

# **Knock-Offs**

## **The Potential for Aesthetic Emulation in Dollar Store Mugs**

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**Cite as:** Johnson, Emma. 2008. Knock-Offs: The Potential for Aesthetic Emulation in Dollar Store Mugs. Dollarware Project, report 05. <http://dollarware.org/report05.pdf>.

*Abstract: Aesthetic emulation, also known as status emulation or more commonly knock-offs, are intended to present the illusion of a more expensive product. By comparing the Dollarware collection with ceramic mugs from stores with higher price ranges, such as department stores or souvenir shops, it is possible to examine the question of whether dollar store ceramics intentionally emulate current trends and aesthetic attributes in higher-end mugs. While the study conducted was not statistically conclusive, it does shed some light on status emulation, some of its alternatives, and the questions we ask ourselves when making a purchase.*

### **Introduction**

Whether we buy ceramic mugs for one dollar or sixty, it is safe to say that some of the same thoughts cross our minds, and that most of these revolve around questions of aesthetics. We consider, sometimes subconsciously, the colour, the shape, and the images on the mug, and we decide based these visual elements whether or not the mug is worth our money, however much that might be. It is also safe to say that, like most other lines of merchandise, the more expensive brands with the larger advertising budgets determine the most popular products coveted by the general public. Such a monopoly on the definition of good taste, despite the fact that a relatively small portion of the population can afford it, has spawned cheaper versions of the same popular products in other stores. But to what extent is this a universal phenomenon? Are dollar store ceramics intentionally emulating the styles and aesthetic attributes of ceramics from a higher price range, in order to appeal to what consumers currently consider "good taste"? In other words, are they knock-offs?

In order to answer this question, a comparison was made of ceramics from the Dollarware collection and similar products from high-end stores. It was assumed that if aesthetic or status emulation is indeed occurring, then similar patterns of attributes would be found at stores from a variety of price ranges. If emulation is not present, then different attributes will be popular in different store categories. The results, however, reveal a far more complex reality that, while not completely excluding emulation, may also indicate a deliberate attempt to stimulate the reverse phenomenon.



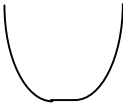
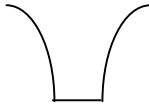

### **Methods**



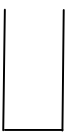

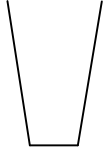

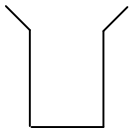
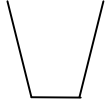
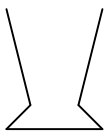
In order to properly conduct a study of the possibility of aesthetic emulation, it was necessary to collect information not only on mugs from dollar stores, but stores in a variety of other price ranges as well. It was therefore clear from the beginning of this project that a great deal of information on the attributes of each Dollarware mug was needed, so that comparable data could be collected at other locations. I reasoned that the purpose of aesthetic emulation is to present the *illusion* of a more expensive product, and thus I decided that the visible style and not the physical quality was the most important characteristic

that needed to be considered. Thus, I collected information on the three most visible aspects of the mug when it sits on a shelf in a store: the iconography, the colour, and the shape.

For iconographic and colour data, I worked with several other students to create distinct categories, and we organized our information for each mug based on the presence and absence of each of these attributes. For iconographic data, we considered the following 15 categories: no icon, a single word, a phrase, humans, cats, dogs, other animals, toys, holiday themes, calendrical motifs, nationalistic themes, occupational icons, food, floral designs, and geometric designs. Any mug could contain any number of these categories, with the exception of 'no icon', after which obviously no other categories would be applicable. For colour, we used the following 10 categories: white (including off-white and beige), black, brown, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink.

Once information on iconography and colour of the Dollarware was complete, I created a simple typology that reduced the shape of the mug to a series of four numbers, each representing a certain aspect of the shape (see Fig. 1). This typology could then be used easily and quickly to identify the shape of any mugs I might encounter at other locations.

