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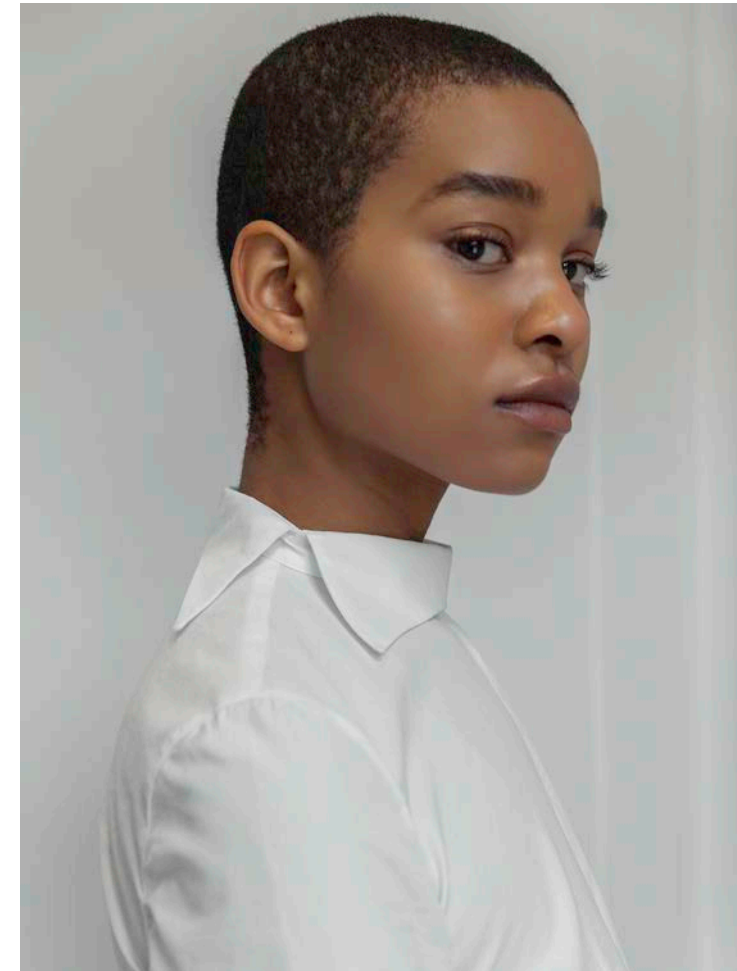
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UNIFORM

IDIOSYNCRATIC

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UNIFORM



ERICA EFSTRATOUidakis

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UNIFORM

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I D I O S Y N C R A T I C

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U N I F O R M

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Industrial Design the Department of Industrial Design of the  
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

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Designed by Erica Efstratoudakis

This book is dedicated to the strong women in my life.  
I wouldn't be me without you.

“Dress shabbily and they remember  
the dress; dress impeccably and they  
remember the woman.”

— *Coco Chanel*

## C O N T E N T S

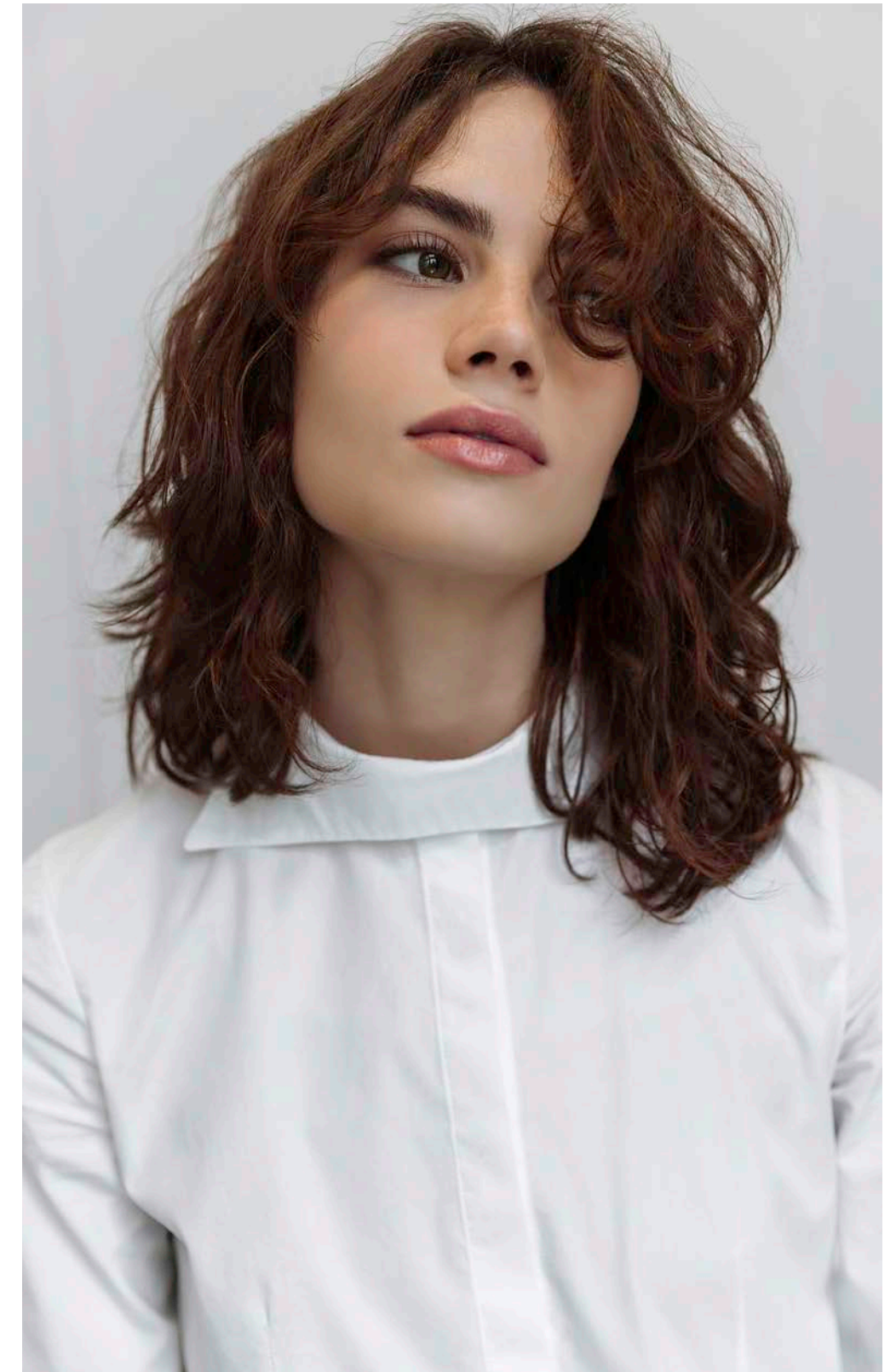
12	Abstract
15	Introduction
17	Story
18	Users
25	What should I wear today?
29	She wore that yesterday
33	Uniforms: blend in to stand out
36	Experiments
38	Baseline black
44	Prototype: white collar
58	Prototype: chemise
74	Final looks: idiosyncratic uniforms
94	A fashionista's critique
95	Fashion as a design problem
98	Conclusion
108	Acknowledgments
110	Bibliography



## ABSTRACT

Clothing mediates between the individual and the social. It creates a dialogue between our inner selves and our environments, a dialogue that becomes especially fraught for women at work. Focusing on women's workwear in male-dominated fields, this thesis calls attention to the existing cultural norms in work environments that solidify dated gender expectations and biases. It suggests that the fashion industry has not adequately addressed the sartorial and emotional needs of everyday working women, and intervenes by placing wearers at the center of the design process. By applying needs-driven solutions and user research to a psychologically powerful force like fashion, this thesis explores the merging of fashion with industrial design. At the heart of the project lies the question, can the implementation of industrial design thinking into fashion address complex issues like gender biases in work environments?

Can the implementation of industrial design thinking into fashion address complex issues like gender biases in work environments?



## INTRODUCTION

Clothing is so much more than pieces of fabric used to cover our naked bodies. It is embedded with meaning, enabling wordless conversations about who we are, what we do, and what we believe in. The things we wear can establish our place within a group, represent larger value systems, and even dictate social behaviors. Societal and cultural norms are often translated into an unwritten dress code that becomes a kind of uniform. These uniforms are especially common in corporate environments where specific modes of dress are perceived as indicators of competence and professionalism.

However, there is still a distinct division in the sartorial approaches of male and female employees in corporate environments, especially the male-dominated ones. Through my ethnographic research, I have discovered that for women working in these fields, getting dressed is a much more complicated and nuanced process than it is for their male counterparts. Balancing professionalism, femininity, and modesty in the workplace becomes a time-consuming, frustrating, and confusing morning routine driven by the question, "Will I be taken seriously in this outfit?"

It should be noted that there is a history of tension between industrial design and fashion. Industrial designers have been known to value function and utility above all else, while fashion designers have been renowned for fulfilling an artistic vision. The distinct methodologies separate the two fields and perpetuate a tone of animosity between them. Industrial designers are really good at focusing on the user of a product and designing around

his/her needs. The fashion industry trains its practitioners to worship star designers who express their creative voice in a collection of garments. While this kind of thinking is conceptual and inspiring, it lacks consideration for the people actually wearing the clothes. Fashion designers have failed to see the value in human centered design, even though clothes are meant to be worn by people. Industrial designers have deemed fashion artistic, frivolous, and feminine, thereby dismissing it from their practice almost entirely. But the friction between the two fields prevents a compelling opportunity for designers to embed larger visions in a product that already has such an intimate and emotional interaction with its users. By understanding the strengths and shortcomings of both disciplines, one could build a bridge and create an additional design methodology more powerful and influential than either approach alone.



Urban uniforms of Providence. Photos taken by fellow grad students.



## STORY

Over the past few months, I have interviewed fifteen women of varying ages, backgrounds and professions about their work life and wardrobe. Our rich conversations made it very clear that dress is something that working women think about. A lot. But the meat of the project lies in the close relationship I have developed with three particular professional women with positions in tech, law, and finance, all classically male-dominated fields. Based on these women's specific needs and feedback, I've iterated prototypes of different elements of a work uniform. Conceptually, my prototypes are derived from historically relevant

and symbolic workwear items, such as the white collared shirt and the chemise dress. They seesaw between masculine and feminine silhouettes and style lines. The concept development process and feedback culminated in the creation of one final look per participant that is idiosyncratic to its wearer's personal and professional needs. My design solution is not a concrete answer to the double standards that exist in the workplace, but is meant to call attention to the attitudes and perceptions that cause women to question their appearances at work, and to contradict the current sartorial expectations and stereotypes.



## USERS

After interviewing more than a dozen women, I realized that different professions set different standards of formality and femininity in dress. The participants in my thesis work extended from workers in the tech world with its expectation of informality and androgyny, to the very formal finance world where feminine dress exudes a sense of power. Through interviewing my participants and other women, I gained an understanding of their emotional and professional needs and can speak to their experiences anecdotally.

