

## The Skinhead Next Door: How Fashion Can Promote Negative Stereotypes

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**S**wastikas, violent gatherings, and Nazi salutes – what do these three things have in common? These are the images that the public generally conjures when prompted by the word “skinhead.” Stereotypically, skinheads are racist neo-Nazis who commit hate crimes and proclaim white supremacist messages. However, as is the case with many stereotypes, these images do not accurately portray the ideology of the original skinhead movement and can pose problems for wearers of skinhead fashion, who face discrimination based solely on their appearance.

Although today the word skinhead is associated with racism and violent neo-Nazi youth, skinheads and skinhead fashion did not originate within the neo-Nazi movement. In “True ‘Skinheads’ Are Not the Racist Thugs of Media Fame,” Jennifer Abbots explains that skinheads originated in England during the mid 1960s, where young people “embraced working-class fashion: cropped hair, meant-to-last shoes and boots, white T-shirts and worn Levis.” Offering an alternative to the general public’s preconception that skinhead music is loud and angry, thus promoting violence, she describes how original skinhead music was Jamaican ska music, a precursor to reggae. Thus, if someone adopts racist skinhead beliefs, they are not truly adopting skinhead beliefs, “for they do not connect to the roots” (Abbots). True skinheads

do not gather for the intent of racial violence; indeed, “many skinheads, especially in New York City, are of Asian or African-American descent” (Abbots). Abbots finds that “racism appeared on the scene in the 1970’s because of the poor economic climate in England...playing on the traditional nationalistic ideas of the working class, the fascist groups did their best to turn the skinheads against their immigrant neighbors.” Thus, racism only entered the skinhead movement because neo-Nazi groups took advantage of the economic situation of working-class skinheads and began to recruit them to their cause.

Political factors were therefore not part of the original skinhead movement; however, any kind of racist involvement, especially one as nega-



*Skinhead at an anti-racism rally in Calgary, Alberta, Canada in 2007*

tively charged in the American media as neo-Nazism, has such strongly negative connotations that it sticks in the mind of the public and effectively erases any non-racist intent of its original participants or their subculture. This perception affects anyone who wishes to enter the skinhead subculture today. Although there are some members of society who simply enjoy skinhead fashion and wear it without practicing skinhead beliefs, this is not usually the case. Most people who adopt skinhead fashion think that they must also adopt skinhead beliefs, and they are often unable to differentiate between original skinhead beliefs and the racist skinhead beliefs that have become the skinhead stereotype.

Generally speaking, the differences between the dress of racist and nonracist skinheads are subtle. The common and recognizable elements that both groups share are shaved heads, white T-shirts, jeans, suspenders, and work boots. Although skinhead fashion was derived from the working class of England, Thomas Shriver and Daniel Sarabia point out that "skinhead clothing can be expensive, and thus seemingly inconsistent with the 'working class' ideals that group members proclaim" (Sarabia and Shriver 279). Traditional skinheads have included "certain name brand clothing such as Ben Sherman button-down shirts, Fred Perry polos, and Doctor Marten boots" as crucial identifying articles of their fashion (Sarabia and Shriver 278). These are important items for any skinhead to have in order to be accepted within the subculture.

There are, however, ways to differentiate between racist and nonracist factions. Skinhead groups demonstrate affiliation with colors and symbols. Part of skinhead fashion is wearing clothing to stand out from the public, even going as far as to wear offensive or taboo images. Neo-Nazi skinheads, however, are usually known for wearing racially offensive images. In "Neo-Nazi Normalization: The Skinhead Movement and Integration into Normative Structures," Amy Beth Cooter describes how members of the neo-Nazi

movement "traditionally presented themselves in a blatant, intimidating fashion replete with tattoos, Nazi symbology, and startling imagery" (145). Cooter notes describes the development of this look as follows:

At first, the use of swastikas or other Nazi symbology was not especially prevalent and, when employed, was intended to convey the general punk attitude of "fuckyouism" as opposed to any particular racist or Nazi ideology. Soon after in the early 1980s, however, as the British government became less supportive of immigration, and as the country simultaneously saw a dramatic increase in youth unemployment, the Skinheads slowly adopted ideals of out-group animosity and social isolationism. "White power" T-shirts became a commonplace addition to the uniform, as did swastikas, iron crosses,...and other Nazi Germany symbols. (147)

Just as white T-shirts symbolize came to white power for neo-Nazis, the colors of other articles of clothing have different meanings for different groups of skinheads. Such is the case with the laces of their boots, where the colors have different meanings not only between racist and non-racist skinheads, but between different geographical locations (Sarabia and Shriver 278-279). While acknowledging that "the color coding of laces can vary from one geographical region to the next," Shriver and Sarabia claim that, for some groups, "white laces express white power, red laces stand for anarchy and communism, and a combination of yellow, black, and blue laces are often used to identify anti-racist SHARPs" (278-279). Referencing skinheads from Portland, Oregon, David Jackson states that their laces are "white for racial purity, red for the blood they are willing to shed and yellow as a signal they have shed someone else's."

