FLEX

FIELD GUIDE 004 / THE SIGNAL IS NOT THE THING

Status symbols, taste, recognition, and the psychology of signalling. An evidence-aware companion to the interactive FLEX site.

A note on the method: this is a conceptual workbook, not a status assessment. No person can be diagnosed, ranked, or assigned an intention from possessions.

01 / THE MAIN ARGUMENT

An object can be useful, beautiful, sentimental, socially legible, or several of these at once. Its signal depends on recognition and context. A costly object may function as a badge among one group and receive no particular attention in another.

The working model: OBJECT (observable cue) → CODE (shared cultural associations) → AUDIENCE (interpretation in context). The arrows are an editorial diagram, not a validated causal test or psychological scale.

02 / WHAT THE RESEARCH DOES AND DOES NOT SHOW

Veblen (1899) offered a historical account of conspicuous consumption: expenditure can signal social position. As a theory developed in a specific context, it is not a universal claim about everyone who buys costly objects.

Han, Nunes and Drèze (2010) investigate brand prominence in luxury goods and show how conspicuousness interacts with status motives and group associations. Their typology is a research model, not a tool for profiling strangers.

Berger and Ward (2010) demonstrate that subtler signals can serve knowledgeable insiders, while being easier for others to miss. Their studies concern selected products and situations; do not infer a general law across every culture.

03 / TWO WORKED EXAMPLES

Case A — The prominent bag. Imagine a bag displaying a large luxury logo. In a crowd, its visibility may make it identifiable to observers who know the brand. One observer may admire it; another may find it excessive; another may not recognise it. **Evidence link:** Han et al. study the role of prominence. **Scenario:** the crowd is imaginary. **Limit:** the owner might prize colour, practicality, a gift, or personal memories.

Case B — The understated jacket. A tailored jacket has no conspicuous mark but carries construction details a specialist recognises. Many passers-by overlook them. **Evidence link:** Berger and Ward find circumstances where subtle signals communicate to insiders. **Scenario:** this jacket is illustrative. **Limit:** appreciation of craftsmanship need not be a status performance.

04 / NINE SCENARIOS — PRINTABLE DECODER

Each cell is one plausible reading, not an actual probability or prediction. Compare the same object under changing audiences.

CUE / AUDIENCE	MIXED STRANGERS	ENTHUSIASTS	FUNCTION-FIRST
Visible logo	Recognised by some; approval varies	Recognised; tastes differ	Utility may matter more
Quiet craft	May be missed	Detail can signal insider knowledge	Quality and repairability matter
Used specialist tool	May look ordinary	Wear suggests practice, not mastery	Reliability may dominate

05 / THE OBSERVATION WORKSHEET

Choose a real-world symbol that interests you. Do not record identifying details about strangers.

1. What is visible? Describe only observable features.

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2. Who recognises the cue? What makes you believe that?

_____

3. What interpretations are plausible besides a status motive?

_____

4. What changes if the audience is unfamiliar with the cue?

_____

5. Would function, pleasure or memory explain its appeal?

_____

6. What could you ask the owner instead of guessing?

_____

06 / A COUNTERARGUMENT

Not all display is conspicuous consumption. People purchase things for sensory pleasure, durability, habit, family attachment and curiosity. Even socially meaningful possessions can satisfy practical needs. Attempts to reduce every preference to insecurity or status pursuit misread human motives and erase cultural context.

07 / THREE REFLECTIONS

The private-room test: Would you still appreciate the object without an audience? A yes does not establish purity; a no does not establish vanity.

The reversal test: Find a community in which the same cue means something different, or means nothing.

The evidence test: Which conclusion requires direct observation or conversation instead of mind-reading?

08 / RESEARCH SHELF & SOURCES

Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* Primary historical text: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Theory_of_the_Leisure_Class

Han, Y. J., Nunes, J. C., & Drèze, X. (2010). Signaling Status with Luxury Goods: The Role of Brand Prominence. *Journal of Marketing, 74*(4), 15–30. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.74.4.015

Berger, J., & Ward, M. (2010). Subtle Signals of Inconspicuous Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research, 37*(4), 555–569. https://doi.org/10.1086/655445

09 / BOUNDARIES

What is supported: selected social signals depend on their visibility and on the knowledge and goals of audiences. What is interpretive: the three-part OBJECT/CODE/AUDIENCE model and scenario readings. What is illustrative: the bag, garment and tool examples. What is unknown: motives or reactions of any particular individual.

10 / RELATED WORLDS

Identity–Action Gap: https://identityaction.sahiltayal.com/

The Other Orbit: https://sahiltayal.online/

Sahilverse: https://sahilverse.online/

Return to the Sahilverse: https://sahiltayal.com/

Write to Sahil: sahil@sahiltayal.com (subject: FLEX — Status Symbols and Psychology)

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