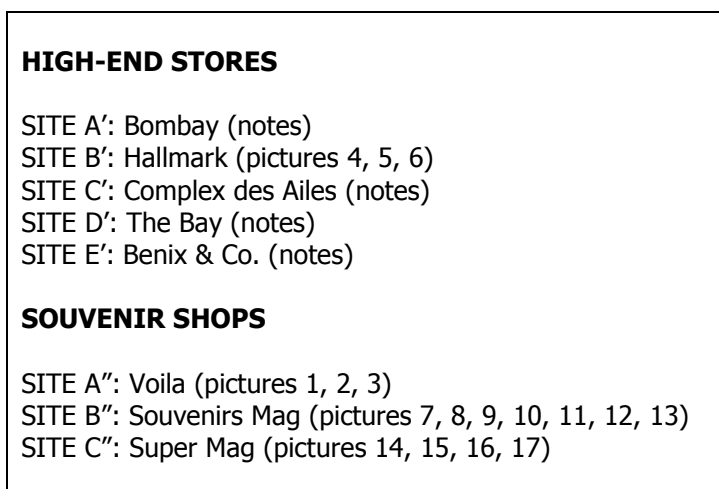
	<i>Attribute</i>		<i>Option</i>	<i>Profile Drawing</i>
1	Wall Angle	1	Straight	
		2	Cone	
		3	Round	
		4	Flare	
		5	Cup	
		6	Other	N/A

2	Height/ Diameter	1	Average	
		2	Lower/ wider	
		3	Higher/ narrower	
		4	Much lower/ espresso	
		5	Much higher	
3	Lip	0	No lip	
		1	Lip	
4	Foot	0	No foot	
		1	Foot	

**Figure 1: Typology Developed for Ceramic Mugs**

After iconography, colour, and typology were complete for the Dollarware collection - with the exception of Site N, Value Village, excluded because of the unknown original cost of the merchandise - I proceeded to collect the same information for mugs at other locations. Because there are potentially hundreds of stores in the Montreal area that carry merchandise comparable to Dollarware mugs, and because access to these mugs would be limited since I was not purchasing them, I felt that simplicity and consistency were the keys to a rigorous study. For the implications of this project to be considered any further, a far larger sample would be needed, as would a greater amount of time with the "high-end" merchandise.

I studied stores located on Ste. Catherine Street between McGill College and St. Urbain, and collected information on as many mugs as possible ranging in price from \$1.50 to \$20. This included mugs displayed on the shelf, even if they were part of a larger set of dishware, but did not include the most expensive porcelain mugs and cups. At some stores, I wrote information on scraps of paper, but where permission was given I took photographs of the greatest concentrations of mugs; from these photographs, I only included mugs in my dataset which had a visibly complete profile. If there were duplicates, and they were at the same store, I did not count them twice; this is because when we collected Dollarware we did not intentionally buy duplicate mugs. However, if there were duplicate mugs at different stores, I did count them, because when we bought Dollarware there was no way to control duplicates from different sites and thus some can be found in the collection. It was clear from my initial research that there were two kinds of "high-end" stores that warranted separation into distinct categories: souvenir shops, and high-end stores including department stores and gift shops (see Fig. 2)