Nonracist skinheads also have their own specific elements of fashion. These are quite opposite to those of the racist neo-Nazis, and nonracist skinheads proudly display their opposition. Jack-

son describes how, in comparison to neo-Nazis, “another gang of skinheads is slightly different in appearance: the swastikas have diagonal lines slashed through them, and black-and-white breast-pocket patches depict a crucified skinhead with the letters SHARP written over the top. These are the Skin Heads Against Racial Prejudice.” By wearing images such as the crossed out swastika, SHARP members directly exhibit their hostility towards neo-Nazi groups. Aside from antiracist symbols like the slashed out swastika, Robert Wood observes that nonracist skinheads also wear symbols such as “an image of a skinhead, half white and half black, nailed to a cross” to represent how skinheads are given a bad image by their neo-Nazi counterparts (Wood 137). SHARPs are interested not only in opposing neo-Nazis but in clearing their name as a subculture, and they use symbols as one way to do this. However, they maintain all the other aspects of skinhead fashion, such as jeans, suspenders, work boots, etc., to keep the image of the original skinhead ideology.

The appeal of skinhead fashion is twofold. On the one hand, there is the pull towards belonging to the skinhead subculture and being accepted within a group. On the other hand, people often have a strong desire to differentiate themselves from the general public and seek the skinhead look because it makes such a strong rebellious statement, portraying the “fuckyouism” mentioned by Cooter. Social theorist Georg Simmel identifies these two elements of attraction, claiming that “two social tendencies are essential to the establishment of fashion, namely, the need of union on the one hand and the need of isolation on the other” (301). Although the two needs may seem contradictory, they can both be accomplished through fashion. When acquiring a new style, “the individual derives satisfaction of knowing that as adopted by him it still represents something special and striking, while at the same time he feels inwardly supported by a set of persons who are striving for the same thing” (Sim-

mel 304). Skinhead fashion can provide individuals with group acceptance while still allowing the wearer to dress outside of the norm.

There is a difference, however, between those who simply wish to dress like skinheads and those who wish to be part of the skinhead subculture, and this is where the similarities in fashion between neo-Nazi skinheads and non-racist skinheads become problematic. By dressing as a skinhead and integrating oneself with other skinheads, one becomes a member of a social and (in recent decades) political group, thus claiming their beliefs as one’s own. A skinhead must be careful, therefore, to make sure that he does not get involved with a neo-Nazi group and become persuaded to help commit hate crimes, because “as a member of a mass the individual will do many things which would have aroused unconquerable repugnance in his soul had they been suggested to him alone” (Simmel 313). Neo-Nazis, in particular, are able to take advantage of an individual’s need for acceptance and use it to entrap him into supporting their political cause. Those who seek to be members of a skinhead group need to know from the beginning whether or not the beliefs of the group correspond with their own beliefs.

This kind of foreknowledge can be difficult to come by, however, because the negative stereotypes associated with all skinheads make it particularly difficult for individuals to distinguish between racist and non-racist skinheads. Uninformed members of society form the stereotype that all skinheads are racist, and this stereotype is widely promoted because neo-Nazi skinheads draw strong negative attention to themselves. This attention is drawn, in part, by their attendance at “hate rock” concerts with racially prejudiced lyrics, where “shaven-headed fans respond with the Nazi salute” and “afterward they hit the streets high on alcohol, drugs or glue fumes, and infused with their mission” (Masland and Breslau). These violent racist events frighten the public, reaffirming their view of skinheads as being

strictly neo-Nazi. Additionally, as stated by Wood, "researchers de-emphasize nonracists as a critical surviving element of the American skinhead phenomenon," and this "obscures evidence of the group's nonracist indigenous origins" (132). Original skinhead beliefs are not based in racism, rather, "traditional skinhead identity is directly linked to...working class pride and racial unity" (Sarabia and Shriver 285). However, because of the racist attitudes and actions of neo-Nazi skinheads, skinheads in general acquire a bad name. An important fact which Melvin Salberg notes is "that not all 'skins' are racist or neo-Nazi, even though the ones who are may be indistinguishable in appearance from those who are not." Salberg is right to identify the similar appearance shared by both groups of skinheads. Because to outsiders nonracist skinheads are nearly indistinguishable in appearance from the racist neo-Nazis, the general public sees them as one group.

However, while Salberg acknowledges that both groups look alike, he overlooks what I consider an important point about the reason why skinhead fashion is so similar across factions: neo-Nazi skinheads adopted original skinhead fashion in order to blend in with the original skinhead movement. By linking themselves with an existing subculture, they avoid being singled out as a neo-Nazi group. By doing this, they consciously help to promote skinhead stereotypes because when they commit hate crimes or gather together at events promoting racial hatred, all the public sees is a group of people who look like skinheads. Therefore, only those who take the time to observe a skinhead's behavior or listen to him speak will be able to determine his intent. According to Salberg, the lines between racist and nonracist skinheads "may appear blurred, but accuracy requires recognition of such distinctions." Wearers of skinhead fashion and those looking to adopt it need to note that though the difference in appearance is small, the difference in ideology is great.

