

MAN UNIFORM
UNIFORM: EVEN 'GILLIGAN'S' PROFESSOR WORE IT
By Beth Jones

Some gentlemen understand that pairing an argyle V-neck sweater with pinstriped dress pants achieves the look that makes Calvin Klein swoon in ecstasy.

And then there's the other, more predominant, breed of American male.

These are the guys who walk up to their closets each morning and with half-opened eyes pull out a pair of khakis and an oxford button-down shirt.

This is the outfit they wear to the office. It's what they put on for dates. It's what they wear to play pool with their buddies and to visit their mom on Sunday afternoons.

This outfit - henceforth referred to as the Man Uniform - is what they wear most every day of their lives.

While speaking to a group of businesspeople at a Connecticut resort, author and motivational speaker Sandra Beckwith noticed that the men in the room had on identical clothes.

"Everywhere you turned there was a guy wearing the same outfit," she said. "They all looked great, but nobody deviated from the uniform."

Men favor this traditional outfit, fashion experts agree, chiefly because it's what they see other dudes wearing.

"It's the uniform that lets you in the club," said Tim Dailey, senior design director for the Lands' End mail-order clothing company. "There's a degree of acceptance that goes along with that uniform and that's why it has become the outfit of choice."

Acceptance is especially important to Southern men, who typically are reluctant to stand out in a crowd, said Roanoke advertising executive Jeff Miller.

"Nobody wants to make a fashion mistake these days, especially in a more conservative market," the 34-year-old said.

One reason oxford shirts appeal to men, Dailey pointed out, is that they're cut with white thread, making them less bold than shirts made of other materials. "That allows a guy to wear colors but tones it down," he said.

Being toned down is just fine by WROV disc jockey Nixon (who, like Madonna, goes by one name professionally). He's an avowed fan of the uniform.

"I want to be as least offensive as possible," he said. "Men dress to blend in."

A woman wearing a pair of khakis and a button-down shirt to the office five days a week would probably be thought of as dowdy or even a wee bit peculiar. But for men, wearing identical outfits Monday through Friday is perfectly acceptable.

"This is a nonissue for them," said Beckwith, author of "Why Can't a Man Be More Like a Woman." "As women, we say, 'How can they do this? I'd never wear the same thing five times a week.'"

"Men," she went on, "are like, 'I wouldn't wear anything if I didn't have to.' "

Then again, the Professor could have run around "Gilligan's Island" in the buff but he didn't. Instead, he wore the Man Uniform.

For a cerebral guy like the Professor, the outfit's durability was likely the source of its appeal.

"In our society, women are the peacocks," said Jeff Wendell, owner of John Norman Clothiers in Roanoke. "Men are more practical."

Wendell pointed to how the British army used khaki for its uniforms. "The reason it's so good is that it has a hard surface so it holds up over time," he said.

Modern khakis require even less care, because many are made from wrinkle-free and stain-resistant fabrics. As for the oxford shirts, they can be inexpensively pressed at the cleaners.

"Ninety-nine cents apiece and you're set," Miller said. "Who can be bothered with starch and steam?"

Another reason the uniform appeals to men, Beckwith said, is that most any shirt works with a pair of khakis. "They know the pieces go together," she explained.

Men hate worrying about such things so much that Beckwith believes a company could make a lot of money by launching a men's apparel line modeled after the old GrrAnimals clothing for children. Instead of animals, tools would be printed on these clothes. A gentleman could put on the screwdriver top with the screwdriver bottom and be confident he had successfully matched his outfit.

While that may be taking things too far, not having to fuss with matching a shirt and tie is another motivation for going with the uniform, said Ted McKosky, assistant professor of theater at Radford University.

There was a period when McKosky, 53, practically lived in the Man Uniform. At one point, he figures, he owned about 40 blue oxford shirts. Everything changed one day in the late 1980s when he walked into class to find all of his students wearing khakis, blue shirts and cardboard beards much like his own.

They were making fun of his fashion sense - or rather, his lack thereof.

The incident didn't hurt McKosky's feelings but it did make him realize he needed variety in his wardrobe. "I haven't worn a blue oxford shirt since," he said.

Not all men sing the praises of the Man Uniform.

Larry Davidson, owner of Roanoke-based Davidsons Clothing for Men, isn't likely to advise a client to fill his closet with khakis and oxford shirts.

"Not only is it boring and uninteresting," he said, "it doesn't fulfill their needs for dressing appropriately in every occasion."

Davidson passionately maintains that the uniform isn't professional enough for many offices.

"It's easy, but it looks like he doesn't care about how he looks," he said.

"If he doesn't care about that aspect of his life, is he someone to take

seriously?"

Clients, Davidson said, aren't the only ones who will notice that a man's not dressing to impress. A man in a pair of nubby khakis, he warned, isn't likely to impress a lot of ladies.

Then again, some women dig the khaki / button-down combo. Beckwith, for one, gives it a thumbs up.

"I think they look pretty nice in those uniforms," she said. "This is not a social problem. We don't have to worry about it."

Besides, Dailey of Lands' End believes men may be beginning to broaden the traditional Man Uniform. His evidence?

Corduroy pants have been a hot seller this fall.