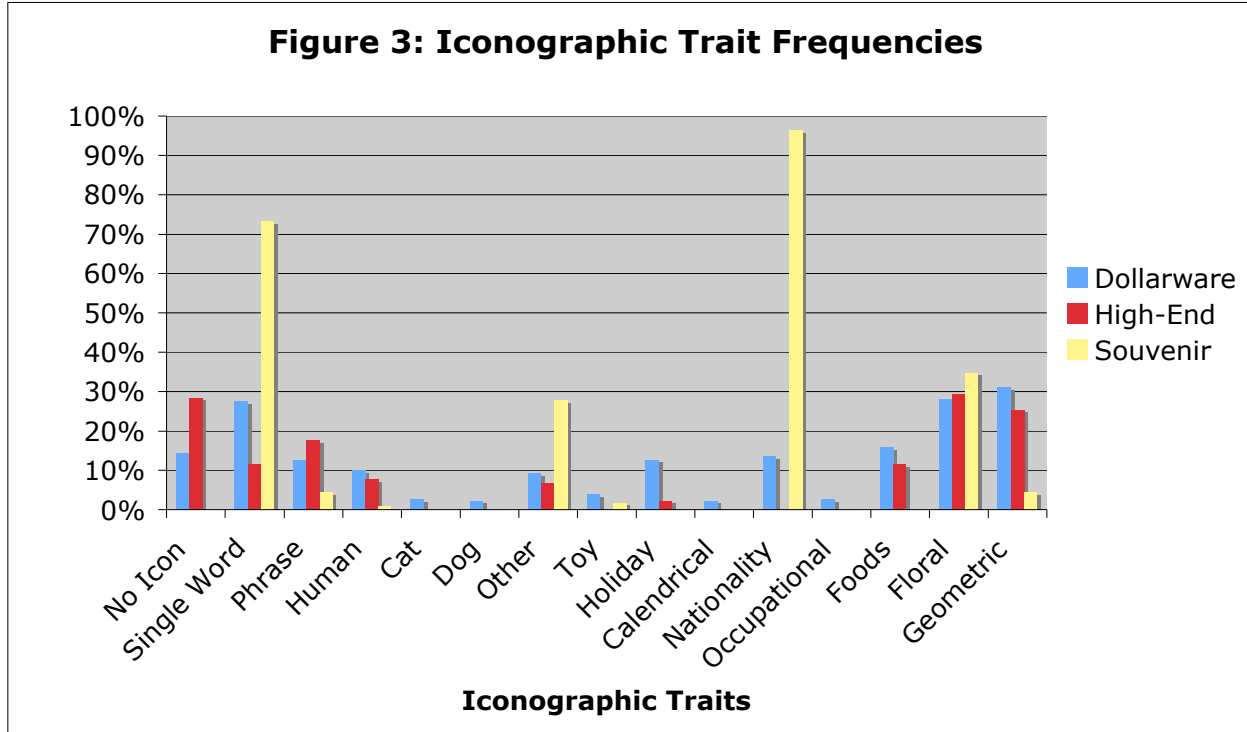
**Fig. 2: High-End and Souvenir stores used in this study.**

With data organized in three attribute lists for three categories of locations – iconography, colour, and shape for each mug from the Dollarware collection, souvenir shop, and high-end store locations – a series of histograms were developed that compared the frequency of each attribute in each location. Histograms were created by compiling frequency information for each attribute (or in some cases, such as colour, the sum of all attributes) and converting each into a percentage of the entire store category; the percentages of all three store categories were graphed together to visually reveal any interesting trends. If any great similarities or differences were observed, a chi-square test was conducted to determine whether or not such patterns were of statistical significance. If aesthetic or status emulation is taking place, then significant parallels in the frequencies of certain attributes would exist, these being identified as the most current and popular trends in ceramic mugs. If it is found that patterns of great difference are statistically significant, then perhaps some force opposing emulation is taking place. Finally, if no significant patterns occur, then several alternatives exist: trends in ceramic aesthetics are not quantitatively visible, those trends are completely random, or this study is simply inconclusive.

**Results**

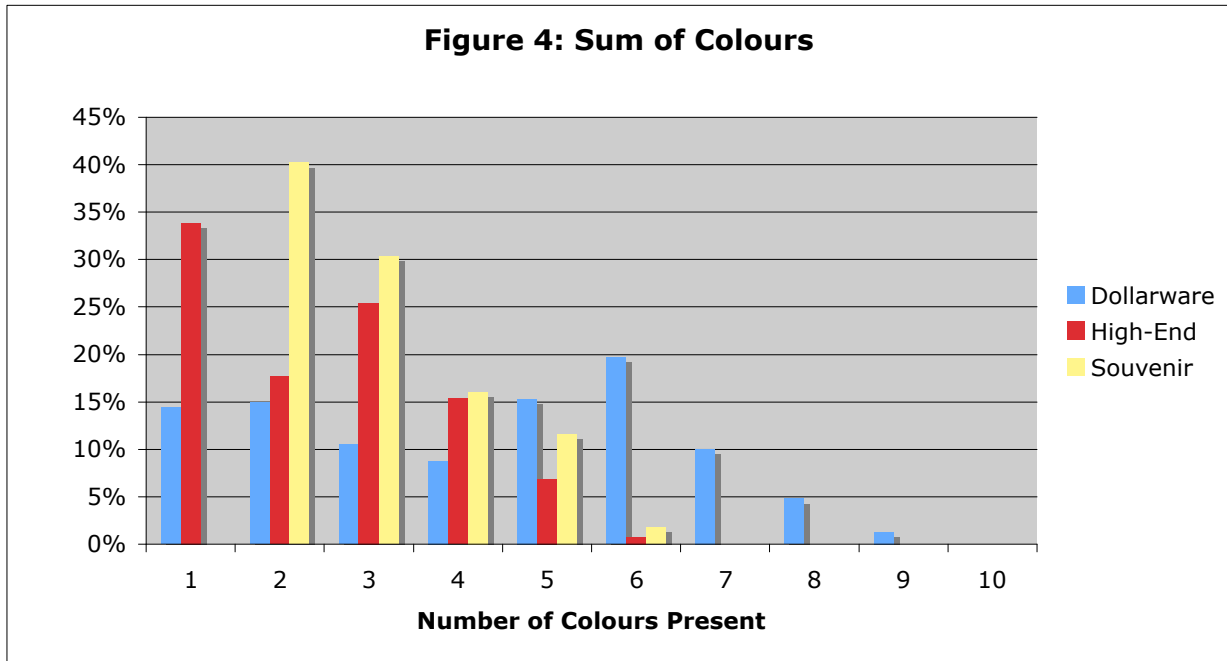
The following are the most interesting histograms generated by the data collected using the methods above. Each one is discussed independently, with one or two interesting relationships considered (although, unfortunately, not all of them), using a chi-square test where appropriate.

