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Why We Dress More Casually Than We Used To:

A few speculations having to do with changing technology and signaling theory

The observation that people dress less formally than in the past is not, I think, controversial. In fact, it seems so obvious that I'd never really thought about it much before. My big suburban public high school in the early '10s mandated (at least) chinos and a polo shirt. My dad's diocesan high school in the 70's required suit coats and ties. Apples and oranges, I know, but for what it's worth, my 21st century catholic-school counterparts had basically the same school dress code as me.

After high school, in the latter 10's, I watched as yoga pants spearheaded a new enthusiasm for "athleisure" – gym clothes outside the gym. "Dress sneakers" became a thing. And now, post-Pandemic, desk workers are bringing work-from-home couture back to the officeⁱ, threatening to make the term "white-collar" an anachronism. Sure, that example is situational, but it points to a larger trend. The ratchet only torques one way. So what's the cause of this casualization, and what does it indicate about culture, more broadly?



The dress sneaker: a strange hybrid of formality and function.

To be clear, this isn't an Ignatius Reilly-style polemic about how Standards Have Fallen. I'm not some reactionary goofball who'd have us all wear slacks and oxfords to Kroger; I wear

jeans and sneakers all the time. It's just that the rise of casual dress seems to me to be one of the profound cultural changes of the last 100-odd years, and I'm trying to come up with a more convincing explanation for it than "we all just decided it was better."

I'm always skeptical of that kind of explanation for cultural phenomena; as I see it, big cultural shifts are almost always downstream of major technological breakthroughs and/or economic trends, and I think our choices of clothing are no exception. However, clothing varies drastically anyway, according to the climate, region, occasion, et cetera, and so I think the broad fact that we tend to dress more casually these days is actually due to a few different causes. One of those causes is transportation.

Utility of clothes



An early-20th-century motoring outfit. The overcoat, goggles, and veil are to protect the wearer from dust.

One of the first and most obvious differences between the early twentieth century and the present is in how Americans get around. Most people walked everywhere, or else rode horses or carriages. Cars were a recent curiosity that most people didn't have, and those that did have them needed their own specialized motoring clothes, since cars did so little to protect their occupants.

The average person spent much more time outside when traveling, and when they got where they were going, there was not much climate control one way or the other.

This suggests to me that things like collars, waistcoats, and hats were not just frivolous ornamentation. A hat, for

example, would protect a person from the sun, provide shelter in the rain, and of course keep a person's head warm in the winter.

Another good example of this sort of clothing-as-protection is those old-timey swimsuits of the 1920s, the kind that look like a loose-fitting, striped jumpsuit with cutoff arms and legs and were usually paired with a wide-brimmed hat. While they look at first glance like artifacts of prudishness (okay, they were probably that too), sunscreen wouldn't be invented until 1932. Even through the 1960s, sunscreen was only marginally effective (typically around 2-4 SPFⁱⁱ). The wearing of modest swimsuits, I think, was dictated more by practical necessity than by some sense of propriety.

The upshot of all this is that back then, people relied much more on their clothes to protect them from the elements, and from the rigors of outdoor travel. However, they also needed to look presentable when they arrived at the church or the office, so the overall result was that they generally wore more clothes, or in other words, they went about more dressed-up.

Signaling Theory

Something else that changed massively in the last century is the price of consumer goods. Generally speaking, almost any manufactured product is insanely cheap now, compared to its equivalent 100 years ago. In the late 20th century, advancements in manufacturing and transportation made formerly expensive clothes cheap enough for ordinary people to afford. For a big chunk of human history, people used clothing to signal their social rank, and this mostly worked because commoners simply couldn't afford to dress up as aristocrats, or at least not in a convincing way.

There were exceptions, however. After the bubonic plague swept Europe in the 14th century, labor shortages meant that workers could charge more for their services, and these newly-affluent townsfolk and merchants could dress like their social superiors. The nobility found this completely unacceptable, of course, and their neat solution was to pass a series of sumptuary laws – laws that restricted what people could wear based on their rank.

