

Identity Signaling, Social Influence, and Social Contagion

Jonah Berger

Certain products catch on and spread like wildfire. Consider Livestrong wristbands. These yellow bands were produced in the summer of 2004 to support cyclist Lance Armstrong and his nonprofit cancer foundation. At first they were worn by mostly celebrities and athletes but soon spread and achieved broad popularity in the general population. The wristbands first sold for a dollar, but stores quickly burned through their original allotments, and the bands soon appeared on eBay for upwards of \$10. Similar levels of widespread success have been achieved by catchphrases like “sweet,” hairstyles like the “fauxhawk” (a short mohawk first worn by soccer superstar David Beckham), and management practices like Six Sigma quality management.

Although some cultural products see widespread popularity, sharp declines in interest often soon follow. Livestrong wristbands were hugely popular for a few years but disappeared soon after. Teens have stopped saying “sweet,” interest in the fauxhawk has declined, and the number of companies practicing Six Sigma has greatly decreased (London, 2003). Although some theories of fads and fashions would suggest cultural products are abandoned because people continually want something novel (Sproles, 1981), such boredom-based explanations have trouble explaining why certain cultural products persist longer than others, or why some cultural practices (e.g., Mohawks) never see a decline. So what drives fluctuations in the popularity and spread of culture?

Before introducing the perspective of this chapter, it is worth first defining what is being studied. Cultural scholars define *culture* as a set of “meanings and practices” (Markus & Kitayama, 2003) or “beliefs, customs, symbols, or characteristics that is shared by one population of people, and which is different from the set of beliefs, customs, symbols, or characteristic shared by other distinct populations” (Conway & Schaller, in press; see also Schaller & Crandall, 2004). Culture can include the products people buy, the attitudes they hold, and the behaviors they engage in. Culture encompasses the style of shoes people wear, their decision to smoke cigarettes, and the catchphrases they say. To refer to such meanings and practices, this chapter will use the terms *cultural practices*, *products*, or *tastes*. Although different cultural products may each have specific nuances that help their success (and influence their failure), a closer look suggests a similar underlying social process that drives many of the observed fluctuations. Researchers have examined the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995), fluctuation in children’s names (Lieberson, 2000), adoption of consumer products (Bass, 1969), and variation in linguistic patterns (Eckert, 1989, 2000). Though each area has particular characteristics, many of the social dynamics are the same. By looking at culture more broadly, we can gain insight into factors that lead many products, ideas, and behaviors, to catch on and become popular, as well as die out, and become abandoned.

This chapter examines the role of the communication of identity in social influence and social contagion. The first portion of the chapter introduces an identity-signaling perspective, or how cultural tastes can act as symbols of identity. This perspective will then be used to help explain why people abandon cultural tastes, as well as why they adopt them in the first place. Special care will also be given to how such principles can be used in interventions to improve adolescent health. Building on these findings, the second portion of the chapter examines how such dynamics can lead to fluctuations in the popularity of cultural tastes. It investigates how identity-signaling concerns lead culture to spread, but also how the same dynamics that drive increases in popularity can also drive people to abandon the taste. Finally, the third portion of the chapter discusses how these ideas help shed light on where culture that eventually becomes popular might originate.

AN IDENTITY-SIGNALING APPROACH TO THE ADOPTION AND ABANDONMENT OF CULTURE

Some insight into why people adopt cultural tastes can be gained from focusing on the other end of the process, or why people abandon cul-

ture. One important factor that influences taste abandonment is divergence from other social groups: People often abandon tastes when members of other social groups adopt them. Kids abandon slang their parents start using, and traditional champagne buyers were turned off once the “chavs,” a subculture of brash, materialistic young adults with a penchant for soccer hooliganism made the beverage a staple of their lifestyle (Clevstrom & Passariello, 2006). Similarly, the Toyota Scion was targeted at young adults, but once it became popular with senior citizens (they enjoyed its low ride and ample headroom), adoption among the target market was stymied.

An identity-signaling approach (e.g., Berger, 2008; Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008) helps explain why social groups diverge from one another. People buy products, hold attitudes, and engage in behaviors not only for their functional value but also for what they symbolize (Levy, 1959). Cultural tastes can act as signals of identity, communicating aspects of individuals (e.g., group memberships or other preferences) to others in the social world (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Solomon, 1983; Wernerfelt, 1990). If we see someone driving a hybrid car, we’re likely to think they are a liberal tree-hugger, if someone loves opera we’re likely to assume they prefer wine over beer, and if someone says “radical” and “sweet” we assume they prefer skateboarding to golf.

Importantly, cultural tastes gain meaning, or signal value, through their association with groups, or similar types of individuals. Tastes are not inherently associated with one meaning or another, rather, they gain meaning based on the set of people that hold them (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; McCracken, 1988). If extreme sports fanatics start saying “radical,” then the phrase will get associated with that type of people. In contrast, if golfers and opera lovers were the first people to start saying “radical,” the phrase would signal a different identity entirely.

