



# A Study of the Impact of Nonconformity Behavior on Others: Focusing on the Red Sneakers Effect\*

Junhyuck SUH<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This research examines how people react to nonconforming behavior 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 a positive inference of status and competence in the eyes of others. **Research design, data, and methodology:** A series of studies demonstrate that people confer higher status and competence rather than conforming individuals using 2-way ANOVA through employees in luxury stores and students at university. **Results:** According to the empirical studies, observers who witness the nonconformity behavior have positive inferences of status and competence rather than conformity behavior. These positive inferences derived from signals of nonconformity are moderated by individual differences in prior knowledge and regulatory focus. **Conclusions:** Through three empirical studies, observers who witnessed role-breaking in prestigious and professional situations found that the individuals who performed the nonconformity behavior had higher status and competence rather than conformity behavior. Even in Korea, a collectivist culture, observers who witnessed nonconformity behavior showed that they gave higher evaluations to the people who behaved informally.

**Keywords :** Nonconformity Behavior, Red Sneakers Effect, Status, Competence, Prior knowledge, Regulatory Focus

**JEL Classification Code :** M11, M19, M21, M29

## 1. Introduction

A woman A has a plan to buy luxury brands such as Prada, Hermès, and LOIS VITTON. When most people enter a luxury boutique, they adorn with clothes and accessories suitable for luxury goods. However, she wears gym clothes even if she owns an elegant outfit. How do people examine her clothes? There is another example. A

man B is going to make an important presentation at a symposium. He wears jeans and red sneakers in this professional situation. How do people examine his attire? A and B made a choice that was different from the prevailing customs even though they could wear elegant outfits and suits.

In both professional and nonprofessional setting, individuals often make a significant effort to learn and

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<sup>1</sup> First and Corresponding Author. Lecturer in Business Administration, Sungkyunkwan University, Korea, Email: mawind99@skku.edu

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adhere to the 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 and avoid negative sanctions such as disapproval, ridicule, and exclusion (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Krulanski & Webster, 1991; Levince, 1989). However, Belleza et al. (2013) showed that under prestigious situations, nonconforming behaviors can be more beneficial than efforts to conform and can signal higher status and competence to others. Since nonconformity often has social cost (Levince, 1989), observers may infer that a nonconforming individual is in a powerful position that allows his/her to risk the social cost of nonconformity without fear of losing her place in the social hierarchy such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Signal theory suggests that, for a signal to be effective, it must be costly and observable by others (Feltovich et al., 2002; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997). They proposed 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, which suggests that individuals display status through the prominent, visual evidence of their ability to afford luxury goods. Similarly, nonconformity can lead to inferences of higher status and competence by providing visible evidence that individuals can afford to follow their own volition. Belleza et al. (2013) labeled this positive outcome of nonconforming behaviors the "red sneakers effect." This term was introduced in Korea, and it was in official use.

At this point, we raise the questions. Could this positive outcome of nonconformity behaviors, the red sneakers effect, apply in Korea? Korea has a relatively collectivist culture. Unlike individualism, collectivism has a strong tendency to follow norms and customs. Belleza et al. (2013) argued that the mechanism for this effect was perceived autonomy and that it was caused by Western culture. On the other hand, we take a big risk when we do something that breaks the rules, like wearing red sneakers in Korea. Korea Society Most people in Korea may rate this adventure rather lowly and criticize it. In other words, it can be said that the red sneakers effect is hard to appear in Korea.

However, this article proposes that this positive effect of nonconforming behavior can be applied effectively in Korea. In many recent lectures such as Sebas Talk and TED, lecturers are often seen intentionally wearing plain clothes rather than formal attire.

