

# The Red Sneakers Effect: Inferring Status and Competence from Signals of Nonconformity

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This research examines how people react to nonconforming behaviors, such as entering a luxury boutique wearing gym clothes rather than an elegant outfit or wearing red sneakers in a professional setting. Nonconforming behaviors, as costly and visible signals, can act as a particular form of conspicuous consumption and lead to positive inferences of status and competence in the eyes of others. A series of studies demonstrates that people confer higher status and competence to nonconforming rather than conforming individuals. These positive inferences derived from signals of nonconformity are mediated by perceived autonomy and moderated by individual differences in need for uniqueness in the observers. An investigation of boundary conditions demonstrates that the positive inferences disappear when the observer is unfamiliar with the environment, when the nonconforming behavior is depicted as unintentional, and in the absence of expected norms and shared standards of formal conduct.

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Your sweats, PJs and flip-flops are losing you money! . . . Do you crave more confidence, respect and power? . . . Find out how image connects to success. (Eve Michaels, author of *Dress Code*)

I have a number of super-successful Silicon Valley clients who dress in ripped denim, Vans shoes, and T-shirts. They are worth hundreds of millions, even more, but it's a status symbol to dress like you're homeless to attend board meetings. (Tom Searcy, *CBS Moneywatch*)

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In both professional and nonprofessional settings, individuals often make a significant effort to learn and adhere to dress codes, etiquette, and other written and unwritten standards of behavior. Conformity to such rules and social norms is driven by a desire to gain social acceptance and status (see Cialdini and Goldstein 2004) and avoid negative sanctions such as social disapproval, ridicule, and exclusion (Kruglanski and Webster 1991; Levine 1989; Miller and Anderson 1979; Schachter 1951). In the present research, we propose that under certain conditions, nonconforming behaviors can be more beneficial than efforts to conform and can signal higher status and competence to others. We argue that while unintentional violations of normative codes and etiquette can indeed result in negative inferences and attributions, when the deviant behavior appears to be deliberate, it can lead to higher rather than lower status and competence inferences.

Since nonconformity often has a social cost (e.g., Levine 1989; Schachter 1951), observers may infer that a nonconforming individual is in a powerful position that allows her to risk the social costs of nonconformity without fear of losing her place in the social hierarchy. Signaling theory suggests that, for a signal to be effective, it must be costly and observable by others (Feltovich, Harbaugh, and To 2002; Spence 1973; Zahavi and Zahavi 1997). We propose that nonconforming behaviors, as costly and observable signals, can act

as a particular form of conspicuous consumption and lead to inferences of status and competence by observers. Such positive inferences are consistent with Veblen's classic theory of conspicuous consumption (1899/1994), which suggests that individuals display status through the prominent, visible evidence of their ability to afford luxury goods. Similarly, we argue that nonconformity can lead to inferences of higher status and greater competence by providing visible evidence that individuals can afford to follow their own volition. Based on some of our experimental stimuli for nonconformity, we label this potential positive outcome of nonconforming behaviors the "red sneakers effect."

As a preliminary test, we first explore the relationship between nonconformity and status in the field by examining the dress style of conference participants and their professional status. Next, five lab and field studies explore how nonconforming behavior is perceived by others. In particular, when do people interpret nonconformity as a signal of status and competence, and what are the processes underlying such inferences? Our studies explore various consumption environments and populations, including shop assistants at high-end boutiques, business executives, and college students.

Our investigation of psychological processes reveals that inferences of status and competence derived from signals of nonconformity are mediated by perceived autonomy. We demonstrate that nonconformity can fuel perceptions of status and competence in the eyes of others because deviating from the norm signals that one has the autonomy needed to act according to one's own inclinations and to bear the cost of nonconformity. Moreover, we show that the relationship between a person's nonconforming behavior and observers' perceptions of enhanced status and competence is moderated by observers' need for uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin 1977), such that observers with high levels of need for uniqueness tend to confer greater status and competence to nonconforming behaviors as compared to observers with low needs for uniqueness. We further investigate boundary conditions of the effect by manipulating and measuring additional characteristics of the observers, the environment, and the nonconforming behavior.

Our research contributes to the conspicuous consumption literature and to research on nonconformity. First, we extend consumer behavior research analyzing alternative and counterintuitive ways to display status, such as using less recognizable but more expensive luxury brands and products or smaller logos (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010). Specifically, we investigate a different kind of consumer behavior and an alternative way of displaying status (e.g., violating a dress code rather than buying subtly branded but expensive luxury products). Second, in contrast to most nonconformity research, which has focused on nonconforming individuals and the antecedents for their behavior, we focus on the consequences of nonconformity and the perceptions of external observers. Importantly, we concentrate on nonconformity-based inferences of status and competence.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Society has powerful formal and informal mechanisms that motivate individuals to conform to social norms and expectations regarding appropriate conduct. While conformity is rewarded with group acceptance and social inclusion (see Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), nonconformity can be risky and costly, often leading to social disapproval, rejection, and punishment (Anderson et al. 2006, 2008; Levine 1989; Lin et al. 2013; Marques et al. 2001; Miller and Anderson 1979; Schachter 1951; Wilson 1979). The power of these rewards and sanctions has been demonstrated in classic social psychology experiments. For example, in Asch's (1956) well-known studies examining the conformity of judgments and opinions in groups, participants often conformed because it was easier to follow the crowd than to face the consequences of going against it (Crutchfield 1955). More powerful and disturbing evidence comes from Zimbardo's (1973) prison experiment, in which volunteers who were randomly assigned the roles of "guards" or "prisoners" behaved accordingly, and Milgram's (1963) obedience experiments, which demonstrated that people readily conform to the social roles they are expected to play.

In the context of consumer behavior, research demonstrates that assimilation and conformity motives can drive consumption practices and choices in the marketplace. Consumers are motivated to behave like those around them and make choices that are consistent with their in-group due to a need to increase affiliation and express desired identities (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; McFerran et al. 2010a, 2010b). In particular, individuals who feel socially excluded and lonely are more likely to conform in an effort to avoid the negative evaluations of others by selecting products endorsed by most consumers (Mead et al. 2011; Wang, Zhu, and Shiv 2012).

Given these powerful social mechanisms, researchers across disciplines—including sociology, social psychology, economics, and marketing—have devoted their attention to the study of nonconformity and its antecedents. Nonconformity is generally defined as a behavior or belief that is inconsistent with norms or standards (Nail, Macdonald, and Levy 2000). In the consumer psychology literature, the tendency to engage in nonconforming consumption has been associated with a desire to distance the self from dissimilar, disliked, or unattractive others or from out-group members (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008; White and Dahl 2006, 2007) or to establish one's uniqueness and distinctiveness (Ariely and Levav 2000; Griskevicius et al. 2006; Simonson and Nowlis 2000; Snyder and Fromkin 1977).

While this literature has focused primarily on the antecedents of the nonconforming individual's behaviors, in our work we shift the focus of analysis to how external observers perceive and interpret nonconforming behaviors in terms of status and competence. That is, rather than examining individuals' decisions to conform or not conform, we examine the consequences of deviating from the norm in the eyes of others. A vast body of research on impression formation and status beliefs suggests that individuals rapidly make

inferences and judgments of others' competence and status based on observable signals, such as appearance, verbal and nonverbal behaviors, attitudes, and consumption choices (Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Dubois et al. 2012; Hall et al. 2005; Knapp et al. 2009; Magee 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2006; Ridgeway et al. 1998; Schmid Mast and Hall 2004; Todorov et al. 2005). We contribute to this literature by investigating the conditions under which lay observers make *nonconformity*-based inferences of targets' economic, professional, and social status.

### Nonconformity, Status, and Competence

As compared to low-status individuals, high-status individuals have wider latitude for deviation and are relatively free from social constraints (Feshbach 1967; Hollander 1958; Peterson and Kern 1996; Phillips and Zuckerman 2001). A group member can be said to earn and maintain increased status through "idiosyncratic credits," or an accumulation of positive impressions in the minds of the rest of the group (Hollander 1958). This accumulation is reflected in the degree to which the individual can deviate from group norms without sanction. Thus, unlike low-status group members, high-status members and powerful individuals can afford to deviate from conventional behavior and common expectations without social disapproval (Cartwright 1959; Galinsky et al. 2008; Haslam 2004; Sherif and Sherif 1964).

More specifically, in the domain of consumption, high-status individuals may voluntarily downgrade their lifestyle and adopt nonconforming consumption habits, such as material frugality, "omnivoreness" (consuming a broad range of products), and simplicity (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Brooks 1981; Holt 1998; Peterson and Kern 1996; Solomon 1999). For example, high-status individuals may choose to dress informally in business settings. Certain CEOs of major corporations, including Microsoft's Bill Gates and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, have been known to appear without ties or even wearing sweatshirts at interviews and formal gatherings such as the World Economic Forum (Etzioni 2004); some successful entrepreneurs have a habit of attending their companies' board meetings in casual dress, such as jeans and sneakers (Searcy 2011).

To provide empirical evidence of the relationship between nonconformity to dress codes and status and competence, we conducted a pilot observational study examining the potential relationship between the dress style of participants in a professional academic conference and the number of articles they had published. In this pilot study, we focus on the link between actual status and nonconforming behavior; in our remaining studies, we focus on the link between nonconforming behavior and observers' perceptions of status and competence. We predicted that conference participants who had gained greater status through research productivity would dress more casually than other participants. Participants were 76 randomly selected attendees of the 2011 Association for Consumer Research conference. We recorded the names of participants, as indicated on their name tags, and coded the formality of their dress. To code dress for-

mality objectively, we created a composite score ranging from a minimum of 0 points (less formal) to a maximum of 4 points (more formal) by discretely coding four clothing elements worn by each participant. More specifically, we adopted the following scoring system: 1 point for wearing a blazer, 0 points otherwise; 1 point for wearing a button-down shirt or a dress, 0 points otherwise (e.g., for a T-shirt); 1 point for wearing formal pants, 0 points otherwise (e.g., for jeans); 1 point for wearing dress shoes, 0 points otherwise (e.g., for sneakers). We then collected data on the number of publications for each scholar in our sample (based on information available online) as an objective measure of status and competence in the academic community. To control for gender and age, we also coded these variables (measuring age by years since PhD graduation) and included them in our regression analysis. We counted participants' total number of peer-reviewed publications in academic journals and their number of publications in top marketing journals for consumer behavior scholars, namely, the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Marketing Science*, the *Journal of Marketing Science*, *Psychological Science*, and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. We found that a less-conforming dress style was significantly correlated with research productivity ( $r = -.35, p < .01$ ). Interestingly, this correlation was even stronger when focusing on publications in top marketing journals ( $r = -.53, p < .001$ ). These results, which hold even when controlling for gender and age,<sup>1</sup> indicate that higher status and performance within a given community is correlated with a stronger tendency to deviate from a conforming dress code (e.g., wearing jeans, sneakers, T-shirts rather than professional attire). Although these results are correlational, they are consistent with Hollander's (1958) theoretical account that high-status and well-respected individuals tend to engage in nonconforming behaviors. But are these nonconforming behaviors actually interpreted as a signal of status and competence by third-party observers? And if so, when and why does this happen?