Consequently, though a taste may signal a certain identity at one point in time, if outsiders adopt the taste, the signal may change. If lots of people who love the outdoors start driving SUVs, then SUVs may come to signal a rugged identity. But once soccer moms or weekend warriors start driving SUVs, the meaning of driving one starts to shift. Regardless of whether these outsiders adopt SUVs because they like the functionality (e.g., they have lots of kids) or because they want to seem outdoorsy, driving an SUV may now come to communicate an entirely different meaning (i.e., soccer mom).

Original taste holders may then diverge, or abandon the taste, to avoid signaling undesired identities. By converging with similar others, people can imbue tastes with meaning and ensure they signal desired characteristics. But when outsiders start using the same product or say-

ing the same phrase, its meaning can change, and it can lose its ability to signal desired identities effectively. As a result, people may diverge, abandoning a taste to avoid being thought of as a member of another social group (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Hebdige, 1987; Simmel, 1904/1957).

Demonstrations of Divergence

Consider the following experiment which examined whether college undergraduates would abandon a cultural product once “geeks” adopted it (Berger & Heath, 2008). Before Livestrong wristbands became popular, research assistants (RAs) went door-to-door in college dorms, handing out yellow flyers with information about cancer, and selling the yellow wristbands to raise cancer awareness. The RAs sold wristbands to one campus dorm (target dorm), and then later, sold the same wristbands to the academic theme dorm, or “geeks,” next door. Different experimenters used an ostensibly unrelated survey to measure how many target dorm members were wearing the wristband before, and after, the geeks adopted it.

Consistent with an identity-signaling perspective, students abandoned the wristband once it was adopted by the geeks. Almost one-third of dorm members who had worn the wristband previously stopped wearing it once the geeks adopted. Furthermore, an additional control condition cast doubt on the possibility that the results were driven by boredom over time. Instead, the study suggested that concerns of sending undesired identity signals, in this case, looking like a geek, led people to abandon the cultural taste.

Similar divergence dynamics extend to a broad range of social groups. White-collar professionals were the first group to give their children suffixes like Jr. but abandoned this practice once the working class began to imitate it (Taylor, 1974); undergraduates reported that they would abandon a catchphrase if other social groups (e.g., business executives, high school students, or students from a local university) adopted it (Berger & Heath, 2008); and African Americans who live in predominantly black communities tend to avoid giving their children first names that are popular among whites (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Thus people may avoid, or abandon, cultural tastes to avoid signaling undesired social identities (also see Cooper & Jones, 1969).

Relation of Divergence to Conformity

These findings illustrate that people often diverge from the behavior of others, but other work also suggests that people converge, or do the

same thing as others. Decades of work in psychology suggest that people imitate the behaviors of those around them (e.g., Asch, 1956; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Sherif, 1936). Participants judging the length of lines, for example, tended to select answers that other participants had chosen, even though they were wrong (Asch, 1956). Similar dynamics are discussed in economics (bandwagon effects—Liebenstein, 1950; herding behavior and information cascades—Banerjee, 1992; Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1992) and sociology (e.g., mimetic isomorphism—DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These theories all suggest that people imitate others, and thus people's behavior should converge, so what determines when people conform versus diverge?

An identity-signaling perspective predicts that the identity of the other taste holders and how much people use the taste domain to infer others' identity will determine whether social influence leads people to conform or diverge (Table 9.1). Certain domains of social life tend to be seen as more symbolic of identity than others (e.g., cars and clothes as opposed to pens and dish soap—Belk, 1981; Shavitt, 1990). When people were asked to select cues that would aid in inference making about others, for example, most people selected clothing (Burroughs, Drews, & Hallman, 1991). Similarly, when people rated different taste domains (e.g., cars, clothes, dish soap, toothpaste, and music) based on how much they use them to infer others' identity there was high consensus across participants. People reported using things like cars, clothes, and music to infer others' identity, rather than dish soap, toothpaste, on pen color (Berger & Heath, 2007).

Identity-signaling predicts that the identity of the other taste holders should have a greater effect on behavior in these symbolic or identity-relevant domains (Berger, 2008). In domains where choice is less identity rele-

TABLE 9.1. Whether People Conform to, or Diverge from, Others Depends on Their Identity and Whether People Use the Choice Domain to Infer Identity

	Group people want to signal membership in (e.g., in-group or aspiration group)	Group people want to avoid signaling membership in (e.g., out-group or avoidance group)
Less identity-relevant domains	Convergence	Convergence
More identity-relevant domains	Convergence	Divergence

Note. *Convergence* means that people deciding which behavior to adopt will conform to the behavior of others, and if they already hold a behavior, they will continue to do so even after others adopt it. *Divergence* means that people will avoid behaviors associated with that particular group, and will abandon a behavior if members of that group adopt it.

vant, consistent with research that has found conformity, people should converge with others regardless of their identity. In these domains, the fact that someone else is doing something suggests that this thing is good, and others will be more likely to do it. Experts should have more influence than others (Kaplan & Martin, 1999), but in general, people will conform. In identity-relevant domains (e.g., cars and clothes), however, whether social influence will lead to conformity or divergence should depend on the identity of the taste adopters. If members of a group people want to signal membership in (e.g., in-group members or aspiration groups—e.g., Englis & Solomon, 1995) adopt their tastes, people will continue using the taste because it signals a desired identity. However, if members of a group people do not want to signal membership in (e.g., out-group members or avoidance groups—Englis & Solomon, 1995; White & Dahl, 2006) start adopting their tastes, people will abandon the taste to avoid sending undesired identity signals.