*Iconography*



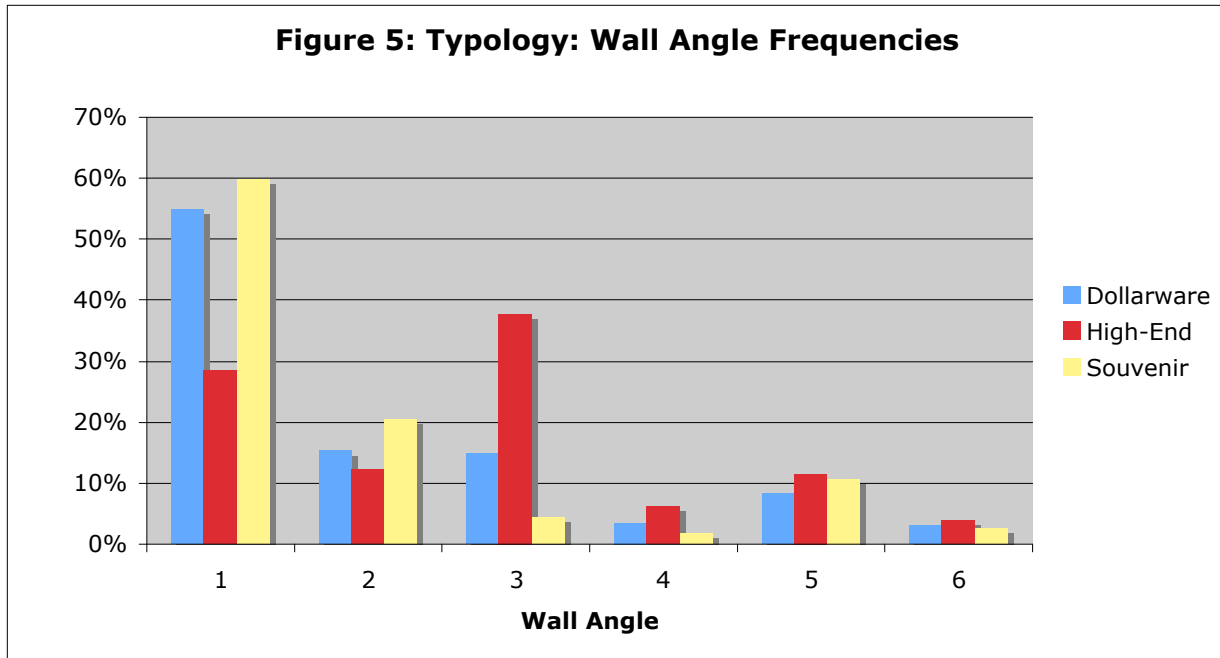
It is clear from the very outset that the similarities assumed to exist in the presence of status emulation are not visible in this histogram of iconographic frequencies. Certain trends are identifiable and perhaps easily explained: it is logical, for example, for souvenir shops to carry nationalistic mugs with a single word on them (such as "Montreal" or "Quebec") and an "other" animal (such as a moose or beaver). However, other frequencies are more difficult to explain: for example, the unusually low number of souvenir store mugs with geometric designs (5%) compared to Dollarware (31%) and high-end mugs (25%). A chi-square test was conducted for the presence of geometric designs in souvenir stores and high-end mugs, and the trend was significant with  $p = 8.19002E-06$  (see Appendix I for chi-square and frequency data), thus indicating that the relationship is not random. However, another chi-square test was conducted and the relationship between geometric designs in Dollarware and high-end merchandise is random, with  $p = 0.248672365$ . To the naked eye, the visibly most similar relationship is between Dollarware and high-end mugs with floral designs, but even this was not seen to be a significant pattern, with  $p = 0.815016377$ . Therefore, while the great differences appear to be significant, the apparent similarities are not.