We propose that nonconforming behavior can act as a particular form of conspicuous consumption and lead to perceptions of enhanced status and competence in the eyes of others. Observers may infer that a nonconforming individual is in a more powerful position that allows her to follow her volition in autonomy and bear the cost of deviating from the norm. Research suggests that high-status individuals tend to avoid blatant and conspicuous displays of wealth, status, or personal accomplishments, and instead seek alternative ways to differentiate themselves from lower-status individuals (Berger and Ward 2010; Feltovich et al. 2002; Han et al. 2010). For example, sophisticated luxury consumers elect to use less known and less conspicuous

<sup>1</sup> In a linear regression, formality score was regressed on number of top publications, gender (dummy coded 1 for male, 0 for female), and age. The final model was significant ( $R^2 = .29, F(3, 67) = 8.9, p < .001$ ). There was a significant effect of number of top publications ( $\beta_{\text{publications}} = -.47, t(67) = -2.8, p < .01$ ), whereas the other independent variables were not significant ( $\beta_{\text{gender}} = -.11, \text{NS}$ ;  $\beta_{\text{age}} = -.02, \text{NS}$ ).

luxury brands. We investigate the conditions under which nonconforming behaviors, such as entering a luxury boutique wearing gym clothes rather than an elegant outfit or wearing red sneakers in a professional setting, can serve as an alternative, nonconventional form of conspicuous consumption. In line with research on status beliefs and impression formation (Hollander 1958; Ridgeway and Correll 2006; Ridgeway et al. 1998), we examine inferences of both status and competence. Status is defined as a higher position compared to others on some dimension (wealth, hierarchy, etc.), and it relates to the respect one has in the eyes of others (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Competence refers to the perceived ability to successfully pursue and perform specific tasks (Fiske et al. 2002).

We argue that inferences of greater status and competence from nonconforming behavior result from observers' attributions of the nonconforming individual's autonomy. Autonomy refers to self-governance and self-regulation (Ryan and Lynch 1989). The central idea in the concept of autonomy is indicated by the etymology of the term: *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law). Thus autonomous individuals tend to act independently and behave according to their own rules. The significance of freedom and autonomy is built into the founding documents of the United States, and the idea that individuals are independent and autonomous is pervasive and generally greatly admired (Dworkin 1988; Markus and Schwartz 2010). Especially in Western cultures that place high value on individualism and independence, resisting group pressure can be perceived as a brave and bold gesture (Baumeister 1982; Galinsky et al. 2008; Kim and Markus 1999). Here, we suggest that nonconformity can be perceived as admirable behavior that reflects high levels of autonomy and control. While being easily influenced by others is not an admired personal trait (see Jetten, Hornsey, and Adarves-Yorno 2006), deviating from the norm signals freedom and autonomy from the pressure to conform (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001; Thompson et al. 2006) and thus can fuel positive inferences in the eyes of others (Van Kleef et al. 2011; Simonson and Nowlis 2000). Hence, we predict that observers will infer enhanced status and competence from signals of nonconformity because they believe that nonconforming individuals have greater autonomy to act according to their own volition and bear the cost of nonconforming:

- H1:** Nonconforming behavior can lead to greater inferences of status and competence as compared to conforming behavior.
- H2:** Positive inferences of status and competence from nonconforming behavior will be mediated by observers' attributions of the nonconforming individual's autonomy.

*Characteristics of the Observers.* We investigate the impact of individual differences in observers' need for uniqueness (Nail et al. 2000; Snyder and Fromkin 1977) on how they interpret signals of nonconformity. Consumers' need for

uniqueness reflects individual differences in motivations for distinguishing the self via consumer goods that manifest the willful pursuit of differentness relative to others (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). Individuals with a high level of need for uniqueness are particularly sensitive to the degree to which they are seen as similar to others and are more likely than others to exhibit behaviors that establish a sense of specialness, such as acquiring unique or scarce products (Snyder 1992).

Previous research on uniqueness motive demonstrates its impact on consumption choices and behavior (Ariely and Levav 2000; Chan et al. 2012; Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Irmak et al. 2010; Lynn and Harris 1997; Maimaran and Wheeler 2008; Ratner and Kahn 2002; Simonson and Nowlis 2000; White and Argo 2011). For example, consumers with a high level of need for uniqueness tend to prefer objects that deviate from norms over those that comply with norms (Lynn and Harris 1997; Snyder and Fromkin 1977; Tian et al. 2001); these consumers often demonstrate nonconforming preferences in group contexts to distinguish themselves from others (Ariely and Levav 2000). Our studies measure *observers'* need for uniqueness and examine how such uniqueness motives impact the inferences observers make about a nonconforming individual. That is, rather than examining how need for uniqueness impacts consumers' decision to conform or not conform, we examine how it impacts the inferences they make about other individuals who deviate.

We hypothesize that individual differences related to need for uniqueness, as measured through the Tian et al. (2001) scale, will moderate the red sneakers effect. Research on uniqueness emphasizes that people who score relatively high on need for uniqueness often deviate from the norm in order to assert their differentness, affirm strong character and, thus, enhance their social-image (Gross 1977; Tian et al. 2001). Moreover, high need-for-uniqueness individuals are relatively free from social constraints imparted by others and exhibit high levels of autonomy (Snyder and Fromkin 1977). Accordingly, we expect those individuals who score high on need for uniqueness to associate (as external observers) higher autonomy, status, and competence with nonconforming behaviors relative to individuals with low need for uniqueness. Therefore, we predict that:

- H3:** Positive inferences of status and competence and attributions of autonomy from nonconforming behavior will be moderated by observers' need for uniqueness; observers with high levels of need for uniqueness will infer more status, competence, and autonomy from nonconforming rather than conforming behavior as compared to observers with low levels of need for uniqueness.

We also examine observers' familiarity with the environment and consumption context as an important boundary condition for the red sneakers effect. Familiarity with the context is critical in verifying and understanding the signal of nonconformity (Hollander 1958). In the consumer behavior domain, individuals who are familiar with the context

are capable of finer, more articulated discrimination in that specific environment compared to those who are not and they rely less on the ownership of prototypical product symbols (Solomon 1999). Accordingly, we predict that only observers who are familiar with the consumption context and have experience observing and interpreting individuals' behavior in this specific context will infer greater status and competence from signals of nonconformity rather than from signals of conformity. For example, in the setting of our observational study, conference participants may infer that their colleagues are violating the dress code with their casual attire, but observers who are not part of this specific community or who have no past experience with it will not make such attributions. Instead, they might infer that nonconforming individuals are unaware of the dress code or cannot afford nicer clothes. Thus, inferences of status and competence require the observer to be somewhat familiar with the environment. We therefore predict that:

- H4:** Nonconforming behavior will be interpreted as a positive signal of status and competence as long as the observer is familiar with the environment.

*Characteristics of the Environment.* Nonconformity signals can only occur in environments that have strong norms and shared standards, with a social expectation of conformity to these norms (Walker and Heyns 1962). For example, formal and prestigious contexts (e.g., a black-tie event, a business meeting) are typically characterized by an official dress code or behavioral etiquette. Accordingly, in all our experiments we examine prestige settings with expected norms of appropriate conduct (e.g., luxury boutiques, golf clubs, professional symposiums at business schools), and we define nonconforming behaviors as those that deviate from such behavioral standards. Consistent with the notion that individuals integrate specific environmental information into their overall evaluations, inferences, and choices (Belk 1975; Herr 1989; Swait and Adamowicz 2001), we investigate the role of context on perceptions of status and competence derived from signals of nonconformity. We suggest that nonconformity is likely to fuel perceptions of greater status and competence in prestigious contexts, with expected behavioral norms and relatively high standards of conduct. For example, in the setting of our first study, luxury boutiques, we find that shop assistants attribute higher potential to a prospect wearing casual gym clothing than to one wearing an elegant dress. We would not expect to detect a similar red sneakers effect in the context of an ordinary store that lacks the expected norm of being nicely dressed. Thus, we propose that a nonconforming behavior will signal status and competence in the eyes of others in prestige contexts with shared standards of formal conduct. We predict that:

- H5:** Nonconforming behavior will lead to higher inferences of status and competence in prestigious contexts with expected norms than in less prestigious contexts.

*Characteristics of the Nonconforming Behavior.* We investigate the extent to which a specific nonconforming behavior is perceived as deliberate and intentional as another important boundary condition for the red sneakers effect. A behavior is defined as deliberate if the actor set out to produce the action (Malle and Knobe 1997), and an intention is generally understood as a determination to engage in a particular behavior (Atkinson 1964). We suggest that observers attribute heightened status and competence to nonconformity when they believe that the nonconforming individual is purposely deviating from an accepted, established norm. That is, the observer assumes that the nonconforming individual is both aware of the norm and potentially able to conform, but deliberately decided to adopt a nonconforming conduct. In contrast, we expect that when a nonconforming behavior is perceived as unintentional, it will no longer be associated with enhanced perceptions of status and competence. For example, when a nonconforming behavior appears dictated by lack of a better alternative (as in the case of observing a poorly dressed person who is homeless) rather than by a deliberate dress choice, it will not lead to positive inferences in the eyes of others.

