

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-science-behind-wfh-dressing-for-zoom-11600626704>

LIFE & STYLE

The Science Behind WFH Dressing for Zoom

What you wear while working actually matters; Researchers studying ‘enclothed cognition’ say your clothing choices at home can affect productivity and performance

By [Ray A. Smith](#)

Sept. 20, 2020 2:31 pm ET

Mina Khan, an information-technology consultant who’s been working from home in Houston since March, tried wearing sweatpants and hoodies instead of the blouses and dress pants she typically wore to the office. It didn’t work.

“Eventually I shifted to dressing the way I used to before because I realized it puts me in a better mental space when I’m working,” says the 26-year-old.

It turns out there’s actual science to back up that feeling. Researchers studying links between clothes, brain activity and productivity have long found that dressing up for work can improve your performance. Some are now turning their attention to how these factors play out in dressing for remote work and Zoom meetings—including the unexpected rise of the nice tops/schlubby bottoms combo.

The rise of video calls has added complexity to an area of research known as “enclothed cognition,” or what signals clothes send to the brain, says Dr. Adam Galinsky, co-author of the pre-pandemic research that coined the term. “In some ways, the clothes that you wear might have an even bigger impact because we can often see ourselves and what we’re wearing and that sort of draws that symbolic value [attached] to it even closer to our consciousness,” he says.

His research, published when he was a professor at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management in 2012, [used white lab coats to test the impact of clothes on psychological processes](#).

In a series of experiments, subjects competed on attention tests. The first pitted a group wearing lab coats against a group wearing street clothes—those wearing lab coats performed better. In the second and third tests, one group was told the white lab coats were doctor’s coats, another was told they were painter’s coats and another wore street clothes while only looking at a white lab coat. In all tests, those who thought they were wearing doctor’s coats had superior results. The research showed that the combination of wearing certain clothes and their symbolic meaning led to more focused attention, Dr. Galinsky says. “That theory has held up remarkably well.”

Now he and two doctoral students at Columbia Business School, where he is a professor of business and chair of the management division, have started looking into the science of clothing and remote work, including the phenomenon of wearing something dressy above the waist and casual sweatpants or shorts below screen level for video-conference calls.



Mina Khan now dresses up when doing her job from home: 'I realized it puts me in a better mental space when I'm working,' she says.

PHOTO: MINA KHAN

"Is there actually an inauthenticity cost or benefit for the fact that we often have these dualistic outfits, and what is that difference, how does that affect people?," he says. "Maybe it can make people feel inauthentic. Or maybe it will feel like people have a little secret and that can be kind of a motivating thing, that they're doing something other people don't know about."

In other research, [a 2015 study](#) found that dressing more formally for work leads to the higher levels of abstract, big-picture thinking associated with someone in a powerful position. The study's co-author Michael Slepian, associate professor of leadership and ethics at Columbia Business School, is beginning to look at whether this still holds for people working from home. "There are a lot of good reasons the findings could still apply today," says Dr. Slepian. "All you need to do is just dress a little bit more formally than you would at home normally."

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you dress up to work from home? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.

To be sure, some people have proven they can be highly effective at office work in casual clothing. When building his company, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg famously favored T-shirts, hoodies, jeans and sneakers. Silicon Valley's tech world became known for upending corporate style with its ditching of suits and ties and standard businesswear.

"Just putting on [formal] clothes doesn't matter as much if you're just as confident when you're wearing casual clothes and you feel like you can work just as well that way," says Vanessa Bohns, associate professor of organizational behavior at Cornell University's ILR School. Yet she recommends changing into clothing associated with work at the beginning of the day to cue a sense of being in serious work mode: "You feel physically

different, and the clothes feel different so that tells your body, which also tells your mind, that this is work time.”

At the same time, what’s casual has evolved. Mr. Zuckerberg and others in his orbit have upgraded their casual style in recent years, sporting more-tailored and expensive tees, sweatshirts and jeans. “They’re not sloppily dressed,” said Dr. Slepian. “So in those contexts, you put on your nicer shirt or your nicer hoodie.”



‘I’m dressed the way that I would dress when I went to the office on a weekend,’ says Ben Vago of his work-from-home style.

PHOTO: BEN VAGO

Ben Vago, a New York-based commercial real-estate attorney who typically would wear a suit and tie or jacket and tie to his office, settled on a middle ground work-from-home style. “I’m dressed the way that I would dress when I went to the office on a weekend,” says Mr. Vago, who is in his 30s. For him, that has meant jeans in a dressier dark wash, a polo shirt or a T-shirt and boat shoes or moccasins. “It’s a little bit more casual, but you want to feel professional,” he says. “It’s going to help you perform your work your best.”

Dressing up too much—say wearing a formal business suit while working at home—could risk self-consciousness and distraction for some, Dr. Galinsky warns. “They might feel kind of ridiculous and that they’re play-acting, and that might also have an impact on them.”

Another important tip for those working from home: What you wear can also make a difference when it’s time to wind down. “Putting on your relaxation clothes or your ‘at home’ clothes, shifts your brain into, ‘I can relax now. I can shift gears. I don’t have to be operating at this high cognitive level,’” says organizational psychologist Cathleen Swody, also a founding partner of executive-coaching firm Thrive Leadership. “It’s like the Mister Rogers effect.”

Write to Ray A. Smith at ray.smith@wsj.com

Appeared in the September 21, 2020, print edition as ‘The Science Of Dressing For WFH.’

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.