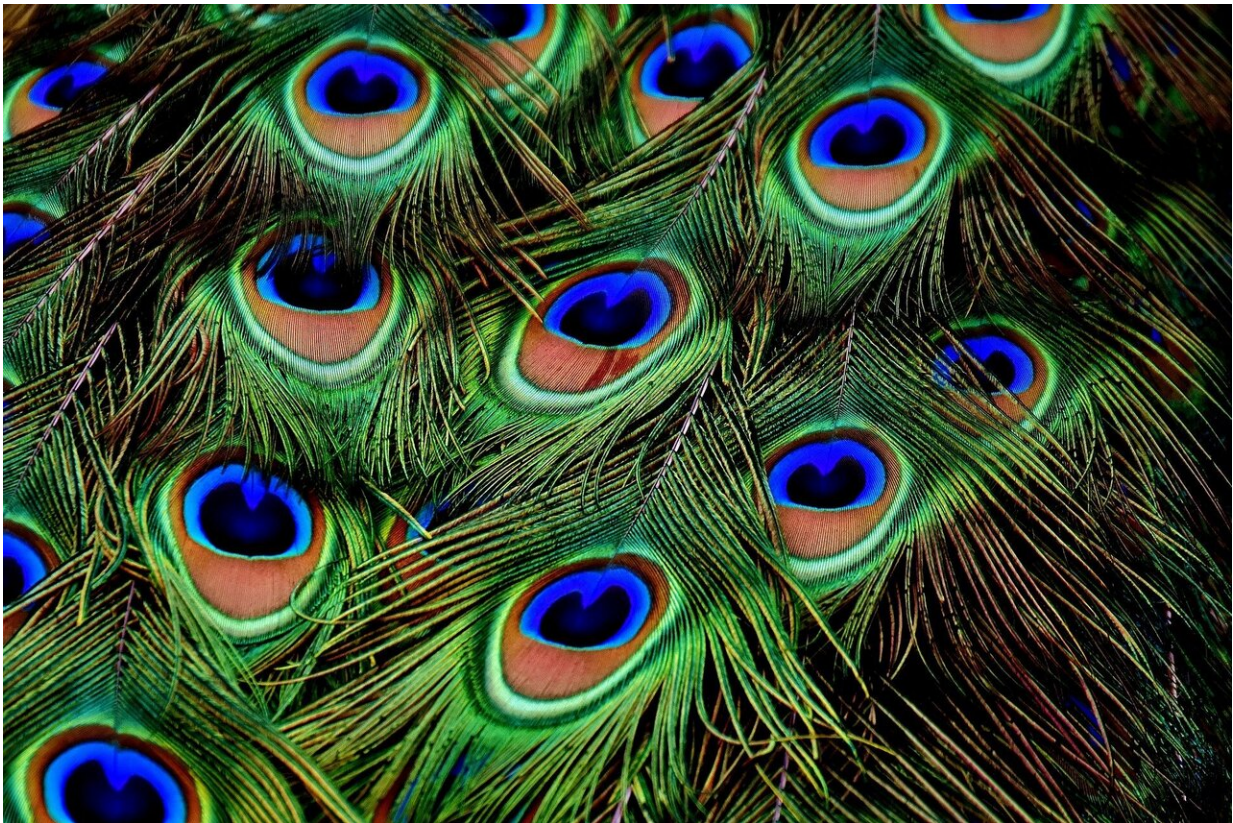


# Charles Darwin and conspicuous consumption: Why bling is blingy

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Luxury brands are a prominent feature of modern society. Thorstein Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" to describe how the upper classes showcased expensive goods without inherent practical

benefits to demonstrate their economic power.

Weblen was inspired by Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution. Darwin himself was greatly puzzled by what he considered wasteful investments in elaborate physiological features, which he saw as the greatest threat to his theory of natural selection. Darwin was so troubled that the sight of a peacock's tail feather would make him feel sick, as this elaborate display made the birds more vulnerable to predators.

Darwin realized that these features provided a reproductive advantage, leading to his [theory of sexual selection](#), an important component of evolution. Such features are attractive to potential reproductive partners because they advertise superior genomic-environmental compatibility and are only possible when an individual has surplus immune and energetic capacity.

Evolutionary Psychologists combined these accounts with an analogy between men's displays of [luxury goods](#) and the peacock's tail feathers in their ultimate explanation for conspicuous consumption. Because they are costly, luxury goods are an honest signal of future paternal investment in offspring. Investment by fathers is known to promote offspring success. The greater a man's economic power, the more attractive he is to women.

However, there is a fundamental problem with this model. The peacock's tail feathers are a signal of the bird's genetic qualities, and peacocks do not provide any paternal care. Their feathers are an example of secondary sex characteristics, features that appear in animals at sexual maturity but are not directly part of the reproductive system. These ornaments and armaments facilitate mating. They enable quick and reliable assessments of physiological quality, physical strength, [social status](#), dominance, and aggressiveness by competitors and potential reproductive partners. The more exaggerated male secondary sex

characteristics are across species, the more males focus on mating competition (acquiring mates), and the less they invest in offspring care.

Three studies tested the hypothesis that consumer products mimicking the physiological properties of male secondary sexual characteristics (e.g., exaggerated size, elaborate coloration, and lower-pitched sounds) are parallel in form and function to secondary sex characteristics themselves. Participants viewed polo shirts with small and large versions of a luxury clothing brand logo in randomized order. In some of the studies, participants predicted the characteristics of the man who owned each shirt. In another, men were asked which shirt they would wear in specific social contexts and women were asked which shirt they thought men would be more likely to wear.

Men owning the large logo shirts were rated higher on mating effort, lower on parental investment, higher on interest in brief sexual affairs, lower on interest in long-term committed [romantic relationships](#), higher in attractiveness to women for brief sexual affairs, lower in attractiveness to women for long-term committed relationships, and higher in developmental environment unpredictability compared to men owning shirts displaying a smaller logo.

Men were most likely to wear the large logo shirt when then competing for social dominance or attempting to attract a sexual partner. They were least likely to wear the large logo [shirt](#) when meeting their potential in-laws or applying for a job. Women's responses mirrored this pattern. Such results indicate the strategic use of luxury displays to signal features consistent with social goals.

The strong and consistent pattern of results demonstrates support for the phenotypic mimicry hypothesis and challenges the notion that men's luxury displays are a reliable signal of their paternal contributions. Overall, these studies demonstrate the power and potential of applying

evolutionary theory to models of human psychology and behavior.

The article is published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

**More information:** Daniel J. Kruger. Phenotypic Mimicry Distinguishes Cues of Mating Competition From Paternal Investment in Men's Conspicuous Consumption, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/01461672211007229](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211007229)

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