

Downwardly mobile: When consumer decisions are influenced by people with lower socioeconomic status

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People assume that consumers are influenced by celebrities and high-status individuals, but according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, it may be the janitor or the security guard who makes you want to run out and purchase the latest gadget.

"Consumers from a lower [socioeconomic status](#) are not usually considered ideal influencers for higher status customers. After all, people accept influence from those they identify with—those who are similar to them or people who they aspire to be like," write authors Edith Shalev (Israel Institute of Technology) and Vicki G. Morwitz (New York University). Because people usually do not aspire to obtain a lower socioeconomic status, it seems unlikely that people would become interested in the same products as people with less status.

However, the authors discovered that under certain circumstances higher status consumers are more likely to emulate the choices of lower status people, a phenomenon called the "low status user effect." For example, observing a janitor using the latest tech gadget may lead a person of higher status to question his own technological innovativeness. "This scenario might lead the observer to think: if a lower socioeconomic status person owns the latest tech gadget and I don't, what does this mean about my relative technological innovativeness?" The authors found that the low status user effect only occurs when the product symbolizes a clear and desirable trait and when the observer is unconfident about her

relative standing on that trait.

One study found that research participants showed more interest in a sophisticated T-shirt when a grocery packer wore it than when a college student donned it. Another study found the same effect for a wireless charger (used by a security guard or an architect). But the effect was found only among participants who considered technological innovativeness to be an important part of their self-definition.

Other counter-stereotypical [consumers](#) may have influence in the marketplace, the authors explain. "A consumer who observes an elderly lady wearing professional running shoes might infer that people in general have become more athletic than before," the authors write. "In an attempt to restore a sporty self-image he may purchase new running shoes."

More information: Edith Shalev and Vicki G. Morwitz. "Influence via Comparison-Driven Self Evaluation and Restoration: The Case of the Low-Status Influencer." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2012 (published online July 25, 2011). ejcr.org

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