

The Origin and Evolution of “Prep” and its Socioeconomic Relevance

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INTRODUCTION

Preppy, Ivy League, WASPy, Country Club—all are used synonymously as terms for the classic collegiate look of the early to mid-twentieth century American menswear that has since been popularized, commercialized, and hyped to excess. In 2010, the Japanese cult preppy style bible *Take Ivy* was printed in English for the first time. The iconic book documenting fashion at American Ivy League universities was originally published in 1965, and sparked a craze for casual Americana in the authors' homeland of Japan. Studying fashion at an Ivy League school at the time of the book's 2010 re-issue inevitably piqued my interest in the associated preppy phenomenon, and I began to look into "prep" in America. I found that its definition seems to remain consistent regardless of who is recounting it: conventionally clean-cut, yet just a bit lazy.

"A list of articles in the Preppie wardrobe would be tedious, but the following are some of the more familiar items: LL Bean boots, Top-Sider moccasins, tasseled loafers; pure wool socks, black silk socks, no socks; baggy chinos, baggy brick red...trousers, baggy Brooks Brothers trousers, baggy boxer underpants; shirts of blue, pink, yellow, or striped Oxford, sometimes buttoned down, some made for a collar pin, usually from Brooks or J. Press...jackets of tweed, corduroy, poplin, seersucker with padless shoulders, a loose fit around the waist...a shapeless beige raincoat bleached by years of use and irrisistant to rain" (Aldrich, 1996: 16)

But beyond its unwavering characterization as a clothing descriptor, "prep" becomes blurry. The existing literature discussing preppy style tends to glaze over its actual origins and complex evolutionary history. Different sources attribute the beginnings of "prep" to institutes

ranging from preparatory schools, Ivy League universities, and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) society, and each declares the “golden age” of preppy fashion as a different decade spanning 1890-1970. In the recent *Preppy: Cultivating Ivy Style*, Jeffery Banks and Doria de la Chapelle wistfully describe “the windswept and privileged style known as preppy” as having “origins rooted in the grounds of the elite Ivy League universities of the 1920s, where young, WASPy, and wealthy gentlemen invented a relaxed new way for collegians to dress” (2011: 3). However, in her book discussing WASP style, *A Privileged Life*, Susanna Salk claims that it was born in the 1950s among the preparatory schools of the Northeast (2007: 106). The authoritative *American Fashion Menswear* alternatively contends that Brooks Brothers was the original proponent of preppy style during the years 1896-1930, along with the privileged elite college students attending Ivy League Universities who helped establish the most current trends in menswear. (Bryan, 2009: 83). These excerpts provide just a sampling of the confusing and contradictory arguments regarding the development of “prep.”

Thus, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, I seek to clarify and substantiate the origins of prep style, its relationship with American collegiate culture and the national class structure, and its evolution as a fashion subculture. A great deal of writing analyzes the correlation between upper class society and northeastern universities, and some material also exists on the basis and popularity of preppy fashions in collegiate culture. However, the connection bridging these interactions is rarely discussed in the existing literature, or is only mentioned on a superficial level, with no apparent evidentiary support. Through a review of literature and historical materials, I will delve into the complex symbiotic relationship between these three aspects of American society (prep style, collegiate culture, and the upper class) as it developed throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Next, I strive to attain a clear understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic significance of preppy fashion at that time in history, its function as an essential arbiter of class for the American aristocracy. I will consider the modern relevance of this historically critical relationship by looking at the development of contemporary fashion marketing and commercialization, ethnographic observation of the modern university climate, and interviews with current college students. Through my research, I determine that the declining value of this style as an indicator of class in our society is a consequence of the dilution of “prep” fashion by mass media and merchandising in the fashion industry. However, I find that, while not as precise of a gauge as it once was, prep style remains relevant as a means of providing insight regarding the wearer’s socioeconomic status and aspirations.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Origins of “Prep”

As discussed previously, the origination and evolution of preppy style are only vaguely touched upon in the relevant literature, with no apparent consensus among academics or fashion pundits. I have researched the history behind several of the various socio-cultural areas suggested as having influenced prep fashion to find that the truth seems to lie in a complex relationship between the American upper class and private education, dating back to the English preparatory school of the nineteenth century. Together, these factors have contributed to the development of our modern understanding of “prep” as a staple of American fashion.

British Preparatory Schools

To begin, I return to the most basic form of inquiry—the style’s namesake: private college preparatory schools. It is somewhat remarkable how rarely the origins of “prep” are attributed to these schools. When the subject is brought up, most references are made to the American prep schools of Exeter, Choate, or Andover; with no literature concerning “prep” suggesting that the style is possibly related to the original English preparatory schools. Perhaps we are too quick to claim “prep” as an inherently American tradition, and consequently overlook any chance that its origins may actually fall outside our borders.

In an attempt to reach into this relatively uncharted territory, I examined Donald Leinster-Mackay’s *The Rise of the English Prep School*—the most complete existing exploration of the British preparatory school system. This history traces the prep school’s foundation upon Roman Catholic education, with the more modern goal of readying unprepared students for classical

university education developing later in the seventeenth century. Similar to present day prep schools, these seventeenth century schools were boarding in nature. However, they did not initially possess a typically wealthy clientele. Instead, these schools were meant to cater to individuals of any class who needed additional attention and tutoring in their education. Eventually, the classical (versus technical) nature of preparatory school curriculums skewed their demographics towards the upper social strata, and by the mid-1800s the schools consisted largely of the sons of the aristocracy. Only those who could afford to neglect apprenticing for trade skills in favor of studying the classics were able to indulge in such an education.

Leinster-Mackay establishes that it was during the nineteenth century that the structure and philosophy of the English preparatory school changed “from ‘godliness and good learning’ to ‘manliness and godliness’” (1984: 191). There was a definitive trend in the 1800s towards schools that promoted such “manliness,” leading to the growing popularity of sports. Athletics were not only considered a source of physical fitness and the maintenance of good health, but the primary means to develop strong character, ambition, and moral sensibilities in young boys—a Mr. E.S. Dudding is quoted as saying, ‘The boy who learns to play for his side at school will do good work for his country as a man.’ (Leinster-Mackay, 1984: 196). Such belief in the power and influence of sportsmanship was commonplace at the time, and led to the institution of athleticism as an integral aspect of preparatory school education—one that has been sustained to the present day and that has played a central role in the development of preppy style, as will be shown later.

With a general context of the history of English prep schools, we can observe the images in the 1990 compilation *Boy's Preparatory Schools: A Photographic Essay* (Briston and Weidner). These schools, to ensure a strong focus on discipline and academics, mandated



Preparatory School in Surrey, England, 1913 (Album 1900)



Bramcourt School (Briston and Weidner, 1990: 106)



Rugby Team (Briston and Weidner, 1990: 6)



Abbey School (Briston and Weidner, 1990: 26)

conventionally simple, neat uniforms. The photographic survey of various preparatory school uniforms portrays the general uniformity of dress—blazers, collared shirts, ties, hats, shorts, long socks, and sturdy black shoes. The ubiquity of such staples is corroborated by Leinster-Mackay, who notes that, on more formal occasions, students are usually dressed “in tweed knickerbocker suits...on Sundays, they wore their ‘Etons’ to attend matins at the parish church” (1984: 134). Other variations depicted in the photographs include collared shirts worn under V-neck sweaters, classic Hunter “wellies” for wet weather, and traditional kilts at schools located in the Scottish regions. Oftentimes the uniforms’ blazer component included an identifiable school crest on the left breast. These features of British preparatory school uniforms are essential aspects of what is now called “preppy style,” making evident an obvious connection between them.

WASPs: The American Elite

Having established the English preparatory school as the originating factor of “prep,” I will now consider at what point and by what means this style of uniform was disseminated to American culture. The diffusion of this British cultural institution begins in the 1880s, when there was a surge in the founding of private boarding schools in the northeastern United States that is credited to WASPs. However, to understanding the reason and significance of this development, it is necessary to backtrack and review the history of WASPs as an American subpopulation.

The WASP is an important factor in understanding the development of prep style, as evidenced by how often the term was used in the arguments for the origin of “preppy” that were quoted during the Introduction. The epithet, often considered to stand in as a descriptor of

“White Anglo-Saxon Protestants,” was coined by E. Digby Baltzell, himself a WASP, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of *The Protestant Establishment*. In his book, Baltzell describes WASPs during the 1880s as “old-stock patriots seeking hereditary and historical roots in a rapidly changing world” (1964: 114). In fact, these wealthy white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant families had been contentedly living as the undisputed elite of the northeastern United States where they had settled prior to the Revolutionary war. However, it can be inferred that while the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century provided a boost to the already high income of these established families, it also made many other men newly wealthy—men from newly immigrated families that had not been raised in privilege but had captured a stroke of luck during the boom of the industrial revolution.