In addition, according to recent trend research, a trend in which individualism is prominent has been reported, especially among the MZ generation. For instance, Seoul National University Trend Analysis Center presented a trend called "Nana Land" (Kim et al., 2020). Other individual's

eye is not important, whereas my own perspective is absolute in Nana land. As mentioned before, in our country, as a collective group, interpersonal relationships were important, so people had a strong orientation toward others, but now the number of people who want to love and protect themselves by setting their own standards is increasing. Nana Landers do not give in to the conventional wisdom of society, rebel against the values that the older generation considered meaningful, and pursue a lifestyle unique to their assets. Moreover, this trend has a strong ability to accept and understand the differences of others. They respect behavior that breaks the conventional norms, which is nonconformity behavior. The new consumer trend, Nana Land, suggests that the red sneaker effect could also be applied in Korea.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is as follows. First of all, in overseas academic circles, research on the effect of red sneakers has recently been conducted in marketing and psychology (Oostrom & Ronay, 2018), and several researches show that similar rule-breaking can result in favorable evaluations from others and a high social reputation (Piff et al., 2012; Van Kleef et al., 2011). However, scholars in Korea pay little attention to this issue. Therefore, this study will conduct three empirical studies to verify whether the red sneakers effect also occurs in Korea, which has a collectivist culture.

Secondly, previous studies presented the boundary condition that the red sneakers effect appears when the observer has expertise or is familiar with the situation, that is, when the observer has high prior knowledge. Thus, we expect that the observer's prior knowledge will moderate the relationship between the independent variables, informal behavior, and the dependent variables, status and competence. In addition, going further in previous research, we plan to examine the moderating effects of regulatory focus, which is a theory appropriate for other individuals' traits. Therefore, we will further develop the research on the effect of red sneakers by adding moderators that were not considered in existing studies.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Nonconformity Behavior**

A member of Congress in Korea, Yu, wore white pants and entered the national assembly in 2003. At that time, many members of Congress criticized his costume unfavorably. Like this, nonconformity can be risky and costly, often leading to social disapproval, rejection, and punishment (Anderson et al., 2006; Levine, 1989; Lin et al., 2013; Marques et al., 2001). In the context of consumer behavior, research demonstrates that assimilation and conformity motives can drive consumption practices and

choices in the market. Consumers are motivated to behave like those around them and make choice that are consistent with their in-group because of a need to increase affiliation and showing their identities (McFerran et al., 2010).

Meanwhile, nonconformity is generally defined as a behavior or belief that is inconsistent with norms or standards (Nail et al., 2000). Nonconformity behavior tends to desire to distance the self from dissimilar, disliked or unattractive others or out-group members (Berfer & Heath, 2007, 2008; White & Dahl, 2006, 2007) or to establish one's uniqueness and distinctiveness (Arievy & Levav, 2000; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). While most of research have focused on the antecedents of the nonconforming individual's behaviors, in our work we have interest in how external observers perceive and interpret nonconforming behavior in terms of status and competence with reference to Belleza et al. (2013)'s study. We examine the consequences of deviating from the norm in the eyes of others.

In the few research, nonconforming behavior acts as a particular form of conspicuous consumption and lead to perceptions of enhanced status and competence in the eyes of others (Belleza et al., 2013). Observers may infer that a nonconforming individual is in a more powerful position that allows her to follow her volition and bear the cost of deviating from the norm. Research suggests that high-status individuals tend to avoid blatant and outstanding displays of wealth and status, and instead seek alternative ways to differentiate themselves from low status individuals (Berger & Ward, 2010; Feltoovich et al., 2002; Han et al., 2010). This difference between high status and normal people can fuel positive inferences in the eyes of others.

We followed the study of Belleza et al. (2013) and status and competence were used as indicators of evaluation by others. 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 & Galinsky, 2008). Competence refers to the perceived ability to successfully pursue and perform specific tasks (Fiske et al., 2002). According to the latest trends, we predict that the red sneaker effect will present in Korea as well. Thus,

**H1:** Nonconformity behavior can lead to greater inferences of status and competence as compared to conforming behavior in a prestigious context.

## 2.2. Prior knowledge and Characteristics of Observers as Moderators

Now we investigate the impact of individual differences in observers' prior knowledge and regulatory focus on how they interpret signals of nonconformity. First, we investigated how people who observed nonconformity

behavior evaluated the status and ability of informal behavior when the observer had high and relatively low prior knowledge about consumption situations and environments in which the red sneakers effect appears.

Familiarity with the context is critical in verifying and understanding the signal of nonconformity. We predict that observers who are familiar with and have high prior knowledge with the consumption context will infer greater status and competence from signals of nonconformity rather than from signals of conformity. Therefore, we will subject two parts to prior knowledge theory (Alba & Hutchison, 1987; Bettman & Park, 1980). One is high prior knowledge about the context and the other one is relatively low prior knowledge. We will predict that inferences of status and competence require the observer to have high prior knowledge. Therefore, we will draw the following hypothesis.

