Lawrence Lee

Professor Henderson

CAS 137

19 October, 2016

Suits in the Millennial Workplace: An Examination of Non-Conformity

The modern suit has become increasingly uniform; there is a defined line between what is acceptable and what is not that is occasionally blurred by passing trends. Suits trace their origins to military uniforms used to distinguish warring factions; through its use in combat, uniforms came to represent modern masculinity. In addition, soldiers often had to pay for their own uniforms out of their wages, leading many to retain their uniforms after their military service; this phenomenon then caused various elements of the military uniform to diffuse into everyday dress, particularly in Britain (Breward). Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, men's formalwear was a broad and expansive category covering outfits from white-tie attire to lounge suits and everything in between. The modern business suit, however, is ubiquitous and has grown to replace previous versions of formalwear for nearly every occasion where it might be required. A standard modern business suit includes flat front, uncuffed pants, a matching, two-button jacket, a neutral-colored shirt, and an unoffending tie; when more formal clothing is required, black-tie attire (formerly considered relatively informal, especially next to white-tie attire) in the form of a standard black tuxedo and bowtie has become the go-to outfit for the modern man. The cause of this consolidation can be traced mainly to the decline in popularity of the suit as a whole – or at least a lowered expectation for men to wear them.

Until the 1970s, traditional suits were ubiquitous in everyday life. Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1967) portrays everyday life in a college town; throughout the movie, men are regularly seen wearing suits in non-formal situations (a date at the zoo, for example). Going as far back as the 1930s, *Modern Times* (1936) starring Charlie Chaplin portrays factory workers and manual laborers heading to work dressed in suits and other formalwear. Even the poorest members of society were not below owning a frock coat or blazer to go out in; it was not an uncommon sight during the Great Depression to see men in soup lines wearing what would be considered formal clothing by today's standards (Woolf). In films set in the modern era, suits are nowhere near as prominent as they previously were (a phenomenon that is observable in everyday life as well). They have been restricted to office buildings (sometimes not even there) and the spaces of the rich and powerful. British bank First Direct polled 2,000 British office workers and found that only 10% wore a suit every day while more than 33% wear jeans regularly, a far cry from the sharply dressed offices of the 1980s portrayed in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

The counterculture of the 1970s was reflected heavily in the fashion of the decade. Traditional suits worn frequently in the 1960s were no longer the norm; instead, new trends in men's fashion including bell-bottom pants and platform shoes took over in popular culture, expressing the 1970s sentiment of non-conformity and rebelling against tradition, the suit being a very traditional garment. In the 1980s and 1990s clothing was heavily influenced by rave, hip-hop, and grunge music continuing the effect that the 70s

had on clothing; casual clothing became exceedingly popular and diverse while the suit declined even further in popularity (Firchau).

A large part of this decline in suits can be traced to the rise of Casual Fridays. Casual Fridays traces its roots back to the Hawaiian garment industry. In the late 1960s, Hawaiian shirt companies were trying to sell more shirts and tried to persuade Hawaiian companies to let their employees wear Hawaiian shirts to the office on Fridays; this idea became known as "Aloha Friday," and garment lobbying groups even went so far as to pass legislation in the Hawaiian Senate to allow office workers to wear "Aloha attire" during the summer (Discipio). By the 1990s, Aloha Friday had made its way to the contiguous 48 states in the form of Casual Friday, bringing with it the Hawaiian spirit of relaxation and "going with the flow."

On Wall Street, the original idea of Casual Friday was to allow employees to come in and focus solely on paper work with very little (if any) client interaction – hence the lack of necessity in dressing up (Castella). Smaller businesses also used Casual Friday during the economic recession as a free incentive for employees; management hoped that wearing more casual clothing would make employees more relaxed and therefore more productive (Clark). As Casual Friday became more and more popular, employees started to question the necessity of wearing a suit during the rest of the week. This trend helped kick start the rise of business casual attire, a trend that Levi's took full advantage of by selling clothing from its "Dockers" brand, particularly khaki slacks (Clark). Eventually, many workplaces would make the transition to "smart casual" for the whole week, only suiting up when an important meeting occurred or a client was in the office (Castella).

Perhaps the most influential factor in the decline of suits is the entrance of millennials to the workforce. As of 2015, the millennial generation has surpassed Generation X as the dominant age group in the workforce (Elejalde-Ruiz). Accordingly, corporate culture has been significantly influenced by millennials. Members of Generation X, when confronted with the influx of millennials, have taken to dressing down to avoid being seen as "slow" or "outdated" by younger employees and simply to fit in with the younger crowd (Dearborn). Many companies, including MassMutual, a life insurance company, have taken to revising their dress codes to allow employees to wear more casual clothing including slacks, simple button-down shirts, and even polos and jeans (Jannuzzi). Even J.P. Morgan, one of the oldest and most esteemed Wall Street firms, recently issued a new dress code allowing for more casual clothing (Fox).