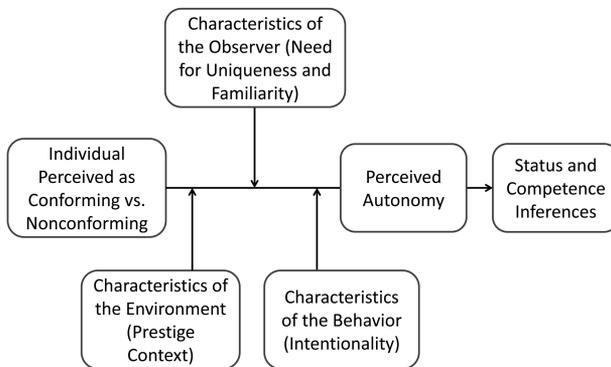
Similarly, we expect enhanced attributions of autonomy derived from signals of nonconformity to dissipate when the deviant behavior is perceived as unintentional. This prediction is in line with research suggesting that intentionality and autonomy are strongly and positively associated (Deci and Ryan 1987). Thus, we hypothesize that:

- H6:** When a specific nonconforming behavior is perceived as unintentional, it will no longer be associated with status, competence, and autonomy.

## Overview of the Present Research

We test our hypotheses and theoretical framework, depicted in figure 1, in five laboratory and field studies that employ different types of nonconformity and different populations of participants. Resistance to conformity pressures can take distinct forms across individuals. Of particular relevance to our work is Tian et al.'s (2001) conceptualization, which suggests that consumers exhibit three main behavioral manifestations of nonconformity. First, "creative choice counterconformity" refers to the tendency of some consumers to seek social differentness by selecting original, novel, or unique consumer goods (e.g., wearing a colorful, unusual tie to a formal event). Second, "unpopular choice counterconformity" reflects the selection or use of products and brands that strongly violate and disrupt existing norms of proper conduct (e.g., wearing a tie around one's head in a formal context). Finally, "avoidance of similarity" entails a downgrading of one's consumption style and refers to a loss of interest in, or discontinued use of, possessions to move away from the norm and reestablish one's differentness (e.g., not wearing a tie in a formal context). In our research, we focus on behavioral dimensions of nonconformity that entail some deviance from the norm but are not perceived as a

**FIGURE 1**  
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES



strong disruption and violation of the norm. Accordingly, the manipulations in our studies center on creative nonconformity and avoidance of similarity—that is, manifestations of nonconformity within the realm of commonly accepted behaviors.

Study 1 examines the responses of shop assistants in luxury boutiques in Milan, Italy, and illustrates that nonconformity, as compared to conformity, leads to inferences of higher status among individuals who are familiar with the environment. Study 2 investigates the effect of nonconformity and the role of the prestige context in a professional setting by testing students' responses to the dress style of their professors. Study 3 delves into the underlying mechanisms of the red sneakers effect and demonstrates that inferences of status and competence are mediated by the autonomy that participants perceive in the individual's nonconforming behavior. Moreover, this study shows that the positive inferences dissipate when the nonconforming behavior is perceived as unintentional. Study 4 examines the moderating role of observers' need for uniqueness and shows that participants with high levels of need for uniqueness tend to attribute more status and competence to nonconforming behaviors as compared to participants with lower needs for uniqueness. Finally, in a follow-up study we increase the validity of our findings by examining nonconformity and need for uniqueness outside the laboratory.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS

### Study 1: Status Inferences Based on a Nonconforming Dress Style

We begin our investigation by examining whether individuals confer greater status to people who do not conform to shared norms of behavior in a given context. We create vignettes that describe a potential client who enters an elegant boutique and engages in either conforming or nonconforming behavior. We employ two different operation-

alizations of nonconforming behavior to luxury stores. In study 1A, we manipulate nonconformity through style of dress (e.g., entering the store wearing a gym outfit vs. a dress), and in study 1B we examine consumers' use of well-known brand names (e.g., wearing a Swatch watch vs. a Rolex). We selected luxury boutiques as an experimental setting due to their established and commonly perceived behavioral norm of elegant dress. Thus, we expect that in this specific context, rather than in ordinary stores, a casual dress style will stand out and will be perceived as a deviation from the established standard. Moreover, we consider the case of people who are either familiar or less familiar with the context being examined by comparing the responses of two samples: shop assistants in luxury shops in downtown Milan, Italy, and women recruited in Milan's central train station. We predict that participants who are familiar with the context (i.e., the shop assistants) will confer greater status to the nonconforming client rather than to the conforming one. However, we expect the effect to be attenuated or even reversed for participants who are less familiar with the context (i.e., pedestrians recruited at the central station). Prior to running studies 1A and 1B, we conducted an exploratory interview in Rome with the store manager of a prestigious luxury brand. According to him, shoppers at high-end boutiques generally wear elegant and expensive clothing, in keeping with the store's luxury atmosphere. However, he admitted that his store's very top clientele also includes customers who dress quite casually. Therefore, we expect shop assistants in luxury boutiques, who are familiar with the environment and are motivated to determine the status of potential customers, to be able to detect and interpret the unconventional behavior of potential customers as a signal of status.

*Method.* We recruited 109 female adults in downtown Milan. All participants responded to a short survey in Italian and received a pen for participating in the study. Fifty-two participants were shop assistants working in boutiques selling luxury brands such as Armani, Burberry, Christian Dior, La Perla, Les Copains, and Valentino (i.e., individuals familiar with the environment of a high-end boutique). On average, shop assistants had 12 years of experience in the fashion sector and an estimated net income ranging from €14,400 to €16,800 per year. The other 57 female participants were recruited at Milan's central station (i.e., individuals less familiar with the environment of a high-end boutique). The estimated average net income for women living in Milan is €15,800 (Registry Office Milan 2011). Thus, both groups share comparable demographic profiles (gender, age, income, and nationality), but the first group is better acquainted with the environment of luxury boutiques than the second group.

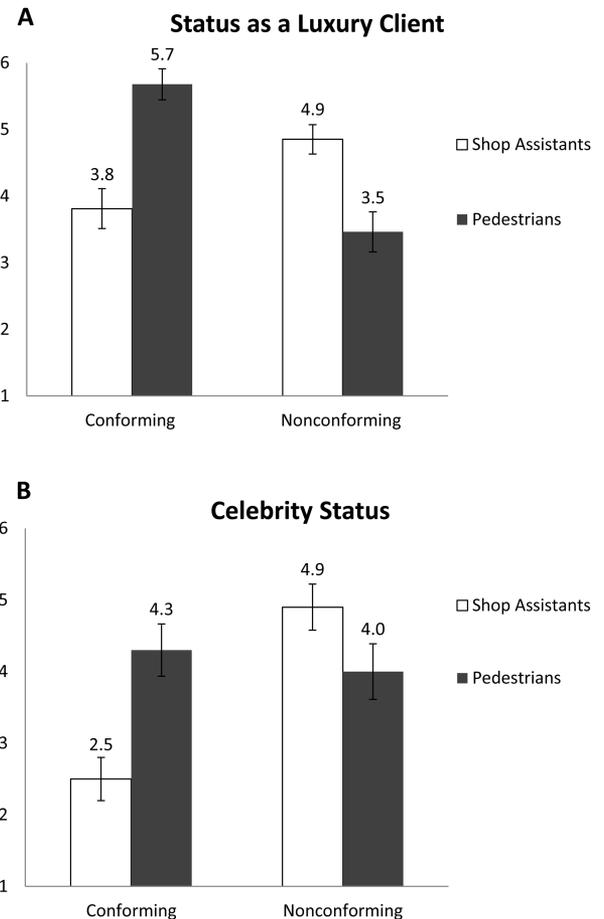
Participants completed the study in their own environment (boutique or train station) and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: conforming versus nonconforming potential client. Participants in each condition read a vignette about a potential client entering a luxury boutique. In study 1A, the text read: "Imagine that a woman is entering a luxury

boutique in downtown Milan during winter. She looks approximately 35 years old.” Participants in the nonconforming condition next read: “She is wearing gym clothes and a jacket.” Participants in the conforming condition next read: “She is wearing a dress and a fur coat.” After reading the vignette, participants answered questions, using 1–7 scales, to assess whether they believed the individual described could be a potential client at the luxury store and whether she might be a VIP or a celebrity. Specifically, participants answered three questions assessing the woman’s status as a luxury client: 1. “How likely is the woman described to purchase something in the store?” (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). 2. “Imagine that the woman described were to buy something. Would she spend more or less than the average store client?” (1 = less than average, 7 = more than average). 3. “Can she afford the most expensive items in the store?” (1 = definitely yes, 7 = definitely no). We averaged the three items and used the resulting measure of status as a luxury client as the first dependent variable in our analyses. Next, participants answered one question assessing the client’s perceived status as a celebrity, the second dependent variable: “Is she likely to be a VIP or a celebrity?” (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). In study 1B, participants in both conditions read: “Imagine that a woman is entering a luxury boutique in downtown Milan during summer. She looks approximately 35 years old.” Next, participants in the nonconforming condition read: “She is wearing plastic flip-flops and she has a Swatch on her wrist.” Participants in the conforming condition read: “She is wearing sandals with heels and she has a Rolex on her wrist.” After reading the description of the client, participants answered the same questions as in study 1A.