Support for these predictions was found using a broad sample of varying ages (Berger, 2008). Participants listed either an in-group or an out-group and then rated how they would react if that group started adopting their preference in each of a variety of taste domains (e.g., favorite music artist, clothing, and dish soap). They also rated how much they would or would not like other people to think they were a member of the group they listed. As predicted, in less identity-relevant choice domains (e.g., dish soap or toothpaste), people conformed to others' behavior (e.g., reported greater likelihood of using that toothpaste brand), regardless of whether they were in-group or out-group members. In more identity-relevant domains, however, whether people conformed to or diverged from others' behavior depended on the others' group membership. People reported they would converge with in-group members and continue using identity-relevant tastes that were adopted by in-groups. But social influence had the opposite effect when the adopters were out-group members; people reported they would diverge from out-groups and abandon identity-relevant tastes that were adopted by out-group members. Furthermore, consistent with an identity signaling perspective, a mediational analysis indicated that whether people conformed or diverged from others in identity-relevant domains was driven by whether they did, or did not, want other people to treat them as a member of that group.

Using Identity Signaling to Improve Adolescent Health

These findings suggest the utility of identity-based interventions to improve adolescent health. The prototype model of risk behavior (Gibbons

& Gerrard, 1995, 1997) suggests that the decision to engage in health behaviors is driven, in part, by people's desire to acquire positive (or avoid negative) characteristics associated with that behavior. People have a prototype, or social image, they associate with health behaviors, and the favorability of this image helps determine whether they will engage in that behavior. Young people who had more favorable perceptions of the type of people who smoke cigarettes or engage in unprotected sex, for example, reported higher willingness to smoke cigarettes or engage in unprotected sex (Gerrard, Gibbons, Stack, Vande Lune, & Cleveland, 2005; Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 1998).

Consequently, it may be possible to help adolescents avoid risky health behaviors by associating those behaviors with social identities they do not want to signal. Gerrard and colleagues (2006), for example, found that an intervention that associated negative characteristics with early alcohol consumption was able to alter the positivity of adolescents' risk prototypes, as well as their actual alcohol consumption. Other research provides further evidence that social concerns of communicating identity are at least partially responsible for such effects. Linking junk food consumption to a social group undergraduates did not want to signal membership in led them to choose less junk food, particularly when their choices were publicly visible to others (Berger & Heath, 2008). These effects are also stronger for people who want to avoid signaling membership in the social group linked to the behavior. One study placed posters in a college dorm suggesting that a particular campus group was known to binge drink (Berger & Rand, in press). Two weeks later, the dorm members reported their recent alcohol consumption and their desire to avoid others thinking they were akin to different social groups. As predicted, undergraduates who did not want others to think they were akin to the social group linked to binge drinking reported consuming less alcohol. These findings suggest that shifting the identity associated with risky health behaviors to one which adolescents do not want to signal can be a useful intervention to improve adolescent health.

IDENTITY-SIGNALING DYNAMICS AND THE SPREAD OF CULTURE

More broadly, an identity-signaling perspective also provides insight into social contagion and the lifecycle of culture. Most existing research has examined individuals abandoning tastes at one time or another based on adoption by, or association with, avoidance group members. But these individual decisions are part of a dynamic system, and aggregated over time, they lead to fluctuations in the popularity of culture.

Music artists, clothing styles, slang, and other cultural tastes often start out by being associated with members of a certain subculture. Punks wear mohawks and tattoos and listen to punk, ska, or other types of hardcore music. Inner-city teens wear baggy pants and sideways hats, listen to hip-hop and rap music, and use phrases like “tight” and “phat.” Similarly, hardcore business people may drive BMWs, use Blackberries, and talk about the “800-pound gorilla” and the “low hanging fruit.”

Once cultural tastes gain value as signals however, out-group members may start poaching them as a way of trying to signal desired meaning. In some cases, these poseurs may poach tastes so that other people will treat them like members of a desired social group. Recent MBA graduates may copy the lingo of business execs, or buy the “right” Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) in an attempt to “pass” or be treated as business executives. In other cases, poaching is not due so much to a desire to be thought of as an out-group member, but rather to be thought of as having some of the characteristics associated with that group. Suburban teens poach the lingo or styles of inner-city teens in an attempt to seem tough or cool.

This poaching then starts a cycle of meaning change. Imagine social groups as layers of an onion, or concentric circles, with the original taste holders as the core (see Figure 9.1). Each layer is another social group or type, with groups that have a greater interest in looking like members of the subculture as more central layers, and groups that are less interested in, or want to avoid signaling subcultural identity as more distal layers. If enough outsiders, or poseurs, start adopting a subculture’s taste, its meaning may shift, and original taste holders may abandon the taste to avoid signaling undesired identities. While listening to a certain music artist, saying a certain slang phrase, or wearing a certain style of clothing may once have signaled subculture membership, adoption by outsiders dilutes or confuses the meaning of the signal. The subculture will then abandon the taste to avoid signaling undesired identities, and a new signal of group identity will emerge (see Heath, Ho, & Berger, 2008, for a broader discussion).