Colour

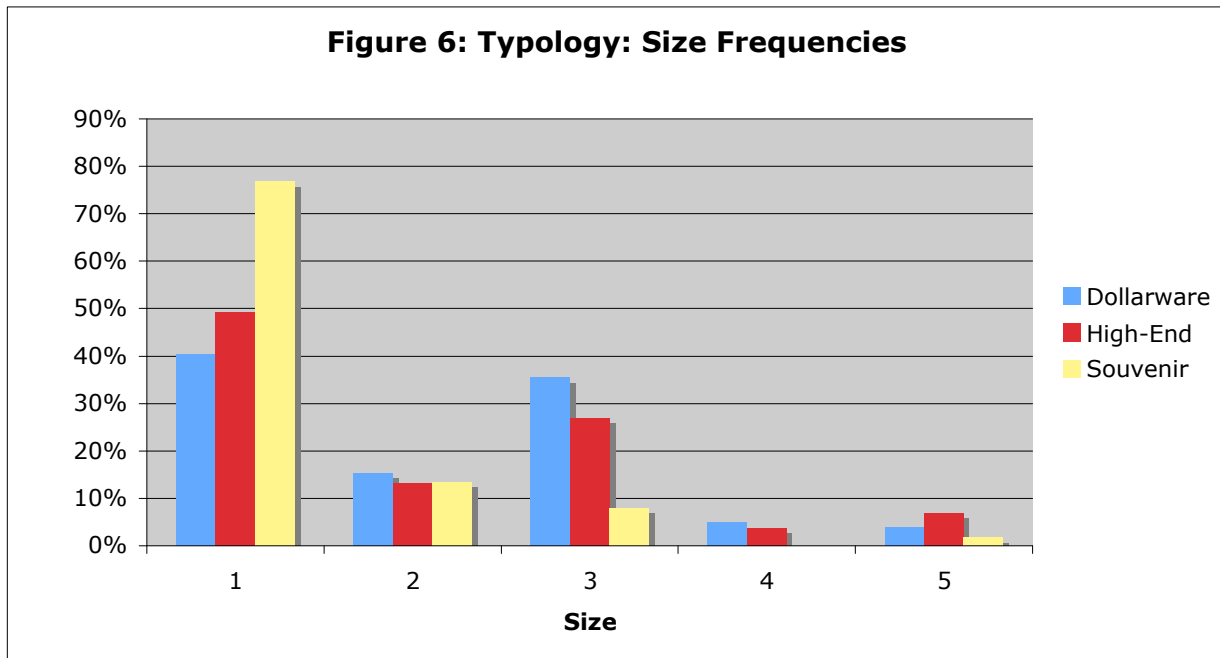


The colourfulness of the mug is also an unexpected series of relationships. There is a clear difference in the number of mugs with a solid colour (14% Dollarware, 34% high-end, and 0% souvenir), and a chi-square showed that this trend was highly significant between Dollarware and high-end mugs, with  $p = 1.78595E-05$ . One interpretation could be that current aesthetic trends prefer solid colours, since higher-end mugs display that trait. It also makes sense that souvenir mugs are completely absent from this category, since we have learned from Figure 3 that all souvenir mugs have some kind of iconography, which generally requires two or more colours. Finally, it is interesting to note that the 5 colour range, Dollarware increasingly grows in prominence: a chi-square shows statistical significance between Dollarware and high-end mugs at this point with  $p = 0.019510636$ , and the trend greatly increases from there. High-end and souvenir mugs disappear from the chart altogether after six colours. This might tentatively suggest that there is a hierarchy of colourfulness in the world of ceramics, with Dollarware being the most colourful, high-end mugs the least, and souvenir mugs somewhere in the middle.

