

American Fashion Embraces the Casual and Comfortable

By Karlyn H. Bowman

Clothes, it's been said, make the man. Perhaps it can also be said that clothes make the nation. President Clinton underscored the importance of the US fashion industry as a major exporter when, in a recent speech, he noted that "American fashion has been an enormous source of creativity and beauty and art, and, frankly, economic prosperity for the US." This billion-dollar-a-year industry that has made Levis and Nike among the world's best known brand names has in recent years made the comfortable and the casual our distinctive national signature.

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Fashion is a most revealing national barometer. Just 30 years ago, in 1966, two thirds of those surveyed by Gallup disapproved of women wearing shorts in public. About the same margin approved of women wearing slacks but 44% felt that wearing them in public was in bad taste. Forty-seven percent disapproved of men wearing sport shirts in church, and 21% felt it was inappropriate for men to shun (sports) coats in restaurants. Today, nearly half of all women report wearing shorts regularly.

Roper Starch Worldwide data confirm just how quickly US workplaces have embraced a more relaxed standard. In 1994, 48% described a "casual day at work" as "in" and only two years later that number grew to 65%. A 1997 study by Bruskin-Goldring Research finds that slightly over half of those surveyed—52%—can dress casually at their workplace any day of the week. Only a quarter—27%—say they can't dress down at all. Differences in responses by most demographic groups were small. What's most surprising, only 30% of those who work in an office say they can't dress casually at their workplace.

Peering Into American Closets

In August 1996, Roper Starch Worldwide updated a series of fashion preference questions. Respondents were asked what they currently have in their closets, what they wear regularly, and what they look best in. Whether it's the influence of American cowboys or just a desire to be comfortable, three-quarters of men report wearing jeans regularly, up from two-thirds in 1990. Sixty-nine percent said they routinely don T-shirts, up from 62% in 1990. Forty percent of men own a leather jacket, but only 12% report that they wear it often. When asked what they look best in, jeans and sport shirts top the list. For women, the trend is also toward informality. Fifty-five percent of women say they wear jeans regularly, up from 49% in 1990.

Fashion, of course, is about change, and the definition of what we like and buy can

change quickly. The "dress for success" look, an idea that John T. Molloy made popular in 1976 in a book by the same name, is clearly passé. Although 56% of women report owning a suit with a skirt, only 16% wear it regularly. The same percent of men report owning a conservative business suit, but fewer than two in ten say they routinely wear it. A Knopf publisher's megaseller titled *Work Clothes: Casual Dress for Serious Work* captures today's fashion mood.

Not surprisingly in our vast middle-class culture, formal evening wear has a limited appeal. Just 17% of men own a tuxedo, but only 2% wear it regularly. A third of women have a floor-length dress or skirt for evening wear, but only 4% wear it repeatedly. Moving from long to short, 22% of women own a miniskirt but fewer than 10% usually wear it. A 1994 Harris survey showed that only 1% of women usually wear skirts or dresses at miniskirt length, and just 3% put their hems considerably above their knees. About 18% say the right length for them is just above the knee and 14% place the perfect hem at the knee. The largest number in the survey, 34%, say their skirts and dresses fall just below the knee while 22% say their skirts are considerably longer. The number of men owning jewelry other than watches or cuff links has stayed fairly steady in the 1990s at around 35%; about 15% wear it regularly.

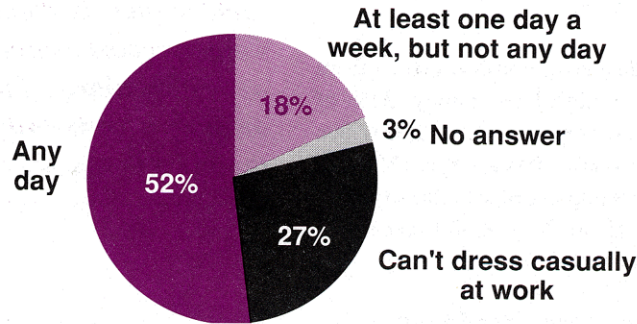
Foot Fetishes

In keeping with the trend toward relaxation in fashion, Roper Starch data show an increase in men and women who wear running or tennis shoes. Today, majorities of both sexes say they wear them regularly. A 1996 survey by The Data Group for Dr. Scholl's and

How Informal Can You Get?

Question: How many days each week can you dress casually for work?

Days per week I can dress casually at my job

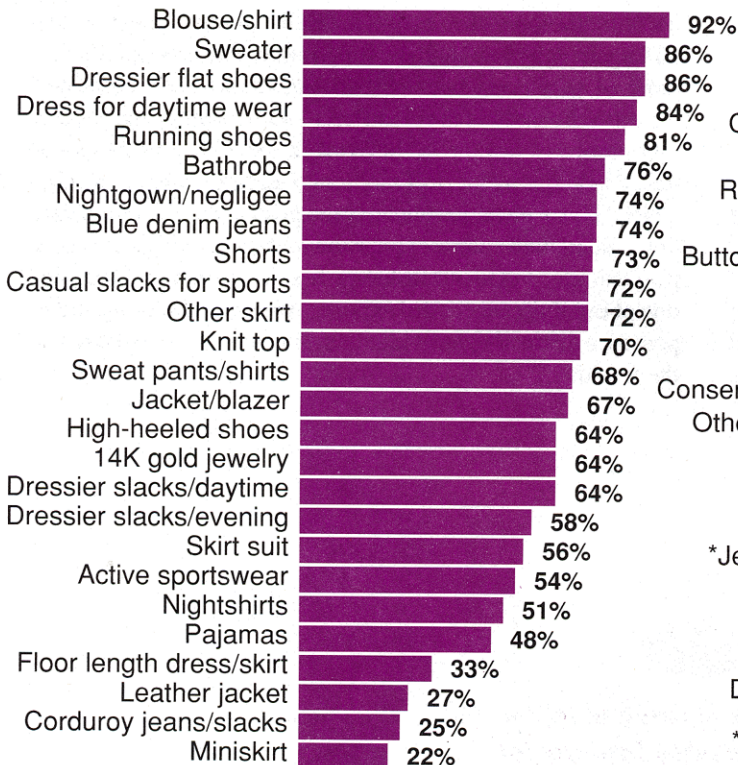


Source: Survey by Bruskin/Goldring, February 1997.

