

Dressing down: Can this actually boost your social status?

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From wearing a suit to a wedding to donning a tie for a job interview, American society has established unspoken rules for dress codes and proper etiquette. But there's always that one guy who wears the bright socks or the obnoxious bow tie. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, this type of behavior has the potential to increase a person's perceived success.

"We proposed that, under certain conditions, nonconforming behaviors can be more beneficial to someone than simply trying to fit in. In other words, when it looks deliberate, a person can appear to have a higher status and sense of competency," write authors Silvia Bellezza, Francesca Gino, and Anat Keinan (all Harvard University).

Across five laboratory and field studies, the authors looked at the role of nonconformity in different populations. The collective results suggest that people attribute higher status and competence to individuals who are nonconforming (rather than conforming) in prestigious contexts with expected norms of formal conduct.

In one study, students were asked to rank the perceived professional status of a professor who was employed at either a local college or a top-tier university and who was either clean-shaven and in a business suit or who had a beard and was wearing a t-shirt. As the researchers predicted, the students attributed significantly more status and competence to the unshaven professor at the top-tier university.

Both niche and mainstream brands interested in the role of nonconformity in advertising can capitalize on the growing demand for clothes and accessories that signal intentional nonconformity. Further, nonconforming brands that are associated with premium prices may signal that the nonconforming individual can afford conventional [status](#) symbols.

"A key question for companies is to understand how consumers can demonstrate that they are intentionally not conforming through brands and products. In other words, 'what makes nonconformity seem more intentional?'" the authors conclude.

More information: Silvia Bellezza, Francesca Gino, and Anat Keinan. "The Red Sneakers Effect: Inferring Status and Competence from Signals of Nonconformity." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2014.

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