Typology

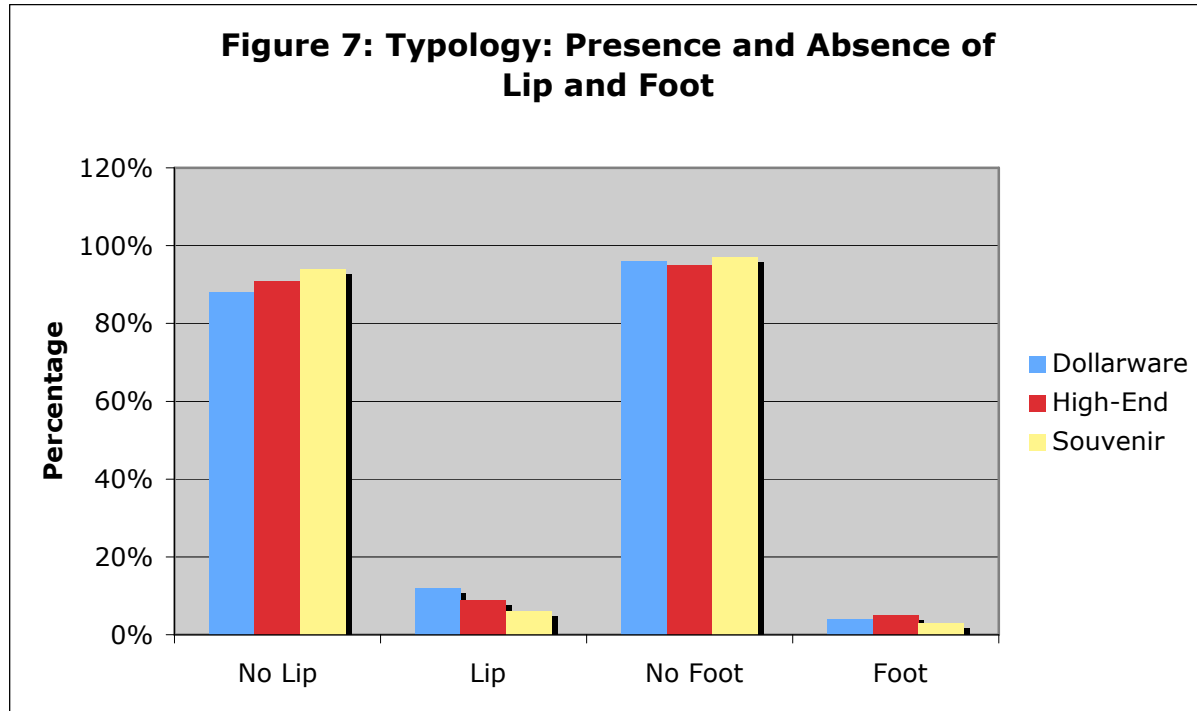


The majority of these frequencies appear to be random, according to a variety of chi-square tests conducted with Wall Angle 1 and Wall Angle 6 – the most visibly different and similar of the six options; all the results were  $p = >0.05$ . The only exception is Wall Angle 3, the concave rounded shape, that appears to have significance for Dollarware (15%) and souvenir mugs (4%) at  $p = 0.004491509$  and most significantly between Dollarware and high-end mugs (38%), where  $p = 9.03025E-07$ . It appears that high-end mugs are significantly more likely to be rounded in shape when compared to Dollarware and souvenir shop collections, and could be an intentional aesthetic decision.



All but one of these relationships are not significant according to chi-square tests, where  $p = >0.05$ . The only statistically significant difference is between high-end (49%) and souvenir (77%) mugs at the

average size (1), where  $p = 1.06766E-05$ . While this might indicate a pattern wherein the average size is more popular in souvenir than high-end mugs, it is difficult to infer any meaning from this dataset keeping in mind that the vast majority of it is completely random. It is important to note, however, that this might only be true when the three store categories are compared to each other, as is the purpose of this study: a completely different examination of the data would have to be undertaken to determine whether chi-square charts reveal patterns for single store categories.