But the cycle doesn’t stop there; original taste holders may be long gone, but as the taste starts getting sucked outward, other social types who actually like the new diluted signal may start to adopt. Once the subculture abandons the taste, it may become even more associated with the second group that adopted it, and this may be appealing to more mainstream social groups. Through the diffusion process, a catchphrase that started with inner-city teens may move to suburban teens who want to look cool. But consequently, it loses some of its value as a signal of toughness as it becomes associated with suburban teens. This causes the

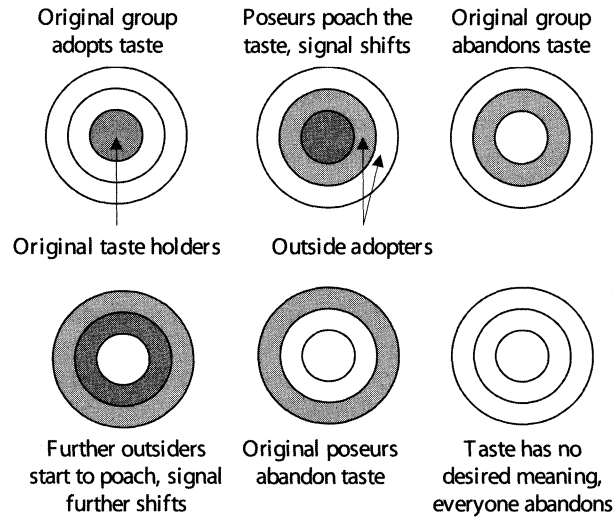


FIGURE 9.1. Movement of cultural tastes and shifts in signal meaning. A group adopts a cultural taste (indicated in gray). Outsiders (i.e., poseurs) adopt the taste in an attempt to signal membership in that group, but by doing so, they begin to change the signal associated with the taste. Original taste holders then abandon to avoid signaling an undesired identity. But because the signal has shifted, the taste becomes appealing to further outsiders, and they adopt, further shifting the meaning. The original poseurs then abandon to avoid communicating the new, undesired, signal. Eventually the taste has no desired meaning to anyone, and is abandoned by all.

original subculture to abandon it but may interest suburban parents who want to show they are hip to pop culture. Their adoption further changes the signal value of the taste and may lead suburban teens to abandon it. Consequently, a taste that started with one group moves further afield, and the cycle continues until the taste no longer has a desirable meaning to anyone and is abandoned by all. Importantly, though individual cultural units themselves may “die,” or become abandoned, group members just shift and adopt or feature other units of culture to maintain distinction, and the cycle starts anew (Mason & Berger, 2008).

This process suggests that all identity-relevant cultural tastes may be in danger of eventually perishing, but certain factors should moderate the speed of diffusion, and consequently, the longevity of the taste (Berger, Heath, & Ho, 2008). Public visibility is one such factor. Tastes that are publicly visible (e.g., the clothes people wear or the car they drive) are easy for others to see and, consequently, easy for poseurs to poach. Public visibility makes it easier for people to identify insiders as a member of a certain social group, but it also makes it easier for outsiders

who want to signal certain identities to steal signals and adopt them as their own. Thus more visible tastes should have a shorter lifecycle.

Cost is another factor that should moderate diffusion speed and taste longevity. Tastes can be costly in a monetary sense (i.e., a car brand that is expensive to buy), but they can also vary in terms of opportunity costs. Having a mohawk or cornrows may make it hard to get a job in certain corporate settings, and this cost impedes weekend warriors from poaching the taste. Tastes can also be costly in terms of time or knowledge; though people can hear a catchphrase in passing and then try to use it themselves, unless they frequently interact with others who actually use the phrase, it will be hard for them to actually say it the right way. Similarly, to find out about the next hot independent rock band, a person has to spend time in the right places talking to the right people (though easy access to information over the Internet has greatly reduced what once was a high cost). Tastes that are more costly, in any sense, should be harder for outsiders to poach and thus have a longer lifecycle.

WHERE TASTES THAT BECOME POPULAR ORIGINATE

Today's margin becomes tomorrow's mainstream.
—BEALE (2005)

An identity-signaling perspective also provides insight into a seemingly perplexing question: Why does what eventually becomes cool sometimes originate with outsiders or traditionally marginalized social group? Academics and cultural observers alike have noted that what eventually becomes popular often starts with outsiders (Blumberg, 1974; Field, 1970; Meyersohn & Katz, 1957; Peterson & Anand, 2004; Pountain & Robins, 2000). The *New York Times* noted “the subtle power of lesbian style” in fashion (Trebay, 2004) and that everyone from celebrities to music stars seemed to be imitating the clothing and hairstyles of homosexual men (Coleman, 2005). Much of the slang and styles of the late 1990s (e.g., baggy pants and fitted hats) originated with inner-city teens. Similarly, observers of culture have noted that “the originators of cool have always been outsiders” (Belk, Tian, & Paavlova, 2006, p. 10) and that “the groups responsible for the radical reform of cultural meaning are those existing at the margins of society, e.g., hippies, punks, or gays,” (McCracken, 1986, p. 76).