**Results (Study 1A).** A 2 (nonconforming vs. conforming client) × 2 (familiar vs. unfamiliar observer) between-subjects ANOVA using ratings of the potential as a luxury client ( $\alpha = .88$ ) as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 104) = 4.9, p < .05$ ), no main effect for familiarity ( $F(1, 104) = .82, NS$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 104) = 37.7, p < .001$ ) depicted in figure 2A. Shop assistants familiar with the environment granted greater status to the nonconforming client rather than to the conforming client ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 4.9$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 3.8, t(49) = 2.8, p < .01$ ). In contrast, participants unfamiliar with the context granted less status to the nonconforming client than to the conforming one ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 3.5$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 5.7, t(55) = 5.8, p < .001$ ). We conducted a similar ANOVA using celebrity status as the dependent variable and found a similar pattern of results. The main effect for nonconformity was significant ( $F(1, 104) = 8.1, p < .01$ ), while the main effect for familiarity was not ( $F(1, 104) = 1.7, NS$ ). Consistent with our predictions, we found a significant interaction between conformity and familiarity ( $F(1, 104) = 15.5, p < .001$ ; see fig. 2B). Shop assistants believed that the nonconforming client was more likely than the conforming client to be a celebrity or a VIP ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 4.9$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 2.5, t(49) = 5.4, p < .001$ ); there was no significant difference

FIGURE 2

STUDY 1A RESULTS: THE EFFECT OF NONCONFORMITY AND FAMILIARITY WITH THE ENVIRONMENT



between conditions for participants unfamiliar with the luxury boutiques ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 4.0$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 4.3, NS$ ).

**Results (Study 1B).** A 2 (nonconforming vs. conforming client) × 2 (familiar vs. unfamiliar observer) between-subjects ANOVA using ratings of the status as a luxury client ( $\alpha = .74$ ) as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 104) = 10.9, p < .001$ ), no main effect for familiarity ( $F(1, 104) = .02, NS$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 104) = 35.0, p < .001$ ). Shop assistants granted greater status to the nonconforming client than to the conforming one ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 4.8$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 4.2, t(50) = 2.1, p < .05$ ); participants with no familiarity with the environment did just the opposite ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 3.4$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 5.6, t(54) = 5.9, p < .001$ ). A similar ANOVA using perceived celebrity status as the dependent variable revealed no main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 103) = 2.5, NS$ ) or for familiarity ( $F(1, 103) = .96, NS$ ) and a significant interaction between these two factors ( $F(1,$

103) = 7.9,  $p < .01$ ). Mimicking the results of study 1A, shop assistants granted greater status to the nonconforming client than to the conforming one ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 4.6$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 3.0$ ,  $t(49) = 3.2$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and there was no significant difference between conditions for pedestrians ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 3.9$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 4.4$ , NS).

*Discussion.* Consistent with our hypotheses, the results of study 1 show that observers grant higher status to a nonconforming individual than to a conforming one, as long as the observers are familiar with the environment. Specifically, shop assistants at luxury boutiques perceived a client to be more likely to make a purchase and to be a celebrity when she was wearing gym clothes or a Swatch than when she was wearing an elegant dress or a Rolex. The effect for pedestrians recruited at Milan's central station was attenuated or even reversed. These participants, of similar background but less familiar with the luxury boutique environment, tended to perceive the shopper with the elegant outfit as being of higher or similar status relative to the poorly dressed shopper. The shop assistants' status inferences are consistent with research demonstrating that conspicuous consumption of brands and explicit use of other status symbols is often associated with low-status groups (Feltovich et al. 2002; Han et al. 2010; Mazzocco et al. 2012). We analyzed shop assistants' open-ended comments and conducted follow-up questions to clarify their status inferences. Interestingly, the shop assistants in our study seemed to believe that the nonconforming client was purposely deviating from the accepted norm of appropriate behavior in an attempt to distinguish herself from the average shopper. Some participants in the nonconforming condition believed, in the words of one of them, that poorly dressed shoppers are often "playing a role and doing it on purpose." One shop assistant stated that "wealthy people sometimes dress very badly to demonstrate superiority" and that "if you dare enter these boutiques so underdressed, you are definitely going to buy something." In contrast, it did not occur to pedestrians that a shopper might purposely enter a luxury store poorly dressed. These remarks suggest that status inferences may be driven by perceived deliberateness of the individual's nonconforming behavior. The scenarios tested in this study bring to mind the famous scene from the film *Pretty Woman* of Julia Roberts's character shopping on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Consistent with our conceptualization, the character's nonconforming dress style did not lead to inferences of high status by store clerks because it did not appear to be intentional. We will directly test this proposition in study 3 by manipulating the extent to which nonconforming behavior is depicted as deliberate or unintentional.

In study 2, we seek to complement the findings of study 1 by testing our hypotheses in a more controlled laboratory environment. We will examine the consequences of nonconformity through down-dressing in a professional setting and the role of the prestige of the context with relatively high standards of conduct. Since in study 1 we demonstrated the boundary condition of familiarity with the environment, in the studies that follow, we focus on participants who are

familiar with the particular environment, and we assess the degree of their familiarity as a precondition.

## Study 2: Nonconformity in Professional Settings

In this study, we examine the effect of nonconforming behavior in a more professional context by testing students' responses to the dress style of their professors. In professional settings, nonconformity, and casual dress style in particular, are typically viewed as costly behaviors that could potentially damage one's employment or promotion prospects (De Souza et al. 2003; Michaels 2012). Given the context, we measure status in terms of respect by others and competence in terms of workplace performance. In addition, we investigate the role of prestige of the context by manipulating between-subjects the reputation of the setting described in the experiment. We predict that students will perceive a male professor who wears a T-shirt and is unshaven (i.e., nonconforming) as having higher professional status and competence than a professor who wears a tie and shaved (i.e., conforming), but only when the professor teaches at a top school where established norms exist regarding formal attire at work.

*Method.* We recruited 159 respondents (55% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 23$ ) at Harvard University in Boston who participated in a series of unrelated lab studies. The vast majority of respondents were current students at local universities (83%), thus ensuring that our sample was familiar with the experimental stimuli (i.e., descriptions of professors). We randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions, in a 2 (conforming vs. nonconforming individual)  $\times$  2 (prestige context vs. nonprestige context) between-subjects design. We manipulated the conformity of the dress style of the professor by telling participants that the professor typically wears a tie and is clean-shaven (conforming) or that he typically wears a T-shirt and has a beard (nonconforming). To manipulate the prestige of the context, we varied whether or not the university the professor teaches at was described as a top-tier university. Participants read the following description: "Mike is 45 years old and teaches at a university [a top-tier university]. He typically wears a tie [a T-shirt] to work and is clean-shaven [has a beard]." Participants then assessed the professor's professional status and competence by answering three questions. 1. "How well respected is Mike by his students?" (1 = not respected at all, 7 = extremely well respected). 2. "How do you expect him to perform in class as a teacher?" (1 = poor, 7 = excellent). 3. "How do you expect him to perform as a researcher?" (1 = poor, 7 = excellent). We averaged the three items ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and used the resulting measure as the dependent variable in our analysis. Participants also answered a manipulation check for our conformity manipulation: "How conforming to his work environment is Mike's style?" (1 = not conforming at all, 7 = extremely conforming).

*Results.* The manipulation check confirmed that the shaved professor wearing a tie was perceived to be significantly more conforming to his work environment than the

unshaven professor wearing a T-shirt ( $M_{\text{conforming}} = 5.7$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 2.9$ ,  $t(156) = 13.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As a further manipulation check, we conducted a 2 (conforming vs. nonconforming individual)  $\times$  2 (prestige context vs. nonprestige context) between-subjects ANOVA using ratings of conformity as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 154) = 165.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a significant main effect for prestige context ( $F(1, 154) = 5.0$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 154) = 6.0$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Given the statistical significance of both treatment variables and their interaction, we proceeded with an analysis of the effect sizes to compare the relative impact of each factor (Perdue and Summers 1986). The effect size of the nonconformity manipulation ( $\eta^2_{\text{nonconformity}} = .52$ ) was respectively 16 and 14 times larger than the effect size of the prestige context manipulation ( $\eta^2_{\text{prestige}} = .03$ ) and of the interaction ( $\eta^2_{\text{interaction}} = .04$ ), suggesting that our nonconformity manipulation was successful.

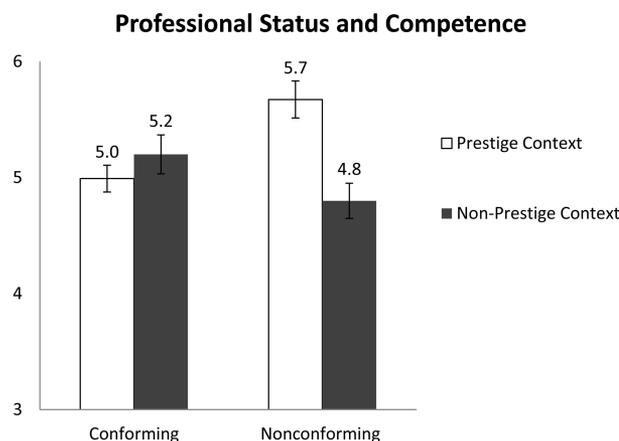
Next, we conducted a similar 2  $\times$  2 between-subjects ANOVA using ratings of the professor’s professional status and competence as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for prestige context ( $F(1, 155) = 6.1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), a nonsignificant main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 155) = .70$ , NS), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 155) = 13.0$ ,  $p < .001$ ), depicted in figure 3. As predicted, when the school was described as prestigious, students attributed significantly more status and competence to the nonconforming professor than to the conforming one ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 5.7$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 5.0$ ,  $t(83) = 3.3$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, when no information about the school was provided, there was a marginally significant difference between conditions in favor of the conforming individual ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 4.8$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 5.2$ ,  $t(72) = 1.8$ ,  $p = .07$ ). These 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. We also checked whether participants’ gender would impact status attributions. We conducted the same ANOVA analysis including gender as a control variable and found no significant effect for this demographic variable.

*Discussion.* Study 2 extends the findings of study 1 regarding the relationship between signals of nonconformity and perceptions of status and competence by examining this link in a different domain. We find that students perceive an unshaven professor who wears a T-shirt to have higher professional status and competence than a shaven professor who wears a tie, but only in a prestigious context, with relatively high standards of conduct.

Individuals can deviate from the norm and nonconform in several ways (Tian et al. 2001). While studies 1 and 2 operationalized nonconformity as dressing down, in the next study we examine nonadherence to dress codes through an original product choice (i.e., wearing a red bow tie at a formal black-tie party at a country club). We also examine the role of perceived autonomy as the key mediating mechanism underlying status inferences. Since in this study we

FIGURE 3

STUDY 2 RESULTS: THE EFFECT OF NONCONFORMITY IN PRESTIGE CONTEXTS



tested and demonstrated the boundary condition relative to prestige contexts, in the experiments that follow we examine the red sneakers effect in similar contexts with shared norms of formal conduct (e.g., country clubs, business schools).