This graph is perhaps the only one that visually represents what could be emulation, since there appears to be a high degree of similarity in the presence and absence of these two morphological attributes. There is certainly no mistaking the fact that in all three collections, lips and feet are not popular. However, the relationships between the presence and absence of these two attributes are not statistically significant according to chi-square tests, with  $p = >0.05$  in every case (for example, for Dollarware and high-end lips,  $p = 0.378371204$ , and Dollarware and high-end feet,  $p = 0.526795262$ ).

## **Discussion**

It is fairly easy to visually identify knock-offs in ceramics: artefact J-12 from the Dollarware collection, for example, has an image of Mickey and Minnie Mouse but no copyright information, and is most likely an attempt to emulate the style of the Disney corporation<sup>1</sup>. However, when we look for widespread aesthetic emulation at the level of popular trends in mug style, we are given a far more complicated picture than might be expected. The fact that there are a few obvious visual identifications does not counteract the fact that no strong statistical patterns have been identified in this study, and statistical significance that has been identified reinforces the *differences* between the collections and not their *similarities*.

This is not to suggest that status emulation does not exist in the world of ceramic mugs. As a student on a budget with an interest in style, I can personally attest to the fact that people do indeed seek out less

<sup>1</sup> I also found two mugs in souvenir stores identical to E-11, which read "J(heart) Montreal", but since I did not collect copyright information for the souvenir collections, I cannot state conclusively whether they are also visually identified knock-offs.

expensive products similar to the more popular trends they cannot afford. However, there appears to be more than this rather simplistic observation occurring in these collections, based on the results given above, and there are some alternative explanations for the behaviour displayed.

One possible explanation is that we have neglected a very important variable: time. In Ian Morris' study of burial in the ancient Greek world, his brief explanation of stylistic change in pottery relies significantly not only on status, but also on the passage of time (Morris 1987: 16-17). He argues that when a style changes at the elite level, it does not simply disappear, but "move[s] down the social ladder, particularly when some individuals or groups within society attempt to emulate others by adopting their styles or products" (Morris 1987: 16). He considers this an integral part of the explanation for continual stylistic change in ceramics. Perhaps, then, looking at contemporaneous trends in mugs will not reveal changes that will occur over a longer period of time, as high-end trends slowly make their way to dollar stores.

Another possibility is that we need to redefine the function of each collection. This is particularly relevant for the souvenir store mugs, which are most likely bought by tourists or as gifts, but not often taken home by the purchaser for personal use. Similarly, Dollarware mugs are often bought as temporary replacements, quick buys, or by those who hope to later replace them with better quality ceramics; alternatively, there are those who proudly display cheaper merchandise, with the mistaken understanding that they are aesthetically pleasing (making it kitsch, see Morreall and Loy 1989), or maybe even with a sense of irony. High-end mugs, on the other hand, are expected to last longer, are for some a major financial investment, and must therefore have a more timeless aesthetic quality to them. Perhaps, then, the same motives for purchasing a mug do not apply to every collection, potentially rendering them incomparable.

So far we have considered possible reasons why aesthetic emulation is not the most widespread trend when we compare Dollarware, high-end, and souvenir mugs. There is one final explanation for the results that must be considered, one that is in direct opposition to the concept of emulation, and that is the possibility that each collection has an aesthetic tradition *of its own*. A comparison of all three store categories appears to generate mostly random trends, but those that are statistically significant indicate major differences instead of similarities, and it is possible to visually identify the most popular trends in each store category: souvenir mugs tend to have a straight wall angle and average size, with two or three colours, nationalistic words, and animals other than cats or dogs; high-end mugs tend to have a rounded shape and average size, solid colours, and floral or geometric patterns; and finally, the Dollarware collection appears to have more colourful mugs of straight wall angles and average or lower/wider size, and displays a much wider range of iconographic traits. Rather than assume that aesthetic trends are being designed at higher price ranges to be copied by lower ones, it is possible that high-end mug designers are attempting to assert their dominance by keeping trends significantly different from any others. Thorstein Veblen, for example, argued that conspicuous consumption, or the accumulation and use of goods and services that are unnecessary and often illogically overpriced, is required to express high status, even if such status is an illusion (Veblen 1973: 60). Therefore, it might be in the best interest of high-end mug producers and retailers to keep their merchandise unique as an object of status to be coveted by the general public. This might partially explain why there are such significant differences between the collections.

