

Fashion's Role in Reinforcing Wall Street's Elite Reputation

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In American culture, the term “Wall Street” conjures up images of panicked traders making and losing fortunes overnight, suave investment bankers flying first class to a company’s headquarters, or the very place itself, home to the powerful investment banks that broker the biggest deals in the American economy. Wall Street banks, like Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, are elusive and intimidating. They don’t sell products to the average consumer, and most of their employees are shored up in imposing New York City skyscrapers, only seeing the light of day to fly first class to visit a client or take a town car home. In the rare occasion you do encounter a Wall Street professional, likely at the other end of the board room table or at a recruiting fair at Harvard, he is impeccably dressed in a conservative dark suit and beaming with confidence. In the business of billion-dollar deals, high client demands, and fierce competition, presentation is key to win over client trust, portray elite status, and prove legitimacy to the rest of American society. In this way, professionals on Wall Street implement their sophisticated taste in fashion to not only impress clients and recruits, but to also validate their high perch in society to an American public intrigued by material goods and status.

Professionals who work on Wall Street are included in the broader “financial services” industry, which includes investment banking, sales and trading, and asset management. It’s important to understand these professionals are not building or selling physical *products* but *ideas*. A large city in the United States, for example, may need to issue debt to cover its growing pension obligations; the bankers are called in to draw up a deal and market the debt to investors. For every bank, therefore, their most important asset is their *people*, the brilliant Wharton grads that bring in client business, come up with the big ideas, and ultimately solve client problems. It’s no surprise, then, that every bank allocates a large budget to flying recruiters and bankers across the country to visit Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, and other elite schools to rope in its future ranks, where eager students listen to elaborate company pitches, attend bank-funded happy hours, and get “face time” with the stylishly-dressed Wall Street professionals. For banks eager to seduce the elite students, putting on a show is necessary to differentiate itself from other high-paying companies like Google, Amazon, and McKinsey. As Harvard student Dafna Hochman noted in 1999, “the business world is obviously desperate to milk our minds, youth, creativity and work ethic. And they have correctly assessed what it takes to attract us: appear competitive, prestigious, and upwardly mobile.” (Hochman) Today, quickly browsing through the most

popular finance-focused social media online is enough evidence to prove that fashion is one of the most seductive ways Wall Street appears prestigious to the young American public.

“Do you guys think that a two-tone gold and stainless-steel Rolex watch is a bit too much for a first year Analyst to wear?” The user “berkalum” poses this burning question in the “Fashion for Business” section of popular online finance forum Wall Street Oasis. With over 500,000 users and more than 200,000 discussions, Wall Street Oasis is where eager future financiers and Wall Street professionals flock to discuss the best schools, suits, and banks for a lucrative career in finance. In the “Fashion for Business” section, popular discussion topics include: “Gucci Loafers with the Gold Bit vs Silver Bit”, “An Introduction to Suits – Welcoming the Analyst Class”, and “Best Non-Frategonia Vest.” Overall, there are more than 1,000 discussions debating the appropriate attire – usually a balance between conservative and luxury – for a successful career in financial services. Similar to Wall Street Oasis, on the popular Instagram page “Arbitrage Andy”, which has 80,000 followers, users anonymously submit finance-related satirical content, a large portion of which focuses on fashion. One post shows the reaction of a young financier whose significant other has texted him a picture of his Gucci “sleds” (loafers) that have arrived in the mail. Another touts the disappointment many finance professionals share over the summer in New York, when it’s too hot to wear an expensive Patagonia vest. Some posts even give away luxury shoes (like the brand Paul Evans) to random Instagram followers. Even the non-fashion posts are elitist in nature, which often tout wealthy New Yorkers who use the helicopter ridesharing app Blade, make fun of non-Ivy League graduates, and in general depend upon a sense of humor only “future 1 percent-ers” would find funny. Overall, the online forums Arbitrage Andy and Wall Street Oasis prove that large communities of young Americans are keenly seduced by the elite trappings of Wall Street even before their careers begin. Because these communities of young people include intelligent and successful individuals from Ivy League schools, this materialistic culture of finance is seen as both exclusive and acceptable, further bolstering Wall Street’s elite reputation.

Once young professionals do “make it” to Wall Street, they are expected to quickly adopt to the proper fashion guidelines of the office. “For men, navy suits and white dress shirts with dark, plain ties are considered standard issue. For women, conservative is the watchword – no low-cut

tops, skirts well above the knee, or dresses that show too much skin.” (Roose, p. 36) For both men and women, it’s also important to avoid outdressing the boss or appearing overly fashionable. Wearing suspenders while still a junior member of the firm is a perfect example. “The way it was explained to me was that you shouldn’t wear suspenders because it looks like you spent too much time on your appearance, and you are supposed to just work hard. You shouldn’t be wasting time putting on suspenders in the morning. Otherwise, you are supposed to look professional at all times and especially if you are meeting with clients. . . . You are supposed to look good but not overly so.” (Ho, p. 73) Failing to abide by these rules could be fatal to a professional’s reputation within the firm. In Kevin Roose’s *Young Money*, one professional tells the story of a young analyst who reported to his first day on Wall Street wearing a tan hound’s-tooth jacket and black turtleneck. He subsequently received judgmental stares and snickers from colleagues for the rest of the day. Similarly, women avoid wearing sneakers for their commute and changing into heels at the office. Because wearing sneakers signifies a long commute from somewhere beyond an acceptable residence in Manhattan, “the socks and sneakers over hose is a marker, albeit imprecise, of a lower-class status.” (Ho, p. 117)