The “old-stock patriots” suddenly felt an unprecedented desire to distinguish themselves from the newly wealthy, and so begins the everlasting battle between “old money” and “new money”—“During the three decades before 1900, the Protestant elite...developed a set of institutions that helped weld into it a national...cultural and social divide between the old patricians and nouveaux riches of the Gilded Age” (Karabel, 2005: 24). During this time, in an attempt to distinguish themselves, WASPs developed a deep esteem for “oldness” and “ruggedness” that seeped into all aspects of WASP culture—including clothing. “Oldness” originally developed as a concept to determine who was not only wealthy, but worthy, as proven by history and hereditary, and as confirmed by “the standards of such newly formed societies as the Sons of the Revolution (1883), the Colonial Dames (1890), the Daughters of the American Revolution (1890), Daughters of Cincinnati (1894), the Society of Mayflower Descendants (1894), etc. It is no wonder that genealogists, both amateur and professional, rapidly came into vogue” (Baltzell, 1964: 114). The value of “oldness” is even further seen in WASPs’ reverence

for inheritance as the most sacred means of wealth; Aldrich writes, “Inherited wealth is widely believed to offer the best base from which to cultivate high-mindedness” (1979: 16). While some may successfully “climb across the barriers of the *economic* class system...there is no way to penetrate socially, not really...attitude, it seems, cannot be bought; it must be inherited” (Robertiello and Hoguet, 1987: 26). Accordingly, money actually becomes somewhat an afterthought in the minds of the old-stock patriots. Anyone, really, can attain the money to qualify as “upper class”—it is heritage that sets the true upper class apart. Rather than excessive wealth, family name and legacy, the underlying knowledge that one’s family does possess decent financial means but more importantly values its powerful American heritage, is what provides acceptance by WASP society. Writers on the subject often echo each other in stressing the WASP insistence on the value of inheriting a good name as exceptionally more relevant to one’s status than actual financial efficiency. *The WASP Mystique* reiterates, “There are, of course, plenty of WASPs who are not especially wealthy but are still recognized and accepted...because they were born into it...this doesn’t exclude them from being part of the elite as long as they come from a ‘good’ family” (Robertiello and Hoguet, 1987: 33).

The irrelevance of money among the well-to-do is further emphasized by Nelson Aldrich, who points out that “Almost never do [WASPs] buy anything: They ‘discover’ their treasures in antique stores or ‘find’ them in galleries” (1996: 80). With the knowledge of having been raised in a WASP household, Aldrich describes this process, in a purposefully histrionic manner, as “one of ingestion, not purchase. The whole point of inculcating the peculiar aesthetic of the class is to lift its habitat above the quick and nasty transactions of the cash nexus to the exalted plane of disinterested delight” (ibid.). He explains the tastes and choices of Old Money as a study in “museum quality,” an attitude implying that anything one purchases must be worthy of

inheritance by future generations. But the paradigm of “museum quality” is fundamentally contradictory to the essence of fashion, the epitome of novelty, which is intrinsically based in newness and constant change. Fashion is completely oppositional in concept to the WASP “oldness” that was just discussed. As Aldrich so bluntly states, “Fashion is a problem for old money” (1996: 77). It seems that in response, the majority of WASPs simply ignore the novelty of fashion. He points out, “It is no coincidence that the two American cities most widely known for their hereditary upper classes, Boston and Philadelphia, are the two most notorious for their hostility to fashion” (ibid.). The enigma of “old money” fashion was also mentioned by Carol McD. Wallace in an opinion piece for the New York Times, in which she insisted that “Preppies had money, but not necessarily a lot” and credited their “curious wardrobes” to the WASP philosophy of “oldness” and inheritance: “Madras jackets might and did go out of mainstream fashion, but that was no reason to stop wearing them” (2005). Salk suggests that perhaps rather than expressing a sense of personality and individuality, as is often credited as a primary purpose of fashion in society, WASP style instead “expresses a way of living” (2007: 103). There is even the same “oldness” incorporated in this style, with a certain respect for worn-in, nearly threadbare clothing, a sort of evidence of always having those clothes that is indispensable.

In a similar vein to the WASP value of “oldness” over money was his respect of “ruggedness” and the outdoors. Returning to Baltzell, “Americans have always longed for grass roots...and these rustic ‘types’ kept up their boats...and caught their lobsters” (1964: 117). It is here that the recurring WASPish penchant for sailing originates—as a means of leisure and exploration outside the confines of industrial city life that was the reality for most Americans at the time. The ability to indulge in “ruggedness” was a luxury during the Industrial era, and one fitting to the WASP aesthetic for “oldness” and going back to one’s roots. This proclivity for the

outdoors became an integral part of the elite community and relates to the casualness that defines the WASP lifestyle in terms of attitudes, mannerisms, and clothing. There is a particular sort of messiness and carelessness to WASP dressing that adds a certain sensibility of insouciance that is often lacking in the fashions among lower classes. In the somewhat satirical *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, Paul Fussell insists, “The wearing of clothes either excessively new or excessively neat and clean also suggests that your social circumstances are not entirely secure. The upper and upper-middle classes like to appear in old clothes, as if to advertise how much of conventional dignity they can afford to throw away, as the men of these classes also do when they abjure socks while wearing loafers” (1983: 58). Vance Packard takes a similar position in his advice to those attempting to make their way up the social ladder, making prominent note of how, “The New England aristocrat clings to his cracked shoes through many re-soilings, and his old hat” (1959: 136).

American Preparatory Schools

The WASP influence of “oldness” on the future of prep style, however, is still missing a key element—the adoption of the British preparatory school system by American society. In fact, this can also be attributed to the same factor of “oldness.” The trend of founding private preparatory schools in America during the 1880 can be considered in the context of all the other societies and organizations founded with a similar intent—with the hope of differentiating “old money” from the “new rich” and cultivating “oldness” within select institutions. In their relentless quest for history and heritage in the new world, WASPs often found themselves returning to the norms of the British upper classes—“Upper class WASPs in America are broadly a copy of their English counterparts” (Robertiello and Hoguet, 1987: 26). Various

aspects of British cultural norms and behavior were adopted by the American upper class and have become identifiable WASP characteristics, including “heavy emphasis on suppression of overt expression of feelings and an attitude of distance and moral superiority while at the same time maintaining a denial of privilege and claim of humility” (ibid., 22). With a lack of true aristocratic nobility in America, as imposed in Great Britain whether by the feudal system or the royal court, the American upper class was left to initiate such institutions of exclusivity themselves. Their response was thus to emulate the English model as definitively as possible without the aid of titles and restrictions, their own version of aristocracy rooted in inherited wealth and proper pedagogy, through the founding of prep schools in the same format.

While British preparatory schools were actually created to resolve a gap in the educational system, American prep schools seem to have been primarily developed as an elite socio-cultural institution. In his criticism of class structure, Paul Fussell determines that these preparatory schools were developed as a “mechanism of snobbery” that helped perpetuate differentiation “in the absence of a system of hereditary ranks and titles, without a tradition of honors conferred by a monarch, and with no well-known status ladder...to confer various degrees of cachet” (1983: 128). Private preparatory schools provided exclusive and isolated communities to protect and nurture young children from WASP families. It was a means of developing and sustaining a tight community and strong social ties. Unlike in Britain, American prep schools did not gradually evolve into elite institutions, but rather were founded, sustained, and promoted by the upper classes from their very beginnings.

In his book detailing the elite higher education system, Karabel distinguishes the private boarding school as “the emblematic institution of the Protestant upper class...bringing together children as young as eleven...the boarding school was the ideal instrument to shape their

personal qualities and instill the values most esteemed by the Protestant elite” (2005: 25).

Effectively, the English prep school model had been reenacted in New England and subsequently entrenched in traditional American WASP ideals. These qualities and values are the same “oldness” and “ruggedness” discussed in detail earlier as vital to the WASP culture. With this fusion of WASP mentality and British preparatory school structure, the gradual evolution of prep style becomes evident. The staid and simplistic dress codes of English prep schools were brought across the Atlantic in direct replication during the establishment of the American schools, but uniforms were gradually influenced by the WASP insistence of “oldness” and ruggedness.” Soon the boys’ shiny black ‘Etons’ were scuffed and their button-up oxford shirts were frayed at the sleeves, and “the preppie ideal” became “indelibly stamped with a certain privileged WASPishness” (Aldrich, 1979: 16). Where English preparatory schools might have demanded polished appearances, their American counterparts were not as concerned with neatness and newness for reasons previously delineated. Instead, more emphasis was placed on the “manliness” facet of the prep school education, which correlated well with the “ruggedness” so valued by WASPs.