### HANNAH



**JOB**  
founder of tech start-up

**WORK ENVIRONMENT**  
small team, hectic

**WORK DRESS CODE**  
casual, androgynous

**HANNAH'S STYLE**  
curated casual, simple

### MICHELLE



**JOB**  
corporate immigration attorney

**WORK ENVIRONMENT**  
conservative, serious

**WORK DRESS CODE**  
business casual

**MICHELLE'S STYLE**  
classic, generic, casual

### SHANNON



**JOB**  
financial VP

**WORK ENVIRONMENT**  
heteronormative, serious

**WORK DRESS CODE**  
formal, conservative

**SHANNON'S STYLE**  
classic, feminine, chic

### THINK & FEEL

need to dress respectably  
dress is important at work  
need to fit in  
power in casual attire  
style evolves with age

### SAY & DO

oversees design & product  
active lifestyle  
works in small office  
travels for research  
sets tone of office with dress

### WORK CULTURE

small team  
colleagues dress similarly  
there is "tech fashion"  
sexist people (outside office)  
pressure to be unique

### PAIN POINTS

does not want outfit to be a distraction  
does not want to stand out  
pressure as a female role model in tech  
mistaken for girlfriend at conferences  
shy personality = mansplaining

### HANNAH



chief creative officer  
& founder of tech startup

“When you are one of the few women founders in tech, you represent so much more than yourself. I am a young founder, I’m Asian, and I am a woman, so I represent so much. Honestly, it’s a lot of pressure.”

### WARDROBE

conservative  
casual  
consistent  
androgynous  
comfortable

Hannah is a founder of a tech startup in Providence, Rhode Island. Before starting her own tech company, she studied mechanical engineering and worked at a couple industrial design firms, dominated by men. Being the only woman on a design team at such a young age greatly contributed to a crippling sense of insecurity, she remembers. Dress played, and still plays, an important role in how she wanted to present herself to her peers.

As Hannah advanced in her career and started her own company, her experience and confidence eventually overpowered her insecurities, but they didn’t take away the stress of other people’s expectations.

When a woman becomes the face of a tech company, the way she looks is automatically associated with the work itself. “There is tech fashion. If you look at women in tech, they all have the same short hairstyle. There is a reason for it; they want to be remembered by their look.” She disclosed that she has encountered a lot of sexist people. To avoid being noticed for anything other than their work, women in tech generally wear understated clothing. The “fashionless” sense of fashion is meant to send the message that she is not following the latest trends because she is too busy doing her work.

Hannah has a consistent sartorial approach. At the time of our interviews, she had a drawer full of Everlane shirts that she would cycle through during the work week. This practice kept her morning routine under 15 minutes, and satisfied her needs for a simple, casual, and comfortable look. It became clear to me that Hannah, who is soft-spoken and shy, feels more powerful when she blends in sartorially.

### THINK & FEEL

rejects clothing expectations  
challenges perceptions  
appearance does not equal competence  
likes generic clothes  
more productive in casual attire

### SAY & DO

office work, guides team  
meets with clients  
active lifestyle  
work does not dictate dress  
wows clients with intellect

### WORK CULTURE

small team  
male colleagues & clients in suits  
expectation to "power dress"  
good looks used to hook clients  
assumption: women are paralegals

### PAIN POINTS

does not want outfit to be a distraction  
slightly insecure about small size  
young look perceived as lack of experience  
certain clients judge based on appearance  
expectation for womenswear to be expressive

### MICHELLE



corporate immigration attorney

“My philosophy is to just sort of rebel against [the idea] that how competent I am is reflected by how I look. I don't think that it's necessary.”

### WARDROBE

conservative  
casual  
classic  
comfortable  
generic

Michelle is a corporate immigration attorney in New York City. Though law firms have no shortage of women, particularly among paralegals, her work dealing with corporate, multinational, and investor visas means that her clients are almost exclusively male. In Michelle's office environment, both her clients and her colleagues wear suits. While the women in the field are not expected to be fashionable or trendy, they are expected to look polished and powerful. However, Michelle takes a slightly different approach. “I prefer to downplay expectations from the start and then surprise positively,” she says. Her fashion philosophy is an active resistance to having one. Michelle wears clothes that are generic, the least interesting thing about her, in an attempt to disassociate her competence from her appearance. She described often feeling the piercing judgments of male hedge fund clients about how she looked. But her rejection of anything fashionable is a sartorial statement in and of itself, and a strong one at that. That is why she prefers to dress casually in the office, especially when she has business meetings. She dresses more formally when she goes to court, out of respect for the etiquette, but even then sticks to basic slacks with interchangeable blouses. Although she doesn't identify with a particular style, she aspires to be classic. For her, a formal outfit is a black pant suit. Michelle is aware that to be taken seriously in her field, especially for a woman, requires a certain etiquette of dress. Her awareness of the work culture and her vestimentary stance against it further validates the challenges professional women face every single day.

### THINK & FEEL

need to feel confident & professional  
style evolves with experience  
used to male-dominated environment  
drawn to fast-paced environment  
hard to balance sexy & modest

### SAY & DO

office work, many meetings  
considers workwear a lot  
active lifestyle  
MBA on weekends  
dress cues from older women

### WORK CULTURE

large team  
lack of women in leadership  
heteronormative  
problem retaining women  
male-centric culture

### PAIN POINTS

balancing attractive & professional is hard  
inappropriate comments made around dress  
unprofessional assumptions at networking events  
mastering dress code has learning curve  
expectation for "power femme" dress

### SHANNON



vice president at financial corporation

“Full disclosure, the bank has a woman problem. We have problems retaining and promoting women. It's a very masculine culture.”

### WARDROBE

feminine  
formal  
classic  
trendy  
fitted

Shannon is a vice president at a prominent financial company in New York City. Even more than tech or law, finance has rigorous double standards for male and female dress. Shannon described a male-dominated dynamic at her workplace, especially in the higher positions. Inappropriate comments are thrown around because of the nature of the environment.

Shannon describes the outfits of the senior women in the organization as impeccable and feminine. Power dresses, power blazers, heels, etc. The explicit display of feminine power through dress is an alternative method to blending in with the men. However, flaunting femininity in that space can be tricky. The women are meant “to look attractive, but not too attractive so as to become a topic of conversation,” says Shannon. “They are meant to wear clothes that fit well, but not too well.” A cut a little too low, a heel a little too high, or a skirt a little too tight all give ammunition for unwanted comments or judgments. Women feel insecure and constantly question their outfits, making the process of getting dressed in the morning, which should be simple and easy, daunting and overwhelming. Shannon admits that mastering the finance dress code has been a learning experience, and she has had some mishaps along the way, but has learned how to take sartorial cues from senior women in her organization.

## WHAT SHOULD I WEAR TODAY?

This seems like a simple question. And in theory it should be. But in reality, a professional woman's thought process goes something like this: *A pair of pants and...which top? This one? No, it shows too much cleavage. Or maybe a skirt? That's a pencil skirt, I can hardly move in it. Or maybe instead of two pieces, I'll just wear this dress. Oh, but last time I wore this dress I was called a distraction. But it's not even that tight. Is it? Or was he just an ass? Should I not be wearing this to work? It covers everything, has sleeves, it's below the knee. I give up, back to pants. And maybe this more mannish top. But I don't feel good in that, I don't want to look manly. I could add a necklace or something? No, I should change.*

Professional women don't know what to wear. Sounds like a trivial problem, right? Nope. Dress etiquette in professional settings is indicative of the culture of the work environment, and in some extreme cases provokes hostility. While hostile behavior in the workplace is not common, this negative commentary exists at the forefront of a professional woman's consciousness when getting dressed every single morning. Male colleagues can base their outfit choice on which suit came back from the dry cleaners yesterday. Seems a bit unfair.

Professional dress codes vary across different disciplines and are interpreted uniquely by individual women. But in a world where suits are the de facto expression of male professionalism, there is no standard silhouette for women. There is a feminized version of the suit— we have certainly come a long way from 80s shoulder pads and explicitly mannish suits— but there is no female equivalent of the suit itself. There is no neutral garment that, when wrapped around the female body, immediately transforms from a lifeless drape into a socially accepted symbol of competence and professionalism in the way that a man's suit does.

In my interviews with various professional women, it became clear that young women who are just starting their careers especially feel the need to exaggerate the masculine elements in their outfits to “fit in with the boys.” Dressing the part seems to be the most immediate

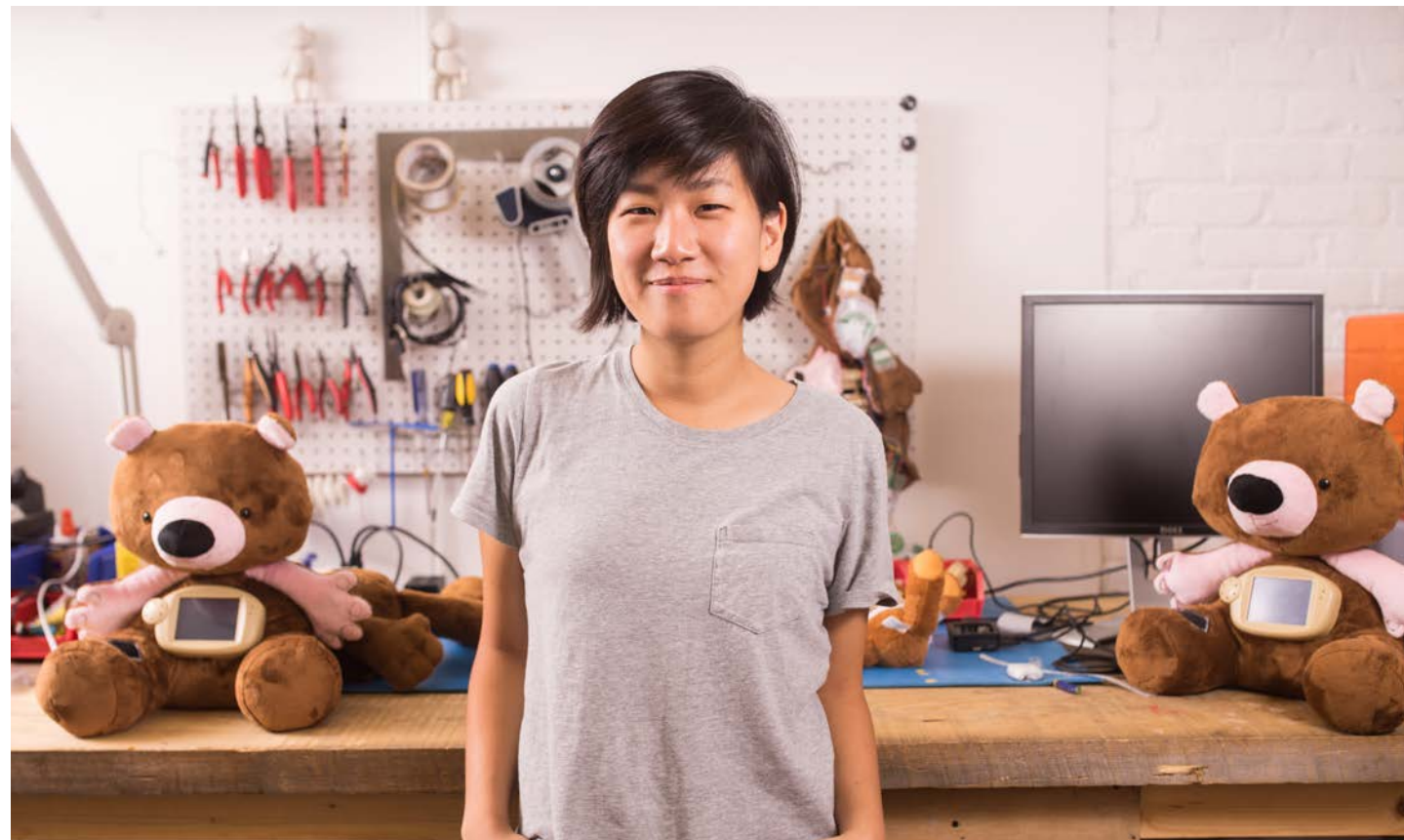
way to present themselves as serious and competent professionals. In reality, appearance has nothing to do with competence. Since when did wearing a floral printed skirt affect the brain's ability to work? It doesn't, and never did. But what it does do is give colleagues the impression that unnecessary attention was paid to the frivolity of fashion, unjustifiably deeming the wearer “not serious enough” to do the job, and do it well.

