

Irony is the new black

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A giddy tween wearing a Justin Bieber t-shirt at a Justin Bieber concert—not too surprising. But what about your hard rock friend showing up to a death metal party wearing a Justin Bieber t-shirt?

New research by Caleb Warren, assistant professor of marketing in the

Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona, indicates that consuming brands ironically is a way to secretly signal our [identity](#) or beliefs to people who know us.

Warren and his co-author, Gina Mohr, associate professor of marketing at Colorado State University, define ironic consumption as using a brand or adopting a behavior in an attempt to signal an identity, trait or belief that is the opposite from the perceived conventional meaning of the product. Through four experiments and an exploratory survey, Warren and Mohr found that [consumers](#) sometimes use products ironically to signal one thing to an "in-group" while signaling something different to an "out group."

"Throughout history, consumers have re-appropriated products to make a statement," Warren says. "For example, trucker hats were at one time low-status products and originally came into fashion through rural workers. They've since been revalued by young urban consumers."

Of course, in order to recognize the product is ironic, those around the consumer need to be aware of his/her tastes, beliefs and identity. We are more likely to perceive ironic consumption when the use of the product is incongruent with the known identity or beliefs of the consumer.

Ironic consumption can also be a way of signaling status, for example, superstar Bruno Mars dancing outside and then eating at a Waffle House. Warren says this exemplifies high-status consumers adopting a low-status product as a way to distinguish themselves from middle-status consumers.

Warren and Mohr also found that ironically using a product can actually be a turn-off, but only with some audiences. Back to that Justin Bieber t-shirt: Justin Bieber fans might be miffed at the hard rocker wearing it, but non-Beliebers will likely think your hard rock friend is cool. In other

words, using a product ironically can alter—for better or worse—the impression that a consumer makes on others.

"Consuming something ironically is also a security measure," Warren says. "No one wants to be mocked for watching, say, Jersey Shore. But if you so do with a behavior that suggests you're watching ironically, you won't suffer any stigma related to the product."

The good news for passé brands is that ironic [consumption](#) can often lead to a new, desirable brand identity. Pabst Blue Ribbon is an example of a product with an uncool legacy that, through ironic adoption, has experienced a cultural rebirth.

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More information: Caleb Warren et al, Ironic Consumption, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucy065](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy065)

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