### Study 3: Nonconformity Depicted as Unintentional and Perceived Autonomy

The goal of study 3 is threefold. First, it examines nonconforming behaviors in the domain of nonadherence to dress codes from a different angle than studies 1 and 2. Tian et al.’s (2001) theoretical account suggests that consumers’ resistance to conformity pressures can have distinct behavioral manifestations, such as downgrading of the consumption style (so-called “avoidance of similarity”) or the selection of original and novel consumer goods (“creative choice counterconformity”). While studies 1 and 2 manipulated nonconformity through casual dress styles, study 3 investigates nonconformity through original dress styles. Specifically, we test how participants grant status within a membership club to an individual attending a formal black-tie party. We describe the individual as conforming or nonconforming by manipulating the color of the bow tie he is wearing at the party (black vs. red). Second, in this study we examine another necessary condition of the red sneakers effect. We expect that when a specific nonconforming behavior is “unintentional” (i.e., “it was not his intention to dress in a way that potentially deviates from the norm”), the nonconforming conduct no longer will be associated with enhanced status, competence, and autonomy, as hypothesized. Finally, in study 3 we delve into the mechanisms underlying status and competence inferences resulting from nonconformity. Specifically, we seek to demonstrate that observers attribute higher status and competence in response to signals of nonconformity because they believe that the

nonconforming individual is autonomous and in control, and can afford to act according to his volition, as predicted by hypothesis 2.

**Method.** We recruited 141 participants who responded to a paid online survey on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; 45% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 35$ ). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (conforming vs. nonconforming dress style)  $\times$  2 (no intention to deviate vs. control) between-subjects design. We manipulated conformity of dress style by telling participants about Charles, an individual attending a formal black-tie party who was either wearing a red bow tie (nonconforming) or a black bow tie (conforming). Participants read the following description: "Imagine Charles, a 40-year-old man who likes to play golf. This year, Charles's golf club is hosting a black-tie holiday party. Charles decides to wear a red [black] bow tie to the party. Most of the other male invitees are wearing a black bow tie." In addition, we manipulated the deliberateness of the behavior by either depicting the choice as unintentional through an extra statement at the end of the description (no-intention-to-deviate condition) or by omitting this information (control condition). Specifically, participants in the no-intention-to-deviate condition read: "It was not Charles's intention to dress in a way that potentially deviates from the expected dress code." After reading Charles's description, participants assessed his perceived autonomy by rating the following two items ( $\alpha = .66$ ): 1. The extent to which Charles can afford to do what pleases him (1 = He can never afford to do what he wants, 7 = He can always afford to do what he wants). 2. The extent to which Charles is in control over the decision of what to wear (1 = not in control at all, 7 = completely in control). Participants then answered two questions on membership status in the golf club and performance as a golf player: 1. "How likely is Charles to be one of the top members of the country club?" (1 = not likely at all, 7 = extremely likely). 2. "Do you think Charles has won golf competitions/prizes in the past?" (1 = not likely at all, 7 = extremely likely). We averaged the two items ( $\alpha = .62$ ) and used the resulting measure as the dependent variable in our analyses. Subsequently, participants answered three manipulation-check questions about, respectively, the perceived (1) nonconformity, (2) creativity, and (3) deliberateness of the behavior described: 1. "To what extent does Charles's bow tie conform to the dress code?" (1 = not conforming at all, 7 = extremely conforming). 2. "How creative is Charles's bow tie choice?" (1 = not creative at all, 7 = extremely creative). 3. "How deliberate is Charles's bow tie choice?" (1 = not deliberate at all, 7 = extremely deliberate). Finally, we asked participants if they ever attended parties or events with formal or semiformal dress codes to assess the general level of familiarity with formal gatherings in the sample.

**Results.** The vast majority of participants (89%) have attended formal gatherings in the past, thus guaranteeing a satisfactory level of familiarity with the scenario being tested.

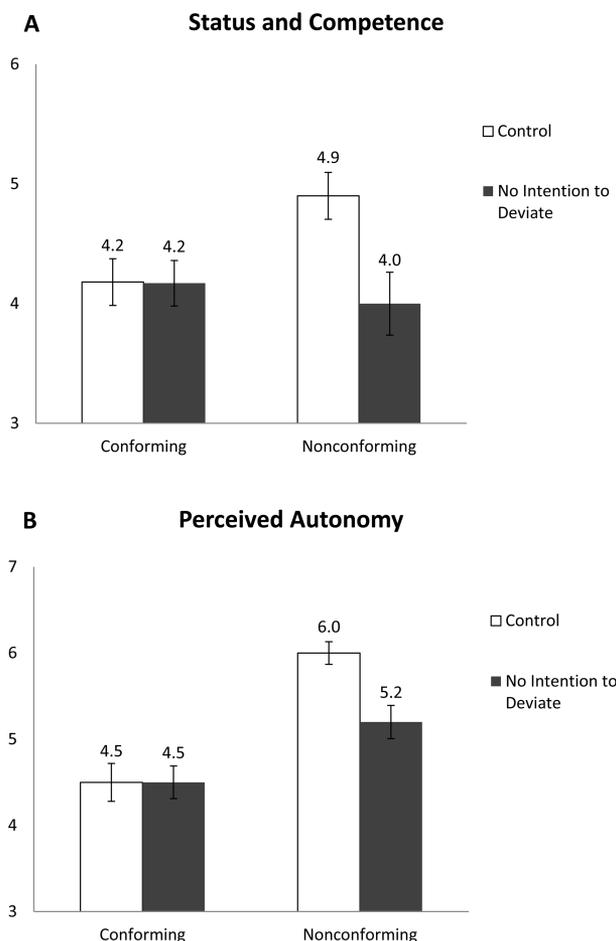
**Manipulation Checks: Nonconformity and Creativity.** As expected, the manipulation checks confirmed that participants perceived wearing a black bow tie to the party as a more conforming and noncreative behavior as compared to wearing a red bow tie. In particular, wearing a black bow tie was perceived as significantly more conforming than wearing a red bow tie ( $M_{\text{conformity}} = 6.5$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonconformity}} = 2.3$ ,  $t(139) = 21.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and as significantly less creative ( $M_{\text{conformity}} = 2.0$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonconformity}} = 4.8$ ,  $t(139) = 11.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As a further check to assess the success and the validity of the manipulation (Perdue and Summers 1986), we also conducted a 2 (nonconforming vs. conforming dress style)  $\times$  2 (no intention to deviate vs. control) between-subjects ANOVA using ratings of conformity as the dependent variable. As expected, the analysis revealed a significant main effect only for nonconformity ( $F(1, 137) = 453.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not for deliberateness ( $F(1, 137) = 1.4$ , NS), nor for the interaction between the two factors ( $F(1, 137) = .81$ , NS). The same analysis performed on ratings of creativity as the dependent variable revealed an analogous pattern of results with a significant main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 137) = 138.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and nonsignificant effects for both deliberateness ( $F(1, 137) = .23$ , NS) and the interaction ( $F(1, 137) = .01$ , NS).

**Manipulation Check: Deliberateness.** Participants perceived the described behavior as less deliberate in the no-intention-to-deviate condition than in the control condition ( $M_{\text{unintentional}} = 4.4$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 6.2$ ,  $t(139) = 6.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As a further check, we conducted the same 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA using ratings of deliberateness as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 137) = 4.4$ ,  $p < .05$ ), a significant main effect for deliberateness ( $F(1, 137) = 51.9$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 137) = 13.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Given the statistical significance of both treatment variables and their interaction, we proceeded with an analysis of the effect sizes to compare the relative impact of each factor (Perdue and Summers 1986). The effect size of the deliberateness manipulation ( $\eta^2_{\text{deliberateness}} = .28$ ) was nine times larger than the effect size of the nonconformity manipulation ( $\eta^2_{\text{nonconformity}} = .03$ ) and three times larger than the effect size of the interaction ( $\eta^2_{\text{interaction}} = .09$ ), suggesting that our deliberateness manipulation was successful.

**Inferences of Status and Competence.** Next, we conducted a 2 (nonconforming vs. conforming dress style)  $\times$  2 (no intention to deviate vs. control) between-subjects ANOVA using ratings of status within the country club and competence as a golf player as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a nonsignificant main effect for nonconformity ( $F(1, 137) = 1.5$ , NS), a significant main effect for deliberateness ( $F(1, 137) = 4.1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 137) = 3.7$ ,  $p = .05$ ), depicted in figure 4A. In line with the findings of our previous studies, when the behavior was deliberate, participants granted significantly more status and competence to the individual wearing the red bow tie than to the one wearing the black bow tie

FIGURE 4

STUDY 3 RESULTS: UNINTENTIONALITY OF THE NONCONFORMING BEHAVIOR AS BOUNDARY CONDITION



( $M_{\text{control nonconformity}} = 4.9$  vs.  $M_{\text{control conformity}} = 4.2$ ,  $t(68) = 2.4$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In contrast, there was no significant difference between conditions when the behavior was depicted as unintentional ( $M_{\text{unintentional nonconformity}} = 4.0$  vs.  $M_{\text{unintentional conformity}} = 4.2$ , NS). Importantly, when comparing the two nonconforming conditions, we found that the positive status and competence inferences associated with wearing a red bow tie significantly decreased when the nonconforming behavior was clearly depicted as unintentional ( $M_{\text{control nonconformity}} = 4.9$  vs.  $M_{\text{unintentional nonconformity}} = 4.0$ ,  $t(68) = 2.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We also checked whether participants' gender would impact status attributions. We conducted the same ANOVA analysis including gender as a control variable and found no significant effect for this demographic variable.