I tend to support the idea that there are several phenomena working simultaneously in these collections. We have observed some significant differences, randomness, and visually identified similarities, none of which can be dismissed. After all, when we consider the fact that personal agency allows individuals to choose their own criteria for purchasing mugs, we have an almost chaotic but perhaps more realistic view of reality, in which intentional status emulation, personal taste, cultural definitions of good taste, and intentionally independent aesthetic traditions combine to create a unique set of criteria for every ceramic mug purchased.

**References**

Morreall, J., & Loy, J. 1989. Kitsch and Aesthetic Education. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 23(4), 63-73.

Morris, I. 1987. *Burial and Ancient Society: The rise of the Greek city-state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Veblen, T. 1973 [1899]. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

**Appendix A: Additional Histogram and Chi-Square Data**

The following is all the data that led me to the above histograms and chi-square tests (Figs. 3-8). Each chart includes the attribute, frequency in raw numbers, the percentage of that store category that carries that attribute, and the total number of mugs in that store category. For figure 3, chi-square test charts have been provided; for the rest, in order to not unnecessarily repeat information, chi-square charts can be inferred based on the frequencies given and the total number of mugs.

*Iconographic Trait Frequencies (Fig. 3)*

Bin	HIGH-END		SOUVENIR		DOLLARWARE	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
No Icon	37	28%	0	0%	33	14%
Single Word	15	12%	82	73%	63	28%
Phrase	23	18%	5	4%	29	13%
Human	10	8%	1	1%	23	10%
Cat	0	0%	0	0%	6	3%
Dog	0	0%	0	0%	5	2%
Other	9	7%	31	28%	21	9%
Toy	0	0%	2	2%	9	4%
Holiday	3	2%	0	0%	29	13%
Calendrical	0	0%	0	0%	5	2%
Nationality	0	0%	108	96%	31	14%
Occupational	0	0%	0	0%	6	3%
Foods	15	12%	0	0%	36	16%
Floral	38	29%	39	35%	64	28%
Geometric	33	25%	5	4%	71	31%
Total Mugs:		130		112		228

Geometric Iconography	Present	Absent	Total
High-End	33	97	130
Souvenir	5	107	112
Total	38	204	242

Geometric Iconography	Present	Absent	Total
High-End	33	97	130
Dollarware	71	157	228
Total	104	254	358

Floral Iconography	Present	Absent	Total
High-End	38	92	130
Dollarware	64	164	228
Total	102	256	358

*Sum of Colours (Fig. 4)*

Bin	HIGH-END		SOUVENIR		DOLLARWARE	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1	44	34%	0	0%	33	14%
2	23	18%	45	40%	34	15%
3	33	25%	34	30%	24	11%
4	20	15%	18	16%	20	9%
5	9	7%	13	12%	35	15%
6	1	1%	2	2%	45	20%
7	0	0%	0	0%	23	10%
8	0	0%	0	0%	11	5%
9	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%
10	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total Mugs:		130		112		228

*Typology: Wall Angle Frequencies (Fig. 5)*

Bin	DOLLARWARE		HIGH-END		SOUVENIR	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1	125	55%	37	28%	67	60%
2	35	15%	16	12%	23	21%
3	34	15%	49	38%	5	4%
4	8	4%	8	6%	2	2%
5	19	8%	15	12%	12	11%
6	7	3%	5	4%	3	3%
Total Mugs:		228		130		112

*Typology: Size Frequencies (Fig. 6)*

Bin	DOLLARWARE		HIGH-END		SOUVENIR	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1	92	40%	64	49%	86	77%
2	35	15%	17	13%	15	13%
3	81	36%	35	27%	9	8%
4	11	5%	5	4%	0	0%
5	9	4%	9	7%	2	2%
Total Mugs:		228		130		112

*Typology: Presence and Absence of Lip and Foot (Fig. 7)*

LIP	DOLLARWARE		HIGH-END		SOUVENIR	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
0	200	88%	118	91%	105	94%
1	28	12%	12	9%	7	6%
Total Mugs:		228		130		112

FOOT	DOLLARWARE		HIGH-END		SOUVENIR	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
0	219	96%	123	95%	109	97%
1	9	4%	7	5%	3	3%
Total Mugs:		228		130		112