While the influence of the American WASP adoption of the British preparatory school on the development of preppy style is neglected in the literature, the significance of the American prep school as a crucial socio-cultural establishment of the upper class is widely recognized. According to Baltzell, these schools do more than simply provide a reasonable education, they “differentiate the upper class...from the rest of the population” and are thus fundamental to the sustenance of the American elite. In his analysis of class structure in the United States, Baltzell argues that the preparatory schools “serve the latent function of acculturating the members of the younger generation...into an upper class style of life” (1964: 293). Arthur Powell expands on

this concept in *Lessons from Privilege*, discussing the intrinsic privilege associated with preparatory schools. He illustrates these institutions as part of a complex network of associations that are part of the affluent American society, noting a veteran prep school teacher who described students of the mid-twentieth century as “very much alike. They lived in the same few neighborhoods and went to the same summer camps. They belonged to the same group of clubs” (1996: 44). The prep schools were simply the primary stomping ground for the WASPs of tomorrow, founded and maintained by their parents, and encouraged the connections between fellow members of the elite that would continue throughout their lives, once they attend the same universities, attain the same sorts of jobs, join the same clubs, and eventually send their own children to those same schools—an everlasting cycle of elitism. The influence of American prep schools on the further development of preppy style comes from a similar sense of community and acceptance among the students. Not only were they “very much alike” in terms of their familial backgrounds and social status, but also in the values that they grew up with, and the clothes that their parents had provided them (Powell, 1996: 44). This leads to a sort of visual identity through dress that begins to identify the elite prep school student and differentiate him from others of the same age but of lower social classes: “The Eastern boarding school people had their own way of dressing...They set the tone: cool, understated, wearing through at the elbows” (Karabel, 2005: 323). The socio-cultural associations of the prep schools to WASP society evoke a sort of elite image that stimulates connections to modern prep style that are lacking in relation to the English schools where the fashions actually originated—Alison Lurie, author of *The Language of Clothes*, for instance, defines the “Preppie Look” as “the sort of clothes worn by adolescents at expensive American boarding schools” (1981: 43). Nevertheless, recognizing the derivation and development of these prep schools and their relation to WASP culture begins

to provide a clear understanding of “preppy” and how it has gradually evolved from its British origins. These schools provided fertile grounds for the development of “prep” style as a fusion of WASP ideals and British culture.

The Ivy League Universities

As the development of preppy style grew out of English school uniforms, was adopted and redefined by WASP culture, and propagated by American prep school traditions, it soon became a crucial aspect of college life, specifically at Ivy League universities. In *Academic Procession: An Informal History of the American College 1636 to 1953*, Earnest reveals, “The caste system was an intricate one reaching back into the prep school and forward into business and professional life,” and consequently positions the university as central and thus fundamental to assuring one’s status (1953: 214). After the young sons of the American elite finished prep school, they continued on to these prestigious universities before entering the world of business. They brought with them their upbringing and ingrained notions of dress, which were fine-tuned and reinterpreted during their college years, eventually resulting in what is now perceived as “prep.”

This phenomenon began with the establishment and history of the Ivy League schools and their inexorable relationship with the WASP aristocracy. “Ivy” as a term was first used in a 1933 article by the *New York Herald Tribune*’s Stanley Woodward, who described the eight schools as the “Ivy colleges,” and the phrase “Ivy League” was coined two years later by *Associated Press* sports editor Alan Gould (Cappello, 2012: 8). Once the term “Ivy” had been mentioned in regard to the colleges, it became a convenient label “used to describe a certain kind of person. Like the school he went to, he was steeped in tradition. He was smart, rich, well

educated” (Birnbach, 1980: 86). Yet, it was not until 1954 that Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Cornell, Columbia, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania formed the official Ivy League athletic conference.

The relatively late origins of the “Ivy League,” however,” do not accurately represent the schools’ histories. These eight colleges, along with some other older New England schools like Amherst and Williams, were incredibly significant in the historic affiliation of higher education with the American elite long before they were named as “Ivy League.” Most of the schools were founded during Colonial America, thus possessing the sort of ancient pedigree revered by WASPs during the late 1800s. These were the schools that generations of the most entrenched American families attended, and during the scramble to seek status these same schools became symbols of the establishment. Harvard alumnus Daniel Cappello argues that while the term “Ivy League” might technically refer to the associated collegiate athletic conference, it has always held a “broader connotation of...prestige, authority, tradition, and influence, and is synonymous with an undeniable intellectual and social elitism” (2012: 8).

For the first part of the twentieth century, higher education was mostly a bastion of the elite by default. It was simply unnecessary at the time for the majority of the population to attain such an education to earn a decent wage. The only people who could afford the luxury of spending a few years mulling over classical philosophy and Latin were those who came from well-to-do families, besides those few from the middle class who were intent on pursuing religious paths for which such a degree was required. Consequently, an association formed between higher education and elite social status. Aldrich references this association when he defines Harvard at the time as having been “the next regular step” for sons of Old Money: “It culminates at Harvard, not necessarily the actual university of that name, but a rhetorical “Harvard,” Yale, or Princeton,

or some other college in the Ivy League...Stanford...or whatever other college the social imagination may plausibly promote to the prestige of Harvard” (1996: 39).

The relationship between high society and esteemed universities was decidedly symbiotic, with both parties contributing to and benefiting from each other’s mounting notions of cachet and elitism through the first part of the twentieth century. This is maintained by the highly specific entrance requirements of these schools as well as their “tuition fees and expensiveness...lack of professional schools, its rules and customs, its life, traditions, and atmosphere” (Slosson, 1910: 104). In exchange, the resultant community of prep school boys contributed to the school’s relatively high academic potential, and the “genteel social atmosphere of the campus” (Karabel, 2005: 204). Karabel emphasizes the university’s historically “critical role in socializing and unifying the national upper class...The upper classes of the great eastern cities increasingly sent their children to the Big Three: by the 1890s, 74 percent of Boston’s upper class and 65 percent of New York’s sent their sons to either Harvard, Yale, or Princeton” (ibid., 25). This increasingly prominent connection between elite schools and the social elite became a tangibly integral aspect of the university climate, image, and function.

Unaffected by financial stress and unconcerned with academic integrity, young WASPs nurtured a certain nonchalance that would have been elusive to those middle class students who were more economically grounded. WASP gentlemen attended college “to learn not from books but from each other—not how to be scholars but how to succeed” (Pierson as quoted by Karabel, 2005: 54). An example found in Yale’s 1904 yearbook provides evidence that the popular culture was in fact “so anti-intellectual...that classes vied with one another for the honor of being the least studious” (ibid., 20). Instead, they focused primarily on developing business connections and social relationships through organizations like the eating clubs at Princeton, secret senior

societies at Yale, finals clubs at Harvard, or fraternities at Dartmouth. Francis Patton, President of Princeton University during the turn of the century, has been infamously noted as saying “Princeton is a rich man’s college and...rich men do not frequently come to college to study” and claiming that the school was “the finest country club in America” (Patton as quoted by Karabel, 2005: 20). Considering the state of the college scene some years later, in the 1920s, Princeton’s Dean Gauss acknowledged this shocking statement as disappointingly true and described the college as having “unfortunately become a kind of glorified playground” (1930: 16). Fass concludes academics were generally considered “at best, a necessary evil,” and were generally neglected in favor of football, gambling, and drinking (1977: 172). An anxiety about schoolwork and dedication to classes was looked down upon during this period in collegiate history. Those who spent their evenings in the libraries were dubbed “grinds” or “greasy grinds”—painfully humiliating nicknames. Much more socially acceptable was a lack of motivation and contentment with what is mentioned in several accounts as “the gentleman’s C.” Scholar Vance Packard explains this barely passing mark as effectively displaying that the student was “above striving...He knows that, for him, college grades have little relevance to his future career.” (1959: 227). Instead, these young men spent their time socializing and participating in sports or other activities, all considered much more relevant pursuits than concerning oneself with grades. Students were well aware of the intricacies of this phenomenon, which was discussed in a 1925 *Cornell Daily Sun* article. The writer calls studying “a secret vice” and explains how any traces of intellectual enthusiasm are lost as students “carefully conceal any such heretical tendencies lest they in turn receive the brand of ‘grind.’” The clearly divided atmosphere at these schools inevitably alienated most students who did not fit the WASP

stereotype and further contributed to the sustenance of an elite university character well into the mid-twentieth century.

This manner of insouciance prevalent among collegiate men influenced popular dress on campus. I have already examined how the tailored uniforms of British prep schools were fused with WASP ideals of oldness and ruggedness to form the prep school look. This style was further refined during the university years with the added element of nonchalance. Students' dress reflected their irreverent attitude towards college life, a sensation illustrated well in this keen description of the typical "role model" WASP collegiate:

"He is good looking, an average student, and has an exquisite talent for always saying the right thing at the right time. His clothes never look put together but always look right...He is an outgoing, easy mannered personality and loves a good party. His sport is crew and his drink is gin and tonic in the evening and Bloody Marys in the daytime. He has never given much thought to the way he is; he assumes it is all inherited and that his father and grandfather behaved in the same way, which indeed they did. He has gone to all the same private schools as they did and when he graduates he will inherit a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. He doesn't give much thought to what other people's lives might be like outside his own small circle and is blissfully unaware that his way of life is not the only way of life" (Robertiello and Hoguet, 1987: 11).

The profile above provides insight regarding not only the dress but also the particular attitude and disposition of the ideal collegiate man. It is a seemingly unattainable image of perfect imperfection, and an aura of undeserved confidence bordering on arrogance, that somehow translates as curiously desirable. In a memoir of his college years, Henry Seidel Canby writes about the exquisitely unique nature of this way of dress and the accompanying attitude.



Blazer with Princeton University Insignia, 1923 (Mears, 2012: 35)



Arrow Advertisement, 1923 (Mears, 2012: 41)



Princeton's Cap and Gown Club, 1894 (Mears, 2012: 27)

He recalls his first day on campus catching a glimpse of the upperclassmen with “an arrogant and enchanting irresponsibility in their behavior which was intoxicating,” and his subsequent urge, “to dress like them, be like them” (1936: 25). Here Canby emphasizes that dress was a critical means of expressing one’s position as a college student. The specific look, “a studied but very complete nonchalance,” was difficult to accomplish and took subtle refinement (Lee, 1970: 162). In attempting to break it down in his analysis of class structures, Paul Fussell humorously references the style’s notorious inconceivability: “A lot depends on a certain habitual carelessness in carriage, a quasi-windblown calculated sloppiness. It’s almost impossible to imitate, and you should have a long thin neck, too” (1983: 66).