**H2:** Observers with high prior knowledge about the prestigious context will infer more status and competence from nonconforming rather than conforming behavior as compared to observers with low prior knowledge.

Secondly, we investigated the regulatory focus of observers. The regulatory focus reflects different orientations in motivations for distinguishing the self via consumers' goods that show the difference relative to others. Regulatory focus theory suggests that people can attain their goals in two different ways, each involving the use of an alternative regulatory focus (Higgins et al., 1997). Individuals who pursue a promotion focus perceive their goals as hopes and aspirations, and thus they are sensitive to the presence or absence of such positive outcomes. In contrast, individuals who adopt a prevention focus perceive the same goals as duties and obligations, making them sensitive to the absence or presence of negative outcomes.

Individuals who embrace alternative regulatory focus manifest different psychological states during the process of goal attainment (Higgins et al., 1997). Because promotion focus individuals strive for matches to their goals, they have been shown to be in a state of eagerness to include as many options as possible that may help them achieve their goals. However, because prevention focus individuals on avoiding mismatches to their goals, they are in a state of vigilance that entails considering more restrictively only appropriate options.

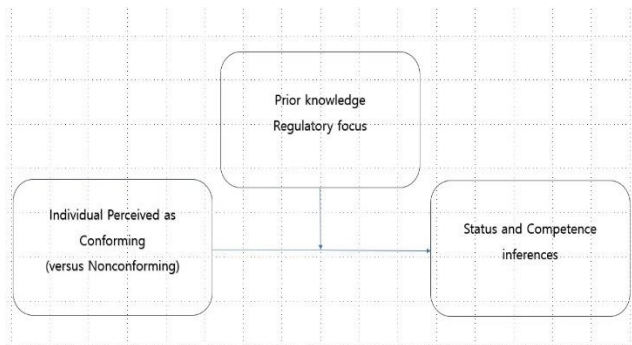
Nonconformity can be risky and costly, often leading to social disapproval, rejection and punishment. These kinds of negative things about nonconformity are very big threat to observers with prevention focus. They criticize nonconforming people and have low evaluations about their dress style when they confront them in a prestigious context. They will want them to avoid these threats and do not want

to violate social norms, so prefer conformity behavior to nonconformity behavior. In contrast, promotion focused individuals don't think of big threats. They have a disposition like a pioneer. They think of nonconforming people in prestigious context as a creative and unique phenomenon. Therefore, observers with promotion focus will evaluate nonconforming people in prestigious context positively.

**H3:** Positive inferences of status and competence will be moderated by observers' regulatory focus; observers with promotion-focus will infer more status and competence from nonconforming rather than conforming behavior as compared to observers with prevention-focus.

### 2.3. Overview of the Research

We will test our hypotheses and theoretical framework, depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Hypotheses and Theoretical Framework,

We will conduct 3 empirical studies to evaluate our hypotheses. Before proceeding with the empirical studies, we should consider the three premises.

First, in this research, we focus on behavioral dimensions of nonconformity that entail some deviance from the norm but are not perceived as a strong disruption and violation of the norm. Therefore, the manipulation in our studies centers on creative nonconformity and avoidance of similarity. That is, manifestations of nonconformity within realm of commonly accepted behavior.

Second, we limit the prestigious and professional context. Nonconforming behavior leads to a higher inference of status and competence, but this only applies in the prestigious and professional situations. In the less prestigious and normal context, nonconformity is not differentiation or conspicuous consumption anymore.

Finally, it is assumed that people who behave nonconformally do so deliberately and intentionally. When

a specific nonconforming behavior is perceived as unintentional, it will no longer be associated with status and competence (Belleza et al., 2013). Next, we will demonstrate three studies. Through considering them, we will test the red sneakers effect in Korea.

## 3. Research Design and Findings

### 3.1. STUDY 1: Status Inference 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. That is, we employ to verify H1 and evaluate whether the scale to investigate the dependent variables, status and competence, is appropriate. We create vignettes that describe a potential client who enters an elegant boutique and engages in either conforming or nonconforming behavior.

