

“Uniform”

Atlas, Style

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From 1st to 8th grade I wore a uniform to school. For those eight years, my life was characterized by polos and shades of plaid.

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It was the first day of 1st grade, when uniforms were new and exciting. The color and strictness of uniforms changed as we got older, but this 1st year, girls started out with the jumper: a skirt with two thick strips of fabric going around the shoulders, always layered with a white polo. On the playground, two girls pulled down, their navy shorts hiding beneath the skirt to show me.

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“What, you don’t have biker shorts?” I didn’t, and I was subsequently scared to go on the tall playground structure where the floor was speckled with holes. My face flushed as they questioned me further. Neither I nor my parents knew this unspoken rule — we’d just assumed everyone wore the jumper like a usual skirt. The rest of the school day I became keenly aware of my difference.

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That night I came home crying. It was 6 p.m. by the time my parents got home, and only one of the two stores that sold my school’s approved uniform was still open and closing soon. “Can’t we just get them tomorrow?” my dad asked. We couldn’t. I saw those girls in my mind’s eye, standing in front of the play structure and asking me if I’d gotten any.

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My dad drove as fast as he could, with my rigid instructions playing in his head: “They have to be the navy ones, a little bit long. Biker shorts. They are called biker shorts.” When he arrived home with the last two pairs in my size, I let out a breath for the first time since recess.

By 3rd grade biker shorts weren’t cool anymore. All the girls wore loose, short, black Nike shorts. They weren’t school-approved, but most got away with it. The biker shorts I cried over were useless now and I perused the Target athletic section for shorts with a similar cut.

It’s silly in retrospect. These shorts were rarely visible. We often took our skirts off for gym class, but it shouldn’t have mattered so much for something that barely peeked out for most of the day. For some reason it did though. The same went for most things. Did your polo shirt have the band on the bottom? Did you wear white socks with plaid ruffles? Were your shoes ballet flats or Mary Janes? There was a sort of unspoken hierarchy. If you didn’t wear the popular subversions of the uniform, you stood out. Our similarities made it so obvious when someone broke the trend. I can still remember the girls who rolled their skirts up to make them shorter, and the girls who bought extra-long ones.

There are many reasons schools institute uniforms. They are said to establish unity, make students concentrate on studies rather than what they are going to wear tomorrow, and level the playing field, displaying everyone as equal. At my school, and thousands of schools around the world, the adults in charge of us shaped how we dressed. They tried to fit us all into one box.

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As someone who wore a uniform, I can tell you it didn't always work. Even when a group's style choices are erased, differences appear, especially to those in the group. Maybe I didn't go back to school shopping every year, but I did pay attention to all the finite details of my uniform, and others'.

Like most kids, I wanted to fit in. I had my mom hem my skirt so that it wasn't too long or too short. I could distinguish my five identical shirts by the softness of the fabric, and chose the nicest ones based on the day ahead of me. I scoured the aisles of DSW to find the best, black dress shoes. These choices were influenced by my peers, what the majority was doing. I imagine my teachers didn't notice the trends that affected their young students, but they were poignant to me.

When I reached high school and we were no longer required to wear uniforms, most adults expected it to be the wild west of fashion. It wasn't. In fact, I was already acutely aware of how to observe trends and how to wear what everyone else did. The uniform didn't disappear, it just became shaped by us.

We are all shaped by fashion trends, even choosing to abstain from them is a contortion to what's popular. Sometimes we want to look the same, become a united front like my school always wanted us to be. Sometimes we want to stand out, follow the opposite of a trend. Regardless, our styles are always shifting in regards to one another. Nobody exists in a vacuum, even if we want to.

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