This nonchalance was largely a consequence of newfound independence and youthful exuberance, “a longing to escape the inferiorities of childhood and triumph over elders who think that they are better...a manifesto of his escape from rule” (Canby, 1936: 33). Students breached convention by lazily mixing traditional sports gear with everyday clothing, and donned their apparel in the characteristically ingenuous nature of young college aged boys away from the watchful eyes of their parents and the rigid demands of their boarding schools. Dressing without regard for traditional requirements in a way exemplified “an age devoid of responsibility and old men’s cares,” when a young man was free to explore and socialize without much liability (Fass, 1977: 231). Sports, in particular, became a popular embodiment of these youthful and lighthearted ideals. They were evidence of masculinity, strength, and leadership, and spilled into the daily lives of college students and their choices of dress because “sportswear provided the opportunity to claim participation in a manly activity” (Clemente, 2008: 26). Partaking in a varsity sport was a factor of social status, considered an elite and respected accomplishment, and thus incorporating sports attire in daily wear alluded to one’s prestigious pastimes. Even students

who did not actually play sports like golf or tennis tended to wear these styles of clothing around campus. Through the systems of social hierarchy on college campuses and their consequences in relation to popular dress, university students had a significant impact on the development of prep style as a progenitor of sportswear. Outside of the campus society, sportswear was only worn under strict rules and social standards defining appropriateness of place and time. But the popularity of sports, combined with the languor of college life, encouraged students to “implement these casual clothes into their wardrobes on a year-round basis” (ibid., 27). From boat shoes to the tennis polo shirt to the varsity sweater, several key elements of prep style can be attributed to this aspect of the university.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

“Prep” as a Socioeconomic Indicator

Having generally explored the origins of “prep” as it grew from a vestige of the British preparatory school tradition to become a popular mode of dress at the American university during the first part of the twentieth century, I can begin to consider the theoretical aspects of fashion in relation to the idea of “prep” as a socioeconomic indicator.

Fashion as Evidence of Social Standing

Clothing has historically been an undeniable factor of one’s social rank and economic means, used to convey one’s position, although exactly what types of clothing are indicative of which classes has shifted over time. Specific fabrics, colors, silhouettes, and cuts are indicative of class and status; certain fashions have been associated with high ranking and others with lower status. Scholar Alison Lurie relates how several ancient societies “passed decrees known as sumptuary laws to prescribe or forbid the wearing of specific styles by specific classes of persons,” citing examples from ancient Egypt to the Greeks and Romans to seventeenth century Europe (1981: 115). In *The Status Seekers*, Packard exposes some specific instances, noting “In early New England, a woman was permitted to wear a silk scarf only if her husband was worth a thousand dollars... Rothenberg, Germany, still exhibits the heavy wooden collar that was locked, during the Renaissance, around the neck of a woman who tried to dress beyond her class,” and so forth (1959: 131).

However, laws like those mentioned above became increasingly difficult to enforce, especially following the weakening of class barriers and relative fluidity of wealth that began by

the eighteenth century and accelerated with the Industrial Revolution, rise of mass production, and advertising. These changes revolutionized dress by making it accessible to a much larger population. Not only was clothing cheaper to manufacture and sell, but more people could afford it: there was a rise of “new money” individuals who had profited from the boom in business and now had excess to spend. Previously, status had frequently been signified by opulent materials, superfluous details, and complexity of style, with members of the elite privy to dressing in a certain manner that was either inaccessible or impractical for those of lower classes. But these visual cues were no longer viable when they were not limited to a discrete minority, as was the case after the Industrial Revolution.

Once fashions became increasingly available to the majority, it might seem that dress could no longer be a reliable source of socioeconomic distinction. Nevertheless, while perhaps less obvious than earlier times, clothing continued to be an indication of class. The theoretical value behind these persistent social norms is examined by Malcolm Barnard, who describes fashion and clothing as “signifying practices” that “are not used simply to indicate or refer to social and cultural positions, they are used to construct and mark out that social and cultural reality in the first place” (2002: 38). He maintains that dress is an inextricable aspect of class identity. Apparel is thus symbolically integral to the social order of our world and is the primary means of how one’s own status is “constituted, signaled, and reproduced” (Barnard, 2002: 107). The highly visible nature of dress makes it a convenient vehicle to create and maintain class distinctions. Consequently, such dependence on clothing as an instrument to implement class boundaries and communicate the privileges of status was unsurprisingly a central facet of college life during the twentieth century.

Rather than the extravagance popular among the historically wealthy in earlier periods, the contemporary post-Industrial Revolution elite “constantly declares...that they choose their clothes for ease, comfort, convenience and practicality” (Lurie, 1981: 137). These types of dress, considered “economically practical, and comfortable to wear...not subject to the vicissitudes of style, did not...wrinkle, tear, or soil easily...uncomplicated in cut, untrimmed, and of some durable material,” are now considered luxurious (ibid., 151). Lurie suggests that classic, unrefined clothes, “In language...are the equivalent of colloquial, down to earth, homey words and phrases, and inspire the same kind of warmth and confidence” (ibid., 152). Along with value, practicality, and durability, clothing often is also defined as prestigious when affiliated with high status sports such as yachting, skiing, golfing, or polo, or with high status organizations, clubs, and schools (ibid.). This clearly ties into the origins of “preppy” as discussed in the previous section explaining why simple, sturdy, neat basics—reminiscent of preparatory school uniforms, sportswear inspired pieces, and Ivy League emblems—have long been essential components in the everyday uniforms of America’s prominent, conservative families.

“Prep” as a Style Subculture and Anti-Fashion Statement of Class

The extension of this concept as a defining socioeconomic gauge in the greater United States came through the establishment of the college preppy look as its own subculture. There is a general inconsistency regarding whether or not “preppy” qualifies as a subculture, with some studies classifying it as such without proper explanation and others abandoning the concept completely. Returning to the root definition of subculture, some well-known studies, such as Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, contend that subculture must be “subversion

to normalcy,” thus excluding “preppy” and its conservative underpinnings (1987: 3). However, backtracking to the definition of ‘culture: the attitudes and behavior that are characteristic of a particular social group or organization,’ and using basic components of word etymology and Latin roots, it would seem that ‘subculture’ could simply be defined as ‘part of a larger culture that is distinguished by its specific attitudes and behavior,’ with no implications on whether or not these distinguishable attitudes or behaviors are in line with or opposed to general beliefs of the larger culture. Hebdige then seems to be describing what would be better termed ‘counterculture.’ This provides a clearer understanding of the various aspects of cultural groups being discussed, and is also supported by Diane Crane, who maintains that “not all subcultures reject the dominant culture” (2000: 188).

Utilizing this outlook on subculture, I can examine the prominent associations of the preppy look with a particular attitude and lifestyle that became ingrained in American society during the twentieth century. It was a term “used to describe a certain kind of person. Like the school he went to, he was steeped in tradition. He was smart, rich, well educated” (Birnbach, 1980: 86). While the approach to “prep” as a classifiable group is neglected in most studies of subculture, it is validated by much of the literature I have studied as both a fashion and lifestyle distinction. The intricate and complex social systems at elite universities that have been discussed soon became, according to Fass, “the first modern American youth culture, a culture that was fed by the larger culture but that was also distinct and separate” (1977: 122). Allison Lurie expands on this thought, noting that prep style “expresses not social protest, but social conformity,” in such a way that unified and cemented “preppies” as a discernible group (1981: 164). Contextually, this “youth culture” came before any other sort of discernible American subculture, such as the 1950s rock’n’roll culture, and the rebellious hippie and punk movements

of the 1960s and 1970s. While the apparent struggle for conformity rather than individuality perhaps seems at odds with these other well-known subcultures, it cannot be denied that the WASP look became a distinguishable factor of a specific social group within the larger population, and “for other youths, college styles epitomized glamour and perhaps even an enviable privilege” (Fass, 1977: 234). In an insightful article entitled *Locating the Punk Preppy*, Daniel Traber discusses how the uniform and attitudes of “preppy” are “chosen to evoke affluence, tradition, and good taste rather than flagrant self expression” and compares this to punk’s defiance (2008: 490). He notes the similarities between the two seemingly disparate styles: “Both...intend to send a message, both mark the subject’s position socially and politically, and both are exclusionary” (ibid.). In this sense, “prep” functions as an essential subcultural group that became an identifiable symbol of a certain attitude of elitism and high socioeconomic means.