What purpose do these unwritten rules serve? For both men and women on Wall Street, appropriate dress communicates elite status and competence, which is crucial for success in a business highly dependent on appearing as a smart problem-solver in front of both clients and other smart colleagues. The senior partners and directors of Wall Street banks frequently meet with the senior executives of Fortune 500 firms, high-ranking officials of sovereign nations, and sophisticated investors managing billions of dollars. Since these senior bankers may be competing with another firm on a deal, they must put their best foot forward. As Ho illustrates, “During the initial meeting between a Wall Street investment bank and a potential client, the managing director (MD) on the deal usually begins the meeting by introducing ‘the deal team’ (the vice presidents, associates, and analysts on the pitch) with the explicit purpose of awing the client with their smartness, and thus, expertise. The presentation (contained in the ‘pitch book’) not only includes the proposal for the deal, the market overview and competitor profiles, and the financial rationale for, and impact of, the deal, but also the relevant biographies and posed pictures of the team members, which painstakingly details their prestigious pedigrees and affiliations as well as profiles their deal experience and industry knowledge in the corporate

client's area of business.” (Ho, p. 69) As you might imagine, dressing professionally is the icing on the cake of a rehearsed client presentation. A banker's attempt at appearing prestigious and highly knowledgeable functions only if her team dresses in Hugo Boss suits, not black turtlenecks. Clients are paying a hefty fee for the bankers' services – sometimes \$100 million or more – and want to feel confident the bankers will do an outstanding job.

When these senior bankers return to the office after visiting clients, they quickly gather the attention of the junior members of the firm, who are usually graduates of Ivy Leagues schools angling to move up the corporate hierarchy. Much of this attention is devoted to how the senior members of the firm dress, as dress is an important signifier of power and status in corporate settings. Flynn summarizes the opinion of various white-collar professionals she interviewed on this topic. “First, they saw a connection between rising up through the ranks and changing dress. Second, they related personal dress to career aspirations, often repeating the cliché ‘Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.’ Third, several men expressed concern that overdressing could be seen as threatening and could be poorly received by upper management.” (Flynn, p. 186) For young bankers, men and women alike, dress clearly communicates both current status and future aspirations. And if many of the young gunslingers in the bank aim to be managing directors someday, it's clear why they take office fashion as seriously as they do on Wall Street.

Wall Street's adoption of fashion to signal power and status also applies to the hierarchy beyond the walls of the bank: American society. Successful financial services professionals, along with entertainers, public figures, and business owners, leverage their exclusive appearance to increase their distance between themselves and those beneath them, a practice strongly tied with history. Clothing has defined societal hierarchies for centuries, most notably through the “sumptuary laws” of the Roman Empire, Renaissance Italy, and Tudor England that defined how different segments of society could dress. In Tudor England, the sumptuary laws specified materials reserved only for nobility, stating, for example, that “no man under the estate of an earl shall wear any clothe of gold, or silver, or tinsel, satin, or any other silk of cloth mixed or embroidered with gold or silver, except viscounts and barons to wear in their doublets or sleeveless coats cloth of gold, silver, or tinsel.” (Kirtio, p. 19) These laws existed to enforce the social hierarchy of English society, widen the perceived gap between the “have” and “have nots”, and therefore

boost the nobility's sense of power over the common folk. Today, there are certainly no sumptuary laws. But Wall Street's elite position still benefits from capitalist America's informal conflation of expensive material goods with power. Films like *Wall Street* (1987), *Boiler Room* (2000), and *Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), which all feature attractive, stylish cast-members, amplify the industry's "larger-than-life" reputation. And the thousands of Americans who earn their living serving Wall Street elite, whether as drivers, nannies, shoe-shines, cooks, administrative assistants, or tailors, are constantly exposed to an exclusive material culture they understand to be beyond reach for the common American.

Since Wall Street is an industry that depends on presentation to sell its ideas to clients, fashion plays an important role in reinforcing the industry's elite reputation and therefore legitimacy. The allure of wearing \$50,000 watches or \$800 Gucci "deal sleds" seduces thousands of elite students to enter the industry each year, which causes the industry to be associated with highly intelligent individuals and respected educational institutions. When senior bankers meet with a client, their professional appearance and prestigious backgrounds emphasize their competence in constructing a favorable deal. Overall, because fashion is a status signifier, Wall Street's inherent dependence on expensive, conservative clothing and jewelry means it is assumed to be a playground for the "elite" of society. These elite connotations distance the financial services industry from other industries in the American economy and bolster its reputation, granting Wall Street firms the ability to continually charge high fees to its clients.

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