

What the Sweater Vest Is Telling Us

By Emily A. Smyth

It was 2020 and I was cooped up at home. My only access to the outside world was the internet. I wasn't going to school or an office every day, so my lifeline in terms of what was going on in the real world came from my phone, primarily Instagram. One day while I was scrolling, a post from The New York Times caught my eye announcing that sweater vests were back and "undeniably sexy." I paused, staring at the article with a photograph of an impeccably dressed model sporting an admittedly stylish-looking argyle sweater vest.

I was shocked.

Steve Urkel was my only reference for sweater vests at the time. Garish, bright '80s patterns: a train wreck on a sweater that didn't even have the gumption to have sleeves. So, of course, this post made me laugh. For a good chunk of 2020, I was already walking around thinking the world had finally gone kaput. But now *this*?

The sweater vest wasn't anything other than dorky. Weren't old, whiskey-drinking curmudgeons in the UK the only people wearing those things? Couldn't we do better? I swore a sweater vest, a clothing item that I doubted even graced my parents' closets in their prime, would never be a part of my wardrobe.

I bought one from J. Crew a few weeks later.

When most of us think "sweater vest," it usually lands in the territory of academics or the nerds of the 80s. Remember how Cody was (rightly) mocked for his sweater vest wearing habits in the *Suite Life* universe? However, according to [ELLE](#) in an article tracing the roots of the trend of the sweater vest, historically the sweater vest was designed for men who were participating in sports. If anything, the design was purely functional. It kept the torso warm, leaving the arms and underarms free to sweat.

In the '90s and early 2000s, sweater vests resurfaced, only this time around it wasn't so much about keeping the arms free to the elements. There was a certain allure to the casual preppiness of the sweater vest. Think of Cher's iconic outfit in *Clueless*: red sweater vest, button up shirt, plaid mini skirt. This preppy-jock look bled into the early aughts.

With the recent Y2K fashion obsession, it makes a lot of sense that sweater vest would rise again. [According to Vox](#), luxury brands such as Gucci and Prada were trying to push the trend as early as 2016, but it didn't really take off until the pandemic. People like me, cooped up in their homes, desperately searching for entertainment, stumbled upon the sweater vest and subsequently fell in love. (Perhaps with a few reservations at first.) People started trying out new things from the comfort of their home: baking sourdough bread, sewing their own clothes, making whipped coffee, etc. etc.

Influencers on TikTok became central to the sweater vests' explosion in popularity. Styling sweater vests were a type of challenge, and with nothing better to do, we all joined in. [As](#)

[Esquire](#) describes it, the sweater vest became a “playground” and the pandemic, paired with TikTok, sparked a trend that many of us never thought would be resurrected. What may have just been an internet fad evolved into a real life, runway phenomenon.

The sweater vest trend isn't just about sweater vests though. It goes to show how much social media has changed the world of fashion, and how the world of fashion is no longer decided by the gods and goddesses of the runway. This has been the case since the rise of MySpace, Tumblr, and Instagram, yet the circumstances of the pandemic cemented it for good. An influencer shares their outfit of the day and boom: we have a whole new trend that gets shared between networks of friends. It's right there in the palm of your hand. There are so many narratives out there vying for your attention and allegiance. But it's not just one dominant trend anymore: it has become an overwhelming buffet of choices.

What kind of outfit you wear says a lot about who you are. German sociologist [Georg Simmel](#) writes about this, arguing fashion is the “basic tension” between wanting to imitate others yet also desiring to distinguish ourselves from others. Instead of what has been typically known as the mainstream vs. the counterculture world of fashion, we are now entering into new territory: everyone has their own trend. In a sense, *your own person* is a trend in and of itself. As long as you are dressing intentionally, no one can really question it.

The other day I saw a girl on the subway wearing white, patent-leather go-go boots. Was it wrong? With so many micro-trends floating around, who am I to say?

Take for instance what I like to call the “jean conundrum”: what exactly is “in” at the moment? While it may be tempting to say skinny jeans are dead, that isn't exactly the case. Every jean is in. There's a universal “choose your own destiny” attitude surrounding the whole trend topic.

According to The [New York Times](#), jeans are actually in the deep throes of an identity crisis. We have the mom jean, the dad jean, the girlfriend, boyfriend, skater, stovepipe, 1990s, cigarette, split, slim...and the list goes on. And they're all acceptable to wear. TikTok, or social media in general, [has aided this buffet of fashion in recent years](#).

Paired with the pandemic, trying new (or renewed) trends to be different, edgy, or simply absurd is what has been saving us from isolation. Sharing fashion trends, contributing to them, or helping spread the hype is what has helped connect people over such an alienating time. We're not just watching the experts do it anymore. We're not just trying to mimic them. We're collaborating and that means there's a lot more room to try out different things. Paired with this concept of “personal choice” overriding any canon of fashion, we are stuck with a world where anything goes as long as you wear it with confidence.

So here we are: sweater vests and white go-go boots and jeans of all types abound. What works for you simply works for you, no questions asked. Is this a bad thing to not have a dominant trend? Doesn't it get kind of tiring anyway, having to look out for the next and best trend; riding the wave out until it dies and then jump onto the next one before you're considered archaic?

So many people tout individuality today that it has become a part of the mainstream fashion sphere. Katrina Klein, who designed jeans for Rag & Bone, doesn't think [the lack of a trend being the trend](#) is a bad thing at all. If anything, it creates more room for creative opportunity. If people want to start experimenting with the sweater vest because they see a girl on TikTok style it well, why on earth would we stop them? Perhaps the days of Anna Wintour and the other fashion tyrants telling us what jeans to wear are over.

Maybe, just maybe, that's a very good thing.