The significance of this symbolic value of “prep” is further cemented by the style’s position as anti-fashion. A somewhat complex construct, anti-fashion is the subject of a detailed analysis by Ted Polhemus and Lynn Proctor that defines it as “all styles of adornment which fall outside the organized system or systems of fashion change” (1978: 16). While “preppy” is not one of the styles specifically identified by the authors as anti-fashion, similarly distinguishable subgroups such as punks and hippies are considered anti-fashion because of their proponents’ disregard for systems of fashion change. Instead, these subcultures opt to create and maintain their own fixed, constant stylized images of dress. Having established “prep” as a subculture of a similar nature to these, I can extrapolate that it is also a form of anti-fashion. Polhemus describes anti-fashion, which is static as opposed to the constant change that is fashion, as being representative of “fixed, unchanging, rigid social environments”—a description that is fitting for

the arrogant elitism and social conformity that had been well-documented at the Ivy League schools and within WASP social circles (ibid., 11). Furthermore, Polhemus asserts that anti-fashion, rather than fashion, is more relevant to the upper class as a means of declaring “one’s social, cultural, political, economic, and geographic affiliations” (ibid.). Instead of following cyclical fashion trends, “the established upper class constitutes a true social group with its own traditional anti-fashion costume,” that is manifested in what is now known as prep style. This concept is deliberately expressed by the unchanging elements that compose “prep.” For instance, Ivy League outfitter J.Press has been selling their “ultra traditional take on the Ivy League look to their customers for over forty years, without changing a stitch,” since their customers “don’t want change, but rather a timeless look” (Banks and Chapelle, 2011: 76). The conformity and classic simplicity that are crucial elements of “prep” are also factors in the style’s role as an anti-fashion establishment of the upper class. This has contributed to “prep” as a constant and thus valid indicator of socioeconomic status in American culture.

One might question how the style, in its apparent simplicity and effortlessness, could function as an indicator of class. However, this speculation is diminished by insider accounts of prep style throughout the twentieth century. In studying old moneyed society in America, John H. Forbes explains, “tiny details became significant. If one saw, one knew. If one did not know, one did not have to see” (2010: 51). Such details might consist of the proper number of buttons on a suit jacket (three) or the appropriate amount of fading in the color of one’s pants. What seems to the outsider as easy and unremarkable has actually been described by individuals like Nelson Aldrich as completely contrived: “the effect of effortlessness requires a good deal of strain, that negligence requires attention, that indifference requires concentration, that simplicity

and naturalness require affectation. The most delicious 'in' joke of Preppiedom is the anxiety everyone feels about being carefree" (1979).

CHAPTER 3

The Historical Relevance of “Preppy” As a Socioeconomic Indicator

Considering the origins of prep style and its relation to the theoretical connections between fashion and socioeconomic status, I will utilize this foundation to further dissect the historical relevance of prep style as a socioeconomic indicator.

Status and Conformity of Style on the College Campus (c. 1925-1940)

By the 1920s, the socially conscious general public began to recognize the Ivy League universities as a possible route for socioeconomic advancement. In their account of college life, Cornelius H. Patton and Walter T. Field explain the growing popular sentiment that “a college man stands a little higher in the social scale...and he may enter social cliques from which the non-college man is excluded” (1927: 305). Thus began the persistent societal obsession with Ivy League schools as fundamental to social position and the subsequent scramble to attend one of these prominent East Coast universities. Consequently, the schools became progressively more concerned with excluding “those individuals and social groups deemed to be of inappropriate background and character to take advantage of the opportunities and privileges afforded by a college degree.” Such persons, whether simply of lower financial means, or of immigrant status, or of Catholic or Jewish ancestry, were “not considered worthy of the economic and social” opportunities that came with attendance at these schools (Levine, 1986: 137, 148). Not only would these candidates be less likely to fully pay for their schooling, but they would also have difficulty fitting into the campus community and their admittance would potentially upset the colleges’ WASP alumni. With a commitment to preventing the infiltration of these unsuited

individuals, scholar David Levine explains how “many of the nation’s best known colleges gave the *appearance* of being selective only because they chose to reject, deliberately and systematically, qualified but socially undesirable candidates” (ibid., 146).

Even when middle class students were admitted to the schools, they were often unable to assimilate properly into the collegiate culture. As addressed previously, university life was not primarily rooted in academics but rather focused on social connections and networking, consistent with the role of colleges as an extension of the WASP prep school mentality. Those students who were working their way through school could not forego their studies in favor of sports practice or parties, as did the wealthier students, and were actually anxious to succeed academically. Thus, those not involved in Old Money society were at a distinct social disadvantage in college life. Tensions grew between the overwhelmingly upper class student population at these elite universities and the minority of middle class “grinds” who had infiltrated their precious campus. The college environment became driven by a desire to prove one’s social prestige that permeated the campus through clubs and organizations that ranged from the school newspaper to sports teams to fraternities and secret societies. These groups became indicators of status and vehicles for social stratification of the campus, and typically “those who came to college with the appropriate socioeconomic background and personality had far greater access to the positions of influence on campus than their less fortunate, even if more intelligent, peers” (Levine, 1986: 114).

This dynamic propelled clothing to become a significant issue in the social system of college life, in which “a student’s wardrobe clearly indicated...class status” (Peril, 2006: 111). Princeton, known as the epitome of elite education and a haven for upper class prep school graduates, is an ideal case study in the use of dress as a status indicator on the college campus.

Scholar Deirdre Clemente has dedicated years to researching the atmosphere of Princeton at this time, and points out that while “social scientists have long recognized the interaction between fashion and social stratification...in such an environment, clothing took on a heightened meaning, as it was readily visible to the judging eyes of those students higher up in the pecking order” (2008: 23). In such a small and tightly knit community as that of the Princeton campus, clothing-based judgments were inevitable and had a candid influence on one’s position on campus since, “For the Princeton man, clothes mean character” (Capello, 2012: 73). In fact, fashion played a significant role as not only an indicator of class in of itself but also as a key factor of entry into the exclusive clubs and organizations on campus that distinguished the most elite students.

Many accounts of college life during the 1920s and 1930s have mentioned the heavily socialized atmospheres at these schools, where wealthier students were less academically inclined and focused their priorities on developing connections. These social ties were formed through campus activities and sports, and eventually through the club systems that developed on nearly all college campuses. Each school had its own sort of organizational social hierarchy, from the finals clubs at Harvard and senior societies at Yale to the eating clubs of Princeton and the fraternities of Cornell. While these systems differed slightly and spoke to the minute differences between the cultures at each university, their overall purpose of creating a structure of exclusivity was analogous. They became essential aspects of college life and defined the experiences of students at their respective universities. Writing about American college students in the 1920s, Paula Fass explains that “those who set great store to the ‘glamor’ of college life associated it from the first with fraternity membership...Thus freshman arrived aping the mannerisms and styles associated with the college image...the collegiate style epitomized by

fraternity men” (1977: 151). Fass implies that the fraternity system was so ingrained as a feature of the campus that students perceived fraternity membership as a necessity of college life, and the styles and mannerisms of fraternity members were popularized as ideal. Whatever the club system, fraternity or otherwise, socioeconomic class and family background were significantly influential criteria evaluated for acceptance so as to maintain the prestige of the individual organization. Appraising the fraternity system at Cornell among other schools, Lee observes, “Membership was frequently awarded to the student according to the wealth reflected in his clothes. The desirable qualities of a candidate did not particularly include brains” (1970: 4). Clothing served as a visual representation of one’s position and consequently became increasingly relevant as a status indicator in college life as the club systems expanded in influence. The critical nature of one’s dress and demeanor in the social climate of the elite college is also emphasized by Karabel, who writes of the process saying, “In a manner of just a few minutes, each sophomore would be assessed on such matters as his appearance, his mannerisms, his interest, and his social skills.” Karabel also relates a scene of Geoffrey Wolff’s novel, *The Final Club*, in which a student’s ‘badly dimpled’ jacket becomes the deciding factor in his losing a spot in a top-ranked club at Harvard (2005: 207). On the topic of “bicker,” the selection process for eating clubs at Princeton, Karabel quotes a former club chairman’s claim that “the ‘name’ of one’s club depends in large measure upon the prep school graduates and tweed clad extroverts that are among its members” (ibid., 303). Such superficial characteristics were the most efficient means of distinguishing those of the proper pedigree and socioeconomic class, and soon became notorious as distinctive features on campus.

Inevitably, those on the cusp of acceptance to the elite societies, and those who were undoubtedly out of reach but still wistful for that lifestyle, attempted to emulate this look,

leading to what was widely recognized as an epidemic of conformity on college campuses during the 1920s and 1930s. Fass writes of a visiting European student who noted in astonishment that all the students he met “dressed alike, they do the same things at the same time and they think and speak in the same terms and have practically all the same interests” (1977: 152). While definitive, this statement should not be considered an exaggeration. Similar sentiment is expressed in Cornelius H. Patton and Walter Taylor Field’s review of college life in the 1920s as compared to their experiences in the 1880s, with perhaps even more of a focus on clothing and a reference to a carefree attitude as well: “Students today are much more alike...they wear the same kind of caps, the same cut of trousers, the same variety of ‘slickers’...they talk the same slang and have much the same easy air of knowing the world. You may tell a collegian today wherever you may meet him” (1927: 320). The authors allude to the concept of the “collegian,” a gradually forming archetype of what is now called the “prep” or the typical Ivy League student whose style has been previously dissected. This persona and his accompanying way of dress were popularized through the club systems that romanticize him and thus encouraged campus-wide conformity to this ideal, “it was conformity, above all, that was the glue of campus life, the basis for group cohesion and identification” (Fass, 1977: 149). The root of this phenomenon goes back to the fact that most students at elite colleges chose to attend not for intellectual pursuits but for developing future connections and social camaraderie. In *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration 1915-1940*, Levine identifies success as “the end-all and be-all of existence” for the college student, “success was dependent on conformity to narrowly defined patterns of status seeking behavior,” with everyone aspiring to attain perfection as the model “male WASP student,” or as close to it as possible (1986: 123). Thus it was within the sphere of

the college campus that prep style initially developed as a significant indicator of socioeconomic status.

