ABSTRACT

Exhibiting good taste can increase consumers’ status within social groups. How can observers interpret such status signals of taste and tell whether someone exhibits truly good taste or whether their choices instead reflect mere pretense, guided by social norms? True good taste discerns and reflects independent judgment of quality. True good taste displays not only preferences for what social or other external norms suggest are high-quality options but also preferences that are authentic. Authentic preferences may deviate from external norms. We propose that, over a series of choices, observers judge those consumers to exhibit truly good taste who choose not only those options that external norms prescribe as superior but also options whose choice contradicts these norms. Accordingly, we hypothesize that judgments of true good taste are a single-peaked function of quality as prescribed by an external norm. We test this hypothesis in four experiments that show that the proportion of high-quality options within a set of consumption choices provides information about both taste and authenticity. Relative to simply maximizing the proportion of high-quality choices, consumers view occasional low-quality choices as signals of authenticity. Judgments of true good taste result from a mixture of choice options that indicate the ability to discern quality independently.