While professional women are expected to dismiss fashion (all participants expressed they felt this expectation on some level), they are also judged by their appearance in the office. This contradiction puts women in a difficult position. But is work really the time to play dress-up? Why do women have to treat their morning routines as if they were preparing for a theatrical performance and dressing for a part? Would the current expectations, stereotypes, and gender biases change if women were to take the same sartorial approach as men? What if there were a female “work uniform” that conceptually acted like a suit?

In Western culture, we tend to judge aesthetics based on visual polarities: hard/soft, angular/round, structured/flowing, etc. We generally consider harder lines, geometric silhouettes, and structured shapes—all visual elements exhibited in the suit—more masculine. In contrast, our eye interprets soft, round, and curvy as feminine. Marilyn DeLong explains in her article *Aesthetics of Dress* that these visual cues are important, because “by understanding the aesthetic response, one can better understand the critical relation of product to culture and to values of the individual and the group.”<sup>1</sup> The problem is not with the spectrum of visual language itself, but in how the spectrum is perceived when applied to professional attire.



Suit supply shop in lower Manhattan



Hannah in her office

When it comes to dress, the descriptors “professional” and “masculine” are synonymous. “Since the industrial revolution, at which point males came increasingly to fall under the visual constraints of a somber work ethic, the tendency, of course, has been for masculine versus feminine ambivalence in clothing to reveal itself almost exclusively on the female side as women have opted periodically—and during certain periods with great fervor—to incorporate into their personas insignia of male status and masculinity.”<sup>2</sup> Society has modified a masculine baseline to accommodate women for a very long time. This tendency is problematic for women with both a feminine sense of style and those with a more androgynous look. Neither aesthetic really resolves the precarious connotations of each approach. Historically, “sartorial prescriptions reflected prevailing societal norms.”<sup>3</sup> In Western culture, femininity has typically been expressed through ornamentation and decoration in dress, often incorporating pieces that were uncomfortable and constricted mobility (think corsets back then, and pencil skirts today). The reason for this was to emphasize a woman’s domestic and maternal role.<sup>4</sup> The perception of femininity remains largely unchanged. It is deeply rooted in socially constructed gender roles, which don’t pan out well in corporate environments, especially those dominated by men. “Femininity is not a desirable trait in the law for the most part,” observes Michelle, the New York attorney.

Although a feminine sense of style imposes many challenges for the wearer, a more androgynous take isn’t necessarily the solution to gender imbalances. Androgyny poses a different set of questions, one that affirms the asymmetry of gendered professional garments. As Fred Davis argues, in its origins and allusions, androgynous dress is “located much more often on the male side of the gender division than on the female.”<sup>5</sup> According to Davis, even in the case of androgyny, a term coined to represent an ambiguous blending of gender identity and its visualizations, there is no real ambiguity. Masculine elements are obviously modified for women. The androgynous aesthetic does not result in a neutral blend of feminine and masculine, but is another case of a strategic application of masculine visual elements to women’s clothing.

An interesting pattern that emerges from studying the dress code of women working in male-dominated fields correlates age with femininity. Every one of my interviewees mentioned that their age has affected their style. Young women tend to feel a stronger need to fit in and prove themselves, which is reflected in their more masculine sense of dress. Downplaying femininity also helps them avoid being mistaken for the girlfriend or significant other of a male colleague, a dated perception that still prevails at corporate

<sup>2</sup> Marchetti, Sara B., and Jane Farrell-Beck. “Look Like a Lady; Act Like a Man; Work Like a Dog: Dressing for Business Success.” *Dress*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2008, pp. 49–69, doi:10.1179/036121108805252790.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Crane, Diana. “Clothing Behavior as Non-Verbal Resistance: Marginal Women and Alternative Dress in the Nineteenth Century.” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1999, pp. 241–268, doi:10.2752/136270499779155078.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, Fred. *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008.

“You have to be a role model for so many people. Because we are so underrepresented, you have to be very conscious about how you dress.”

—Hannah

networking events (a few of the women I spoke to described their humiliation when these wrong assumptions were made). By contrast, older women, generally with higher-powered positions, years of experience and an established sense of self, feel confident enough to dress in a more feminine manner. This behavioral pattern alone illustrates the implicit perception of feminine clothing as weak. Experienced women no longer feel the need to prove their competence, so they can be more expressive through their dress without fearing that their ability will be questioned.

So how does a modern woman dress for success? In an attempt to navigate the sea of challenges, women generally practice one of two distinct fashion philosophies. The first method involves taking visual cues from senior women in the organization and mimicking their style. Younger women know that women in high positions have made it through the ranks, so their dress becomes symbolic of power and success. Imitating their look becomes a newbie’s way of fitting in and reinforcing her aptitude. The second method commits women to an active resistance to any fashion philosophy (which is, by default, a fashion philosophy in itself). The overarching statement of the second method is established by the idea that clothes in a professional setting should not be

a distraction, thereby redirecting all attention to the work. Ironically, in most cases, detracting attention from clothes actually requires a lot of thought, especially since it is important that this statement remain consistent. Hannah, the tech startup founder, claims she doesn’t want her clothes to be a distraction. “I’m here for a job,” she says, “Ignore everything else. Just look at my face.” She also stresses the importance of dress for a woman in her position. “You have to be a role model for so many people. Because we are so underrepresented, you have to be very conscious about how you dress.”

I have no issue routinely wearing the same shirt in different colours say, but the same shirt three days will be a lot to explain to everyone around me. I'll be a walking experiment in a fairly obvious way

Is that the idea?

I can organize my schedule to wear it tomorrow and day after.

Michelle, speaks up about on discomfort wearing the same garment multiple days in a row

## SHE WORE THAT YESTERDAY

A lot of women who practice the second method (wearing basics to ensure the outfit is not a distraction), intentionally or not, stress the importance of a consistent look (think Steve Jobs in his black turtleneck) for memorability. However, contrary to the dress code for men, there is a taboo in the working world around women wearing the same thing everyday. If a man were to wear the same suit a few days in a row, it is very likely that it would go unnoticed. Yet if a woman wears the same thing twice, she is judged for it. We instinctively pay more

attention to what women wear likely because the acceptable attire does not fall under the same "visual constraints of somber work ethic"<sup>6</sup> that menswear does. The taboo also attests to the pressures and expectations placed on women to maintain a certain appearance or "brand"—one that is not necessarily trendy, but carefully considered and curated, yet retains a certain nonchalance. "There's a lot more individuality that is expected to be expressed in a woman's clothing than in a man's," says attorney, Michelle.



Scene from 2000 American film *American Psycho*



Generic outfit, "Youth Mode" by K-Hole

WOMEN'S WORKWEAR CURRENT MARKET

FORMAL

CASUAL



LOW END

HIGH END



## UNIFORMS :

### BLEND IN TO STAND OUT

According to Oscar Wilde, the ultimate fashion statement is, oddly enough, the suit. The simple, classic, suit. A beautiful, rational, and functional garment that has remained basically unchanged since the French Revolution. A uniform of sorts that is still worn by most men who work in corporate settings. But how often do you see traditional suits on the runway? And more importantly, why is there no equivalent garment for women? Why are women expected to keep up and change their own look every six months? And why, if a woman rejects that practice, does she risk being criticized for trying to blend in with the men?

Contrary to the belief that uniforms enforce anonymity, they actually have the opposite effect. They help assert identity. It sounds counterintuitive, and indeed it is not always the case. But in situations where quasi uniforms are adapted by groups of people, the parameter of a specified mode of dress acts as a baseline for individuals to form their own perspective. The tiniest differences become magnified and therefore more significant. Or as Jennifer Craik puts it in her book, *Uniforms Exposed*, “often, uniforms involve formative moments of self-hood, especially associated with breaking out or away from normative codes...about individual interpretation or difference in sameness.”<sup>7</sup> A lack of focus on the body emphasizes the face. For a professional woman attending a networking event or speaking at a conference, redirecting focus to her face and her accomplishments as opposed to her sense of fashion can really come in handy.

The effect of the uniform or sense of “anti-fashion” gained enough traction in early 2014 to become a term: Normcore. The popular contemporary trend, which started as an ironic interpretation of the millennial obsession with being different, became a prominent fashion movement that replaced street style clichés with bland, unfashionable attire. It is based on the concept that when the pressure to seem special is taken off, one is truly liberated through the rejection of the status quo. Trend forecasting group K-Hole in their report *Youth Mode*, emphasizes the real feat of the trend, which embraces a human need to connect with others and belong to a group. Forging a sense of belonging to a specific community is precisely the function of a uniform, even if that uniform is a hoodie and jeans or a suit and tie. The uniform facilitates a transformation of body that grants the wearer the ability to adopt a certain persona while projecting a specific image. It is for all these reasons that I was compelled to call my collection of garments work uniforms as opposed to workwear.

“Fashion rests upon folly. Art rests upon law. Fashion is ephemeral. Art is eternal. Indeed, what is fashion really? A fashion is merely a form of ugliness so absolutely unbearable that we have to alter it every six months! It is quite clear that were it beautiful and rational we would not alter anything that combined those two rare qualities. And wherever dress has been so, it has remained unchanged in law and principle for many hundred years.”

— *Oscar Wilde*

EXPERIMENTS

“You can wear black at any time. You can wear it at any age. You may wear it for almost any occasion.”

– *Christian Dior*

## **1** BASELINE BLACK

The baseline experiment was meant to introduce the project to the participants. It was a warm-up exercise, a jog around the block before the sprint. I asked them to wear all black (their own clothes) for three days and keep a journal about the experience. Nobody expressed any major distress or concern during this experiment, mainly because they were wearing their own clothes. Aside from a color (or lack thereof) constraint, they were free to choose any garment. Letting the participants choose their own garments gave me a good sense of who they were and their go-to everyday style choices.

## HANNAH'S THOUGHTS

Wearing all black is pretty easy since I wear like this often (or too often). It's the color combination where you look casual-profesh or cool-profesh.

Forcing myself to wear all black is surprisingly challenging. Wearing all black and forcing myself to choose an outfit to fit in a certain style frame is making me feel creative with my choices.

I think wearing all black makes me feel a bit more serious. I feel intense wearing only all black. I think I prefer all black outfits when I want to feel serious and intense. But not as an everyday work thing. I miss colors.

Separate from work, I definitely hit the point of no longer wanting to wear all black to work. I like when I choose to wear all black, not as a requirement. This may be due to my limited black outfit choices. If I had more, I think I might not have a problem with this. I didn't like it because I had to spend more time deciding what to wear in the morning.

