

CHAPTER

1

# From Status Symbol to Status Update

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL



The notion of the status symbol goes back as far as human history. In ancient China, once a man reached 20, he was permitted to wear a cap. This was celebrated with a ceremony called *Guanli*, or Ceremony of the Cap. As each new dynasty took hold, the caste system of the cap evolved, developing ever more specific rules and privileges associated with each style. What your cap looked like, and what shape or color it was, said very important things about you. For example, in the Han Dynasty a “lowly person” had to be content wearing only a headband, whereas the elite could get really decadent and wear a headband with a matching hat.

Since its early beginnings with the highly nuanced Chinese cap trend, the notion of the status symbol really took off, taking hold all over the globe in an ever widening array of objects and styles, all designed to tell a story about the importance of the owner. In America today, Maybach vehicles, Christian Louboutin shoes, Hublot watches, and real estate in glamorous places like the Hamptons or Malibu are the de rigeur status symbols of opulence and power among the super wealthy.

America’s youth has had a love/hate relationship with status symbols. For one, the glittering objects of the affluent elite have been by and large out of reach for them. In earlier generations, young people were motivated to work hard and long to reach the point where status symbols such as a beautiful home or a nice car were attainable. As the gap between aspirational youth and the affluent mainstream widened, however, the nation’s youth rejected the status quo and turned to anti–status symbols to express a different kind of importance within their own cultural sphere.

Along with this shift away from traditional status symbols, came a new set of values to support this new anti-status iconography. In the sixties, for example, ripped jeans, flag t-shirts, and long hair became counter-culture status symbols. Along with these symbols came a lifestyle and world vision centered on experiences that were not about luxury but about the pure enjoyment of life in its simplest and purest form. Be-ins, happenings, and protests, became the status alternatives for a youth culture in revolt against a system that had shut them out entirely, and that stood for materialism over existentialism. For young America in those days, poverty became chic, and wealth became tacky. And so a schism grew up between the mainstream and the counterculture with regard to visions of what status really meant, what was truly important and valuable in life, and how that was expressed.

Mainstream Status Symbols in the Sixties	Counterculture Status Symbols in the Sixties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lincoln Continental</li><li>• Travel aboard a Pan Am jet clipper</li><li>• Color TV</li><li>• A royal title</li><li>• A suburban bungalow</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The peace sign</li><li>• The Afro</li><li>• Levi's</li><li>• Psychedelic drugs</li><li>• Tie-dyed t-shirts</li><li>• Communes</li></ul>

## The Hip-Hop Invasion and the Reimagined Status Symbol

---

Young America's feelings about mainstream status symbols changed dramatically in the nineties. Suddenly, traditional status symbols of luxury and affluence became more accessible to youth culture. The accessibility of luxury opened up enormous windows of opportunities for brands and entertainers alike. The emergence of hip-hop culture combined with a booming economy toward the end of the twentieth century brought status symbols to young people in a whole new way. An infinite and innovative variety of status symbols, which were accessible and available everywhere from suburban malls to urban street corners across the U.S., led a hip-hop renaissance, along with a world vision that supported this new emphasis on accessible affluence for youth.

### Hip-Hop Status Symbol Highlights

Through pervasive lyrics, from the likes of Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, Kanye West, Mase, Nas, and others, the new importance of status symbols to young America came through loud and clear. This new youth narrative, which stressed affordable opulence, helped usher in a wave of accessible luxury

goods creating status symbols in every section of the economy. Here are some of the more notable examples:

- One of the first status symbols that emerged from hip-hop's early influence was from Run DMC in 1986 by way of their hit song "My Adidas." These early rap pioneers received a multimillion dollar endorsement deal as Adidas' three-striped sneakers tread the streets from Queens to Long Beach, California, in heavy rotation.
- In 1994 Snoop Dogg donned some Tommy Hilfiger gear on *Saturday Night Live*, and sales reportedly jumped by over \$90 million that year. Prior to the SNL endorsement, Tommy Hilfiger was largely an elitist fashion brand relatively unknown in inner cities and hip-hop culture.
- Leading into 2001 at least 10 Rap and R&B songs by artists including Jennifer Lopez had mentioned Cadillac's Escalade brand in their song lyrics. During the MTV video awards that year, Ludacris drove an Escalade right onto the stage. His hit song that year "Southern Hospitality" included the lyrics: "Cadillac grills, Cadillac mills, Cadillac fills." Suddenly Cadillac, which had an average consumer age of 62, had its Escalade SUV on back order in the

dealerships of major cities where a whole new generation was lining up to be a reimagined Cadillac owner.

- In 2003 after Justin Timberlake wore a Von Dutch trucker hat to the Grammy after parties, stars like Britney Spears and Ashton Kutcher quickly followed suit. The Von Dutch had been in fringe existence for five years before this fortuitous set of events. After its celebrity patronage, it became a status symbol at suburban malls in white upper-middle class enclaves across America, selling out of stores at prices exceeding \$100.

Through hats, cars, and sneakers, America's hip-hop and pop culture icons of the new millennium became core drivers of discretionary spending among America's youth. Logos meant more than ever before and played an increasingly important role in showcasing social status, wealth, and style, the very same way that wearing hats did in ancient China.

