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RETAIL

Ties Are Dead. Or Are They?

A G7 Summit photo op featuring world leaders without neckties had the internet buzzing about the decline of the go-to men's accessory. But the story of the tie is an evolution, not an outright death.




Presidents and prime ministers from the US, Italy, Japan, France, Germany, the UK and the European Union gathered in Bavaria, Germany for the G7 Summit. (Getty Images)

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Last week, when presidents and prime ministers from the US, Italy, Japan, France, Germany, the UK and the European Union gathered in Bavaria, Germany, to take a “family photo” at the annual G7 summit, there was one glaring omission: neckties.

The world's most powerful political leaders' casual look — a stark contrast from years past, when everyone wore a tie — ignited a global discussion. One headline: “World leaders criticised for ‘sloppy’ appearance as they forgo neckties at G7 summit.” An online critic tweeted that the group resembled “the dads and uncles at the end of a wedding who had 35 Heinekens and are accosting the photographer while their wives yell at them that their taxi is outside.”

Ties weren't completely absent from the summit. Some politicians had worn them earlier, and the gathering also took place over the weekend, when wardrobe expectations are more relaxed. But the explicit choice to forego the necktie during this year's photo served as a signal of the once-pervasive menswear accessory's waning presence. "The tie is dead," **declared** menswear blogger Derek Guy on Twitter.

Indeed, even years before the pandemic, men's wardrobes experienced a mass casualisation, pushing companies like JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs to adopt a more flexible dress code for their employees in 2016 and 2019, respectively. Covid-19 solidified this trend, and along with the dip in sales of tailored suits and formal menswear, ties sales started slumping. Tie sales declined almost 6 percent in 2019, according to market analysis from Kantar, and in 2020, fell 42 percent, according to a data report from Management One.

But as menswear sales are now bouncing back, brands have conflicting opinions on where they stand on neckties. Some are distancing themselves from the accessory while others see a necktie resurgence.

Experts agree that while the necktie is not as pervasive in the corporate work setting as it once was, it's still important in occasionwear. Plenty of shoppers are also wearing ties to the office as a form of self-expression, not because they have to.

And while casual wardrobes are here to stay in many workplaces, there are still professionals who want and need ties. Personal stylist Lauren Rothman, who works with a slew of politicians, TV anchors and restaurant groups in the Washington DC area, said she is giving varied styling advice. She said she tells news anchors to keep wearing ties, for example, since she believes TV audiences aren't ready for such casual appearances while recommending some restaurant groups have managers switch to jackets instead.

A World With Fewer Ties

To some shoppers who are abandoning neckties, the accessory has “reverberations of stuffiness, conservatism and being buttoned-up,” said James Harris, co-host of the menswear podcast Throwing Fits. As employees return to offices, many shoppers would rather buy nice denim and invest in less formal menswear options.

To another type of fashion enthusiast who might have owned dozens of colourful ties a few years ago, the choice to experiment with jewellery or more daring footwear choices feels more exciting now, Harris added, especially given how much the style rules around masculinity have changed.

“I think we’re exploring how you can express personal style without subscribing to pre-established rules from 10 years ago,” said Harris. “Guys are not shopping for ties the way they are shopping for sneakers right now.”

Brands are responding in kind: Zegna has scaled back on its tie assortment, instead focussing on more casual categories, like knitwear and sports coats, Gildo Zegna, chairman and chief executive of Ermenegildo Zegna Group, told BoF.

“The tie is not dead 100 percent, but surely it’s not popular anymore and is being replaced more and more with other items,” Zegna said. “There’s a trend by which men want to wear a suit in a different way, with ... a silk shirt or a polo, or a luxury slipper. For the tie, I don’t see a good future.”

Ditching the necktie has also become more popular in politics, said Rothman, who noted that politicians like Andrew Yang and Pete Buttigieg often adopted a no-tie look early on in their campaigns for image reasons. Rothman said the G7 leaders likely ditched their ties because of the general messaging it sent to world audiences.

“They’re trying to signal that as the world is more casual, they’re closer to the everyday folks and relate better to them,” said Rothman.

How Ties Will Survive

Fashion brands who are experiencing an uptick in tie sales say shoppers who are buying the accessory for work wardrobes are doing so as a style choice, not because of a mandated dress code. For customers like these, brands could find success with floral patterns and bold colours, which are selling well at Bonobos, fashion director George McCracken said.

“The way guys are wearing ties has shifted,” said McCracken. “It’s less about using it in a uniform and more about it being a fun accessory.”


Prada - Runway - Milan Fashion Week S/S 2023 A model walks the runway at the Prada fashion show during the Milan Fashion Week S/S 2023 on June 19, 2022 in Milan, Italy. (Daniele Venturelli/Daniele Venturelli / WireImage)

At Bonobos, the category is seeing double-digit growth this year, said McCracken, and the brand expects tie sales will soon hit pre-pandemic levels. Neiman Marcus is stocking up on its assortment of ties after attending the men's fashion presentations in Milan this past month, where brands like Brioni, Thom Ford, Prada and Brunello Cucinelli all debuted strong menswear looks featuring ties, said Bruce Pask, men's fashion director at Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman Marcus.

"We're seeing brands that have mastered this luxurious, casual elegance have a real significant presence of neckties in their collection," he said. "They are cultural indicators."

And as more **weddings** and formal events that were cancelled during the pandemic resume, Pask believes the ties will continue to pick up interest. The accessory might not be an everyday item anymore, but he said shoppers still want ties for special occasions and are willing to spend more on ones that feel special.

"We're seeing an increase in [tie sales] in events that are black-tie [or] white-tie driven because of the yearning to celebrate," said Pask.

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