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DRESS CODES

After Years of Being Out, the Necktie Is In

By [DAVID COLMAN](#)

GEORGE McCracken doesn't have to wear a tie. A 25-year-old painter in Manhattan who works in store design and display to pay the bills, Mr. McCracken is a member of that lucky group who can wear just about anything they please to work.

But George McCracken does wear a tie. "I don't ever wear a collared shirt without one," he said. "It started when I had a job where I had to wear a jacket and tie, but after I left, I started wearing it anyway, out with friends, as an informal thing. It just felt comfortable."

And Mr. McCracken is not alone. Check out any art gallery, advertising agency or downtown bar where the cool kids hang. Look at [Justin Timberlake](#), Adam Brody, Elijah Wood or any other young actor who presumably is not also holding down a desk job.

Necktie sales may have foundered in the decade or more since the words "casual Friday" entered men's vocabularies, but in the last year or two, stylish men in their 20s and early 30s have embraced the old four-in-hand as a style statement — that is, as long as it is an optional one. Even with tie sales among older age groups uniformly down, sales to men 18 to 34 were up more than 13 percent, to \$343 million from \$303 million, between March 2006 and March 2007, according to NPD Group, which tracks clothing sales and trends.

"There's no question that there has been a dramatic increase among younger guys, who are age 18 to 34, expressing themselves by dressing up," said Marshal Cohen, the chief retail analyst at NPD. "He's not hesitating, given the option, to grab a tie, and a fancy tie at that."

This is a news flash that will either amuse or dismay men in their 40s and 50s, who after years of wearing a tie to work, finally won the right to hang up the old choke chain.

But this is no ordinary necktie. A far cry from the storied “power ties” in aggressively colored and printed silk twill that defined the power corridors of the 1980s, the defiantly low-key tie of today is destined for dress-up Thursday as well as casual Friday.

It may be made of wool, cashmere, silk knit or glove leather; cut a pointedly skinny two-and-a-half inches wide; woven in plaid or printed with an unorthodox pattern of skulls with bunny ears. It may boast a trendy label like Alexander Olch or Band of Outsiders. Slightly offbeat in a laid-back way — the Wes Anderson of the accessory world — the youthful tie is giving the old dress code a much-needed shot in the neck.

“It’s a uniform that doesn’t look like a uniform,” said Daniel Pipski, 31, a senior vice president at LivePlanet, the Los Angeles production company whose founders include [Ben Affleck](#) and [Matt Damon](#). In Hollywood, where the open-collar dress shirt is king, the necktie is largely held to be a benighted relic of East Coast business style. But that has not deterred Mr. Pipski, who sees the tie as a kind of style passkey, especially the slender wool 1950s-style ties created by the Los Angeles label Band of Outsiders. (He owns about 60 of them.) To him, ties manage to be both a bit of self-expression and a concession to business dress.

“Wearing a tie is a kind of style,” he said. “It’s a thing you’re doing. It’s seen as ‘creative.’ So you can go from meetings with the creative side and then go meet the head of a studio.”

Labeling these ties creative may seem odd considering how restrained they are compared with the wincingly gimmicky “creative” ties of the mid-1990s, which were decked out with cartoon characters, beer logos and the like. Lighthearted as they were, they did little to keep the necktie close to any man’s heart.

Then the combination of casual Friday and the dot-com explosion appeared to condemn the necktie to the style gallows. The number of ties sold in the United States, which reached a peak of 110 million in the early 1990s, fell to 60 million in 2001, according to Gerald Andersen, the director of the Men’s Dress Furnishings Association (which until 2001 was called the Neckwear Association of America). The change of name, and focus,

makes some sense: NPD reports that for the year ending March 2007, tie sales were down to 44 million.

The tie's renaissance among the hipster set had its roots in fashion, sparked by designers like Thom Browne and Hedi Slimane, who made it a part of their collections. It was not long before bands like the Strokes were casting off that late-1990s frayed indie-rock look for sharp black suits and matching skinny ties. In keeping with the trend, sportswear lines like Theory and Club Monaco now offer ties, a break from the casual ethos on which they were founded.

Tie sales have definitely edged up at Bloomingdale's, and Kevin Harter, the men's wear director, credits the increase to younger men. "They're using them as fashion statements, with suits or with jeans," he said. He added that he now displays ties with denim and sportswear instead of just in the tie department.

At Saks Fifth Avenue, sales have increased in the low double digits in the last year, said Michael Macko, the men's fashion director, who similarly attributes the rise to the young men buying ties from the likes of Alexander Olch or Jil Sander.

Even a few men outside the 18-to-34-year-old demographic have taken a shine to the tie. "It's been a while since I actually wanted to wear a tie," said Trey Laird, 43, the president of Laird + Partners, a New York advertising firm. "But I've been feeling it myself as well as seeing it on a lot of the younger guys in the office. It wasn't any one thing that did it. You get bored of the same look, and as much as I like jeans and a blazer, it gets boring after a few years."

Or as Mr. McCracken, the painter, put it: "Just like you could point to a time, like when [Tom Ford](#) was at Gucci, that it became uncool to wear a tie, now it just feels like wearing a tie is the more punk thing to do."

Indeed, with Mr. Ford up to his old chest-hair-baring tricks in the ad campaign for his new cologne, it does seem time for a new look. Would a necktie kill the guy?

At least Mr. Ford, with his shirt unbuttoned down to the Netherlands, miraculously never suffers from the great blight that affects so many tieless men: collar wilt — that is, its gradual collapse (or migration underneath the jacket collar) as the day wears on. Any

man who derides the necktie as solely a decorative accessory would do well to remember that it serves an important function in holding a look together.

It's too soon to tell if the tie will come back as a mandatory presence, or if its new allure will be transitory. But while it is a smart and easy way to look both cool and professional, there is at least one rub.

Sean Safford, 34, an assistant professor at the [University of Chicago](#) Graduate School of Business, has rediscovered the tie's allure and has even mastered the Windsor knot. "The problem is that all the dress shirts I got over the years to wear without ties don't really work with them," he said. "Buying new shirts to go with the new ties gets expensive."

Welcome to the Fashion School of Economics, Mr. Safford.