#### 3.1.1. Study Design

We made two types of questionnaires. One is a nonconformity behavior picture (entering the elegant boutique wearing ripped jeans and a Swatch watch), and the other one is a conformity behavior picture (entering the elegant boutique wearing a classy dress and Rolex watch). Then, evaluate the status and competence using Belleza et al. (2013)'s scale below the questionnaire picture.

We planned to distribute the questionnaire to employees of luxury stores, believing that the evaluations of professional employees at luxury stores would be more accurate and familiar to the situation than those of the general public. Therefore, we visited the luxury store of S Shopping and briefly explained the purpose of this empirical study, and 62 employees who listened participated in this study. The employees who participated in the empirical study were divided into two groups. To one group, questionnaires were distributed to consumers who engaged in conformity behavior, and to the other group, questionnaires were distributed to consumers who engaged in nonconformity behavior. Employees of the luxury store who participated in the study were provided coffee coupons from Starbucks worth 10,000 won as compensation for participating in the study.

#### 3.1.2. Result and Discussion

The scale used for status and competence had a Cronbach alpha value of over 0.8, and as a result of Varimax factor analysis, it was extracted as a single factor, showing the reliability and validity of the questions. Then, we employ a T-TEST using SPSS. As a result, employees working at

luxury stores evaluated consumers with nonconformity attire as having higher status and competence than consumers with conformity attire ( $M_{\text{nonconformity}}=5.13$ ,  $M_{\text{conformity}}=4.76$   $t(59)=-3.12$   $p<.05$ ) depicted Figure 2. This suggests that, as we expected, observers evaluated nonconformity behavior more highly than conformity behavior in the prestigious situation, and the red sneakers effect appeared.

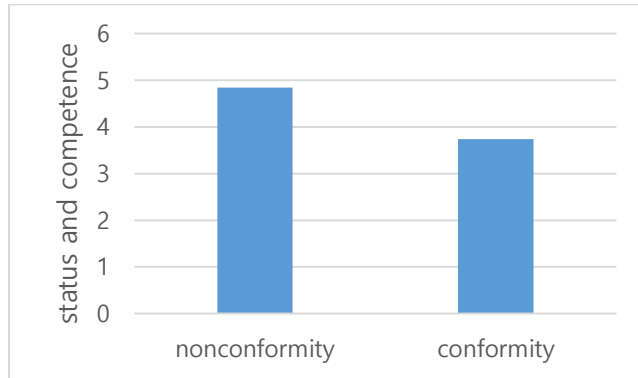


Figure 2: Evaluation of nonconformity and conformity

### 3.2. STUDY 2: Status Inference Based on a Nonconforming Dress style and Prior Knowledge

According to STUDY1, the observers who had the familiar prestigious situation evaluated nonconformity behavior more highly than conformity behavior. However, We need to consider whether the identical evaluation shows among regular customers. Moreover, we expected that individuals with more familiar and high prior knowledge to the prestigious situation have higher status and competence than individuals with relatively unfamiliar and low prior knowledge. It implies that prior knowledge will moderate between nonconformity(conformity) behavior and dependent variables, which are status and competence We planned to STUDY2 to verify them, that is, H1 and H2.

#### 3.2.1. Study Design

STUDY 2's design is almost identical to STUDY2. Similar questionnaires were used in this study. Additionally, in order to evaluate the observers' prior knowledge, we created and evaluated questions on subjective and objective knowledge about clothing and shopping in the questionnaire with the help of master's students in the Department of Clothing.

205 students taking marketing classes at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul participated through the SKKU marketing pool and conducted in a computer classroom (male=102, female=103).

First, the participating students were divided into two groups. All participants assessed their prior knowledge by answering questions about clothing and shopping. Then, one group was shown a picture of them entering a luxury store dressed nonconformally, and the other group was shown a picture of them entering a luxury store dressed in luxury goods alike Study1. The individuals' status and competence of the behavior were evaluated. The measured variables were identical to STUDY 1. Students who participated in the study were given additional points in the marketing course they were taking as a reward for participating.

#### 3.2.2. Results and Discussion

The scale used to evaluate prior knowledge had a Cronbach alpha of over 0.7. As a result of Varimax factor analysis, it was extracted as a single scale and found to be reliable and valid. We conducted a 2(high prior knowledge versus low prior knowledge) X 2(nonconformity behavior versus conformity behavior) between-subject ANOVA. The analysis revealed main effect of prior knowledge ( $F(1,201)=31.5$   $p<.001$ ) and behavior( $F(1,201)=10$   $p<.05$ ) was significant. Also. An interaction effect was significant ( $F(1,201)=4.10$   $p<.05$ ). The results are depicted in Figure 3.