I do think all black is versatile to fit in many settings. It's easy to coordinate, and different textures can make the overall look more sophisticated or casual. I personally don't think all black is boring at all. I do like all black outfits. I just wish I had more choices in my closet to choose from.

## TAKEAWAYS

### ON STYLE

In-line, but all black gets boring

### ON PRODUCTIVITY

No change

### ON REPEAT

Challenge to keep it interesting

### ON SELF

Felt more serious

### ON OTHERS

Others did not notice



### MICHELLE'S THOUGHTS

I actually liked the black baseline experiment because I could keep it professional while forgetting entirely about what I was wearing. For me that's key – forgetting about what I'm wearing and being able to focus on work rather than being empowered by what I'm wearing because I'm confident that it's fashionable.

It felt great not to have to think about what to wear in the morning.

### TAKEAWAYS

**ON STYLE**  
In-line, but all black gets boring

**ON PRODUCTIVITY**  
No change

**ON REPEAT**  
Challenge to keep it interesting

**ON SELF**  
Felt more serious

**ON OTHERS**  
Others did not notice



### SHANNON'S THOUGHTS

I thought a lot about what I was going to wear given that I would be wearing it in the office for three days. I ultimately decided on one of my black go to dresses, one that I often wear under a blazer for interviews or important meetings. I feel confident in it without having to think too much about it.

When I walked to get lunch during the day I noticed two older businessmen check me out and I didn't over-think it. I am not dressed inappropriately, they are just, well them.

I would be lying if I didn't say that it felt a little out of place wearing the same outfit for a second day in a row.

Not picking out my outfit this morning cut me down on some time.

At first I felt self conscious about wearing the same thing but eventually I barely thought about what I was wearing and was more focused on my actual tasks at hand.

My work uniform took me from my 7:30am start time till past 9pm. The entire day I felt more than comfortable in my black dress. I certainly released I did not stand out though. Many of the women at the conference were wearing black dresses with some sort of jacket. I blended in, whether that is good or bad I am not sure.

Overall the baseline experiment was interesting and definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone to be wearing the same thing three days in a row, but I did purposely pick something I knew I felt comfortable and confident in.

### TAKEAWAYS

**ON STYLE**  
In-line

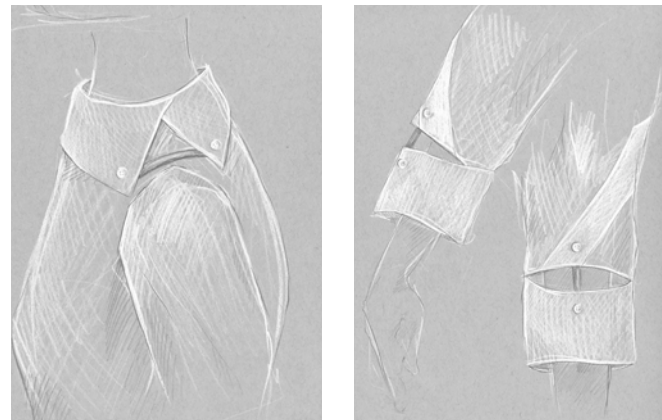
**ON PRODUCTIVITY**  
No change

**ON REPEAT**  
A bit uncomfortable

**ON SELF**  
Blended in

**ON OTHERS**  
Female colleague commented





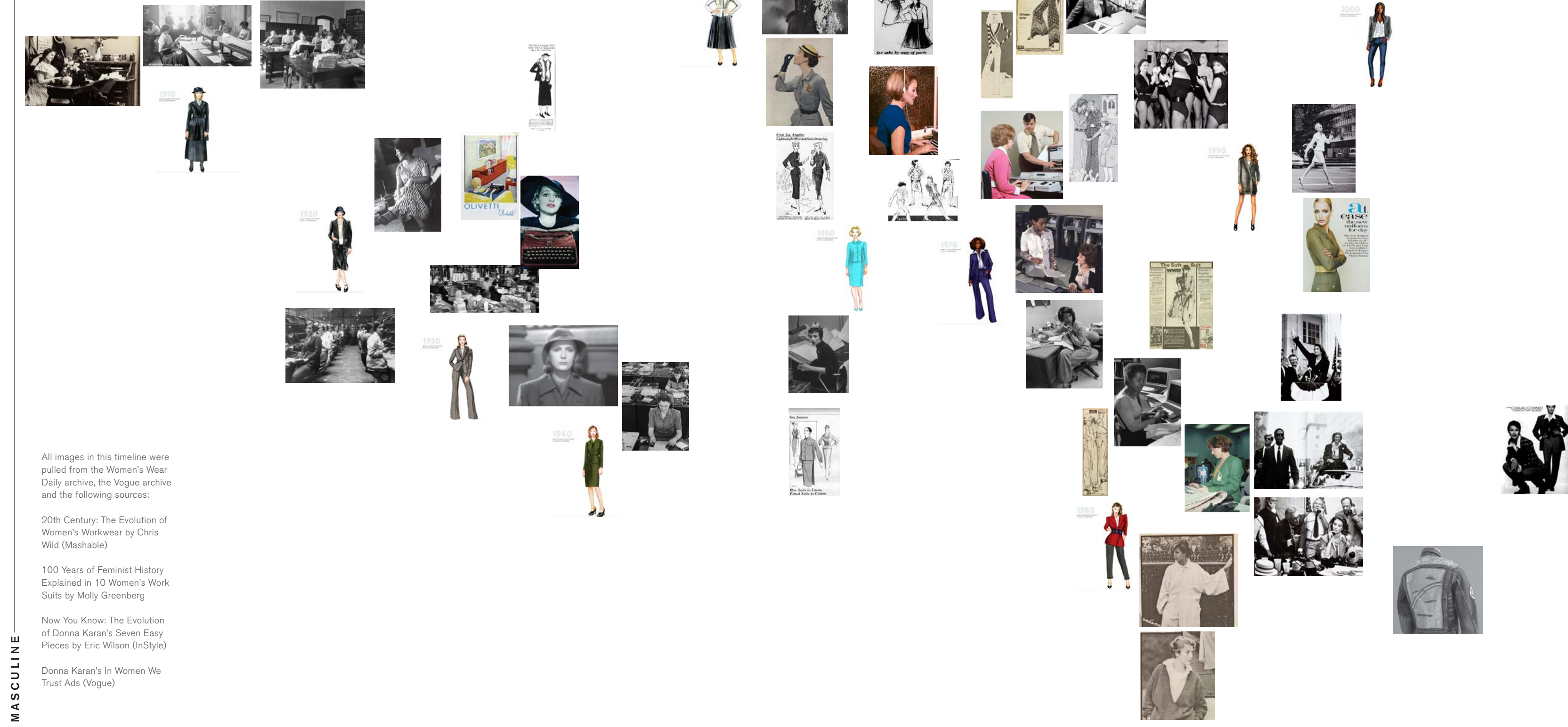
Scene from 1939 American film *Ninotchka*

## 2 PROTOTYPE WHITE COLLAR

The first prototype was basically my way of leveling the scale. I gave all three women the same garment, my take on the classic white collared shirt. The design is based on my analysis of the evolution of women's workwear throughout the 20th century, as well as user insights regarding the significance of a modest neckline in professional attire. I adapted the silhouette of the traditional white collar, originally from men's shirting, and twisted it on its side. The hidden placket of buttons subtly suggests the presence of a tie. The side seams are almost perfectly straight, as they would be in men's shirts, but the darts in the front and back tailor the garment to a slightly more feminine silhouette. The symmetry of the shirt is key to its design. Men's clothing, especially suiting, tends to be symmetrical, exhibiting a sense of structure, confidence, and timelessness. There is a lot more liberty and play with arbitrary asymmetry in women's clothing, which I wanted to avoid in the first prototype garment.

WOMEN'S WORKWEAR 20TH CENTURY

FEMININE



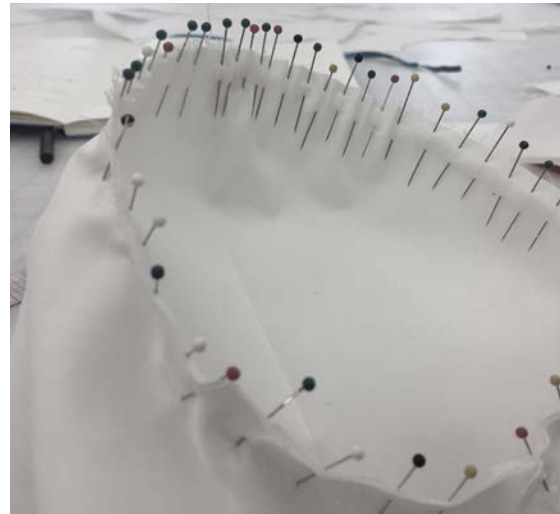
All images in this timeline were pulled from the Women's Wear Daily archive, the Vogue archive and the following sources:

20th Century: The Evolution of Women's Workwear by Chris Wild (Mashable)

100 Years of Feminist History Explained in 10 Women's Work Suits by Molly Greenberg

Now You Know: The Evolution of Donna Karan's Seven Easy Pieces by Eric Wilson (InStyle)

Donna Karan's In Women We Trust Ads (Vogue)





## HANNAH'S THOUGHTS

I felt uncomfortable for work, but I do think it's something I might wear when I'm going out or in a more formal occasion.

The shirt was a bit tight around my armpit/shoulder area - it was fine when standing, but I felt the pinch when I sit to work on my laptop. I started losing productivity due to the discomfort.

Because it looks more formal than my typical wear, it took a longer time to decide what to wear because I wasn't ready to wear something that was very outside of the norm.

I added a cardigan to make it "look" like my typical wear. With the high neck collar and the black cardigan over, I felt a bit like a nun or a priest.

The shirt was not in line with my style for work.

Wearing the shirt made me realize that I do care a lot about the ease of wear and comfort in specific positions (I was more aware of my posture more than ever) - more than I thought.

The form fitting shirt lines and the neck collar were too out of the typical work wear. If it was looser, it would be something I might wear.

The formal look of the shirt definitely made me look professional. But because I wasn't too comfortable with the shirt, I don't think I was 100% at myself at meetings - I had to pay attention on how the shirt is affecting my body almost every 5 minutes.