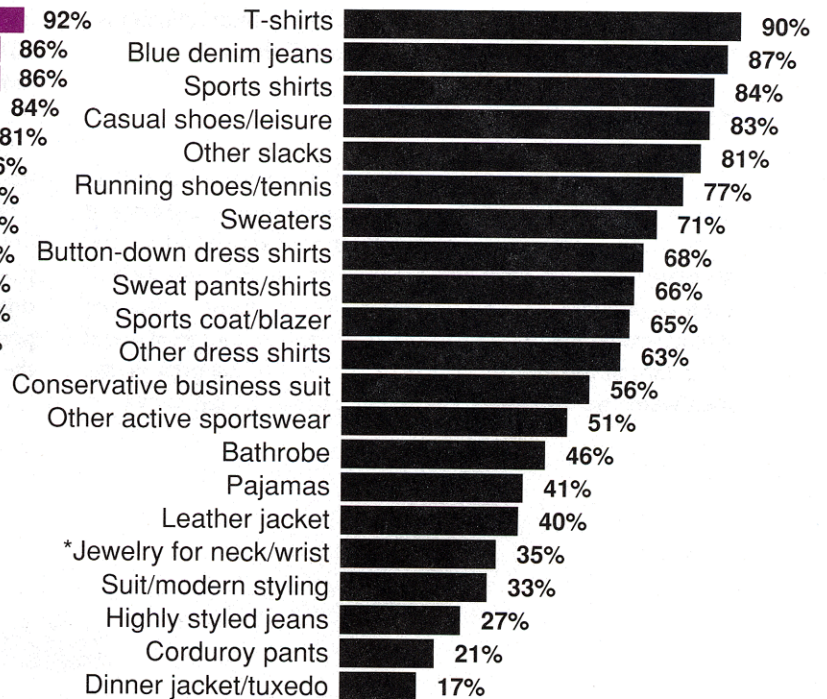
Talk About Full Closets!

Question: ...[H]ere is a list of some different types of clothing. Would you read down that list and call off each item that you now have in your wardrobe?

Women's Responses



Men's Responses



*Does not include watches or cuff links.

Source: Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, August 10-17, 1996.

Fashion Trends

the American Podiatric Association shows an increase in women who say they don't wear high heels. In their first study, conducted in 1986, 39% of women reported they didn't wear high heels daily. Ten years later, that number had spiked to 46%. When asked why they had given high heels the boot, lack of comfort was the major response. Eighty percent of the women in the survey say they would wear high heels more often if they were more comfortable.

Another indication of the desire for comfort comes from the change in the definition of a high heel. Today, 31% of women in the Dr. Scholl's/APA survey consider a shoe with a one-inch heel to be high, whereas only 10 years ago, 18% said a one-inch heel was high. The leveling impulse is clearly being driven by the young. Among 18 to 24-year-old women, a plurality, 42%, considered a one-inch heel high.

"At What Point Do You Consider Shoes To Be High Heels?"

	Women's Responses in:	
	1986	1996
1 inch	18%	31%
2 inches	48	48
3 inches or higher	33	20

A Roper Starch survey for Rockport shoes finds that over six-in-ten women say that shoes are their favorite item of clothing to buy. And in a sentiment sure to warm the heart of Imelda Marcos, 58% of women told Roper Starch/Rockport that one can never have too many pairs of shoes.

Young and Restless

In fashion, as in so many areas, the young often lead change. In a new survey by Roper Starch, nearly a quarter of Generation Xers maintain that their clothes, jewelry, and accessories say the most about them, compared to only 14% of the total population. A new Maricopa Research poll shows that women under age 30 are almost as enthusiastic as men about the return of the miniskirt. Among the rest of the population, men welcome the change but women think it's bad news.

Although most teens today would probably reject wearing a uniform, their jeans and T-shirts clearly identify them as members of the teen tribe. Perhaps paradoxically, their "uni-

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forms” allow them to express their individuality which may be one reason the polls showed support for school uniforms when the President suggested they might help bring a more disciplined atmosphere to schools.

Individualism

According to writer Diane Johnson, for many decades the received view of fashion “laid down by Herbert Spencer, Veblen, Marx and others” was that it “was essentially an aspect of the class struggle... [U]pper class fashions trickle down to the lower orders, becoming cheaper and more vulgar as they do, until the upper classes turn in disgust to something new that will again demonstrate their superiority. The aristocrat's costume of yesteryear becomes the current waiter's costume.” Recent scholarship takes a different view, suggesting that the appearance of fashion in the West in the 14th century can be traced to evolving ideas of modernity and expanding individualism. Those ideas, particularly the primacy of the individual, have found their fullest expression in the United States, in our political life, and in our fashions. It's not surprising, then, that one of our most successful exports, American fashions, incorporates a distinctive individualism and conveys it to the rest of the world.



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