The New Meritocracy and Its Effect on "Prep" (c. 1940-1980)

The end of World War II was a major turning point in the history of universities, which had no choice but to face an influx of returning soldiers funded by the G.I. Bill. Prior to the war, "the typical prestigious college took an entering class with an average aptitude score of 500" and placed most emphasis on a requirement of "good character" and upbringing (Baltzell, 1964: 341). This changed in the years following the war, and "a definite shift took place toward meritocracy" (Horowitz, 1987: 148). By the late 1950s even Princeton, known as one of the most exclusive of the Ivy League, had become a "predominantly public-school-educated institution" (Packard, 1959: 238). The unprecedented excess of interest in these schools forced administrations for the first time to make decisions regarding acceptances. Changes were not only confined to the universities but also extended to their "feeder" preparatory schools, including such "bastions of old-stock exclusiveness" as Groton and St. Paul's (Baltzell, 1964: 344). Baltzell quotes the Rector of St. Paul's having reported that the school was attempting to "reach out to the world of which we are a microcosm," thus acknowledging the push for change in an increasingly fluid socioeconomic state.

Nevertheless, other accounts of college culture during this tumultuous period of change suggest that elitism and exclusiveness persisted, although more discreetly. Examining the history of admissions at Ivy League schools, Karabel exposes how Harvard managed to "[present] a carefully cultivated democratic face to the public while quietly doing what it felt necessary to preserve its close historic ties to the privileged groups whose goodwill remained

indispensable to its welfare” (2005: 190). He explains that certain measures of privilege were inherent to the “meritocratic” academic standards that these schools utilized, which “had the effect, if not the intent, of favoring the children of the affluent” (Karabel, 2005: 370). For instance, students from less affluent backgrounds were not privy to the same opportunities and secondary school education (i.e. preparatory schools) compared to those from upper class families, thus still putting them at a basic disadvantage even considering newly meritocratic admissions policies.

Even when students managed to overcome the obstacle of a less than adequate secondary school education, they continued to face social challenges once on campus. Clubs and fraternities had always been an integral aspect of campus life, but became even more relevant at elite universities “because of the influx of public school graduates” in the decades after World War II (Packard, 1959: 241). These organizations were now not only stomping grounds for the elite, but also played a vital role in helping upper class students bond with each other and simultaneously “develop a sense of...apartness from the general run of students” (ibid.). Functioning as vehicles of exclusivity on campus, clubs and fraternities were crucial to the sustained elitism both in social culture and preppy style at these universities through the transition to meritocracy.

By the late 1960s, however, the consequences of the transition to meritocracy became apparent in its reflection on college culture. In his analysis of campus life, Calvin B.T. Lee claims that by the end of the decade, the concept of the archetypal college man was falling out of favor. *The Ivy League Guidebook* further corroborates this sentiment. Written by students at Harvard University, the book satirically laments how “preppies” were “now being swept from the college scene by the frenetic sensuality of the plastic hippie...being infiltrated increasingly

by intellectuals, activists, and artists; anti-Semitism and racial discrimination are dwindling” (Tobias, Bortz, and Weinberger, 1969: 157). Regardless of their tone, however, there is unquestionable truth underlying the authors’ claims that “preppies themselves know that even at Princeton they are a steadily decreasing minority” (ibid.).



Princeton, 1938 (*LIFE Magazine*, 1938)



Brown, 1938 (*Ivy Style Blog*)



University of Pennsylvania, 1949 (*Ivy Style Blog*)



Yale, 1959 (*Ivy Style Blog*)



Yale, 1950s (Mears, 2012: 92)



Yale, 1964 (*LIFE Magazine*, 1964)



Dartmouth, 1965 (Ishizu, 1965: 63)



Yale, 1965 (Ishizu, 1965: 70)

CHAPTER 4

The Evolution of “Prep” as Fashion

In sync with the democratization of university culture was the “fashionalization” of prep style during the mid-twentieth century resulting from a popular desire to achieve the social status and cachet associated with this way of dress. This gradual growth in the popularity of the preppy look was later punctuated in the 1980s with a boom of commercialization and public infatuation with this style. In this section, I will review the evolution of “preppy” from an elite, nondescript style subculture to its modern significance in fashion.

The “Fashionalization” of “Preppy” (c. 1925-1980)

It is clear that “preppy” functioned as a mechanism for enforcing social distinctions in collegiate culture throughout the early twentieth century. The first twenty years of the 1900s were a time of unbreached exclusivity and a committed reverence for Old Money. Those styles considered “preppy” were confined to the elite college-educated population, young men whose tastes were reflective of their preparatory school upbringing and Ivy League repertoire. As “prep” became increasingly associated with elite status on the college campus, this style of dress began to gain popularity as a fashionable look to emulate.

Evidence of this first appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, at the height of the preppy look on the college campus, when the growth of film, magazines, and advertising began publicizing the glamour of university life, exposing the dress and behavior that defined the previously exclusive lives of students at elite colleges. Consequently, those who may have not ever had the access to these social situations now “knew, or thought they knew, what the ‘glamorous’ youths of the

campus were wearing, smoking, dancing, singing, and doing” (Fass, 1977: 127). The collegiate look slowly began to be emulated by other youths across the nation of traditionally lower social status, such as the working class. Levine’s examination of what he calls “the culture of aspiration” portrays a time when people were just beginning to grasp the social and cultural benefits of university life. Prestigious schools had become a “symbol of economic and social mobility” sought after by those who wished to climb the social ladder (1986: 21).

This phenomenon is explained by what Polhemus termed “fashionalization,” the way that the fashion system tends to appropriate fixed anti-fashions to create cultural trends, possibly threatening the original anti-fashion symbol. In this case, the “fashionalization” of prep style relates to the beginning of the threat towards the use of “preppy” as an anti-fashion label indicating status. College students were “not oblivious to this manipulation of their styles and behavior,” as evidenced by an article bemoaning this threat to the exclusivity of collegiate dress: “This collegiate craze is putting a cramp in the regular college man’s style. It is making him too public a specimen...It’s a fad...it’s being carried too far—this playing with things that really have meaning” (Fass, 1977: 127). The author of this article is clearly contemptuous of the “fashionalization” of preppy style and acutely aware of how this could endanger the true significance of collegiate dress as a means of distinguishing social status. His fears would be increasingly relevant in the coming years, as the popularity of the “Ivy League look” grew dramatically following the war years, as a result of the democratization of university culture initiated by the G.I. Bill that was discussed in the previous section.

The increased accessibility to college education along with the continued growth of new media during the mid-1900s further facilitated the spread of this collegiate style in popular culture, “[turning] the idea of youth into an eminently salable commodity” (ibid., 126). “Prep”

had really cemented itself as a staple of mainstream culture by the 1950s, at which time magazines such as Esquire and Playboy focused their content primarily on educating young men on recreating collegiate style. The founder of Esquire, Arnold Gingrich, created the magazine in an effort “to liberate male stylishness from the closed little circle of ‘high society’ with its English traditions, its private schools” (Chenoune as quoted by Conekin, 2000). A particular Esquire article captured the nonchalance that is the essence of “prep,” noting, “naturalness is the answer—no frills, nothing superficial” (Bryan, 2009: 56). That particular shade of unruliness crucial to the collegiate look became so sought after that at one point during the 1950s, the Harvard campus store began to manufacture “Dusty Bucks,” shoes that were pre-treated to create a look that was “ever so slightly worn and ever so slightly dirty” (Lee, 1970: 99). “Preppy” continued to trend into the 1960s, when President Kennedy brought the look into the spotlight, but then began to decline in popularity throughout the latter part of the decade and the 1970s as youth countercultural movements began to gain attention.

Commercialization: The 1980s “Preppy” Craze

While the “fashionalization” of prep style during the middle part of the century subtly threatened the ability of collegiate dress to distinguish one’s class, its popularity had never truly reached that point of saturation until the 1980s. The start of the decade was marked by the release of *The Official Preppy Handbook*, a tongue-in-cheek guide to all things “prep.” In her book, Lisa Birnbach satirically accounts all aspects of the preppy lifestyle, from schooling to shopping to sporting. She describes the “ten fashion fundamentals” of preppy dress, including “neatness, conservatism, attention to detail, practicality, quality, natural fibers, anglophilia, specific color blindness, the sporting look, and androgyny” (1980: 122). Failing to see the

humor in Birnbach's writing, thousands of Americans engrossed themselves in the book and attempted to emulate her exaggerations of the Old Money lifestyle that has just been dissected. It was the first time that "preppy culture had been distilled into a portable and easy-to-understand resource. The privileged lifestyle that had taken generations of Blue Bloods to develop and refine was now a commodity to be bought and imitated" (Hogan, 2008). Followers of *The Official Preppy Handbook* "didn't care that it was intended to be...a send-up of "true" prep culture," because the appeal of that life was overwhelmingly attractive to them (ibid.). It is interesting, however, to note Birnbach's use of "neatness" as a descriptor of the style she is purveying, because this seems at odds with the windswept, nonchalant nature of "prep" that I have previously discussed. Her mention of "neatness" hints at a slight divergence from the scruffiness of traditional prep style, and suggests that the new "preppies" of the 1980s placed a greater emphasis on immaculate taste and perfection in their appearance.