## TAKEAWAYS

### ON STYLE

Not in-line, too formal

### ON PRODUCTIVITY

Decreased due to discomfort

### ON REPEAT

Uncomfortable

### ON SELF

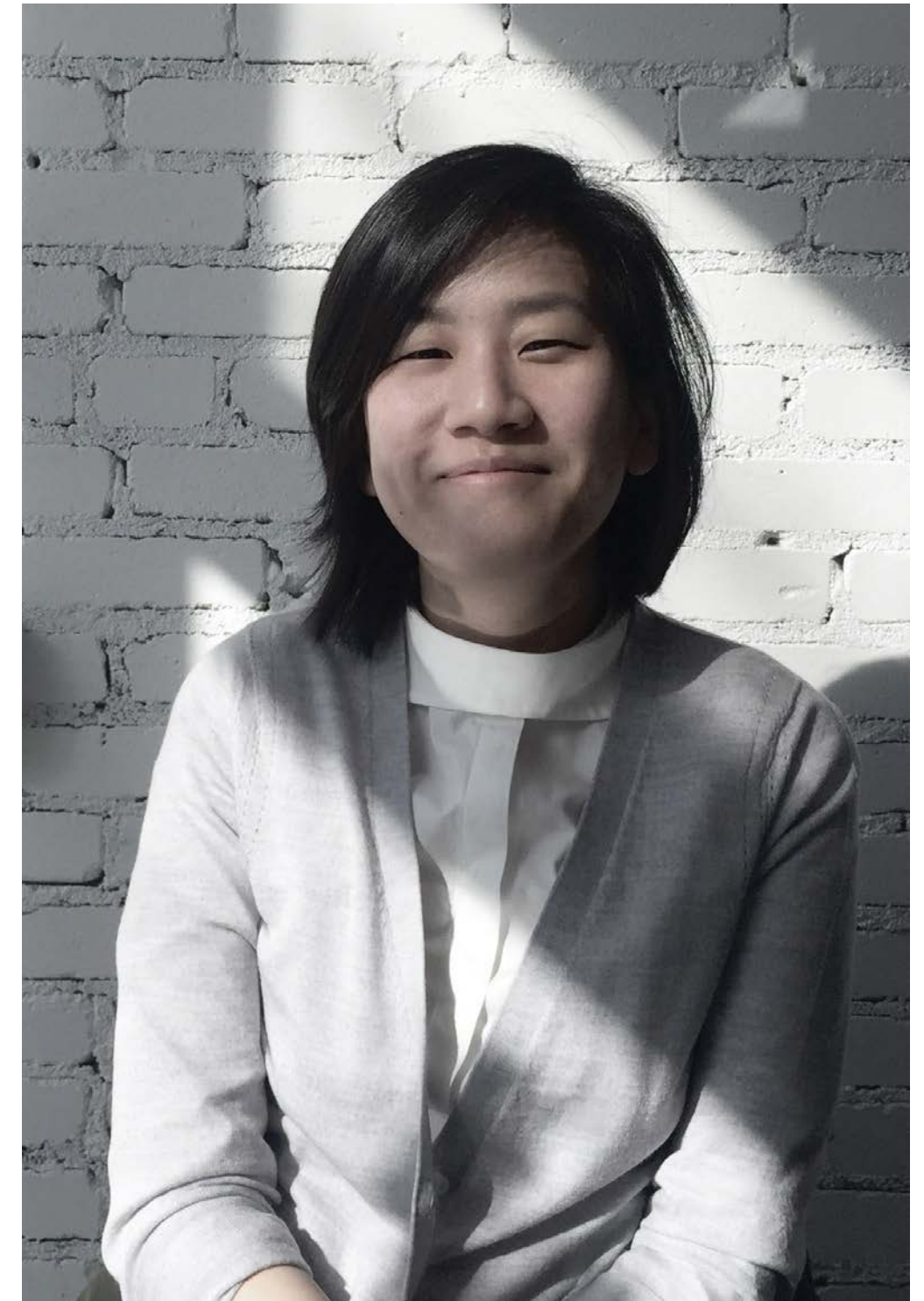
Very self-conscious

### ON OTHERS

Others did not notice (she did not wear it long enough)



“Overall, the outfit was way out of my comfort zone.”





## MICHELLE'S THOUGHTS

I did not wear the shirt to the office today. I had a few meetings and was concerned that it would be too distracting. It was perfectly tailored and fit well but would definitely be out of the ordinary for me with the stylized neck. A law firm is a relatively conservative place and something like that may be a bit jarring. I would be more comfortable wearing it when I had no scheduled meetings and I could explain the experiment to my colleagues.

I try to dress in a way in which my clothing is not noticed. As simple and elegant as the shirt is, it is definitely a noticeable piece!

I have no issue routinely wearing the same shirt in different colours say, but the same shirt three days will be a lot to explain to everyone around me. I'll be a walking experiment in a fairly obvious way.

I'm not sure if that experience is the same for other women in male-dominated industries but for me it's much more about substance than form. Hence clothes that go unnoticed are ideal and those that warrant notice would immediately make me acutely uncomfortable.

While working on any particular case I was engrossed enough to forget what I was wearing but every time I had to meet someone I became self-conscious.

I felt a little uncomfortable and "on display" as it's not how I would normally dress and it caused more attention to be drawn towards what I was wearing than I would like. It distracted me a bit from my productivity because it was always on my mind a bit.

It's a small firm and everyone picked up on me being dressed differently. We're not a "fashion forward" place so it was a conversation starter.

## TAKEAWAYS

### ON STYLE

Not in-line, too formal

### ON PRODUCTIVITY

Decreased due to discomfort

### ON REPEAT

Did not wear more than once

### ON SELF

Felt uncomfortable, "on display"

### ON OTHERS

Colleagues noticed, conversation starter



“The legal industry is notorious for how conservative it is. We're always a decade or two behind, with clothes, attitudes, personalities...”



## SHANNON'S THOUGHTS

I had a range of feelings. At first I was a little thrown off by the design because it was very different than my normal dress. And then I really enjoyed it because it was so well structured and tailored, almost like a good men's suit. It made me feel confident because it was flattering.

I was thrown off by the collar at first to be honest, it looked like it was turned to the side! But then I loved it, it was so different and really cool. I actually got all collar compliments from men!

I felt more relaxed in this shirt and also as my confidence grew I was moving around with more grace and ease.

I was kind of surprised when I received the shirt. It wasn't anything like I had seen before; the collar, the cuffs. When I put it on this morning I immediately noticed how tailored it was to my body, making it very flattering while still feeling comfortable.

At around 10:30am I received a compliment on my shirt, which was exciting!

I got a second complement in the afternoon, from a male coworker actually, admiring the collar and the tailoring. It was a nice (and office appropriate!) comment to get from a coworker.

This was a really fun experiment! My job can be stressful at times and this definitely helped me relax more and focus on the tasks at hand vs. how I look or what I am wearing.

## TAKEAWAYS

### ON STYLE

Not feminine enough but tailoring was in-line

### ON PRODUCTIVITY

Ease of choice and confidence boosts helped productivity

### ON REPEAT

Mixed feelings

### ON SELF

Felt confident

### ON OTHERS

Colleagues noticed and complimented the fit



“It was different than my normal dress...it was so well tailored, almost like a good men's suit. It made me feel confident because it was flattering.”





### 3 PROTOTYPE CHEMISE

The feedback I received from participants was taken into consideration during the design and development phase of the second prototype. The second concept uses Cristóbal Balenciaga's revolutionary chemise or sack dress from the late 1950s as inspiration. It was a controversial garment because it bypassed the waist line and merely skimmed a woman's body instead of hugging it. Men at the time claimed it was ugly and unflattering. However, similar to the suit acting as an envelope around the man's body regardless of size, the chemise dress does the same thing. It skims the body, it doesn't hug. It accommodates all body types and sizes, a feat missing from the common perception of what "professional" looks like for a working woman. I modified elements from the chemise dress into three distinct looks that accommodated the individual needs of the women, while remaining visually consistent.

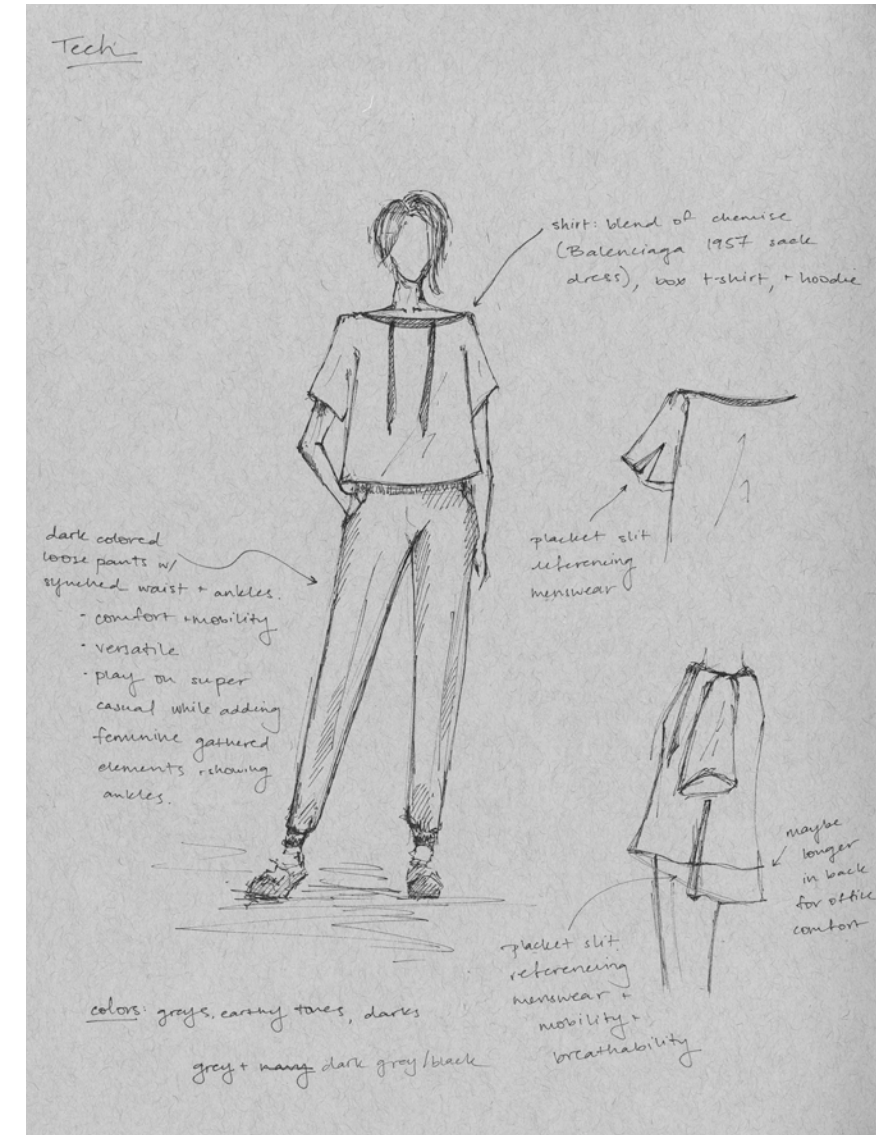
Images (clockwise from top left)  
Balenciaga, Sack Dress, 1957  
Balenciaga, Chemise Dress, 1957  
Balenciaga, Day Tunic, 1957  
Balenciaga, Sack Dress, 1957

## CONCEPT HANNAH

It is common knowledge that the techy uniform is a hoodie and jeans (validated by television shows like Silicon Valley). However, this dress code only applies to the men in the field. It is less clear for women. In her recent article "The subtle sexism of hoodies: Women in Silicon Valley have no idea what to wear to work," Aimee Groth addresses the blurry dress code for women as an indication of the work culture. "The fact that a distinct style for women hasn't emerged is a reflection of their place in the ecosystem—ambiguous. In a network where culture fit is especially important, adapting to social norms is integral to success. In order to join a tribe, you've got to dress, talk, and act similarly. Power is being able to operate outside the norms and still be accepted by the group." The overall aesthetic of the dress code can be summed up in two words: casual and androgynous. In the tech world, casual means competent, and femininity is ignored like an uncomfortable dinner conversation. But in this space where it is perfectly acceptable for men to wear hoodies and jeans, is dressing the same really the right answer for all women? Absolutely not.

