

## Chapter 20

# Art and Brand Contamination: How Brands Have Blurred the Distinction Between Low Culture and High Culture

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### ABSTRACT

*Albeit often perceived as two worlds apart, low culture and high culture are increasingly converging to collaborate in mutually advantageous ways. Brands—including the name, term, sign, symbol, or combination of them that identify the goods and services of a seller or group of sellers, and differentiate them from those of the competitors—are the new territory where high culture and low culture co-exist and collaborate, creating new possibilities of cross-fertilization and hybridization between the two. Through the analysis of successful examples coming from different industries, this chapter aims to highlight how brands have blurred the distinction between low culture and high culture. On the one hand, brands can use the heritage of the arts world to gain authenticity and legitimate themselves in the eyes of consumers and the society. On the other hand, artists and arts organizations, such as museums and other art institutions, can indulge in popular culture in order to become appealing to younger target markets and enhance their brand awareness and image.*

### INTRODUCTION

Art and cultural products have traditionally been classified dichotomously and placed along a continuum at the ends of which are the “high” and the “low” culture designations (Bourdieu, 1979). Defined as “the great body of cultural skills and the great works which embody and represent them” (Williams, 1974), high culture is destined to elites, and includes arts and cultural products / genres belonging to

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the so-called high or legitimized art (Bourdieu, 1979), i.e., painting, sculpture and classical music. In contrast, low culture refers to popular music, cinema and other cultural genres characterized by mass production, universality, commodification, and wide accessibility (Rooney, 2017). Mainly perceived as “artistically and conceptually inferior to high art”, low culture is traditionally targeted at masses (Rooney, 2017). Thus, the distinction between high and low culture reflects that between socio-economic and educational classes (Gans, 2008).

Many thinkers (e.g., Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall), however, have challenged this strict divide arguing that low or pop culture deserves the same “close study as high art” (Hewett, 2015). In fact, the boundaries between high and low art have been blurring and we are witnessing a phenomenon of aestheticization of consumption (Featherstone, 1991) in which high and low art are increasingly mixing in areas such as design, advertising and branding. Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup is, perhaps, the most famous examples of the contamination between high and low art. Louis Bunuel’s representation of the Last Supper in *Viridiana* and, more recently Ariana Grande’s performance citing the same Leonardo’s artwork are just few examples of the contaminations between high and low culture.

This chapter will argue that brands - including the name, term, sign, symbol, or combination of them that identify the goods and services of a seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from those of the competitors (Kotler, 1991) - are the new territory where high culture and low culture co-exist, creating new possibilities of cross-fertilization and hybridization between the two. Examples include arts brands, such as the “Caravaggio brand” and the “Botticelli brand”, which are ‘appropriated’ by commercial companies to sell their products, or artists depicting products such as a Louis Vuitton handbag or Coca Cola.

Building on the literature on high vs. low culture, brand and postmodernism, this chapter will illustrate through examples how brands have blurred the distinction between low and high culture. In particular, the authors will describe different types of art and brand contamination and offer managerial implications. The authors will use instances to demonstrate how, in the postmodern era, the distinction between high and low art does no longer make sense and will emphasize how the phenomenon of aestheticization of everyday life and consumption (Maffesoli, 1990) has made brands the free zone where high and low culture can coexist.

## **HIGH VS. LOW CULTURE**

In the past, arts and culture were associated with upper classes, aristocracy or royalty that wished to separate themselves from lower and uneducated classes. Upper classes could count on financial resources and free time and could easily access cultural activities such as opera or ballet, which soon became designated as *high culture* (Bourdieu, 1979). The latter term is in contrast with *low culture*, a deprecating expression indicating different forms of cultural expressions produced by the mass. However, this does not mean that less privileged classes did not have resources to create or esteem high culture. For example, back in times, theatre was considered as popular culture. However, Shakespeare, one of the main representative artists of the low culture of his times, is now considered for his great value (Fisher, 2013).

This suggest that the distinction between high and low culture could be mostly ideological and retrospective. Generally speaking, what is considered popular culture today, could potentially achieve the status of high culture in the future, as long as it receives support and endorsement from respected individuals (gatekeepers) or institutions. Moreover, scholars (e.g., Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006; Kolb 2013) have

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