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Success Outside the Dress Code

The subtle cues that help nonconformists break from the pack and thrive; Power of sweatpants



By

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Even though humans are wired to conform and be part of a group, being a nonconformist can sometimes increase a person's status and perceived competency. Shirley Wang reports on Lunch Break. Photo: Videoblocks.

Anyone who has felt like the odd duck of the group can take heart from new research from Harvard Business School that says sticking out in distinct ways can lend you an air of presence or influence.

Standing out in certain circumstances, like wearing sweats in a luxury store, also appears to boost an individual's standing.

One obvious way people signal what the researchers called "status" is through visible markers, like what they wear and what they buy. Previous research has largely examined why people buy or wear branded items.

Less work has focused on what others think of those who try to communicate that they are different or worthy of attention. Efforts to be different are interesting because humans are wired to conform and be part of a group.

In a series of studies published in the Journal of Consumer Research in February, Silvia Bellezza, a doctoral student, and two Harvard professors sought to examine what observers thought of individuals who deviated from the norm in the workplace and in a retail setting. Some of the work was conducted in the lab on students. Other studies took place in the community and involved passersby or attendees of a seminar. Most of the studies included about 150 participants. What they found was that being a little different can socially benefit people—in some situations.

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"The problem is that conforming to norms is an easy and safe spot to be in," Ms. Bellezza said. "If you're willing to deviate, there are upsides." It's also long been known that people veer from what's expected after they've built up enough trust within a group. But, she says, acting differently risks losing the benefits that come with conforming, such as shared group identity and automatic group trust.

In their first study, they asked shop assistants and pedestrians in Milan to rate what they thought of people who walked into luxury stores wearing gym clothes. The subjects also rated those who wore outfits typically considered more appropriate, like a dress and fur coat.

Pedestrians were more likely to think that a well-dressed individual was more likely to have the money to buy something in the store. Shop assistants thought the opposite. Those more familiar with the luxury retail environment were more likely to assume that a gym-clothes-wearing client was confident enough to not need to dress up more, and therefore more apt to be a celebrity making a purchase than someone wrapped in fur.



Big Shots in Sweatpants: Luxury-store sales staff assumed shoppers in sweats were more likely to buy. *Jason Raish*

The same pattern emerged in subsequent studies conducted in other settings: Students afforded more respect to a fictitious bearded professor who wore a T-shirt than to a clean-shaven one who wore a tie. Candidates entering a business-plan competition who chose to use their own PowerPoint presentation background were tabbed more likely to win than those who used the standard background.

There are boundaries to the benefits of looking different, the Harvard work showed. If an individual was viewed as accidentally out of sync with everyone else, such as mistakenly wearing a red bow tie rather than black at a formal event, that erased positive feelings about him among those surveyed. Those opinions only improved when the survey group believed their contrarian acted differently on purpose.

"In order to think that the person's a big shot, you have to understand that the person is willingly engaging in this nonconforming conduct," Ms. Bellezza says.

In addition, the environment must give cues that suggest a person's talent or wealth. Standing in the front of the classroom or walking confidently into a luxury store already imply some level of belonging. But when an observer didn't know whether the person they view is part of the group, eccentric dress was seen as a negative, according to the researchers.

People who tend toward the offbeat themselves show extra fondness for freethinking behavior in others. Francesca Gino, an associate business administration professor at Harvard Business School and an author on the paper, decided to test the theory outside the lab as well. She wore red Converse sneakers to teach a one-day event on small business management education. Dr. Gino found that those who identified themselves on a questionnaire as having a higher need to be unique were more likely to give her higher ratings than those who didn't.

"They inferred, 'She's so autonomous, she must do whatever she wants,' " Ms. Bellezza says.

There are times when communicating high rank and competence becomes more important, such as during a shake-up in management at work. Signaling one's place in a group reduces uncertainty, but sometimes the goal may be to fit into the group, and sometimes to signal that one is a high-status person in the group, says David Dubois, a marketing professor at Insead in France and Singapore.

Willingness to deviate can be useful for groups as well, particularly when it comes to decision-making, says Charles Pavitt, a University of Delaware communications professor who studies social influence.

The person who brings up alternative points of view to make sure the group has sufficiently examined all options can help the group reach a better decision. If the group trusts the individual's intentions, this perspective will be considered seriously and the individual will still be considered part of the group, he says.

Perhaps the best strategy for preserving your place in the group while presenting offbeat ideas is to state explicitly that you are playing devil's advocate, Dr. Pavitt says.

Marshall Scott Poole, a communications professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, cautions that while groups tend initially to make an evaluation of status based on external characteristics, over time people focus less on those characteristics and more on behavior.

Dr. Poole's best practical advice: "Don't talk a lot if you have high status. People will assume you're competent and when you talk, they will listen to you."

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