I wouldn't describe Hannah's style as feminine. She generally wears skinny jeans, box t-shirts, and hoodies. But she made a point to tell me that she tries to dress up a little for meetings, so I got the sense that she internally struggled with presenting herself as a woman in tech. Her version of a hoodie and jeans wasn't good enough. Based on her feedback from the white collared shirt which pushed her too far in terms of formality, I knew whatever I made for Hannah had to be a subtle departure from her norm. I wanted to encourage her to be comfortable with a bit more femininity in her work outfits.

Hannah's second prototype adapted the collar from the chemise dress into a t-shirt with bell sleeves made from a fine Italian wool. The collar, sleeves, and color made the loose silhouette of the box t-shirt a little more feminine. The thicker wool (as opposed to a thin cotton) references a hoodie, but a bit more formal. I paired the shirt with a pair of drapey tencel pants, which I hoped would make her feel comfortable, feminine (but not too feminine), and free.



## HANNAH'S THOUGHTS

I LOVE THE NEW PROTOTYPE OUTFIT SO MUCH.

It looked and felt like something that I would wear everyday. It was almost like my dream come true. The shirt was so comfortable. The fitting was perfect. The pants were so light and comfortable.

I was able to work very comfortably in various meeting with partners and teammates. Emily complimented me by saying that she liked my outfit today.

Overall, I felt hip. I felt like myself in a very comfortable and confident way. I felt polished.

The outfit was totally in line with my style. 3 out of 4 teammates who were at the office that week complimented. One of them mentioned that "this is very you."

[Re: wearing it 3 days in a row] I was worried that the outfit was going to get dirty—especially the shirt. I was surprised that I was okay with wearing the same outfit for 3 days— I never wear the same thing for multiple days in a row.

Wearing the new outfit (the prototype was something that I might wear when I go out for dinner, not typically for work), made me rethink about my wardrobe. It also made me brainstorm on how to elevate my work attire so that I can get out of my comfort zone. I really enjoyed feeling strong and confident with the outfit that I'm wearing. I felt like I was setting a tone. I felt empowered.

## TAKEAWAYS

ON STYLE  
Perfectly in-line

ON PRODUCTIVITY  
No change, comfortable

ON REPEAT  
Okay with it

ON SELF  
Felt polished, hip, comfortable, and empowered

ON OTHERS  
Others noticed and complimented



“I felt confident. I felt like I was bringing my best self to work.”



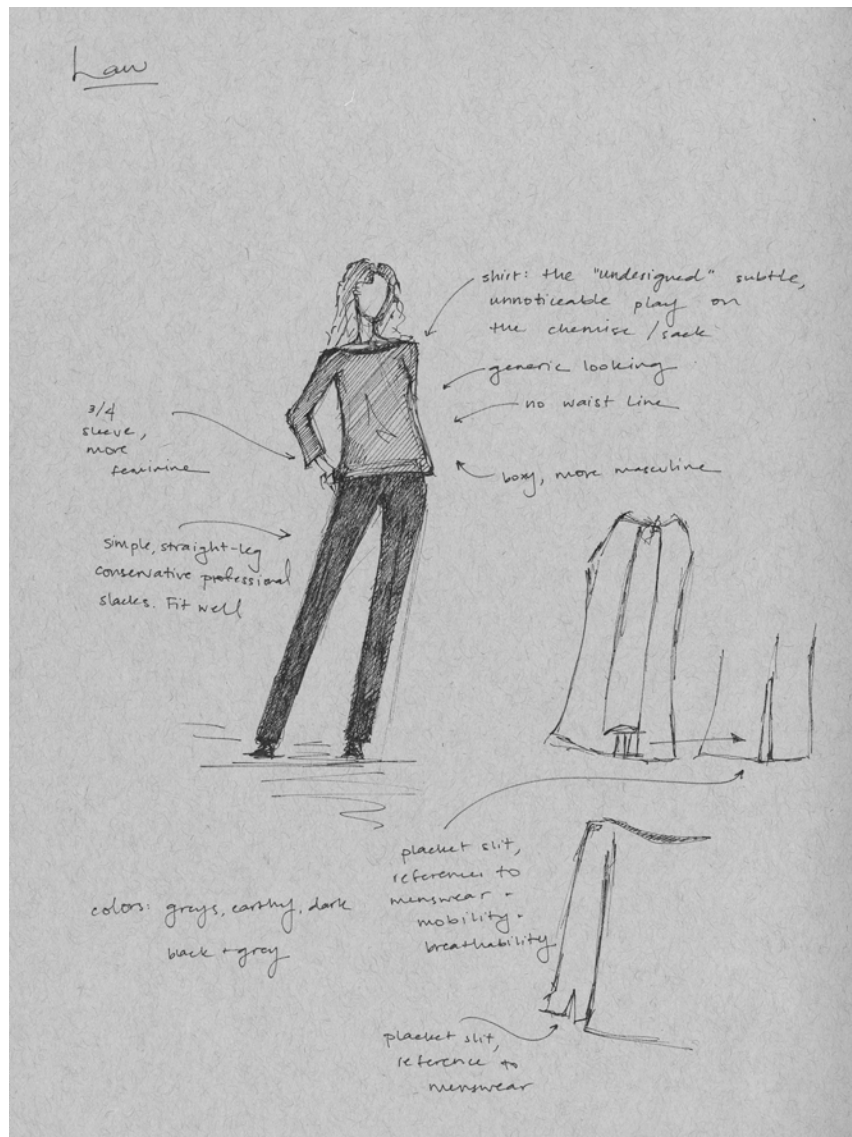




**CONCEPT MICHELLE**

Michelle's intense discomfort with the white collared shirt made it clear that for the second prototype, I had to make her something almost invisible. Design the undesigned. For this one I had to completely let go of any pride I have as a designer and create something effectively uninteresting for her.

Once again, I modified the collar from the chemise dress and turned it into a loose-fitting grey sweater, made from fine Italian wool. The fabric and fit ensured that the top would be very comfortable and allow Michelle to forget about what she was wearing, which is key for her. The grey color is understated and simple, rendering it unnoticeable, also key for her. The flattering neckline is the only element of the top that suggested a hint of femininity, but in a very subtle way. She paired the top with professional black slacks.



**MICHELLE'S THOUGHTS**

The top was very comfortable and perfect for this week - busiest week of the year.

I barely thought about what I was wearing at all most of the day, which is how I like it.

It would not be ideal during times of heavy client interaction, meetings etc. feels like being in pyjamas which is both how I love it, but also doesn't fully work for "professional" attire.

It was quite in line with my taste, both in terms of color and style. The fabric was great too!

**TAKEAWAYS**

**ON STYLE**  
Perfectly in-line

**ON PRODUCTIVITY**  
No change, comfortable

**ON REPEAT**  
Not okay with it

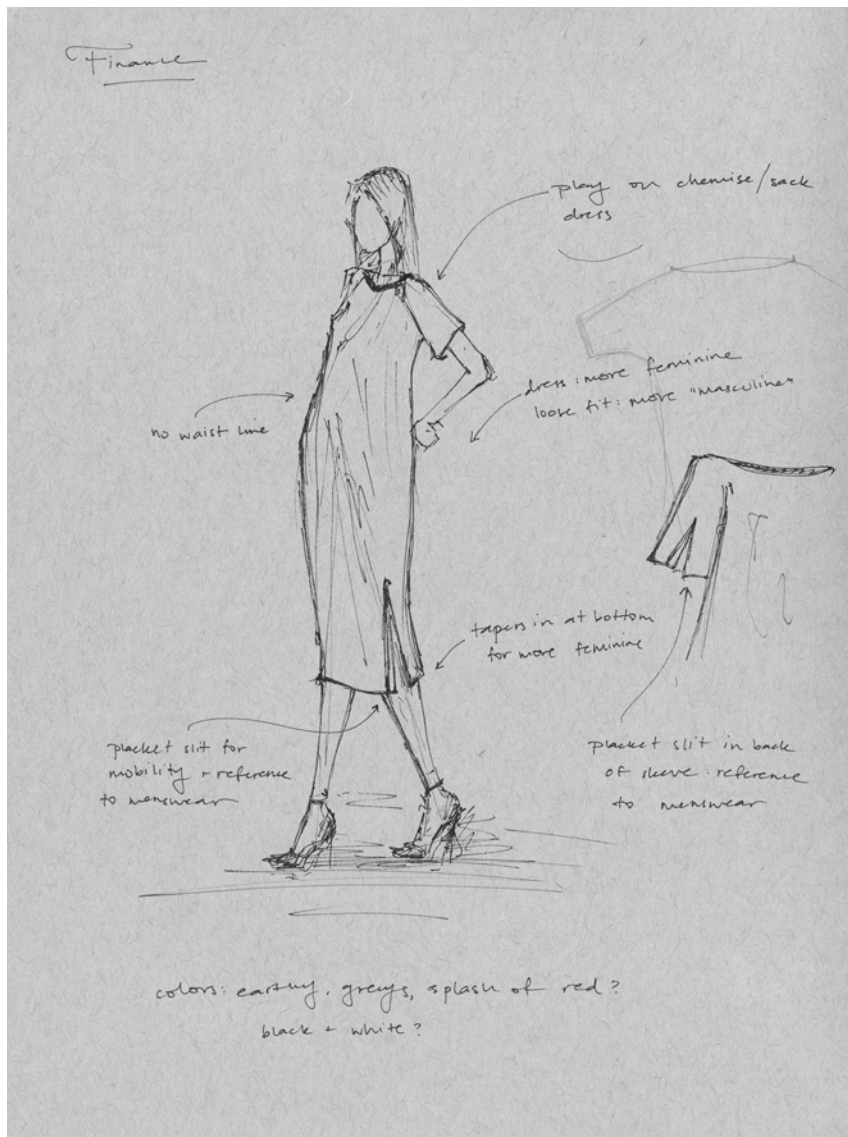
**ON SELF**  
No change

**ON OTHERS**  
Others did not notice



**CONCEPT SHANNON**

For Shannon, my user with the most feminine sense of style, I made a chemise dress with a wide neckline and bell sleeves. Shannon had described her idea of female professional attire as fitted, which she explained to me most women adhere to in her organization. For this experiment I wanted to push her out of her comfort zone to test how she would feel about a looser fit. I designed the dress so that it would only slightly skim her hips, but not hug them, and the omission of a waistline created the classic sack silhouette. Also made from a fine Italian wool knit, this dress is all about comfort and mobility. I was curious if these physical characteristics of the garment would also give Shannon a corresponding emotional sense of freedom and mobility.



**SHANNON'S THOUGHTS**

This is nothing like I ever wear. It is VERY loose on me and long. My husband commented that I look more "trendy" than "corporate."

I purposely wore higher heels with so that I still look and feel feminine despite the shape of the dress. I do really like the sleeves though, they are really cool.

I felt kind of self conscious throughout the day that my dress was so loose. I did become used to it though, and eventually stopped thinking about it so much. The dress was extremely comfortable.

I almost feel like I am putting on scrubs like a nurse or doctor or something? Does that make sense, like a loose uniform, or a smock.

A lot of people noticed that I was wearing this for a second day in a row, mostly because it is so off from the standard of dress I typically wear in the office.

