Prada or Marc Jacobs products who earn at least five thousand dollars per month; they characterized these people as Brand Citizens. Bellezza and Keinan wanted to understand how these shoppers might feel if Prada or Marc Jacobs began handing out free paper shopping bags, meant as collectors' items, to whoever happened to enter their stores. Dividing the participants into groups, the researchers told one group that even though an imaginary customer named Lucy was unable to afford a designer purse, she still thought of herself as belonging to the community of Prada/Marc Jacobs owners and intended to use her complimentary shopping bag "to show that she is a customer of the brand." In contrast, researchers told another group that while Lucy was unable to afford shopping at the store, she simply wanted to use her shopping bag to express her affection for the Prada/Marc Jacobs brand without any desire to come across as something that she wasn't.

The participants were then asked to record how Lucy's ownership of the free collector's shopping bag would affect the prestige of Prada or Marc Jacobs, with one representing less prestige and seven representing more. The first group's average score was a 3.6; the second a 5.5. Brand Tourists, the research suggested, are much better for a brand than Brand Immigrants. "This is really all about generating a fan club," Bellezza told me. "It's about cheering up the core users without making them feel that the brand is losing its distinctiveness."

In another study, Bellezza and Keinan examined the outlook of Harvard students. Framing Harvard itself as the brand in question, the researchers surveyed sixty full-time undergraduates willing to relay their thoughts on students enrolled in a six-week Harvard summer program. Dividing the participants into two groups, the authors told one group that upon completing the program the summer-school students intended to "put Harvard University on their résumé, because they think of themselves as real Harvard students." The other group was informed that the summer students did not intend to put Harvard on their résumé, because they did not consider themselves genuine students of the institution. The participants were then asked to assess how the summer program would impact both Harvard's reputation and image on a scale of one (very negatively) to seven (very positively). Those presented with the first scenario reported an average combined score of 3.8, while those presented with the latter reported a 4.4. Like the shoppers in the Prada/Marc Jacobs study, Harvard students appeared more welcoming toward those who respected the distance between themselves and the brand, as opposed to those who denied that a distance existed.

Not all of Bellezza and Keinan's studies, however, have such a strong element of social class. The authors focussed on athletes who partake in [Tough Mudder](#) events—multiple-mile obstacle courses that can include crawling through mud, swinging on ropes, and scaling up walls—to find if there were similar concerns of outsiders spoiling the Tough Mudder brand name. There were. They enlisted eighty-three participants who had earned their way into the Tough Mudder community by completing a race, and presented them with an imaginary spectator named Mike. One group of participants was told that Mike planned on buying a twenty-five-dollar ticket to attend both a Tough Mudder event and its related after-parties to associate with Tough Mudders and give the impression to friends and family back home that he, too, was one of them—even though he had never entered a race. The other group was told that Mike wanted to attend simply to witness Tough Mudders in action and applaud their dedication. Again the results found that while participants thought a Brand Immigrant stance posed a potential threat to the brand's integrity, a Brand Tourist attitude could enhance it.

Why might some people feel so invested in their brand? Because to brand something, after all, is to give it a mark of distinction. Other research, Bellezza told me, suggests that certain brands have grown to assume the role that politics and religion have traditionally held in shaping an individual's identity. She said that she sees certain flagship stores designed by famous architects as our modern-day cathedrals. When a brand loses its sheen, then, so do the people who believe in it.

Bellezza mentioned Tiffany & Co. as a good example of a company executing the policy outlined in her and Keinan's report. Some store locations offer side entrances and [private viewing rooms](#) to physically separate the elite shoppers from those looking to purchase a seventy-five-dollar [Heart Tag Charm](#). The core Tiffany users, Bellezza says, are therefore defined by their access to privileged retail space, while the company can still grant a degree of access to the masses without tarnishing the brand. In 2013, the Luxury Institute, a research and consulting firm, conducted a [survey](#) that revealed that Tiffany was the jewelry brand most widely purchased by American women with a minimum net worth of five million dollars.

As Amy Merrick [noted](#) in April, Burberry recovered from its overexposure problem. Following the arrival of Angela Ahrendts as its C.E.O., in 2006, (who has since left for Apple), Burberry began scaling back its licensing agreements and [removing](#) its signature check from about ninety per cent of its items. A sense of sustainability has returned, thanks to a clear balance of insiders enjoying their cachet and outsiders looking in.