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Pumps and Circumstance

Katia Jean Paul ruminates on the trends and the elements of style within the culture at large.



What to Do About ‘Normcore’

by [Katia Jean Paul](#)
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When I made the transition from office staffer to work-from-home scribe earlier this year, my daily commute to and from the office wasn't the only thing that went the way of the dinosaurs. For the first few weeks, I would still partake in the ritual of getting dressed "to go to work" (i.e. my writing desk), right down to the dab of lipstick I seldom left home without. But as time went on, while I continued to slip out of my pajamas into more presentable attire every morning, something changed: I gradually began to eschew prim and proper skirts, sheer blouses, tailored sheaths and 4-inch heels, and would throw on whatever I had lying around. On a routine workday, stepping out to grab a quick latte at the corner café in nondescript jeans, a button-down and my sneakers, I blended in seamlessly in a neighbourhood where my usual sartorial displays had me sticking out like a sore thumb.

Outside of business lunches, work and social engagements, I admit; I didn't put much thought or effort into how I looked. I betrayed my own aesthetic. Jeans, a sweatshirt and runners became my uniform of choice for my latte runs and the like. Ask any fashion pundit, and they'll swiftly tell you: I've gone 'normcore'.

Coined sometime in 2013 by the trend forecasters behind New York-based brand consultancy group [K-Hole](#), the concept didn't get much traction then, but it's been the sole word on everyone's lips in recent months. So what is normcore? Depends who you ask. It's a mindset, an attitude to the 20-something, freethinking hipster folks at K-Hole. "The basic idea is that young alternative types had devoted so much energy to trying to define themselves as individuals, through ever-quirkier style flourishes like handlebar mustaches or esoteric pursuits like artisanal pickling, that they had lost the joy of belonging that comes with being part of the group. Normcore was about dropping the pretense and learning to throw themselves into, without detachment, whatever subcultures or activities they stumbled into, even if they were mainstream," sums up Alex Williams in a *New York Times* article titled, "[The New Normal](#)". But, the concept of blending in instead of standing out now extends to clothing, and once the fashion set got wind of the movement, well, it became a trend. In a nutshell, normcore is the art of dressing in 'normal' clothes—no-brand jeans, non-ironic t-shirts, baseball caps, New Balance sneakers, Birkenstocks and fanny packs—essentially all the makings of suburban chic. Think Jerry Seinfeld circa 1990, the late Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. Or, if the latter gents leave you wanting, Alexa Chung.



Clockwise from top left: Jerry Seinfeld, keeping it normcore since 1989; model Joan Smalls walks the runway in a normcore look at the DKNY Spring 2014 fashion show during Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week; Alexa Chung is normcore (just don't tell her that) ;Birkenstocks are so normcore.

Now, there are 'Get the Look' edits *à la* normcore, complete with Mom jeans and [Teva sandals](#) left and right. [Vogue.com](#) even dubbed Kate Middleton—whose downtime wardrobe on the royal family's recent tour of New Zealand was surprisingly ordinary (a fitted shirt from the Gap? A Zara blazer? Gasp!)—[the Duchess of Normcore](#).

After crop tops, and 'Parental Advisory' sweatshirts, normcore is the latest trend in the '90s revival that has swept up the fashion world.

Apparently, we would be remiss to dismiss this latest trend as a joke. As Williams argues, it has gained real momentum. We could also deliberate ad nauseum on the convenience of dismissing a style of dress people have been prescribing to for ages, something they feel is unique to them, only to deem it—and by association, its adherents—relevant (offensive much? [Chung thinks so](#)), now that it is 'in'. Then, there's the question of whether the look is truly bland and 'normal' if you have to put effort into achieving looking 'normal'. So much for "dropping the pretense" *n'est-ce pas*? And what of the idea that an ensemble isn't normal unless it is a throwback to the '90s? Not all of us care to revisit that era. Worse of all: it seems normcore—at its washed-out jeans, Patagonia-fleece-vest core—is encouraging the art of dressing unimaginatively and poorly, really.

But, all this would be to no avail. Normcore is now part of the sartorial lexicon. Still, I would like to offer this thought:

Trends are cyclical, we know that much. Dressing 'normal' is not. Nor should it be dismissed. So here's a novel idea: don't do normcore. And if you do, please don't call it that. Whatever your brand of style, whether it's chock full or devoid of flourishes, keep it clean (no holey shirts beyond this point!) and keep it you.

Fashion, art, architecture, design, TV, and film: Katia Jean Paul is a Montreal-based writer who casts a critical eye on her many idées fixes, unearthing the aesthetic and cultural dimensions within each and every subject. / Follow Katia on Twitter: [@KatiaJeanPaul](#)

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