Logos from companies like GAP, Abercrombie & Fitch, and FUBU were brazenly branded across outerwear and considered high fashion simply because of their label. By the mid-00s, hip-hop would go on to reach arguably its cultural peak as whimsical lyrics about Gulfstream private jets, Cristal champagne, and Jacob the Jeweler bling were commonplace in songs on Casey Kasem's top 40 lists.

## Status Symbols Disrupted

---

While much has been written about the effect of the 2008 financial collapse on American culture, its impact on pop culture and music has largely been understated. In fact a strong argument can be made that the experience of parental stress and deflated 401(k) accounts made YouthNation rethink the importance of the material status symbols that had become so important in defining their identity in the nineties.

The logos once proudly emblazoned across their chests, YouthNation realized, were nothing more than manufactured corporate symbols of a crumbling and sometimes corrupt empire. Somehow, having mom or dad splurge on a \$200 pair of Air Yeezys when they were trying to piece together the monthly mortgage payment just didn't seem as cool anymore.

The foundational belief that home prices and stock values would always rise, and every generation would do better than the one before it, came crashing down with every word out of Maria Bartiromo's mouth on those scary fall 2008 mornings on CNBC. Despite the continued popularity of a select group of hip-hop artists who became bona fide crossover stars into mainstream pop (Jay-Z, Kanye West, Lil' Wayne), 2008 created a palpable shift within popular music as the once dominant genre of hip-hop gradually lost its hold on YouthNation's imagination.

A new measure of importance and a new definition of status emerged out of the social media trend that was beginning to entrance our culture. Shiny new stuff started



to lose its glimmer, and in its place came a new form of status, based not on material items, but on experiences.

### YouthNation's Guide to Creating a Status Symbol

Though status symbols may differ widely in form, shape, and design, there are a few key elements that all status symbols have in common. Here are the critical components that go into the creation of any breakout status symbol to guide you in the creation of your own luxury offerings:

1. **Cost:** In modern society, few things play a bigger role in establishing something as a status symbol than the amount of money it takes to acquire it. The ownership of certain things that come at great cost—a mansion, a luxury vehicle, a yacht, or vacation home—signifies economic class and, in some cases, power. In fact, the purchase of some items, such as a private jet, can propel you into an even higher social class, in this case the “jet set” which travels the world from the privacy of their own aircraft. Note: If you want to see YouthNation's take on the “jet set” follow “RichKidsOfInstagram” on Instagram (but don't procrastinate on that for too long).

Some high-cost status symbols even seem to defy the basic principles of economics and are known as Veblen goods. The price of Veblen

goods will always remain high, regardless of low demand, and in fact, lowering their cost would make them less desirable to those few with the money to burn.

2. **Exclusivity:** The more difficult something is to obtain, the more desirable it becomes as a status symbol. This is true for both goods such as the Veblen goods that defy economic principles, as well as certain services and memberships. The American Express Centurion Card, for example, is an invitation-only card made available exclusively to those who meet a set of eligibility criteria. The same applies for highly coveted nightlife establishments such as New York City's Provocateur which is widely known for only catering to the uber rich, super cool, or beautiful. For Provocateur and others like it, it's who can't get in which maintains its level of exclusivity.
3. **Identity:** Status symbols express important qualities about the identity of their owner. Ownership of expensive items and membership to exclusive clubs and services immediately mark one as wealthy, powerful, or both. But even everyday items can be imbued with powerful symbolism, especially in today's tech-obsessed culture. Early adopters of Google Glass, for example, were immediately identified as tech

elites. Owners of Mac computers are associated with creativity more often than their PC-using counterparts.

4. **Cultural significance:** Perhaps the most critical aspect of a status symbol is that it reflects the social and cultural dynamics of its time and place. For example, the tie-dyed t-shirt held little meaning before becoming popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a symbol of the counterculture movements taking place across the country. In the 1980s, a cordless phone signified wealth and early adoption of technology in America, but in 2015 it has become difficult to imagine using anything but a smartphone. Every status symbol is a product of its own time and place in our cultural history.
5. **Celebrity endorsement:** There is a reason why brands throw down millions of dollars for celebrities to endorse their products—it works. However, as we saw with the hip-hop movement, even when unpaid, the simple association of a product with a celebrity or culturally significant figure can cause it to go flying off of the shelves or lot. There was a 45 percent increase in consumer interest for OMEGA's Seamaster collection after it appeared on James Bond in the 2013 film, *Skyfall*. While a fictional celebrity, James Bond represents an aspirational

lifestyle that has historically held great appeal for men, and OMEGA capitalized on this association to drive sales.

The marketing around Dr. Dre's Beats by Dre brand has always relied on celebrities wearing and using the product. From Lady Gaga to Pharrell to legendary producer Dre himself, who better to recommend a pair of headphones than your favorite musician? When Apple acquired Beats for \$3 billion in 2014, they were buying more than just a product but also the all-important aura of "cool" that has resulted from Beat's savvy marketing and celebrity endorsements.