Such suggestions are intriguing because they contradict the traditional perspective on the way culture spreads. The trickle-down theory of fashion (Robinson, 1961; Simmel, 1904/1957; Veblen, 1899/1912)

suggests that people adopt from those above them in the status food chain. Fashions are initiated by the higher class and imitated by the lower classes. These theories suggest that everyone wants to look wealthy and they will explain why the middle-class poaches the status symbols of the rich. But such trickle-down dynamics are less useful in explaining why people would ever poach the styles of inner-city teens, gays and lesbians, trailer-park inhabitants, or other traditionally marginalized minority groups. Most members of the mainstream would shun association with any of these groups, yet there are many examples of the mainstream eventually adopting things that were once associated with marginalized groups. Why?

An identity-signaling perspective helps shed light on this question; tastes that originate among traditionally marginalized groups often become popular because people poach them as a way to distinguish themselves from the mainstream. To illustrate this notion, we can focus on three types of social groups: the mainstream, marginalized or oppositional groups, and hipsters. Briefly, the mainstream is the majority culture, marginalized groups are groups that are discriminated against by the mainstream, and hipsters are usually connected with the mainstream but want to distinguish themselves from it. There are obviously multiple groups at each of these levels and even groups in between, but focusing on these three groups simplifies the perspective.

Minority culture often differs from mainstream culture. Some cultural differences may just result from different backgrounds of the two groups; immigrants, for instance, bring with them different cultural traditions from their homeland. In other cases, minorities may actively create culture that distances themselves from the mainstream (see Ogbu, 1992, for the distinction between primary and secondary cultural differences). Whether due to their race, sexual preference, or some other factors, outsiders are often discriminated against by the mainstream and thus often can't gain status within mainstream society. Discrimination often leads to an oppositional identity (Solomon, 1992), and psychological threat may lead oppositional groups to "disidentify" (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Steele, 1997) with mainstream culture. Rather than embrace the mainstream culture that spurns them, these groups may instead create a status hierarchy and cultural system of their own.

Originally, mainstream people will avoid signals associated with marginalized groups to avoid signaling a marginalized identity. Social identities are often defined and maintained in opposition to other groups and just as marginalized groups may define their identity in relation to the mainstream, the mainstream may define their identity as separate from marginalized groups. In addition, some mainstream individuals

may already have a lot in common with members of marginalized groups and thus are particularly wary of having overlapping tastes. People who once lived in a trailer park, for instance, may move to the city and renounce the culture of their old life because they see doing so as “moving up” in the world. Thus members of the mainstream attempt to stay far way from anything that would signal they are a member of a marginalized group.

There are also segments of society who exist within the mainstream, or just outside it, who prefer a social identity that is distinct from the mainstream (in this model, hipsters). Tastes are less useful in distinguishing between different types when too many people hold them, and consequently, groups form smaller units as a way of coordinating more effectively. By sharing culture with a cohesive set of others, these individuals can more easily recognize people who share similar interests (e.g., track bicycles), or know who to talk to when looking for information about the next hot band. Such individuals may have high needs for uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001) or desires to be early adopters (e.g., the first to wear a new style or listen to new music, Rogers, 1995; also see Moore, 1991), but more generally, they are united by their desire for identities that separate them from the mainstream. Consequently, members of such groups want to hold cultural tastes that provide them with the desired distinction.

Unfortunately for hipsters, their sources of distinction are never safe; mainstreamers who want to seem hip or cool may poach hipster tastes to try and signal that identity. Although mainstreamers do not want to be the first to pilot new cultural tastes, some of them are fast followers, and by poaching the tastes of another group, these poseurs create the signal dilution or confusion outlined earlier. By poaching hip tastes, they destroy the previous mark of distinction, and now hipsters must adopt a new taste to avoid signaling undesired identities.

One powerful way hipsters can try to reinstate their distinction is by poaching the cultural tastes of traditionally marginalized groups. The tastes of marginalized groups should be appealing for two reasons. First, though hipster-types could (and sometimes do) create new culture, it is often easier and more efficient to poach existing symbols of differentiation. As groups get larger, their coherence, or the percentage of characteristics they have in common often decreases, and thus it should be easier for cultural tastes to gain meaning when they are associated with social groups that are not overly large. Furthermore, because the meaning of signals is socially constructed, adopting a new cultural taste, and attempting to imbue it with meaning, takes time. Mountaineers can get together and decide that wearing a red-striped hat will be their group

identifier, but it will take nonmountaineers a number of times of interacting with a striped-hatted person, and learning they are a mountaineer, to realize that this is how they should interpret the signal. Those receiving the signal determine how to treat the signaler, and thus a more efficient way for people to ensure they are treated as different from the mainstream is to adopt existing tastes that already communicate the desired differentiation.