*Perceived Autonomy.* We then performed a similar analysis using ratings of autonomy as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for noncon-

formity ( $F(1, 137) = 35.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a significant main effect for deliberateness ( $F(1, 137) = 4.1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 137) = 4.8$ ,  $p < .05$ ), depicted in figure 4B. As predicted, when we provided no information about the intentions of the described individual and the behavior was interpreted as deliberate, participants perceived the nonconforming individual as having significantly higher autonomy than the conforming one ( $M_{\text{control nonconformity}} = 6.0$  vs.  $M_{\text{control conformity}} = 4.5$ ,  $t(68) = 6.0$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The nonconformity manipulation elicited a significant difference between conditions also when the behavior was depicted as unintentional ( $M_{\text{unintentional nonconformity}} = 5.2$  vs.  $M_{\text{unintentional conformity}} = 4.5$ ,  $t(69) = 2.6$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Importantly, the comparison between the two nonconforming conditions revealed that the perceived autonomy participants associated with wearing a red bow tie was significantly weakened when this nonconforming behavior was depicted as unintentional ( $M_{\text{control nonconformity}} = 6.0$  vs.  $M_{\text{unintentional nonconformity}} = 5.2$ ,  $t(68) = 3.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as we predicted. In sum, we find that enhanced perceptions of the nonconforming individual's status, competence, and autonomy dissipate when observers perceive the nonconforming conduct as unintentional.

*Mediated Moderation Analysis.* To test moderation by deliberateness and mediation by perceived autonomy, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (Edwards and Lambert 2007) examining whether perceived autonomy mediated the detected interaction between nonconformity and deliberateness. As reported above, deliberateness significantly moderated both the dependent variable (status and competence) and the mediator (autonomy). Moreover, when status and competence were regressed on nonconformity, deliberateness, their two-way interaction, and autonomy, the mediator was significant ( $B = .38$ ,  $t(137) = 4.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the effect of the interaction between nonconformity and deliberateness on status and competence became nonsignificant (from  $B = .82$ ,  $t(137) = 1.9$ ,  $p = .05$ , to  $B = .51$ ,  $t(136) = 1.2$ , NS). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .033 to .717), suggesting a significant indirect effect.

Taken together, the results of study 3 deepen our understanding of the interactions among the underlying processes of the red sneakers effect. We find that nonconformity leads to inferences of heightened status and competence, as long as the deviant conduct is perceived as deliberate. Moreover, we show that autonomy mediates the interaction between the nonconformity manipulation and deliberateness on status and competence inferences.

*Discussion.* Study 3 extends our previous findings by examining deviance from the norm through a dress choice that denotes originality. We demonstrate that participants perceive an individual wearing a red bow tie at a black-tie party in a country club as a higher-status member in the club and as a better golf player relative to a conforming individual wearing a black bow tie. Importantly, this study explores the role of perceived deliberateness as a boundary

condition of the red sneakers effect. As predicted, we find that when the behavior is perceived to be unintentionally nonconforming, the positive inferences associated with nonconformity dissipate. Finally, we provide evidence in support of our proposed mediating mechanism and show that participants infer enhanced status and competence because they believe that the nonconforming individual has the autonomy to follow his preferences and deviate from the norm.

#### Study 4: Inferences from a Nonconforming Presentation Style and Observers' Need for Uniqueness

Thus far, our experiments have manipulated nonconformity as nonadherence to expected dress codes. In this study, we extend our findings by examining a different way of deviating from the norm: the styles people use in their PowerPoint presentations in a prestigious competition. We test how participants confer status and competence to a contestant in the MIT's well-known \$100K business competition. We manipulate between subjects whether the contestant adopts his own PowerPoint presentation layout (nonconforming condition) or MIT's official layout (conforming condition). Importantly, we clearly establish the behavioral norm by stating in both conditions that other participants in the contest are using MIT's official background. In this study, we test whether the relationship between nonconformity and perceptions of greater status and competence is moderated by respondents' level of need for uniqueness. Consistent with hypothesis 3, we expect participants with high levels of need for uniqueness, as compared to participants with low levels of need for uniqueness, to confer greater status and competence to the nonconforming individual. Moreover, we seek further support for hypothesis 2 and for the findings of study 3 on the mediating role of perceived autonomy. Finally, in this study we measure the actor's perceived awareness of the typical PowerPoint slide style to confirm that in all conditions the contestant is viewed as knowledgeable of the norm.

*Method.* We recruited 149 participants who responded to a paid online survey on Amazon MTurk (50% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 37$ ). Participants were introduced to the study and read a description of the actual MIT \$100K competition. They were told, "The MIT \$100K Competition is one of the nation's premier business plan competitions. The capital raising contest is aimed at helping students and researchers in the MIT community start up their firms. The MIT \$100K brings together a network of resources (venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, mentors, and more than \$350K in cash and prizes) to help participants through the funding process of new ventures." Then participants read about John, a candidate in the competition. The study manipulated between subjects whether John adopted his own PowerPoint presentation layout (nonconforming condition) or, like most other contestants, the MIT official layout (conforming condition). Participants read the following description: "Imagine John, a 22-year-old student at MIT, who is participating in the

MIT \$100K competition. John has already passed the first round of the contest and is about to participate in the second round. As he is preparing the slides for the presentation of his business plan, he could pick the official MIT background or use a background of his choice for the slides. His slides would have a more unusual and less conventional background. The majority of the other participants are using the official MIT background for the slides. Eventually John decides to use his own [the MIT official] layout for the slide presentation."

Subsequently, participants answered a series of questions. In order to avoid potential order effects, we counterbalanced the appearance of the measures. Specifically, the order of appearance of the dependent variable (perceived status and competence) and the mediator (autonomy) was interchanged, and the moderator (need for uniqueness) appeared either at the beginning or at the end of the survey. We assessed status and competence by asking participants to answer four questions: 1. "How likely is John to win the MIT \$100K competition?" (1 = not likely at all, 7 = extremely likely). 2. "How likely is John to become a millionaire entrepreneur one day?" (1 = not likely at all, 7 = extremely likely). 3. "How do you think John's business idea compares to other business proposals in the contest?" (1 = below average, 7 = above average). 4. "How well respected is John by his friends?" (1 = not respected at all, 7 = extremely well respected). We averaged the four items to create a measure of perceived status and competence ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and used it as the dependent variable in our analyses. Similarly to study 3, participants assessed John's perceived autonomy by rating the following two items ( $\alpha = .81$ ): 1. The extent to which John can afford to do what he wants (1 = He can never afford to do what he wants, 7 = He can always afford to do what he wants). 2. The extent to which John is in control (1 = not in control at all, 7 = completely in control). As a manipulation check for our nonconformity manipulation, participants answered the following question: "How conforming to competition standards is John's presentation style?" (1 = not conforming at all, 7 = extremely conforming). Moreover, participants were asked to judge John's awareness of the norm: "Is John knowledgeable about the appropriate slides style for the competition?" (1 = not knowledgeable at all, 7 = extremely knowledgeable). We then assessed the level of acquaintance with the behavior described by asking respondents to rate their familiarity level with PowerPoint or similar presentation programs (1 = not familiar at all, 4 = somewhat familiar, 7 = very familiar). Participants completed the 31-item scale developed by Tian et al. (2001) to measure the degree to which individuals pursue differentness and uniqueness (e.g., "I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands").

*Results.* Preliminary analysis revealed no significant differences in the patterns of results between respondents' gender groups; thus, we analyzed the results jointly. The manipulation check confirmed that participants perceived the student as nonconforming when he was using his own back-

ground for the slides ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 5.7$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 2.7$ ,  $t(147) = 14.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, participants' mean level of familiarity with PowerPoint was fairly high ( $M = 5.1$ ) and significantly above the scale midpoint (4) in both conditions ( $M_{\text{conforming}} = 4.8$ ,  $t(66) = 3.8$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 5.3$ ,  $t(80) = 6.9$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

As expected, participants granted more status and competence to the nonconforming individual than to the conforming one ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 5.0$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 4.2$ ,  $t(147) = 5.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, they perceived the nonconforming individual as more autonomous and more able to afford his preferences ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 5.6$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 4.3$ ,  $t(147) = 7.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Participants thought that John was more knowledgeable about the appropriate PowerPoint slide style for the competition when he was nonconforming rather than conforming ( $M_{\text{nonconforming}} = 5.8$  vs.  $M_{\text{conforming}} = 5.2$ ,  $t(144) = 4.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that in this case nonconforming behavior is not associated with ignorance of expectations in the given context.

*Perceived Autonomy as Mediator.* We examined whether perceived autonomy mediated the relationship between nonconformity and greater status and competence inferences, as we hypothesized. First, the nonconformity manipulation affected status and competence inferences ( $B = .38$ ,  $t(147) = 5.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Second, the nonconformity manipulation significantly affected autonomy ( $B = .66$ ,  $t(147) = 7.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, the influence of the independent variable on status and competence became nonsignificant when autonomy was included in the model (from  $B = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ , to  $B = .11$ , NS). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .164 to .389). These results suggest that participants attributed higher status and competence to the nonconforming individual, relative to the

conforming individual, because he was perceived as more autonomous.

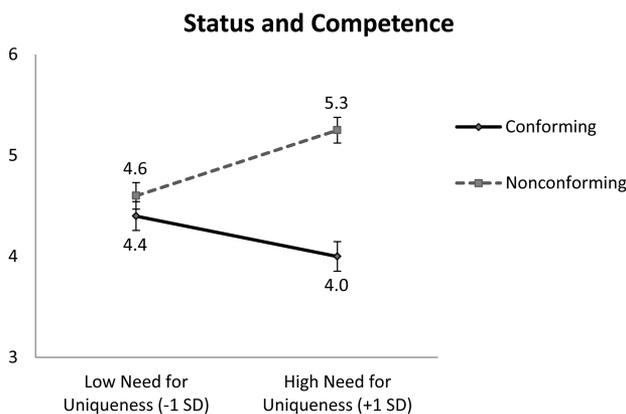
*Need for Uniqueness as Moderator.* Next, we examined the moderating role of observers' need for uniqueness ( $\alpha = .97$ ). We analyzed responses using a linear regression with perceptions of status and competence as the dependent variable and with the following independent variables: a variable for the behavior coded as 1 for using a nonconforming presentation layout and -1 for using a conforming presentation layout, need for uniqueness scale (standardized for ease of interpretation), and their interaction. This analysis revealed a main effect of condition ( $B = .38$ ,  $t(145) = 5.5$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a nonsignificant main effect for observers' need for uniqueness ( $B = .08$ , NS), and a significant interaction between these two variables ( $B = .28$ ,  $t(145) = 4.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>2</sup> To further explore this interaction, we performed a spotlight analysis (Fitzsimons 2008) that considered the effect of nonconformity among those participants with higher and lower need for uniqueness. As illustrated by figure 5, a spotlight analysis at one standard deviation above the mean of need for uniqueness revealed a significant difference ( $B = .66$ ,  $t(145) = 6.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ): participants with high need for uniqueness conferred significantly more status and competence to John when he engaged in a nonconforming behavior as compared to when he engaged in a conforming behavior. In contrast, a similar spotlight analysis performed at one standard deviation below the mean of need for uniqueness showed a nonsignificant difference between conditions ( $B = .09$ , NS). Thus, nonconformity predicted higher inferences of status and competence when respondents scored high in need for uniqueness, but such relationship did not exist for respondents who scored low in need for uniqueness.