It was a good and different experience to wear something so out of my comfort zone.

It was not at all my style, especially in the office. I typically wear tailored well-fitted dresses that are flattering to my shape. I did not like the loose fit of the garment.

I felt like I was overcompensating a bit because the garment was very loose. I wore a higher heel to try to off set the fit of the garment.

I felt a little off on the first day in the morning, self conscious, which in turn probably distracted me a bit.

A girlfriend at work noted that my dress was a different look than I usually wear, which is a true statement. Made me realize how observant some people are of others in the office.

**TAKEAWAYS**

**ON STYLE**  
Not in-line

**ON PRODUCTIVITY**  
Distracted, decreased productivity

**ON REPEAT**  
Uncomfortable with it

**ON SELF**  
Overcompensated femininity with heels

**ON OTHERS**  
Others noticed and commented



“It was very off ‘my brand’ in the office, but it also felt kind of liberating to do something so different.”





**FINAL LOOKS**  
IDIOSYNCRATIC UNIFORMS

Understanding the needs of three unique women with distinct fashion philosophies who work in particular office cultures posed quite a challenge. Therefore, each look is idiosyncratic to its wearer and proposes a different interpretation of female dress etiquette in the workplace. The designs of the final work uniforms are rooted in the relationships I built with my users, resulting in bespoke pieces that demonstrate a blend of user feedback and historical fashion research.

## CONCEPT HANNAH

### RIPPLE & SLATE

A PLAY ON THE TECHY HOODIE AND JEANS

FEMININE

FORMAL

SUBTLE

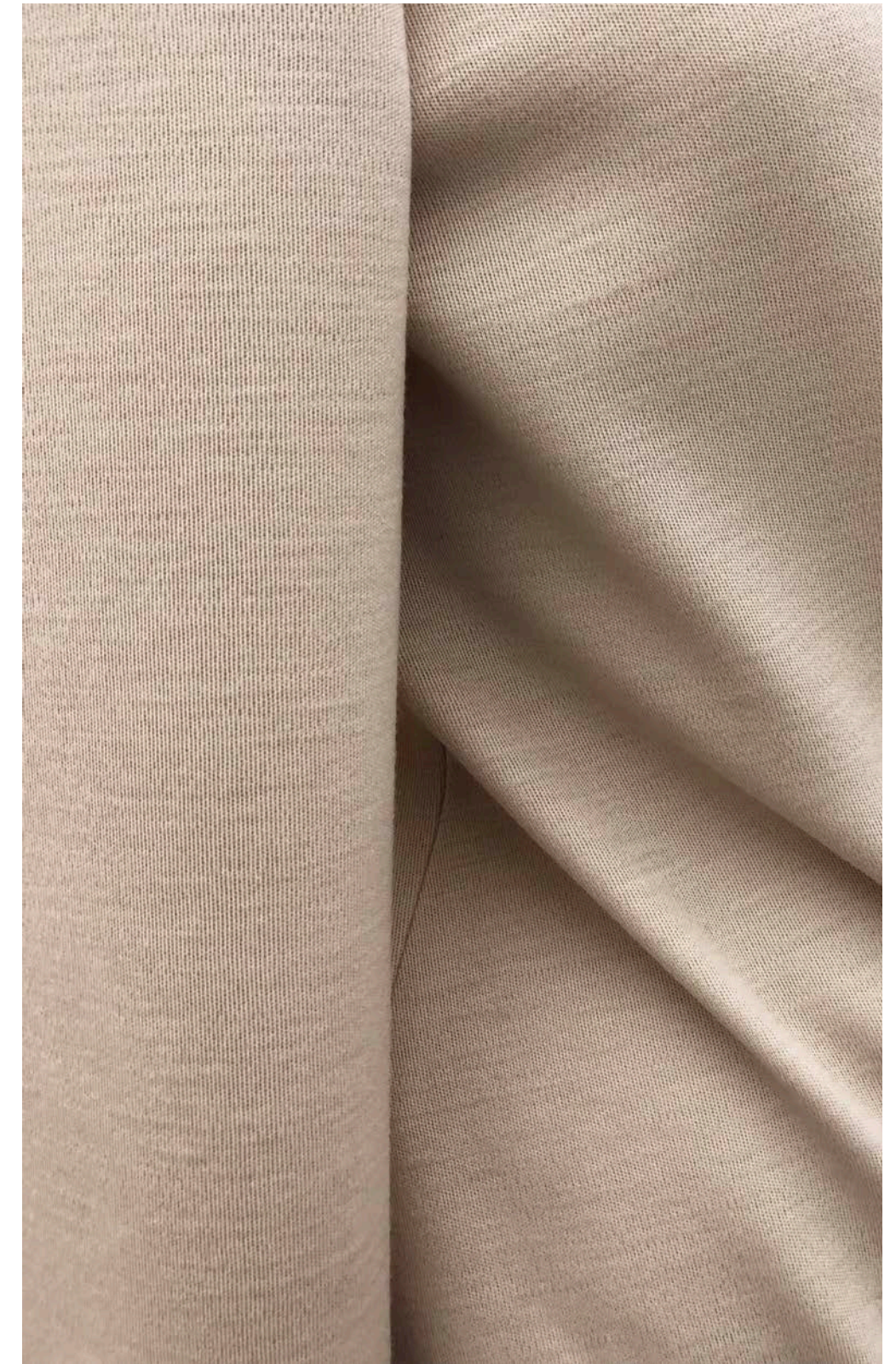
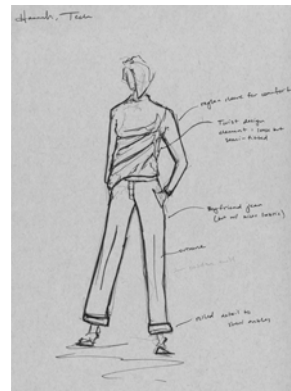
COMFORTABLE

From the last prototype, I noticed how much Hannah loved the polished feel of the outfit. The elegant fabrics combined with a casual loose fit empowered her to set the tone in the office, which she really enjoyed. With this feedback in mind, I designed her last look as an alternative play on a more feminine and formal version of the the techy's hoodie and jeans.

I patterned the top, or what I call "the ripple sweater" so that it falls with a light twist or ripple, blending an angular silhouette with a soft fall on the body. The wool knit fabric references a hoodie, but the color and fine quality of it suggest a feminine and formal tone.

The fit of the pants is the perfect blend of a boyfriend jean (a term for women's loose-fitting jeans) and a professional slack. Every design decision in the pants reinforces that blend: pockets, belt loops, a metal fly front zipper (all elements usually seen on jeans), combined with a slim fit and a high quality slate-colored Italian cotton gabardine. The pants teeter on the boundary between casual jean and formal office slack. And of course, they are incredibly comfortable.

With this more feminine and formal version of the techy uniform, I wanted to imply to Hannah that there is power in differentiating herself from the rest of the techies. Even if the differentiation is internal and no one notices, her emotional and physical comfort will translate into confidence and poise at work.





#### **HANNAH'S THOUGHTS**

I think this outfit made me look polished and elegant, while looking super comfy. Because it has those two qualities balanced out, I felt powerful and intelligent.

I love the final pants. After the photoshoot, I kept thinking about how awesome those pants were. They're so so comfortable yet formal at the same time.

I have become more aware of what I wear and how confined I was from the social norms set from men.

“This project made me realize that I don’t have to wear hoodies and shirts like techy people all the time. I can dress elegantly and have fun dressing whatever I want, and don’t need to fit the stereotypes.”





## CONCEPT MICHELLE

### KNIT CRATER

A PLAY ON THE CLASSIC SUIT

SUBTLE

TIMELESS

SIMPLE

COMFORTABLE

Although Michelle indicated that she loved the comfort and inconspicuousness of the last prototype garment, she felt it wasn't formal enough for business meetings. Considering her professional needs and personal taste, I decided to make her a suit with a few understated design details. Unlike most suits, this suit is constructed entirely out of a knit wool, making it stretchy, breathable, and comfortable. The shoulder crater detail indirectly references 80s power suits and futuristic warriors (think Working Girl meets Star Wars), but is executed in an understated, almost unnoticeable, way. The silhouette of the suit is classic and simple, making it both generic enough for Michelle and elegant enough to be timeless.

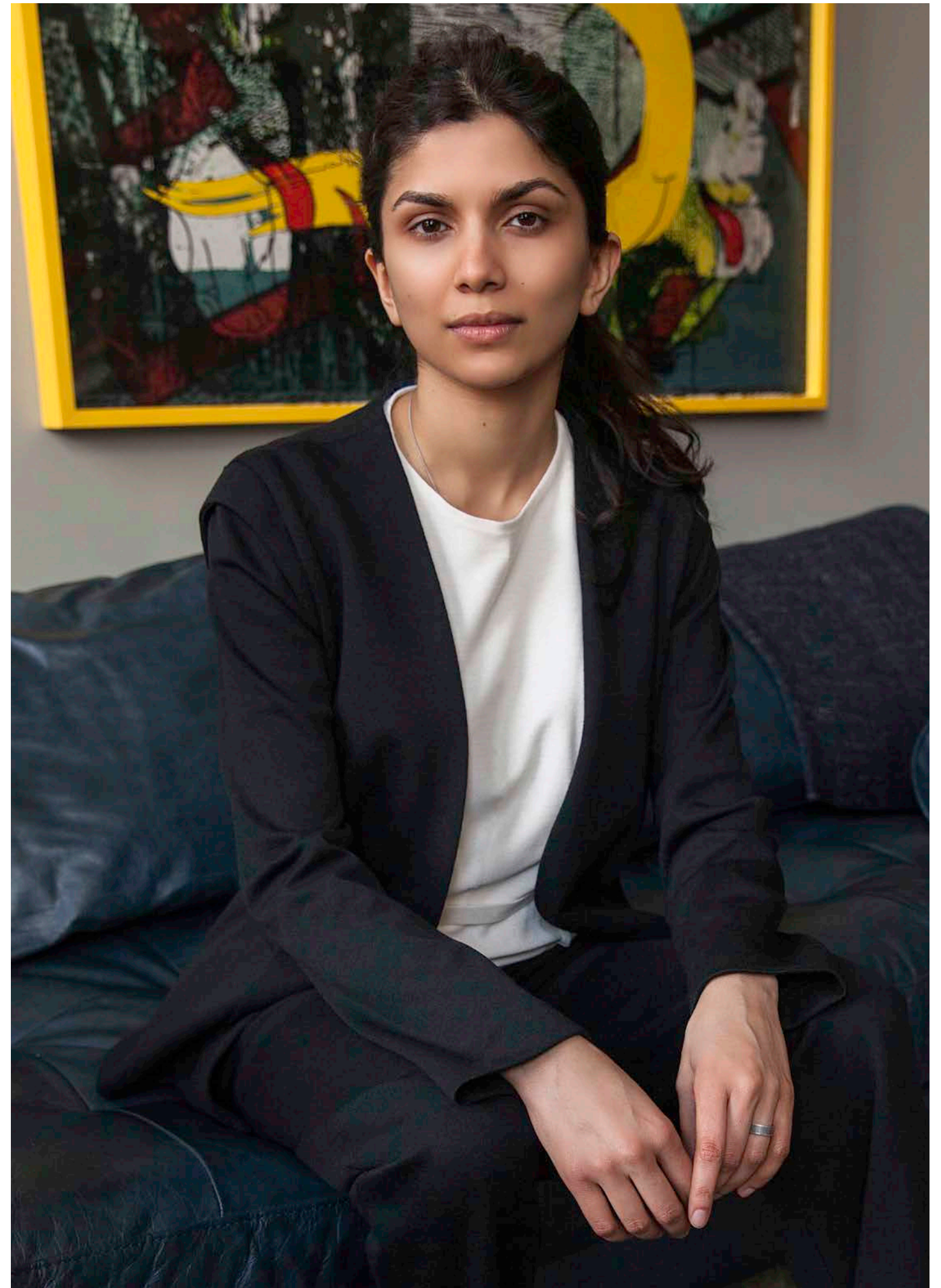


#### **MICHELLE'S THOUGHTS**

This is exactly the kind of thing I would wear to work. Simple, comfortable, and elegant.