In present-day America, such laws would be a tough sell, and tricky to implement. Using formalwear as a status symbol simply hasn't been viable in the last few decades, since just about anyone can go out and buy a suit. But there's another, more elegant solution. Scott Alexander, a prolific blogger, points out in a 2014 essayⁱⁱⁱ that "If the rich deliberately dress like the poor, then the middle-class have nowhere to go – if they try to ape the rich, they will probably just end up looking poor instead. It is only the rich, who are at no risk of ever being mistaken for the poor, who can pull this off."



Balenciaga Paris sneakers, \$1,850. They look like this new.

Being the consummate Bay-area nerd that he is, Alexander explains this in game-theory terms, using cellular automata as visual aids. If his argument is too abstract to feel convincing on its own, here's an article^{iv} from Fashion Network, about how coveralls, boiler suits, and other blue-collar staples are one of 2022's hottest trends.

The macro-level result of this, I think, is that suits and ties now are to the office worker what company-logo polos are to the guy working the counter at Autozone – nothing to aspire to, not something he'd ever wear off the clock, a mere symbol of company fealty.

Shoes and their Evolution

The term “formality” denotes convention, adherence to tradition. Formal shoes are, by definition, of an old design. Flat soles, block heels, and leather uppers are all standard features on dress shoes. Specialized athletic shoes have existed for a long time, but until the late 20th century these were still flat-soled canvas shoes and didn’t offer much in the way of support.

That changed in 1970s. Shoe manufacturer Brooks hired podiatrists to work in their R&D department, and in 1975, they began making midsoles out of EVA -- ethylene vinyl acetate, an air-infused foam that provides cushioning and absorbs shock. The next year, they introduced the Vantage, a sneaker designed to control pronation (the rotation of the foot along its long axis)^v. Computer-aided drafting software and computer-controlled machine tools gave designers unprecedented control of nearly every aspect of a shoe’s performance. Now, you can buy a pair of mass-produced sneakers that are specifically suited to your foot shape, gait, and athletic activity of choice.

In other words, sneakers are incredibly good these days, performance-wise, and that’s in large part because they’re not formal, i.e. they’ve evolved a great deal over the last 50 years. I suspect this has had a bottom-up effect on clothing more generally; it would feel incongruous to throw on a pair of Nike Flyknits with an oxford-cloth button-down shirt, at least to me. It’s also likely that the same kind of technological improvements have happened with other types of clothing in less obvious ways.

What all this means for the future

It’s near-tautological to say that technological advancements cause cultural change. But a curious thing about new technologies is that, as they mature, they converge. Take, for example,

the mobile phone. Back in the aughts, no one knew what the ideal phone looked like. Phone manufacturers tested manifold combinations of sliding or folding keypads, and every button layout imaginable (Remember the Blackberry?). Now, in 2023, every phone is pretty much the same type of glass monolith. It's a solved problem.



The Nokia N-Gage, a proto-smartphone from 2003

Clothes are less straightforward. There will always be huge variation in what people wear, based on their specific needs, occasions, and personal tastes. However, if we understand that clothes are a technology subject to the same evolutionary pressures as our other devices, it seems possible that a similar sort of converging force could act on them. Garments that we now view as “casual” could eventually become formalized, i.e. part of a system of convention/etiquette, the way suits and ties are now. “Dress hoodies” could be the next big thing. After all, “convention” just means “the way in which something is usually done.”

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ⁱ Martin, Rachel, and Milton Guevara. “The Pandemic Has Changed Workplace Fashion. What Does That Mean for You?” *NPR*, NPR, 7 July 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/07/1109317208/pandemic-workplace-fashion>.

ⁱⁱ “Summer Skin: Then and Now.” *University of Utah Health | University of Utah Health*, 30 Nov. 2022, <https://healthcare.utah.edu/healthfeed/2016/05/summer-skin-then-and-now>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alexander, Scott. “Right Is the New Left.” *Slate Star Codex*, 22 July 2020, <https://slatestarcodex.com/2014/04/22/right-is-the-new-left/>.

^{iv} “Why Workwear Is Shaping up to Be a Top Fashion Trend of 2022.” *FashionNetwork.com*, <https://us.fashionnetwork.com/news/Why-workwear-is-shaping-up-to-be-a-top-fashion-trend-of-2022,1378116.html>.

^v Alger, Kieran. “The History of the Running Shoe.” *Zappos.com*, <https://www.zappos.com/c/history-of-the-running-shoe>.