The media's unwillingness to distinguish between racist and non-racist skinheads makes it even more difficult for an individual to make an informed choice. One example of this is MTV's report on skinheads, *Hate Rock: an MTV Special Report*. In his review of this program, John O'Connor criticizes MTV's depiction of "hate rock" and the history of skinheads. According to O'Connor, MTV correctly identifies the skinhead movement's origins in English punk culture, but throughout the program they still equate the term "skinhead" with neo-Nazi youths. O'Connor questions the accuracy of MTV's report and the view that MTV gives the public of skinheads and their music. He notes that MTV's film provides frightening details about neo-Nazi skinhead groups, such as a skinhead website providing instructions on how to make bombs and footage of neo-Nazis insulting Jews and homosexuals, and provide only a passing mention that neo-Nazis don't represent the entire skinhead subculture. For instance, "the viewer is speedily shunted...between thugs sounding off against Jews and homosexuals and sudden reassurances by MTV that 'not all skinheads are racist or anti-Semitic.'" Although they acknowledge nonracist skinheads, they do not provide substantial information about them, nor do they mention any ma-



Logo of Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARP)

major nonracist organizations, such as SHARP. By not making a clear distinction between racist skinheads and nonracist ones, MTV popularizes racist skinhead stereotypes.

Nonracist skinheads can even be responsible for perpetuating negative stereotypes about themselves by allowing racist skinheads to provoke them into adopting the racists' tactics. Violent acts by racist skinheads are not solely directed towards different ethnicities; Salberg includes the ADL's "most recent report, which highlights the alarming increase in violent crimes committed by neo-Nazi skins, [and] notes that their victims include not only blacks, Jews, Asians, gays and Hispanic people, but also nonracist skinheads." But as Abbots notes, this violence is not one-sided: nonracist skinheads, unwilling to stand by and let this violence proliferate, will occasionally attack racist skinheads. One faction in particular, Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARP), was created by traditional skinheads to help differentiate themselves from racist skinheads. SHARP is an organization which Abbot claims "is dedicated to upholding the traditions of the skinhead movement, as well as battling racism." However, resisting neo-Nazism often means meeting violence with violence, and SHARP members, in particular, are ready to take a stand for what they believe in. In fact, as Wood notes, "like racist skinheads, SHARP members and organizations often are militant and violent," and have been known to shoot racist skinheads and destroy their places of gathering (Wood 138). These actions ultimately do not help the public image of skinheads because most people cannot easily distinguish between violence committed by racist skinheads from violence committed by nonracist skinheads. They only promote more violence associated with skinheads, thus, the stereotypes continue.

True skinheads are not the only ones affected by such stereotyping; people who do not identify themselves as skinheads yet wear articles of skinhead dress are also discriminated against. The

article "Boots Make a Statement: Is It Fashion or Politics?" in *The New York Times* covers an occurrence in which a high school in Texas banned skinhead and gang fashion from the dress code. School officials made a rule prohibiting the use of "what officials said were emblems of violence and hate, thick-soled storm trooper boots, Los Angeles Raiders jackets and other attire favored by skinheads and gangs" ("Boots Make a Statement"). Because of associations or racist skinhead stereotypes with skinhead fashion, this ban assumes students adopt racist ideologies by wearing skinhead dress. The ban met much resistance: students protested, claiming that by wearing these articles of clothing they were merely trying to be "fashionable, not racist" ("Boots Make a Statement"). After students spoke out, vouching for "freedom of speech and freedom of expression," the ban was lifted (qtd. in "Boots Make a Statement"). Bans such as these are based on racial crimes and appearances of neo-Nazi skinheads in schools with "swastikas shaved into their scalps" ("Boots Make a Statement"). Because of this connection in school officials' minds between skinhead clothing and Nazi imagery, anyone who wears clothing associated with skinhead fashion is thought of negatively. Even those who are simply trying to be fashionable need to be aware of the strong stereotypes that are linked with the skinhead way of dress.

By educating oneself about the true origins of the skinhead subculture, one is able to understand the differences between racist and nonracist skinheads. Those who dress like skinheads should, therefore, be aware of the stereotypes surrounding the skinhead image so if a passerby confronts them, they can explain their beliefs. This way, instead of being caught off guard by those who find their appearance offensive, wearers of skinhead fashion can proudly dispel their negative skinhead stereotypes and inform the people they encounter of the nonracist origin of skinheads. And the street goes both ways—just as people who dress like skinheads need to know about the skin-

head subculture, so does the public. This is just one instance of how negative stereotypes can continue to proliferate solely on the basis of appearance. So, next time you see someone dressed like a skinhead, don't assume that he is a violent racist whom you need to keep away from your children at all costs. Instead, strike up a conversation and see if they know as much about the subculture they are representing as you do.

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