Second, hipsters should find the tastes of marginalized groups particularly appealing because mainstreamers want to avoid them. The hipsters are engaged in a repeated chase with mainstreamers. Every time the hip adopt a new taste, the mainstream soon follows, and so hipsters are constantly looking for something new. But because the mainstream wants to avoid the signals of the marginalized, those tastes may be a particularly good place for hipsters to poach. By adopting tastes that the group they are trying to get away from wants to avoid, hipsters can decrease the likelihood that the mainstream will immediately poach their new tastes.

But when hipsters adopt the cultural taste of a marginalized group, it often ensures the taste's death. Although tastes associated with marginalized groups might originally have been appealing due to their distinction from the mainstream, by adopting the taste, hipsters change its meaning. What was once a signal of a marginalized identity shifts toward becoming a signal of being hip. This ultimately leads the tastes to look more appealing to the mainstream. Although mainstreamers want to avoid looking like the outsiders, some of them also have at least some desire to look cool or hip. Consequently, once the hipsters adopt, some mainstreamers, and soon the broader masses, will flock in, and the taste slowly gets sucked into the mainstream. Thus a taste that started out as a signal of marginalized status, can, by nature of its value as a signal of distinction, gain broader appeal, which will then lead to its eventual abandonment.

Outsider Innovation

Marginalized tastes should also be appealing to those looking for distinction from the mainstream because they are innovative relative to the current standard. Most of the discussion so far has treated signals like they are sent and received with full fidelity, but the process is often noisy. The meaning of a taste is shared socially, but individuals may vary slightly in their exact conception of what signals a certain group identity. Furthermore, tastes are often continuous rather than discrete; a shaved head is different from a crew cut, but it is hard to distinguish between

someone who has forgotten to shave their head for a week and someone who received a crew cut that was too short. Consequently, signals are more likely to be received correctly the more they differ from one another. If most people are letting their hair grow long, getting a midlength cut doesn't provide much differentiation. Shaving one's head is a better signal of distinction. Thus, doing the opposite is a good way of avoiding undesired signals (Heath et al., 2006; also see the ratchet effect, Lieberman, 2000).

Such separation should increase the appeal of tastes associated with any group that is relatively distant from mainstream culture. The prior discussion focused mainly on the tastes of marginalized groups, but similar dynamics should apply to any group whose tastes differ from what is popular at the time. Before they became popular in the late 1990s, Hush Puppies were worn mainly by senior citizens and were obviously not in fashion. Hipsters started wearing them, however, "precisely because no one else would wear them" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 5). Similarly, some of the hottest cars for young people today are models usually identified with seniors, for example, old Buicks and Chevrolets; they have the cool factor of being so "out" they are "in" (Saranow, 2006). Because what is popular with seniors is so distant from most of what is popular currently, adopting tastes associated with this group provide a good way of distinguishing oneself from the rest of the mainstream.

Change in Culture Itself Due to the Onset of Popularity

Tastes originally linked with marginalized groups may eventually become popular, but at least some change to the taste itself often occurs along the way. People often suggest culture is watered down for mainstream consumption, and marginalized tastes likely undergo shifts to make them more palatable. Unless mainstream taste has radically changed, the marginalized taste's edginess that once opposed the mainstream must now be rounded and brought into the fold. People who listened to bands before they became popular, for instance, often remark that they much preferred the band's original albums to their newer work.

In some cases though, the perception that the cultural unit has changed may result more from the new taste holders, rather than the actual culture itself. Once an independent music artist becomes popular, listening to that artist is no longer a sign that one is "indie" and instead becomes a signal of being mainstream. Thus even if the music itself doesn't change much over the progression of albums, people may perceive it as having changed based on the identity of the new adopters.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on the role of identity signaling in social influence, social contagion, and fluctuations in the popularity of cultural tastes. What we buy or how we behave can act as signals of social identity, but when outsiders adopt these tastes, what it means to buy that product or engage in that behavior can change. Consequently, original taste holders may diverge to avoid signaling undesired identities. This process has a number of implications for understanding the spread of culture. Tastes may gain popularity if they signal a desired identity, but once outsiders adopt, they will lose that desired signal and may eventually be abandoned they no longer communicate desired meaning for anyone. Furthermore, because traditionally marginalized groups are often seen as outsiders in society, cultural tastes that these groups pioneer may eventually become popular because they provide a way for hipsters, or other social groups, to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. By focusing on how cultural tastes can act as signals of identity, we gain greater insight into why products, ideas, and behaviors catch on as well as why they die out.

This identity-signaling perspective is particularly useful for understanding the behavior of adolescents because they are at a time in their life where identity concerns have great importance. Teens care a lot about fitting in, finding friends, and meeting romantic partners, and consequently, they care a great deal about what their behavior communicates about their place in the social hierarchy. One of the main reasons adolescents smoke cigarettes, for example, is to “look cool” or appear rebellious (Delorme, Kreshel, & Reid, 2003). Although this increased emphasis on identity means that adolescents may be more tempted to engage in counternormative behaviors for signaling purposes, it also suggests that identity-shifting interventions may be particularly effective among this population. By shifting the identity associated with a risky behavior to one which adolescents do not want to communicate, we may be able to reduce their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors (see Berger & Rand, in press).