These changes in corporate culture are seen by many as an effort by companies to attract and retain millennials. With firms in Silicon Valley (often founded by millennials themselves) offering an incredibly array of benefits, relaxed dress codes, and on-campus perks, more traditional companies are struggling to attract the next generation's best and brightest. The big tech firms of Silicon Valley did not have a corporate culture to adhere to; they grew out of garages and backrooms of houses and their first employees wore whatever they wanted to the "office." The adaptation of traditional corporate culture to millennial desires can be seen in more than just dress codes. Wall Street firms are traditionally seen on par with law firms in terms of hours worked by junior employees, who were (until now) expected to stay late during the week and bring home enough material to work on over the weekend. Yet earlier in the year, the investment banking

staff at J.P. Morgan was told to take weekends off – an unprecedented move within the industry (Fox).

Millennials aren't just breaking out of traditional molds within the workplace; these changes being made in corporate culture are reflective of greater generational values as a whole. The millennial generation is decidedly more non-conformist than its predecessor, Generation X, and is more likely to hold non-traditional views as a result. Millennials tend to be more liberal, are more likely to be unaffiliated with a religion, and less likely to believe in God (New Strategist Editors, The) – all views and opinions that, while now a part of the status quo, would have been seen as radical and possibly even dangerous just a few decades earlier. It would not be a stretch to say that millennials are members of an unorthodox generation that has the ability to change society to an extent never before seen in history.

The gradual decline of the suit can be traced to a multitude of factors from pop culture in the 1970s to corporate policies in the 1990s; perhaps the most influential factor is the rise of the millennial generation and the assimilation of its members into the workforce. The non-conformist tendencies of millennials have manifested themselves in modern corporate culture, forcing firms with established traditions and protocols to change their ways in order to stay current; regardless of whether or not a suit can provide some benefit to the wearer, millennials dress how they want to. Suits are simply one indicator of this change – the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Other societal traditions are bound to follow in the footsteps of the business suit. Millennials are beginning to

emerge as the disruptive generation, changing or abolishing societal norms to suit their own needs and desires.

Words: 1418

Works Cited

Breward, Christopher. *The Suit: Form, Function and Style*. London: Reaktion Books, 2016. Print.

Castella, Tom de. *Are work suits on the way out?* 11 February 2011. Web. 20 October 2016.

Clark, Krissy. *Dress code: The history of 'business casual'*. 17 August 2012. Web. 25 October 2016.

Cohen, Anya. "Men's Clothing Stores: Industry Outlook." Industry Report. 2016. Web.

Dearborn, Jenny. *The Surprising Way Millennials Are Changing The Workplace*. 26 March 2014. Web. 20 October 2016.

Discipio, Christopher. *A Child Of Waikiki And The Early '90s Recession: The Bizarre History of Casual Fridays*. 20 November 2015. Web. 25 October 2016.

Elejalde-Ruiz, Alexia. *Millennials at work dress sharp, say 'yes' to the boss, survey finds*. 12 May 2015. Web. 20 October 2016.

Firchau, RJ. *100 Years of Men's Fashion*. 4 September 2015. Web. 20 October 2016.

Fox, Emily Jane. *J.P. MORGAN BANKERS NO LONGER NEED TO WEAR SUITS WHILE COUNTING THEIR HUGE PILES OF MONEY*. 3 June 2016. Web. 20 October 2016.

Graduate, The. Dir. Mike Nichols. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Anne Bancroft and Katharine Ross. 1967. Theater.

Jannuzzi, John. *MassMutual Lures Millennials, Says "Whatever" to Business Suits*. 17 July 2015. Web. 20 October 2016.

Kraus, Michael W and Wendy Berry Mendes. "Sartorial symbols of social class elicit class-consistent behavioral and physiological responses: A dyadic approach." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2014): 2330-2340. Journal.

Modern Times. Dir. Charles Chaplin. Perf. Charles Chaplin and Paulette Goddard. 1936. Theater.

New Strategist Editors, The. *The Millennials: Americans Under Age 25*. Ithaca: New Strategist Publications, 2001. Print.

Slepian, Michael L, et al. "The Cognitive Consequences of Formal Clothing." *Social Psychology & Personality Science* (2015): 1-8. Journal.

Wolf of Wall Street, The. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Jonah Hill and Margot Robbie. 2013. Film.

Woolf, Jake. *The History of the Suit by Decade*. 2015. Web. 20 October 2016.