Students granted greater status and competence to the nonconforming individual than the conforming one ( $M_{\text{nonconformity}}=4.8$ ,  $M_{\text{conformity}}=4.2$   $t(204)=2.1$   $p<.05$ )

Students with high prior knowledge evaluated the status and competence of the individual in nonconformity attire more highly than the individual in conformity in formal attire ( $M_{\text{conformity attire}} = 4.3$ ,  $M_{\text{nonconformity attire}} = 5.3$   $t(204)=3.3$   $p<.05$ ). As we expected, H1 and H2 were supportive.

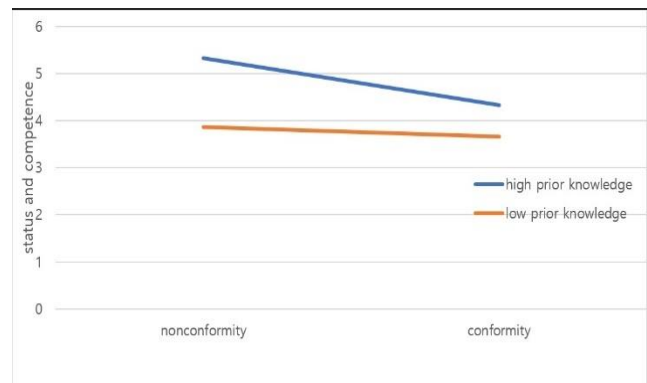


Figure 3: The Interaction Effect between Prior Knowledge and Behavior

### 3.3. STUDY 3. Nonconformity in Professional Setting

In this study, we examine the effect of nonconforming behavior in a more professional context by testing students'

responses to the dress style of a lecturer. Also, we expected the traits of observers to be affected, so we look at the interaction between behavior and status, competence through observers' regulatory focus.

### 3.3.1. Study Design

We recruited 130 students taking marketing classes at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul participated through the SKKU marketing pool and conducted in a computer classroom (male=64, female=66).

At first, the scales of Higgins et al. (1997) were developed to suit this study and divided into promotion focus and prevention focus according to the regulatory focus of the subjects. And then we divided into two groups.

In this study, we used a TED video of a lecture given in conformity and nonconformity attire as the professional setting. The videos used in this study included a video of famous writer Malcolm Gladwell giving a lecture wearing a suit as conformity behavior and wearing jeans and a shirt as nonconformity behavior.

One group watched the TED video of wearing a suit, as conformity behavior in a professional situation, and the other one watched the TED video of wearing jeans and a shirt as nonconformity behavior. After watching the video, they evaluate the status and competence of the lecturer. The students who participated in the study were given additional points in the marketing course they were taking as a reward for participating.

### 3.3.2. Results and Discussion

The scale used to evaluate regulatory focus had a Cronbach alpha of over 0.7. As a result of Varimax factor analysis, it was extracted as a single scale and found to be reliable and valid. In this study, the results may vary depending on the quality of the lecture contents. Therefore, as a result of evaluating the contents of the lecture, the quality of the contents was found to be useful, and both videos were found to be suitable for this study.

We conducted a 2(promotion focus versus prevention focus) X 2(nonconformity behavior versus conformity behavior) between-subject ANOVA. The analysis revealed main effect of regulatory focus ( $F(1,125)=13.11$   $p<.001$ ) and behavior ( $F(1,125)=5.26$   $p<.05$ ) was significant. Also, An interaction effect was significant ( $F(1,25)=4.44$   $p<.05$ ). The results are depicted in Figure 4.

What is noteworthy in STUDY3 is that subjects with prevention focus gave very low ratings to nonconformity behavior, so conformity behavior was rated higher than nonconformity behavior. On the other hand, subjects with promotional focus showed no significant difference in the conformity or nonconformity parts. This means that for people with a prevention focus, nonconformity behavior is considered a big risk and they are very sensitive to avoiding

this risk.