This perspective also speaks to the growing body of work seeking to understand the propagation of culture. Recent work on cultural psychology has examined how the meanings and practices inherent in a culture influence human psychology, but much less research has examined the reciprocal process, or how human psychology influences the meanings and practices that persist in a culture (Schaller & Crandall, 2004). Researchers have just begun to examine how aspects of human psychology, such as emotion (e.g., Heath, Bell, & Sternberg, 2001) or memory (e.g., Norenzayan & Atran, 2004; Rubin, 1995), properties of culture itself,

such as its communicability (e.g., Schaller, Conway, & Tanchuk, 2002) or fit with the surrounding environment (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2005), and social network structure (e.g., Mason, Jones, & Goldstone, 2008) influence the spread and persistence of culture. By understanding the communication of identity, hopefully we can gain greater insight into culture more broadly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ben Ho and Winter Mason provided helpful comments on the chapter, and I am greatly indebted to Chip Heath for the numerous discussions that helped develop many of the ideas mentioned here.

REFERENCES

- Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs*, 70(Whole no. 416).
- Banerjee, A. V. (1992). A simple model of herd behavior. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 107, 797–817.
- Bass, F. M. (1969). A new product growth model for consumer durables. *Management Science*, 13, 215–227.
- Beale, L. (2005, June 19). John Hughes versus the vampires: The dilemma of the midnight movie. *New York Times*, p. 22.
- Belk, R. W. (1981). Determinants of consumption cue utilization in impression formation: An associational deviation and experimental verification. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 8, 170–175.
- Belk, R. W., Tian, K. T., & Paavola, H. (2006). *The meanings of cool: Transformations and continuities within global consumer culture* (Working paper).
- Berger, J. (2008). *Conformity versus divergence: The role of identity-signaling in responses to social influence*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Berger, J., & Heath, C. (2005). Idea habitats: How the prevalence of environmental cues influences the success of ideas. *Cognitive Science*, 29(2), 195–221.
- Berger, J., & Heath, C. (2007). Where consumers diverge: Identity-signaling and product domains. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 121–134.
- Berger, J., & Heath, C. (2008). *Who drives divergence?: Identity-signaling, outgroup dissimilarity, and the abandonment of cultural tastes*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Berger, J., Heath, C., & Ho, B. (2008). *Divergence in cultural practices: Tastes as signals of identity* (Working paper).
- Berger, J., & Rand, L. (in press). Shifting signals to help health: Using identity-signaling to reduce risky health behaviors. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(3).
- Bikhchandani, W., Hirshleifer, D., & Welch, I. (1992). A theory of fads, fashion, custom, and cultural change as informational cascades. *Journal of Political Economy*, 100, 992–1026.

- Blumberg, P. (1974). The decline and fall of the status symbol: Some thoughts on status in post-industrial society. *Social Problems*, 21, 480–498.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Burroughs, W. J., Drews, D. R., & Hallman, W. K. (1991). Predicting personality from personal possessions: A self-presentational analysis. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 6(6), 147–163.
- Coleman, D. (2005, June 19). Gay or straight? Hard to tell. *New York Times*, Sunday Styles, p. 1.
- Conway, L. G., III, & Schaller, M. (in press). How communication shapes culture. In K. Fiedler (Ed.), *Frontiers of social psychology: Social communication*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Cooper, J., & Jones, E. E. (1969). Opinion divergence as a strategy to avoid being mis-cast. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 13, 23–30.
- Clevstrom, J., & Passariello, C. (2006, August 18). No kicks from “Chavpagne.” *Wall Street Journal*, p. A11.
- Delorme, D., Kreshel, P. J., & Reid, L. N. (2003). Lighting up: Young adults’ autobiographical accounts of their first smoking experiences. *Youth and Society*, 34(4), 468–496.
- Deutsch, M., & Gerard, H. B. (1955). A study of normative and informational social influences upon individual judgment. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 51, 629–636.
- DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. (1983). The iron cage revised: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48, 147–160.
- Douglas, M., & Isherwood, B. (1978). *The world of goods: Towards an anthropology of consumption*. New York: Norton.
- Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social identity in the high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eckert, P. (2000). *Linguistic variation as social practice*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Englis, B. G., & Solomon, M. R. (1995). To be and not to be? Lifestyle imagery, reference groups, and the clustering of America. *Journal of Advertising*, 24, 13–28.
- Field, G. A. (1970). The status float phenomenon—The upward diffusion of innovation. *Business Horizons*, 8, 45–52.
- Fryer, R. G., Jr., & Levitt, S. D. (2004). The causes and consequences of distinctively black names. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 119, 767–805.
- Gerrard, M., Gibbons, F. X., Brody, G. H., Murry, V. M., Cleveland, M. J., & Wills, T. A. (2006). A theory-based dual focus alcohol intervention for pre-adolescents: Social cognitions in the Strong African American Families Program. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 20, 185–195.
- Gerrard, M., Gibbons, F. X., Stock, M. L., Vande Lune, L. S., & Cleveland, M. J. (2005). Images of smokers and willingness to smoke among African American pre-adolescents: An application of the prototype/willingness model of adolescent health risk behavior to smoking initiation. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 30, 305–318.
- Gibbons, F. X., & Gerrard, M. (1995). Predicting young adults’ health risk behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 505–517.
- Gibbons, F. X., & Gerrard, M. (1997). Health images and their effects on health behav-