Additionally, we examined the slopes of need for uniqueness in each condition. The slope was positive and significant when John was depicted as adopting a nonconforming presentation format ( $B = .36$ ,  $t(145) = 3.9$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that participants scoring high on the need for uniqueness scale attributed more potential to John when his behavior was perceived as deviant (as compared to the reactions of participants with lower levels of need for uniqueness). However, when John was described as adopting a mainstream presentation style, the slope of need for uniqueness was negative ( $B = -.20$ ,  $t(145) = -2.0$ ,  $p = .05$ ), suggesting that participants high in need for uniqueness granted less status and competence to John when he followed the same behavior of other contestants.

Next, we also examined the moderating role of observers' need for uniqueness on the mediator, perceived autonomy. We analyzed responses using a linear regression with perceived autonomy as the dependent variable and with the

FIGURE 5

STUDY 4 RESULTS: OBSERVERS' NEED FOR UNIQUENESS AND RESPONSES TO NONCONFORMITY (SPOTLIGHT ANALYSIS)



<sup>2</sup> The 31 items of the Need for Uniqueness scale, as conceptualized by Tian et al. (2001), can be further divided into three subsets: (1) Creative counterconformity (12 items); (2) Unpopular counterconformity (11 items); (3) Avoidance of similarity (8 items). We performed the same moderation analysis with each of the three subscales and found a significant interaction with each of them.

following independent variables: a variable for the behavior coded as 1 for using a nonconforming presentation layout and  $-1$  for using a conforming presentation layout, need for uniqueness scale (standardized for ease of interpretation), and their interaction. This analysis revealed a main effect of condition ( $B = .66, t(145) = 7.5, p < .001$ ), a nonsignificant main effect for observers' need for uniqueness ( $B = .02, NS$ ), and a significant interaction between these two variables ( $B = .19, t(145) = 2.1, p < .05$ ). To explore this interaction, we performed a spotlight analysis (Fitzsimons 2008) that considered the effect of nonconformity on perceived autonomy among those participants with higher and lower need for uniqueness. A spotlight analysis at one standard deviation above the mean of need for uniqueness revealed a significant difference ( $B = .85, t(145) = 6.7, p < .001$ ): participants with high need for uniqueness perceived John as significantly more autonomous when he engaged in a nonconforming behavior as compared to when he engaged in a conforming behavior. A similar spotlight analysis performed at one standard deviation below the mean of need for uniqueness also showed a significant difference between conditions ( $B = .47, t(145) = 3.8, p < .01$ ). While the nonconformity manipulation elicited a significant reaction for participants with both high and low need for uniqueness, the magnitude of the effect for respondents with high need for uniqueness was almost double compared to the size of the effect for respondents with low need for uniqueness ( $B_{\text{high uniqueness}} = .85$  vs.  $B_{\text{low uniqueness}} = .47$ ).

*Mediated Moderation Analysis.* To test moderation by need for uniqueness and mediation by perceived autonomy, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (Edwards and Lambert 2007) examining whether perceived autonomy mediated the detected interaction between the nonconformity condition and need for uniqueness. As reported above, need for uniqueness significantly moderated both the dependent variable (status and competence) and the mediator (autonomy). Moreover, when status and competence were regressed on nonconforming behavior, need for uniqueness, their two-way interaction, and autonomy, the mediator was significant ( $B = .37, t(144) = 6.6, p < .001$ ), and the effect of the interaction between nonconforming behavior and need for uniqueness on status and competence decreased (from  $B = .28, t(145) = 4.1, p < .001$ , to  $B = .21, t(144) = 3.5, p < .001$ ). In a bootstrap analysis, we found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (95% CI = .004 to .162), suggesting a significant indirect effect.

In sum, the results of study 4 shed light on the interactions between the underlying processes of the red sneakers effect. Need for uniqueness moderated both the direct effect of nonconformity on status inferences (dependent variable) and the first stage of the indirect effect of nonconformity on perceived sense of autonomy (mediator), suggesting that participants high in need for uniqueness attributed higher status and competence and heightened sense of autonomy in response to nonconformity signals, relative to participants with low levels of need for uniqueness. Moreover, we find

that autonomy mediated the interaction between the nonconforming manipulation and need for uniqueness on status and competence inferences.

*Discussion.* Study 4 extends our findings about nonconformity-based inferences beyond the domain of nonadherence to dress codes. We find that participants perceive a contestant in a prestigious competition as having higher status and competence when he adopts his own layout for the presentation rather than the standard background. In addition, we show the moderating role of observers' need for uniqueness on inferences of heightened status and competence and perceived autonomy. Relative to participants with low levels of need for uniqueness, participants with high levels of need for uniqueness attributed greater status, competence, and autonomy to the nonconforming individual rather than to the conforming one. In line with hypothesis 2 and the findings of study 3, we provide further evidence in support of our proposed mediating mechanism and show that participants infer higher status and competence because they believe that the nonconforming individual has the autonomy to follow his volition.

In the next, follow-up study, we examine responses to nonconformity outside the laboratory and provide further support to the moderating role of need for uniqueness through a behavioral proxy.

### Follow-Up Study: Stepping Outside the Lab with Red Sneakers

This follow-up study aims to increase the ecological validity of our findings by employing a real-world manipulation of nonconformity and by examining a product-related behavioral proxy for need for uniqueness. Specifically, we examine the reactions of executives attending a formal symposium in a prestigious business school at which a professor wears red sneakers while teaching in the classroom. In addition to measuring need for uniqueness through conventional scale items, we collect information on whether participants own shoes that have an unusual color and thus do engage in less conventional consumption in their daily lives. Relative to individuals with low need for uniqueness, we expect individuals with high need for uniqueness to own more unusual pair of shoes and to attribute more status and competence to signals of nonconformity, in line with hypothesis 3 and with the results of study 4.

*Method.* Participants were 59 male executives ( $M_{\text{age}} = 46$ ) attending the Inner City 100 Urban Small Business Symposium.<sup>3</sup> At this 1-day event, executives gather for networking opportunities and a full day of management education. We decided to focus our analysis on male participants because almost all female respondents (28 out of 30) said they owned a pair of distinctive-looking shoes. In the case

<sup>3</sup> This number excludes 10 participants who did not notice that the professor was wearing red sneakers, possibly because the shoes were not visible from where they were sitting.

of male participants, 40 individuals out of 59 indicated that they owned this type of shoes. Because this behavior seems to be the prevailing norm for female individuals, it is not a discriminating behavioral proxy for nonconforming and uniqueness motives. Nevertheless, we also analyzed the sample in its entirety and, as reported below, the nature and significance of the results did not change. In this study, the female negotiations professor taught her 90-minute session wearing a pair of (nonconforming) red Converse sneakers. At the end of the class, participants were asked to complete a short survey. Participants assessed the professor's professional status and competence by answering four questions similar to those used in our previous studies: 1. "How high is [professor's name] status within [school name] (compared to colleagues in her cohort)?" (1 = definitely low, 7 = definitely high). 2. "How likely is she to be the head of the negotiations unit at [school name] 10 years from now?" (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). 3. "How likely is [professor's name]'s research to be featured in the *Harvard Business Review*?" (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). 4. "In your opinion, how likely is she to be selected to present her research at the prestigious [school name] research symposium?" (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). We averaged the four items ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and used the resulting measure in our analysis. Next, we asked participants whether they had ever owned a pair of distinctive-looking shoes: "Did you ever own a pair of shoes that had a distinctive color?" (yes, no). To make sure that owning a pair of distinctive shoes was a valid behavioral proxy for uniqueness motives, we asked participants to answer three items (two questions related to distinctiveness and one specific to nonconformity) selected from Snyder and Fromkin's (1977) need for uniqueness scale: 1. "Do you typically prefer to conform to dress codes?" (1 = strongly avoid, 7 = strongly prefer, reverse coded). 2. "Do you like to dress in a way that is distinctive?" (1 = dislike extremely, 7 = like extremely). 3. "Please rate your agreement with the statement: Whenever I take part in group activities, I am something of a nonconformist" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

**Results.** First, we checked the relationship between owning a pair of distinctive shoes and the items measuring need for uniqueness. We found a positive and significant correlation between these measures ( $r = .37, p < .01$ ). Additionally, owners of a pair of distinctive shoes displayed higher average scores on need for uniqueness than did others ( $M_{\text{owners}} = 4.6$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonowners}} = 3.9, t(57) = 3.0, p < .01$ ).<sup>4</sup> These results suggest that owning a pair of original shoes was a valid behavioral proxy for uniqueness motives for male individuals in the sample. Importantly, participants who owned a pair of distinctive shoes attributed greater professional status to the professor wearing red sneakers than did those participants who did not ( $M_{\text{owners}} = 5.6$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonowners}} = 5.1, t(57)$

$= 2.4, p < .05$ ).<sup>5</sup> Thus we confirm that people with high rather than low levels of need for uniqueness are more likely to attribute enhanced status and competence to nonconforming individuals.