Regardless of its inconsistency in relation to traditional "prep," Birnbach's bestseller took the country by storm, exposing a cultural obsession with the preppy look that was subsequently exploited by shrewd entrepreneurs like Ralph Lauren. Born Ralph Reuben Lifshitz, Lauren had established his "prep" inspired menswear line in 1971 and gained a steady business before it exploded in popularity during the early 1980s. Lauren's stores and collections emulated his vision of Old Money Americana and the aristocracy of the elite. Forbes explains that "to the truly privileged, the entire Ralph Lauren concept was tin plated, lacking context and nuance," but to the general public, it was a perfectly packaged introduction to a world that they had previously only read about. The success of Ralph Lauren at this time signified what one journalist calls the "democratization" of "prep," giving anyone anywhere the opportunity to capture "the rumpled and ironic blending of dress and casual clothes" that so deftly characterizes the preppy lifestyle

(Hogan, 2008). Lauren's concept was quickly imitated by others, including Tommy Hilfiger, who established his brand in 1984, and by Arthur Cinader, who founded J.Crew at the end of the decade. The basic aspects of the "preppy" look were reproduced and marketed by these mass retailers, and thus began the commercialization of what once was the exclusive style code of the American elite. By the end of the twentieth century, classically "preppy" signifiers like polo shirts, chinos, blazers, and boat shoes could be found at almost any major fashion retailer.



The Official Preppy Handbook, 1980



Tommy Hilfiger Advertisement, 1986 (*Tommy Hilfiger Blog*)



Ralph Lauren Advertisement, 1987 (*Top Models of the World*)



J.Crew Advertisement, 1988 (Bourne, 2010)



Ralph Lauren Advertisement, 1997 (Mears, 2012: 70)

CHAPTER 5

“Prep” in the Modern Era

With the “fashionalization” and commercialization of “prep,” the association between the style and socioeconomic status has been inevitably muddled and diluted. In her New York Times article, Wallace argues that, “When anthropologists study a tribe, however respectfully, they change it. Preppy clothes...were a visual language, instantly not only identifying, but also...placing the wearer,” which no longer existed once, during the 1980s, the entire look was commercialized and reproduced by such retailers as Ralph Lauren and J.Crew. Birnbach herself claims that “the reality is that people at that time went to schools and belonged to clubs that most ordinary people couldn’t get into...it’s just fashion now, [I am] guilty for having ruined it all.” Many, including New York Times contributor Carol McD. Wallace, have come to believe that “prep” has become no more than a high school cafeteria table category, a label floating amongst “emo,” “goth,” and “punk” (2010). In a recent article, she writes that after the 1980s, “the preppy uniform became just clothes” (ibid.). In this section, I will attempt to explore the nature and significance of “prep” in contemporary society beyond these broad claims by returning to what has been the key breeding ground of the style for over a century—the Ivy League universities and the students who attend them.

The New Universities

Writing about campus life in the late 1980s, Helen Horowitz acknowledges that for the most part “Preppy clothing has lost its connection to Eastern preparatory schools and has, in many places, become the uniform of the organized student” (1987: 274). Yet, who is the

organized student? Despite a growing emphasis on diversity and socioeconomic equality in contemporary college admissions, much evidence exists suggesting that Ivy League schools are still partial to students from affluent families. Even simply by consequence of exorbitant tuition costs, the “dramatic and highly visible change in the physiognomy of the student body” is still outweighed by “the privileged class origins of students at the Big Three” (Karabel, 2005: 536). Despite costs that “well under 10 percent of American families could afford” as of 2000, Karabel’s research shows that most students at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were able to pay their expenses without financial assistance (ibid., 537). Even more telling is data from Harvard in 2002 that exhibits a definite trend in favor of legacies (applicants descended from alumni), of whom 40 percent were admitted as compared to 11 percent of the general applicant pool (ibid., 50). Such statistics suggest that despite an obvious shift towards meritocracy, and the decline in the visibility and significance of elitism as a precursor to collegiate life, certain associations and recognitions of superiority continue to persist.

Another point brought up by Horowitz is the description of fraternity and sorority members as “[coming] from the ranks of wealthier students” (1987: 274). Recalling the significance of Greek Life on campuses during the early democratization of university admissions following World War II, it is evident that the use of exclusive organizations to promote elitism in collegiate life has persevered.

An Ethnographic Review: Current Campus Views on “Preppy” Style

The “fashionalization” and “commercialization” of prep, along with the growing diversity of elite colleges, has undoubtedly affected the relevance of the term “preppy” and what it signifies. To investigate how the definition, connotation, usage, and implications of this term

may have changed, and to determine the nature of its modern relevance, I have gathered a combination of both my own observations and information obtained from interviews with students at Cornell University.

My position as a student at an Ivy League University has given me a unique ability to observe the relevance of “prep” on a modern college campus. In contrast to Horowitz’s previously mentioned suggestion that what has historically been classified as preppy clothing had, by the mid-1980s, become “the uniform of the organized student,” there is considerably less consistency of the prep look on the college campus today. Instead, speaking to the relative informality of modern society and laziness of young collegiate, many students at Cornell University choose to dress in nondescript casual clothing such as denim jeans, sweatpants, sweatshirts, t-shirts, sweaters, and fleece jackets. Nevertheless, a significant minority of students adhere to the conventional notions of preppy dress. In daily wear, chinos, madras plaid shorts, oxford button-up shirts, and polo shirts, are common sights, not to mention Sperry Topsider boat shoes worn without socks even in the coldest months of Ithaca winter. For formal occasions students tend to abide by an unspoken uniform of chinos, oxford button-up shirts, and blue blazers. My observations of collegiate menswear on the Cornell University campus suggest that the continued presence of prep style on campus, while perhaps less prominent than an outsider might imagine, corroborates the idea of a certain upbringing and socioeconomic status being relevant to this population of students.

I tested this hypothesis based on my own observations through case-study interviews with several current undergraduate male students at Cornell University. To provide a well-rounded consideration of prep style on campus, I attempted to obtain a sampling of students of varying socioeconomic background. I chose to speak with students in their final year of undergraduate

study because they have had nearly four years of experience and observation on campus to contribute. Ten senior male students at Cornell University were interviewed over the course of my research. Three of the students self-identified as being from an upper class background, four as from an upper-middle class background, two as from a middle class background, and one as from a lower class background. A series of seventeen basic interview questions were discussed with each participant (Appendix). The interviews began with questions regarding the participant's age, hometown, high school classification (private or public), self-identification of familial social status, and brief family history of college education. The next set of four questions concerned the individual's definition of the term "preppy" and its relation to his own personal sense of style. Subsequently, a set of five questions were discussed that were meant to explore the participant's perception of "prep" as a cultural term and indicator of socioeconomic status. The final three questions related to the individual's observation of the relationship between "prep" and college life. Dependent on the conversation, tangential questions were also discussed during the interview in relation to the answers provided by the participant. In seven of the interviews, the topic of fraternities was brought up during the conversation and became the subject of several additional questions.

These interviews confirmed that the term "preppy" possesses a relatively consistent definition. Each student interviewed had a clear concept of what they defined as "preppy," which he communicated through descriptions of certain sensibilities, products, and brand names that he associated with the style. These included repeated references to the terms "collegiate... prep schools... WASPy... Northeastern... American," the key features of "loafers... Sperry Topsiders... button-down shirts... slacks... blazers... madras... seersucker ... pastel colors," and the brands "Brooks Brothers... Ralph Lauren... J. Crew... Vineyard Vines... J.Press." The students

interviewed all agreed that these associations tend to come from the media, particularly books, television, and film, and the people who wear this style of clothing. While these basic definitions and associations remained consistent through all of the interviews, there were distinct differences in what might be described as comfort level when discussing these questions. For instance, one student, DR, who self-identified as coming from an upper class background and described his hometown as a “very WASPY area...the same small village that Martha Stewart and Ralph Lauren call home” was clearly more confident in describing his definition and associations of “prep.” He had spent a significant amount of time around individuals who he believed could be defined as “preppy,” and thus possessed a clear image of what this term meant. In contrast to DR, another student, AB, who self-identified as coming from a lower class urban background, explained that his perception of “preppy” changed drastically since studying at Cornell University. He had never before encountered anyone who dressed in this style outside of film, advertising, and literature. Upon arriving on campus, AB was introduced to a relatively foreign way of dress and described being “surprised” that some students on campus “actually dressed like that” outside of advertisements. While he still had a clear understanding of what he believed “preppy” to mean based on the images he had seen, AB was not as comfortable in describing his perceptions. It can be inferred that because of his background, AB feels like more of an “outsider” in discussing the subject of prep style than DR, and is not as confident in his definition and associations.