The top and trousers of the final ensemble are simple, comfortable, and elegant.

I could definitely get behind wearing trousers like those and a top every day. With slight variances of course, so general style would be great.





“Attorneys are expected to dress professionally, but not fashionably. There is really one main message that the clothes should convey – competence.”

## CONCEPT SHANNON

### BASKET WEAVE

A PLAY ON THE FITTED DRESS

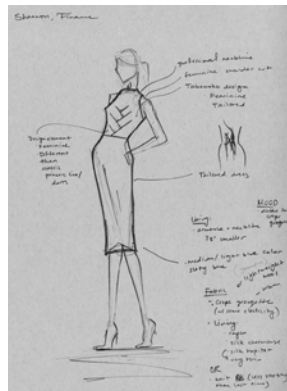
SUBTLE

TIMELESS

SIMPLE

COMFORTABLE

Shannon's discomfort with the loose-fitting dress confirmed that her final look should be a well-tailored, obviously feminine piece. So I made her a dress with a hand-stitched basket weave pattern in the front bodice to fit the female form. I chose a basket weave for a few reasons. First, it is a departure from classic princess style lines that are traditionally used in dresses. Second, it is a geometric pattern comprising straight lines (which I mentioned earlier in the discussion of visual polarities are perceived as masculine) that is treated in a clearly feminine way. The pattern causes the fabric to fold and flow over and around the breasts, an emblematic part of the female body. However, the folds of fabric scoop around the breasts loosely in a way that is noticeable without being overtly sexual. The fabric, a light-weight wool, is a soft blue, rendering the dress airy and light, while its tailored structure keeps it professional (according to Shannon, at least).



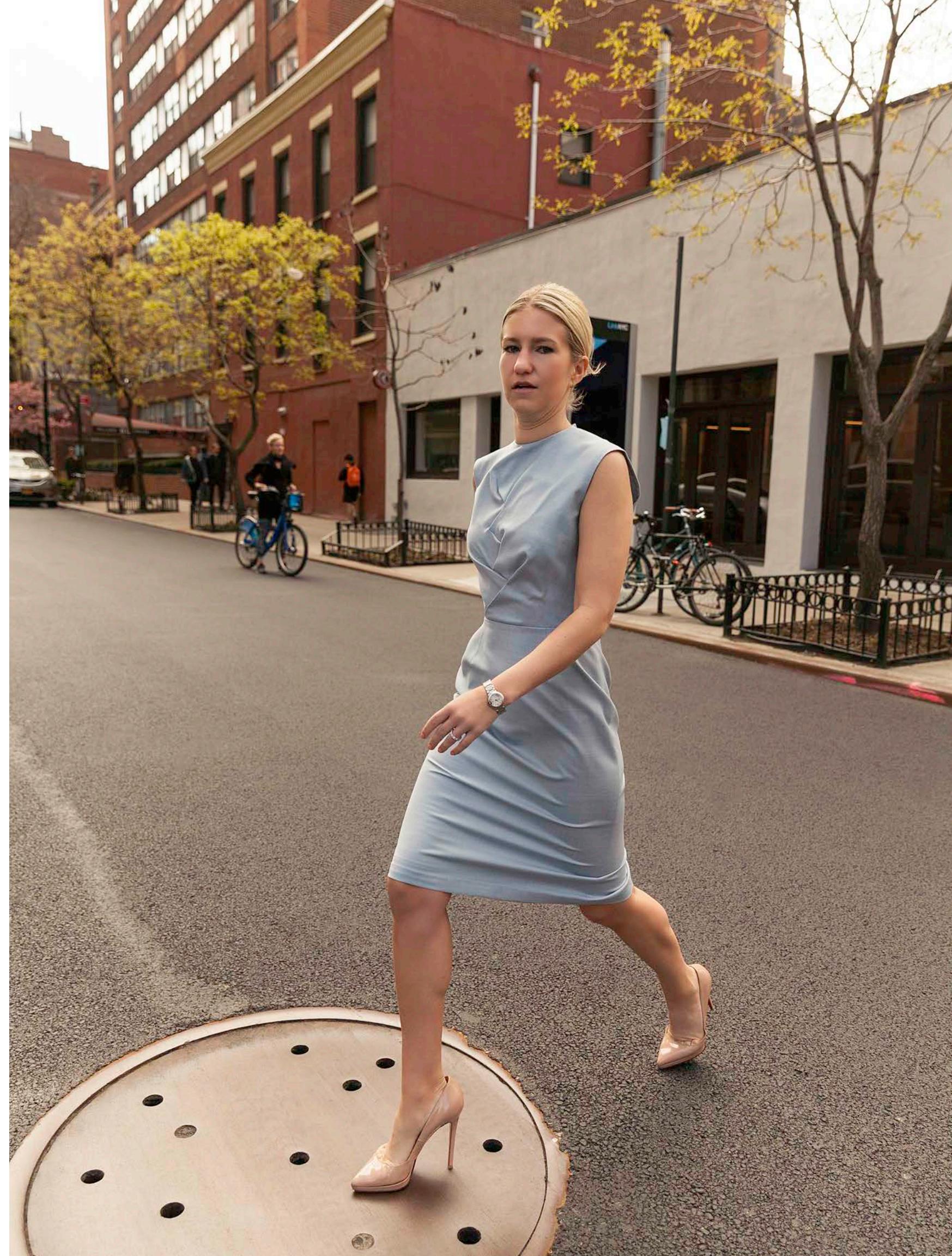


#### **SHANNON'S THOUGHTS**

This dress is my favorite of all. The color, fabric, front detail, and fit make me feel confident, feminine, and professional.

Professional goes beyond being business formal. Clothes should make you feel confident but also not distract you so you can focus on the job.

“Being a part of this process made me consider what it means to dress in a feminine way at work.”



“Your collection looks like you want these women to sit in the corner and shut up.”

— Gill Linton

In the eyes of Gill Linton, a prominent fashion figure and founder of Byronesque (a collective that sells epic vintage pieces by star designers from the 80's, 90's, and 00's), my collection enforced the stereotypes I have been working against. To Linton, who lives in the fashion world, subtlety reads as submissive and therefore anti-feminist. However, to a real woman who works in a male-dominated field, subtlety is key. The goal, as Shannon mentioned, is to not become a topic of conversation. This collection is not about my own voice as a designer; it is about listening to the women who wear the clothes, and their empowerment dictates the success of the garments. It was in that moment, when Linton failed to understand my concept, attacked my collection and proceeded to show her disinterest by looking at her phone, that I realized how real the tension between our fields really is. Not only is it still very real, it is difficult to navigate. That was also the moment I realized that this kind of collaboration is definitely worth pursuing. I would love to imagine a future in which industrial designers and fashion designers do not attack each other, but combine their strengths (ID thinking and fashion creativity) to design amazing collections that are innovative in their aesthetic and satisfy the needs of the wearers.

To Linton, a real rejection of the status quo sends a loud disruptive message. Despite her rude demeanor in her expression of visceral anger towards my "quiet" work, her reaction validates the ideological failure that is this thesis. There is no one so-called uniform that satisfies the needs of all women, their aesthetic preferences, and their body types. There is no garment for women that exists outside the madness of trends, stands the test of time, and unquestionably represents professionalism in the way that a man's suit does. When it comes to womenswear, the aesthetic can always be critiqued. Too bold runs the risk of becoming sexualized and/or distracting. Too subtle can be considered submissive. Too feminine can be critiqued as frivolous and weak. Too androgynous can be considered a cover-up, an easy way to blend in with the men, the fashion equivalent of signing emails with only initials to conceal one's gender. All of these criticisms validate the difficulty women have getting dressed and also make it a really interesting problem to work on.

## FASHION AS A DESIGN PROBLEM

How can we better understand the sartorial needs of women working in male-dominated industries? It's such a complicated and nuanced challenge. One way is to treat it like a design problem. That means talking to the women actually wearing the clothes.

We all wear clothes; we all feel the effects of clothes on both an internal and external level. They can make us feel productive or lazy, beautiful or sloppy, and sometimes even like an entirely different person.

Traditionally, fashion designers are not encouraged to consider the needs of their wearers at all. Fashion designers are chosen and rewarded for their conceptual visions and avant garde aesthetics. This leaves women like Hannah, Michelle and Shannon to become their own fashion designers, combing through racks of professional clothes in search of a look that they know they will be taken seriously in. While there is a time and a place for a bold statement piece, work is not that place. Most working women do not want that kind of attention to their attire. They are not fashion designers and never wanted to be. What if we designed more clothes for them? What if we took seriously the complicated landscapes they work in and created clothes that helped them navigate the minefield? This is the kind of condition that

industrial designers excel at addressing. In industrial design, good insights do not come from annual sales or market trends; they come from people. Working with Hannah, Michelle, and Shannon taught me so much about what professional women actually need. Their personal anecdotes reflect relatable sentiments that almost every working woman experiences. By putting prototypes in the hands of users, we can refine and improve our products so that they're more likely to do the job they were bought to do.

A garment is a tangible mediator between our personal and projected selves—the first visual indicator of who we are. This intimate connection we have with our clothes is powerful. That is what makes applying a human-centered approach to designing them worthwhile.







## CONCLUSION

My design solution is not the ultimate answer to the double standards that exist in work environments. There is no ultimate answer. Calling the final looks "work uniforms" is an ideological failure. But the fact that it's a failure emphasizes the attitudes that cause women to question themselves at work. Even in an ideal scenario, where this project provides women with proper defensive tools, it does not target male behavior. The uniform itself will not change inappropriate male conduct, but merely represent an attitude against it.

Whether or not it is possible to address the double standard, we can still make clothes that make women feel comfortable at work. When Hannah told me that the outfit I made for her made her feel like she was bringing her best self to work, I knew that's where the success of this project was. Even if the value of this kind of process is internal instead of external, that can be enough. If all it takes is listening to user needs and making an idiosyncratic outfit that makes a wearer feel like Wonder Woman, then we should do just that.









## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A very big thanks to my wonderful participants, Hannah, Michelle, and Shannon. None of this could have happened without you.

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Thank you to all my friends and family, for supporting me and understanding why I have missed every social event this past year. A special shout-out to my friends Jazmine Furtado and Vincent Pamparo, who inspired my interest in uniforms.

And last but certainly not least, to all the women who took the time to talk to me about their experiences, thank you. Your stories are inspiring.

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