**Discussion.** In this follow-up study, we extended our findings by examining nonconformity in a real-world context and a behavioral proxy for need for uniqueness. We find that owners of products that deviate from the norm (individuals with high levels of need for uniqueness) are more sensitive to nonconforming behaviors and grant more status and competence to signals of nonconformity than individuals with low levels of need for uniqueness.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Individuals who are aware of social norms and expectations may still decide to deviate from standards of appropriate behavior in the way they dress, speak, and behave. Our research examines how third-party observers interpret such violations of conventional norms in terms of status and competence attributions. We demonstrate that nonconforming behavior, as a costly and visible signal, can operate similarly to conspicuous consumption and, as compared to conforming behavior, lead to inferences of enhanced status and competence in the eyes of others. Across a series of lab and field studies, we explore observers' reactions to a variety of nonconforming behaviors in different settings and find that observers confer higher status and competence to nonconforming individuals compared to conforming ones. At a process level, our investigation reveals that the positive inferences from signals of nonconformity are driven by perceived autonomy and moderated by observers' need for uniqueness. Moreover, we explore boundary conditions of the red sneakers effect and demonstrate that inferences of greater status and competence disappear when the observer is unfamiliar with the environment, when the nonconforming behavior is perceived as unintentional, and in the absence of established norms of formal conduct in the given context.

Our theoretical framework (fig. 1) and findings deepen our understanding of when and how individuals attain status and competence in the eyes of others by adopting behaviors that deviate from the norm. This research highlights the value of nonconformity and contributes to the literature in several ways. First, while most nonconformity research in psychology, sociology, economics, and marketing has focused on the nonconforming individual and on the antecedents for her behavior, we focus on the consequences of nonconformity and on the perceptions of third-party observers. In the present article, we focus specifically on inferences of status and competence. Though prior literature on nonconformity has highlighted potential costs to nonconforming individuals (e.g., rejection from a group, see

<sup>4</sup> There was also a significant correlation ( $r = .25, p < .05$ ) and a significant difference between groups ( $M_{\text{owners}} = 4.5$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonowners}} = 3.9, t(87) = 2.5, p < .05$ ) when we included all 89 individuals (male and female) in the sample.

<sup>5</sup> There was also a significant difference between owners of original shoes and nonowners ( $M_{\text{owners}} = 5.7$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonowners}} = 5.2, t(86) = 2.4, p < .05$ ) when we considered all 89 individuals (male and female) in the sample.

Schachter 1951), here we show that nonconformity can lead to attributions of *greater* status and competence. Second, the current research extends findings on subtle ways to display status (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010) by investigating a different kind of consumer behavior (e.g., not respecting a dress code, using a nonstandard presentation style). Moreover, our work provides novel insights into the psychological processes underlying the inferences of greater status and competence for nonconforming individuals rather than conforming ones. We demonstrate that positive inferences of status and competence from signals of nonconformity are mediated by observers' attributions of autonomy. Observers confer greater status and competence to nonconformity compared to conformity because they believe that the nonconforming individual has the necessary level of autonomy to follow her own inclinations and bear the cost of deviating from the norm. Our research also contributes to the growing literature on distinctiveness motives and variety seeking (Ariely and Levav 2000; Chan et al. 2012; Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Lynn and Harris 1997; Maimaran and Wheeler 2008; Ratner et al. 1999; Simonson and Nowlis 2000; White and Argo 2011) by examining, for the first time, the moderating role of need for uniqueness in observers.

### Directions for Future Research

Our research can be further extended to examine additional potential moderators of the red sneakers effect. In particular, future work could examine how inferences from signals of nonconformity relate to cultural variability along the dimension of individualism-collectivism. Individualism-collectivism is perhaps the most basic dimension of cultural variability (Hofstede 1980; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui 1990) and constructs related to this theme, such as the independent versus interdependent self-construal, have been extensively investigated in psychology and consumer behavior (Aaker and Lee 2001; Agrawal and Maheswaran 2012; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Han and Shavitt 1994; Lee, Aaker, and Gardner 2000). This research indicates that Western cultures tend to embrace individualism. Individualists construe themselves as independent and unique, and they value characteristics that distinguish themselves from other members of the group. In contrast, East Asian and Latin American cultures tend to promote collectivism. Collectivists view themselves as interdependent and as part of a group, and they place high value on maintaining harmony with others in the collective entity. Since collectivists are strongly motivated by group norms, future research could examine whether individuals from cultures strongly oriented toward collectivistic values or individuals chronically oriented toward interdependent self-construal react differently to nonconforming behaviors.

Another fruitful direction for further research pertains to the study of gender, physical attractiveness, and more general stereotypes. Future work could examine gender dynamics by manipulating the gender of the nonconforming individual across experimental conditions. Furthermore, it would

be interesting to examine whether the nonconforming individual's physical attractiveness moderates the red sneakers effect observed in our studies. Past research demonstrates that physically attractive individuals are assumed to possess more socially desirable characteristics and are expected to lead better lives than their less attractive counterparts (Berscheid and Walster 1974; Langlois et al. 2000; Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid 1977). Hence, future research could examine whether observers associate nonconformity with even higher inferences of status and competence in the case of attractive, rather than relatively less attractive, individuals deviating from the norm. Moreover, drawing on stereotype research examining the intertwined relationship between competence and warmth (Fiske et al. 2002), it would be interesting to explore additional dependent variables and inferences such as warmth and liking of the target individual. Additionally, further research could investigate the impact of the observers' status and their relative status compared to the nonconforming individual (e.g., students evaluating a professor versus professors evaluating a student).

Finally, future work could investigate the extent to which the nonconforming individual is deviating from norms of appropriate behavior and its impact on status inferences. In the current research, we focused on behavioral manifestations of nonconformity that entail deviance from the norm, but that are not perceived as a strong or offensive violation of the norm. Based on the threefold conceptualization articulated by Tian et al. (2001), our experiments manipulated nonconformity as "avoidance of similarity" (e.g., using one's personal PowerPoint presentation format rather than the standard one in a formal competition) and as "creative choice counterconformity" (e.g., wearing a red bow tie at a black-tie party). Future research could manipulate nonconformity by varying the third behavioral manifestation of nonconformity, namely "unpopular choice counterconformity," and examine under what conditions the use of products and brands that strongly violate existing norms of proper conduct would also result in inferences of greater status in the eyes of others. One hypothesis is that nonconforming behaviors might lie within a "range of acceptance" for observers, such that deviance within the range leads to inferences of higher status and competence, whereas deviance outside the range might not.

### Managerial Implications

Our research investigates nonconformity within the realm of branded consumption and our findings offer actionable implications for brands. Specifically, the results of study 1 demonstrate that under certain conditions, less luxurious brands can signal higher status than more expensive ones (e.g., Swatch vs. Rolex). This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that conspicuous consumption of brands and the explicit use of other status symbols can be associated with low-status groups (Berger and Ward 2010; Feltovich et al. 2002; Han et al. 2010; Mazzocco et al. 2012). At times, less-conforming brands or perhaps even original product choices within the same luxury brand can serve as

a signal of even higher status and competence in the eyes of others as compared to more conforming luxury brands and more mainstream product choices.

Our research also bears potentially important managerial insights by highlighting the boundary condition of perceived intentionality on the positive inferences derived from signals of nonconformity. We demonstrate that nonconformity to normative codes and etiquette can result in inferences of greater status and competence, relative to conformity, when the deviant behavior appears to be intentional. Thus, a key question for marketers is to understand how consumers can demonstrate that they are *intentionally* not conforming through brands and products. What makes nonconformity seem more intentional in consumption? Some existing products on the market appear “engineered for nonconformity.” For example, the LittleMissMatched brand sells collections of mismatched socks sold in packs of three with the tagline “nothing matches, but anything goes.” In this case, nonconformity is a product feature that clearly denotes the intentionality of the consumer to deviate from the standard practice of wearing paired socks. Indeed, there is a growing demand for what Eric Jennings, the men’s fashion director at Saks Fifth Avenue, refers to as “crazy socks,” according to a *New York Times* article (Colman 2011). “The more novelty, the brighter or bolder the pattern or color, that’s what men are buying,” says Jennings. Marketers of both niche and mainstream brands can capitalize on the growing demand for clothes and accessories that signal intentional nonconformity.

In addition, price might be a valuable driver of perceived intentionality in marketing nonconforming products. Nonconforming brands that are associated with premium prices signal that the nonconforming individual can afford conventional status symbols. This notion is consistent with the “poorgeoisie” trend of wealthy consumers embracing nonconformity by “dressing like hoboes but spending like millionaires” (Kandell 2012). The brands and products that these consumers use to deliberately “look poor” are often priced much higher than average fashion brands, such as a \$300 pair of Acne jeans or a \$200 Guayabera shirt. Thus, the relatively high price of these nonconforming product choices manifests as an intentional willingness to deviate from the norm. Future investigations may directly test this hypothesis by manipulating the price of the nonconforming product or brand in an experimental setting.

In conclusion, we hope that our work is a first step toward providing a more articulated view of nonconformity behaviors in the domain of consumption. Contrary to the notion that nonconformity has ubiquitous negative effects, the current research demonstrates that nonconforming rather than conforming to behavioral norms can lead to inferences of greater status and competence in the eyes of others.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The pilot study reported in the introduction was conducted by the first author at the Association for Consumer Research conference in 2011 in Saint Louis, Michigan. Study 1 was

conducted in 2012 by the first author and a research assistant. Participants (shop assistants in luxury boutiques and pedestrians at the central train station) were recruited in downtown Milan, Italy. Participants in study 2 were undergraduate students recruited in 2011 at the CLER lab at Harvard Business School, Boston. A lab manager with the support of research assistants managed the collection of the data in the CLER lab. Respondents in studies 3 and 4 were recruited through the Amazon Mechanical Turk online panel in 2013. Participants in the follow-up study were business executives attending a session at the “Inner City 100 Urban Small Business” Symposium held in 2012 at the Harvard Business School, Boston. The second author taught the session, while the first author and a research assistant collected the data (questionnaires) at the end of the session. The three authors jointly analyzed all of the data.

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