I found that all of the students interviewed believed that preppy style continues to have some relevance as a socioeconomic reference. For example, three students suggested that although much more readily accessible than in the past, brands producing preppy clothes still typically require that one possesses at least an upper middle class lifestyle to afford such

clothing. There was clear agreement among all students of an association between “prep” and financial means. However, I recognized some discrepancies in the different participants’ beliefs regarding whether prep style reliably denoted anything other than socioeconomic class. Some individuals expressed that people who dress “preppy” are also typically from the Northeast, had conservative political beliefs, attend boarding schools and/or Ivy League universities, go sailing, and play sports such as tennis, polo, and lacrosse.

Others, however, suggested that such extrapolations are not necessarily always reliable. For instance, DR suggested that there is a “preppy” way of dress as well as a “preppy” lifestyle, and that while these often overlap, they sometimes do not. He proposes that both are valid reasons to describe someone as “preppy,” but that one does not inevitably require the other. For instance, dressing in a preppy style may denote a certain level of financial means, but it does not always signify a preppy lifestyle. However, if an individual participates in a preppy lifestyle, they typically also dress in a preppy style, particularly because of the strong relationship between many aspects of preppy dress and preppy lifestyle activities (i.e. boat shoes for sailing).

One student, LN, provided an alternative opinion. Also from an upper class background, but hailing from an urban neighborhood with exposure to variety of styles while growing up, he felt that there were still ways to distinguish between those who might dress in a preppy style and aspire to participate in the associated lifestyle versus those individuals who dress in a preppy manner and are already a part of that lifestyle. LN feels that while many people may wear clothes defined as “preppy,” the manner with which they are worn is telling. He proposes that there remains a certain factor of nonchalance and disregard amongst individuals who are from solidly moneyed backgrounds and who dress in a conservative prep style that is not present in the attire of individuals from newly wealthy backgrounds who attempt to emulate this look. This

seems to be consistent with the “neatness” mentioned in Lisa Birnbach’s *The Official Preppy Handbook*, that I previously noted as inconsistent with traditional “prep” values. LN generally judges that people who dress in a neater, spiffier, more “perfectly-put-together” version of prep style tend to be those who aspire to become involved in the preppy lifestyle. Conversely, those who do not seem to care about what they are wearing and are unconcerned with how old their clothes look, tend to be the individuals who actively participate in that lifestyle, which includes certain participation in sporting activities (sailing, polo, golf), educational pursuits (boarding schools, Ivy League universities), and other social elements (country clubs, vacation homes).

Students generally agreed that prep style was relevant to their collegiate experience, even though most did not describe their personal style as having a significant relation to what they defined as “preppy.” One individual, DA, who identifies himself as being of an upper class background, pointed out that, for instance, many students at Cornell dressed in a way that would be consistent with his definition of “preppy” when they go to bars at night, regardless of their personal style of dress on a daily basis. He suggested that compared to his experiences in cities and on other college campuses, where he would often see people dressed quite casually, in denim jeans and t-shirts or sweatshirts, male students at Cornell typically wore a uniform preppy look of slacks or chinos with a collared button-down shirt. DA’s observation about dress as related to the campus social life implies that dressing in conventionally preppy attire is seen as the appropriate code of attire in situations where socioeconomic status and social hierarchies might be emphasized, and that perhaps daily wear is less significant in distinguishing oneself. This inference is consistent with my historical review of prep style on college campuses being used as an important mechanism of class distinction in social situations, versus the relative indifference towards the intellectual side of campus life and the academic realm in general. Many

participants also mentioned fraternity life as being an example of how “prep” was relevant to college life. Of the ten individuals interviewed, five were actively involved in a social fraternity on campus. While only one of these five students identified their personal style as “preppy,” they all shared experiences of dressing for fraternity events, such as wine tours and semi-formals, in a way that is consistent with their definitions of “preppy.” Furthermore, three of the five individuals not associated with fraternities on campus, expressed the belief that most students who dressed in a preppy style on a daily basis were also members of fraternities on campus. This suggests that there continues to be a strong relationship between preppy clothing and fraternity membership, as was seen in my historical review of “prep” on college campuses during the twentieth century.

Finally, while, as previously mentioned, all students believed that the term “preppy” is indicative of higher socioeconomic status; several participants also suggested that the term may have a negative connotation dependent on one’s position. Among some students, particularly those who self-identified as being of upper class upbringings, the negative connotation related to dressing in a preppy style was accounted for as a misreading of notions of modesty and humbleness that they themselves valued. Interestingly, all of the students who self-identified as “upper-class” had similar definitions of their personal style. When asked to describe their style they did not use the term “preppy,” and instead used words like “comfortable...not very fashionable...haphazard...worn-in.” However, when specifically asked whether their personal style is related to “prep” they all acknowledged that their daily wear was consistent with several aspects of what they considered to be “preppy.” This apparently unconscious correlation was generally attributed to their upbringing. Two of the three students identifying themselves as from upper class backgrounds had attended private secondary schools, and all of these students

described the neighborhoods they grew up in as being “WASPy.” Among students who did not participate in this style, and particularly those who also self-identified as being of middle or lower class status, the negative connotation associated with “prep” was attributed to a negative perception of the attitudes and behaviors of those who they observe dressing in a preppy manner, specifically those involved in fraternity life. For instance, both BW and JH, students who identified as “upper middle class” and were not involved in fraternity life, described an association on the Cornell University campus between “obnoxious and arrogant” characters of some fraternities and the preppy clothing that they typically wear, which contributes to a negative connotation.

CONCLUSION

While popular culture tends to dismiss the modern “prep” as a nondescript follower of a certain style, as portrayed by Birnback’s earlier quoted claim that “prep” is nothing more than fashion at this point, other evidence suggests that the historically established connections between “prep,” collegiate life, and socioeconomic position, still persist, though perhaps to a lesser extent. One must consider that the theoretical definitions relating to the associations between clothing and class are more complex than they once were, “Clothing as a form of communication has become a set of dialects, rather than a universal language” (Crane, 2001: 188). Instead of specific styles of dress obviously and explicitly being designated as appropriate for various social classes, as done in ancient and medieval times, “more subtle sorts of conspicuous consumption are directed towards one’s peers rather than toward the world in general” (Lurie, 1981: 130). Although the term might have been victim of overuse and overextension, it has not reached the point of being as simple a descriptor of visual aesthetic as are, for example, the terms “sporty” or “girly.”

In the case of “prep,” certain elements of clothing and the demeanor with which they are worn still effectively suggest a particular socioeconomic situation. What has actually diminished is the ability for the “prep” look to concretely signify involvement in the historically associated lifestyle that includes an established “old money” family, preparatory school upbringing, Ivy League education, country club membership, and participation in sports like polo or sailing. However, dressing in a preppy manner may at least signal an aspiration to adopt this type of lifestyle, even if the individual is not currently involved in such activities. Reviewing the history and evolution of prep style and its robust connection with institutions of American upper

class society, from its preparatory school origins through its presence on Ivy League campuses, has continued to signify socioeconomic superiority in the American context that is the foundation of this sort of aspirational desire. With the post-war changes in the university system that allowed greater access to education and social mobility, the influence of media and advertising, and the commercialization of this style in the 1980s, the opportunity presented itself to use prep style as a function of displaying one's social aspirations, not only position.

It was during this period of the late twentieth century that the rift between conventionally "old money" families and recently wealthy "new money" individuals came into play. The aspirational adoption of "prep" by those who might be classified as "new money" may thus be indicative of an attempt to reconcile with the type of "old money" lifestyle that still seemed elusive to them. This phenomenon is consistent with the observations and beliefs gathered during my interviews of modern college students, which suggested that dressing in a preppy manner denotes a minimum socioeconomic status as well as an association with a certain type of attitude and lifestyle—or a desire to be associated as such—dependent on the individual. While it may not be possible in contemporary society to immediately and explicitly identify the class to which an individual belongs based on their dress, as it may have been prior to the excess of commercialization and mass marketing that has permeated our culture, the semiotic value of clothing has endured in this example. "Preppy" continues to possess a sense of cultural capital that provides implications relating to the lifestyles, attitudes, and aspirations of individuals who choose to don this look.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Name

Age?

Hometown?

Private or Public High School?

How would you classify your family's socioeconomic status?
(upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, or lower)

Did your parents attend college? Did your grandparents attend college?

How would you define the term "preppy"?

What particular items of apparel, brands, or images do you associate with the term "prep"?

Where do you think these associations come from?

How would you define your typical personal style?

Do you think your personal style has any connection with "prep"? Why or Why not?

Do you think that the label "prep" or "preppy" has a positive or negative connotation? Explain.

Do you believe there is any way to visually determine if someone is "preppy"? How would this process work?

Does identifying someone as "preppy" tell you anything else about a person in addition to his personal sense of style? What sorts of information can you deduct?

Do you think that there is a relationship between "preppy" style and socioeconomic status? Explain—why, where does this relationship come from, etc.

Do you believe that "prep" as a fashion genre and a lifestyle genre are the same or different? Is it possible to dress "preppy" and not be "preppy"? Or is it possible to dress in a different style and be "preppy"?

Do you think there is a connection between college life and "preppy" style"? Explain.

Do you think this is specifically relevant to your university in any way?