

For sensation-seekers, the color red can elicit rebelliousness, study finds

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The widespread use of the color red to signal danger can actually be counterproductive for certain people, says soon-to-be published research co-written by Ravi Mehta, a professor of business administration at Illinois. Credit: College of Business

As anyone who has driven a car or crossed a busy street knows, colors

play a significant role in influencing people's interactions with the world around them. And the color red, in particular, elicits the highest level of compliance for conformity with social norms.

But according to new research co-written by a University of Illinois expert in product development and marketing, under certain conditions, the color red can arouse "noncompliant behavior" - basically, a rebellious streak - for a certain sensation-seeking segment of the population.

The widespread use of the color red to signal danger, warn people or stop unwanted behavior can actually be counterproductive for high sensation-seekers, says published research co-written by Ravi Mehta, a professor of business administration at Illinois.

"The color red is almost always used to stop people from doing something - to signal dangers, or to prevent someone from making a mistake or to induce compliant behavior," Mehta said. "But if you're someone who is high on the sensation-seeking scale - basically, someone who seeks thrills - the color red elicits arousal. And then you go against what you're told to do, or what you think you are expected to do. It induces what we call 'reactance,' and you end up doing the opposite of what others want you to do. Hence, noncompliant behavior."

Across three experiments that tested their hypotheses, Mehta and his co-authors found that the color red positively affects one's attitude towards noncompliance. The paper further illuminates the underlying process and explicates the role of arousal and reactance.

Although previous research has identified red as the color of compliance, Mehta's paper proposes that this effect may not hold under "high sensation-seeking propensity conditions." The researchers defined sensation-seeking as "the seeking of varied, novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social,

legal and financial risks for the sake of such experience."

"Because high sensation-seekers have a higher tendency to react, the exposure to the color red for these individuals will increase reactance and, by extension, noncompliant behavior," Mehta said. "In other words, if you give an inherently thrill-seeking person that dose of arousal, that's all the trigger they need to rebel."

The research advances color literature by demonstrating that the well-accepted effect of red on compliant behavior may not always be true and identifies conditions in which red may lead to rebellious behavior. The notion that red may induce noncompliance under high sensation-seeking circumstances also has potentially important real-life implications, Mehta said.

"Red is often used to signal danger, warn people and prevent or stop people from engaging in unwanted behavior. Low sensation-seekers, who are less inclined to engage in risky behavior, will typically respond to these signals in the intended manner - that is, they avoid the dangerous situation, obey instructions and refrain from engaging in the unwanted behavior," he said. "High sensation-seekers on exposure to red, however, are likely to react and demonstrate higher noncompliance."

But behaviors that are habitual - seeing a stop sign, for example - wouldn't be affected so much as a sign with a red background that tells someone to wear sunscreen or stop smoking.

"For a certain subset of people, that message is going to backfire," Mehta said. "The big takeaway is this only applies to a specific population. But since they're a population that's already predisposed to taking risks, we perhaps have to watch out for them a little bit more and be cognizant of how the color red can affect their decision-making process."

The paper, titled "When Red Means Go: Non-normative Effects of Red Under Sensation Seeking," will be published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

More information: Ravi Mehta et al. Creating When You Have Less: The Impact of Resource Scarcity on Product Use Creativity, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucv051](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv051)

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