- ior. In B. P. Buunk & F. X. Gibbons (Eds.), *Health, coping and well-being: Perspectives from social comparison theory* (pp. 63–94). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Gibbons, F. X., Gerrard, M., Blanton, H., & Russell, D. W. (1998). Reasoned action and social reaction: Willingness and intention as independent predictors of health risk. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 1164–1181.
- Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Heath, C., Bell, C., & Sternberg, E. (2001). Emotional selection in memes: The case of urban legends. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*, 1028–1041.
- Heath, C., Ho, B., & Berger, J. (2006). Focal points in coordinated divergence. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, *27*(5), 635–647.
- Hebdige, D. (1987). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Routledge.
- Kaplan, M. F., & Martin, A. M. (1999). Effects of differential status of group members on process and outcome of deliberation. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, *2*, 347–364.
- Leibenstein, H. (1950). Bandwagon, snob, and Veblen effects in the theory of consumers demand. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *65*, 183–207.
- Levy, S. J. (1959). Symbols for sale. *Harvard Business Review*, *33*, 117–124.
- Liebertson, S. (2000). *A matter of taste: How names, fashions, and culture change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- London, S. (2003, June 12). Why are the fads fading away? *Financial Times*, p. 14.
- Major, B., Spencer, S., Schmader, T., Wolfe, C., & Crocker, J. (1998). Coping with negative stereotypes about intellectual performance: The role of psychological disengagement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *24*(1), 34–50.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (2003). Culture, self, and the reality of the social. *Psychological Inquiry*, *14*, 277–283.
- Mason, W., & Berger, J. (2008). *How culture spreads: Social networks, identity-signaling, and the diffusion of culture* (Working paper).
- Mason, W., Jones, A., & Goldstone, R. L. (2008). *Propagation of innovations in networked groups*. Manuscript under review.
- McCracken, G. (1986, June). Culture and consumption: A theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *13*, 71–84.
- McCracken, G. (1988). *Culture and consumption: New approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Meyersohn, R., & Katz, E. (1957, May). Notes on the natural history of fads. *American Journal of Sociology*, *62*, 594–601.
- Moore, G. (1991). *Crossing the chasm: Marketing and selling technology products to mainstream customers*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Norenzayan, A., & Atran, S. (2004). Cognitive and emotional processes in the cultural transmission of natural and nonnatural beliefs. In M. Schaller & C. Crandall (Eds.), *The psychological foundations of culture* (pp. 149–169). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational Researcher*, *21*(8), 5–14.
- Peterson, R. A., & Anand, N. (2004). The production of culture perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *30*, 311–334.

- Pountain, D., & Robins, D. (2000). *Cool rules: Anatomy of an attitude*. London: Reaktion.
- Robinson, D. E. (1961). The economics of fashion demand. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 75, 376–398.
- Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations*. New York: Free Press.
- Rubin, D. C. (1995). *Memory in oral traditions: The cognitive psychology of epic, ballads, and counting-out rhymes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saranow, J. (2006, May 9). Hip to be square: Why young buyers covet “Grandpa” cars. *Wall Street Journal*, p. A1.
- Schaller, M., Conway, L. G., III, & Tanchuk, T. L. (2002). Selective pressures on the once and future contents of ethnic stereotypes: Effects of the communicability of traits. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 861–877.
- Schaller, M., & Crandall, C. S. (2004). *The psychological foundations of culture*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Shavitt, S. (1990). The role of attitude objects in attitude functions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 26, 124–148.
- Sherif, M. (1936). *The psychology of social norms*. New York: Harper.
- Simmell, G. (1957). Fashion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62, 541–548. (Original work published 1904)
- Snyder, C. R., & Fromkin, H. L. (1977). Abnormality as a positive characteristic: The development and validation of a scale measuring need for uniqueness. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 86, 518–527.
- Solomon, M. R. (1983). The role of products as social stimuli: A symbolic interactionism perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10, 319–329.
- Solomon, P. R. (1992). *Black resistance in high school*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Sproles, G. B. (1981). Analyzing fashion life cycles: Principles and perspectives. *Journal of Marketing*, 45, 116–124.
- Steele, C. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613–629.
- Taylor, R. (1974). John Doe, Jr: A study of his distribution in space, time, and the social structure. *Social Forces*, 53, 11–21.
- Tian, K. T., Bearden, W. O., & Hunter, G. L. (2001). Consumers’ need for uniqueness: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28, 50–66.
- Trebay, G. (2004, June 27). The subtle power of lesbian style. *New York Times*, Sunday Styles, p. 1.
- Veblen, T. (1912). *The theory of the leisure class*. New York: Viking Press. (Original work published 1899)
- White, K., & Dahl, D. (2006). To be or not be?: The influence of dissociative reference groups on consumer preferences. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 16(4), 404–414
- Wernerfelt, B. (1990). Advertising content when brand choice is a signal. *Journal of Business*, 63, 91–98.