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Untucked but far from uptight

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By **ANGELA ALLEN, Columbian staff writer**

Sloppy and disrespectful or cool and sexy?

If you haven't noticed, a lot more men and boys than your average messy middle-schooler are leaving make that deliberately wearing their shirttails outside of their pants. Not tucking-in is a decision, not an oversight.

How could a dress shirt's skinny triangular pennants flag so much change in the male dress code?

"Seinfeld's" wacky Kramer character is credited with starting the trend a decade ago. Charlie Sheen is carrying it on with TV's sitcom "Two and a Half Men," and 40-year-old actor Nicolas Cage let the tails loose on his wedding day this summer tux, tie and all.

"Funny, years ago it was very popular with the men who had stomachs and remember the bowling shirt?" says Anna Soo Wildermuth, president of the national Association of Image Consultants. "If you are good-looking and fairly thin, you can wear anything."

It's not that simple, the pundits say.

The urge to leave shirttails trailing instead of tucked makes fashion sense and reflects a more style-conscious anything-goes culture. Whatever your buttoned-up father might say, for most occasions, men will commit neither a style faux pas nor communicate deep-seated disrespect with a flying tail.

Some say it's just fashion. European men have worn fitted shirts out forever. Are American men just now catching on?

"Guys are just looking at ways to be a little more stylish," said Stan Williams, fashion director of the men's lifestyle magazine Maxim, from his New York office.



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As the pant's rise dropped and waist dipped lower, it became "harder to tuck your shirt in," said Williams, who confirmed he was wearing his shirt in with his belt buckle showing during the phone interview. "It's a more interesting proportion to leave the shirt out than in. It's a natural progression."

Though he called the shirttail-out look more "a crisp, finished look" than sloppy, Mark-Evan Blackman, director of men's fashion design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, said an "out" shirt has nothing to do with a low-cut pant.

"The average shirttail is cut below a man's crotch. Just about any shirt will stay in place and low-rise jeans look great when a shirt is tucked in," as long as the wearer is in good shape, he added.

A more practical reason is simple comfort combined with a casual culture allowing "dress-down Friday" to extend to dress-down Thursday and dress-down Wednesday. "A less formal approach has been accepted on most levels of society. ... Men still want to be comfortable looking great. Women will suffer in pain for fashion. Men don't deal with that equation."

Blackman called shirttails-out "a cool, masculine look" that designers are taking to another level with layering. Looks include a preppy argyle vest over a long-sleeved woven shirt, a T-shirt underneath, or short-sleeve T-shirt over the dress shirt or another T-shirt.

"It's a youthful, cool layering sensibility. It's fresh," Blackman said.

If a man's proportions are good and his anatomy on the wiry side, an out shirt "adds a nice, laid-back, effortless, chic look," said Dany Levy, founder and editor of the growing four-year-old trend Web site, dailycandy.com.

But with a heavy-set guy, shirttails-out can appear unkempt and slovenly, she said. Short-legged or long-torsoed men can shorten their legs even more with a hanging tail.

With this season's emphasis on conservative back-to-school clothes (even the traditional-clothes retailer Talbot's showcased boys in pullover sweaters and jackets with shirttails out for fall), the style "gives the basic white shirt an edge," Levy said. "It personalizes the shirt."

Giving a personal spin to clothing, combined with finding a modest way to be trendy, is all a part of the fun, Levy said, and "it's certainly tamer than low-slung pants. Those I find plain, old unattractive."

Thank God, added Sandra Beckwith, a gender-issue consultant, author and speaker in Fairfax, N.Y., near Rochester, "that the

teenage boys aren't tucking in. The younger generation feels comfortable wearing their shirt over the low-riders, and they can follow a trend without exposing their anatomy. It's a solution to a rather unusual fashion problem."

If fashion reflects cultural change, does a flying shirttail indicate rebellion or a reluctance to follow the rules?

Not exactly, though as the Fashion Institute of Technology's Blackman said, "No guy, no matter how old, wants to look like his dad. All our dads tucked their shirts in even if they were at a Little League game."

Adds Maxim fashion director Williams, "I really don't think it's rebellious at all. It just looks kind of cool. More guys are looking at styling trends."

Beckwith, the gender specialist, agreed that men have become more fashion-conscious and "more concerned about their own appearance. A hanging shirttail kind of moderates that. It's a tailored look, but still cool enough to be casual. He knows enough to buy the good shirt, but he's got to be cool with it."

But Beckwith, who lectures on gender differences in the workplace, argued a hanging tail "is probably liberating. It's an indication of a desire to live by freer rules. It is more comfortable to have your shirt out. And if he's in a creative profession, you don't want him to be uptight."

Even in an ever loosening-up culture, not every occasion is appropriate for a hanging-out shirt, experts agree.

"These shirt styles are meant to be fun. The unexpected touches (Western details, floral embroidery, rock 'n' roll motifs) are intended to be conversation pieces," said Keith Wagner, Northwest fashion director of Nordstrom. "These shirts are great for going out and having fun, and are a nice alternative to a jacket. They are OK for any age, as long as the man is in the right shape to wear them."

After 5 p.m., on a casual date or worn with jeans at a laid-back dinner or cocktail party are fine venues for the fashion. A corporate office is usually off-limits unless the workplace culture is closer to Google's than to IBM's. Tails flying at the opera is pushing it, and what about a wedding?

"I don't know what Nicolas Cage was thinking about," said Maxim's Williams, commenting on Cage's shirttail show at his summer wedding. "Any bride who would allow her groom to do that has no self-respect."

Some argue that an untucked shirt under a coat represents the default mode between conforming to a grown-up culture and

remaining a "bad boy."

Or maybe the trend is even more complex.

"A tailored dress shirt left untucked, especially worn with a tie, sends the classic mixed message of a post-modern culture," said Suzanne Baldaia, an associate professor whose areas of expertise include fashion and culture at Johnson & Wales University based in Providence, R.I.

Wearing a shirt out, she said, "has multiple meanings with diverse influences from ethnic, sociocultural, political, religious, economic spheres. They all come into play in a postmodern aesthetic.

"There is a questioning of the rules. Individuality is emphasized, but also, there's adhering to a particular group through which to be 'cool:' It's like saying, 'Look, I'm unique and cool, just like all the other cool people who get it.'

"It's rather a paradox. Both conformity and nonconformity. It's enigmatic, but there is a code. And if you know the code, you get it."

Update

Previously: Hawaiian shirts and bowling shirts. "My gut says that Hawaiian shirts did not influence this shirrtails trend," Mark-Evan Blackman of the Fashion Institute of Technology said.

What's new: Dress shirts worn tail-out or half-tucked in. "If you neatly tuck in part of the shirt, it shows that you care to think about it," Stan Williams, Maxim magazine fashion director, said.

"Stand-alone" (no jacket necessary) or "novelty" shirts are among those designed to be worn out. The cut is more fitted than a regular woven shirt, and special details, including deep and/or contrasting cuffs and collars, are part of the look.

What's next: Shirrtails are inching back into pants. This is the year of the cool belt, and the buckle should show.

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