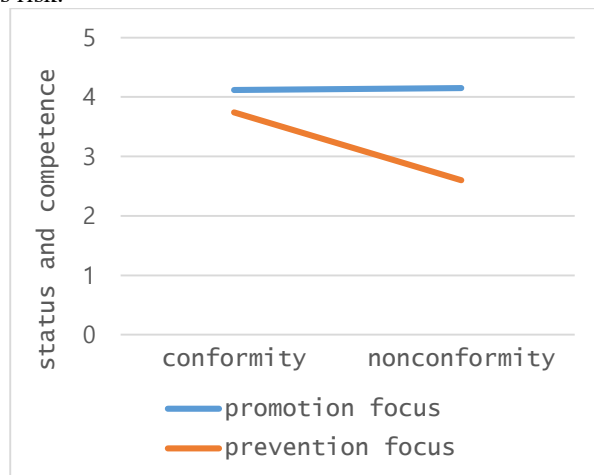


Figure 4: The Interaction Effect between Regulatory and Behavior

## 4. Discussions

### 4.1. Findings and Implication

This study is a study on a type of role-breaking effect called the red sneakers effect. According to Belleza et al. (2013)'s study, which first proposed the red sneakers effect, it was argued that the red sneakers effect appears due to perceived autonomy, a general characteristic of Western countries. Because Korea has a collective culture, unlike Western countries, it was questionable whether this red sneaker effect would occur. However, as the recent trends of the MZ generation show individualism and autonomous characteristics similar to those of Western countries, it was expected that a role-breaking effect similar to the red sneakers effect would appear. Through three empirical studies, observers who witnessed role-breaking in prestigious and professional situations found that the individuals who performed the nonconformity behavior had rather high status and competence. Even in Korea, a collectivist culture, observers who witnessed nonconformity behavior showed that they gave higher evaluations to the people who behaved informally, which can be said to be a major contribution of this study.

This study is a study that looks at informal behavior from the perspective of an observer. In general, research has focused on the mechanisms of people who engage in nonconformity behavior, but recent marketing research has begun to focus on studies from an observer's perspective. Following this research trend, this study was also viewed from the perspective of an observer. In particular, it was expected that the evaluation would vary depending on the

observers' prior knowledge and regulatory focus, and this was set as moderators.

As a result, the observers' prior knowledge and regulatory focus were found to moderate the relationship between nonconformity behavior and the dependent variables, status and competence. In particular, observers with relatively high prior knowledge evaluated the people who chose nonconformity behavior as having relatively high status and competence when observing or witnessing nonconformity behavior. On the other hand, observers with a prevention focus evaluated people who chose conformity behavior as having higher status and competence. They perceived nonconformity behavior as a big risk and reacted very sensitively to it.

The results of this study also provide new implications for marketers. Marketers will be able to achieve good results if they establish a marketing strategy that appropriately responds to their products and services by utilizing the effect of consumers' red sneakers. In particular, marketers who planned differentiation through luxury brands can enjoy even higher effects if they pay attention to the effect of red sneakers and establish differentiation strategies in advertising and distribution structures. In addition, because ordinary clothes indicate high status and competence, marketers who provide low- to mid-priced clothes or brands will be able to create new target customers through changes in positioning that enable the high-end of their products. Furthermore, higher performance can be achieved by conveying knowledge about the relevant environment to consumers through effective communication, increasing prior knowledge, and priming with promotion focus.

#### 4.2. Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

Because the research began by identifying the characteristics of the MZ generation in the background of the item settings of this study, there are limitations that may be overlooked in research on a specific generation. Because the empirical research participants in this study were also college students in their 20s, there are limitations to the representativeness of the sample. Broadening the demographic variables could provide more implications.

In addition, we believe that new research can be derived based on the results of this study. It would be very interesting research to develop the results of this study and find new mediators and moderators. For example, we believe that the self-efficacy of observers would be a good candidate to mediate the relationship between nonconformity behavior and status, competence. Moreover, variables such as the observer's self-monitoring and need for uniqueness are also expected to have a moderating effect.

This study can be said to be a type of study on the rule-

breaking effect. Just as the rule-breaking effect has been shown due to changes in consumer trends, it will be a very interesting study of the rule-breaking effect that is different from the generally accepted phenomenon in Korea. It will be able to provide a new perspective for research on the pursuit of differentiation and diversity.

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