

# Fashion for “Looking Successful” “Looking Carefree” “Looking Smart”

by Kaori Nakano



Frances McDormand at the British Academy of Film and Television Awards, with members of the team of the film “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri”

At the start of this year, I was invited to a New Year’s Party attended by many in the fashion industry. About one thousand gathered in the banquet room of a long-established hotel, and to my surprise, more than ninety percent were men wearing dark suits. Most of the women making up the remaining less-than-ten percent of the guests were also dressed in gray or navy suits. It was not a formal occasion; it looked like the guests had simply attended in their normal work outfits. On the stage, one person after another with the title “chief” rose to make very similar speeches. They spoke of their duty to promote, in this age of increasing diversity, greater diversification in their industry, and each time this was said, in one variation or another, all the nearly identical heads facing the stage nodded together. The person standing next to me said with a wry smile, “Diversity was the topic last year, too.”

People tend to speak out for something because

they are aware it is insufficient or lacking. There would be no need to appeal for more diversity if diversity already existed. When I reflect on myself in this light, I think that I am drawn to stereotypically feminine fashion because I have a suspicion that I might be a bit lacking in femininity.

This means that we can conjecture what a person secretly thinks they lack by the image they try to project.

Why are titles such as “Looking Successful,” “Looking Carefree,” “Looking Smart” so popular for fashion and style magazines? If we are already successful, carefree, and smart in real life, we wouldn’t need try to give other people that impression. The stronger an expression of some particular quality a person tries to present, the more likely it is that they feel in their heart they are lacking that quality.

Inevitably, guidelines for presenting a particular

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image remain highly stereotypical, and the resulting impression is often laughably superficial. Let's take fashion guidelines for looking smart. I flipped through several fashion magazines on this topic, and most of them advocate clothes with clean, simple lines, shunning color and suppressing any hint of sensuality. You can't argue with that. That's the kind of "smart look" I'd want for the office. But the fashion of individuals who have genuinely impressed me with their smart look has quite often been extravagant, colorful, and sexy, with a touch of humor. Those who are really smart can make even elements that most people regard as stupid or silly look smart.

And the captions for the photos illustrating this "smart look" are often filled with strange locutions that are the opposite of smart—"intelligence," "elegance," and "sophistication." "Intelligence," "elegance," and "sophistication" do the job just fine, thank you.

An example of what I regard as "smart" fashion is Frances McDormand, who won the Golden Globes best actress award this year for her performance in the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*.

In 2017, cases of sexual harassment in the film industry led to the emergence of #MeToo as a major social phenomenon. At the Golden Globes award ceremony in early 2018, female actors voluntarily wore black to show their endorsement of the "Time's Up" movement that provides support for victims of sexual harassment. In a show of solidarity stretching across the Atlantic, the dress code for the BAFTAS (British Academy of Film and Television Awards) which followed soon after the Golden Globes was also black. With very few exceptions, female actors complied and wore black gowns or dresses.

In the climate of passionate solidarity for justice for sexual harassment victims, it must have taken considerable courage to opt out of this dress code, but Frances McDormand wore a gown with a flamboyant pattern of red and pink against a black background.

Precisely because McDormand usually dresses very simply, her gown had an enormous impact. She began her acceptance speech by gesturing self-effacingly to her dress and joking, "I have a little trouble with compliance." She affirmed her solidarity with the women wearing black in the audience, and her dress, suggesting that there are

many different ways of expressing our convictions, was well received as a symbol of her characteristic humor and free-wheeling spirit. In addition to allowing an invigorating breath of fresh air into what could too easily have become a lockstep march of oppressive political correctness, she is also to be credited with introducing the unfamiliar words "inclusion rider" to the world. This is a stipulation dictating that the ratio of women, minorities, LGBT individuals, and handicapped persons in the film industry should correlate with their ratios in the population at large. I was among those who first heard this term in her speech.

This sort of truly smart behavior scatters to the winds the superficial image of "looking smart." The veneer of "looking successful" loses its luster with the passage of time, and the harder one tries to appear carefree, the more anxious one is inside. In the end, the only way to really look smart and become successful and carefree is by accepting yourself for who you are, being true to your beliefs, and acting with initiative and responsibility.

But before I start giving such high-sounding advice, I'd probably better do something about my own love of very feminine fashions.

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In addition to authoring columns and series appearing in the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and other media, Kaori Nakano is active in a wide variety of arenas as a lecturer, consultant, and copy editor transcending the boundaries of art, media, and business and the author of several books, including *Shinshi no Meihin Goju* ("The Gentleman's World through Fifty Masterpieces," Shogakkan) and *Dandyism no Keifu: Otoko ga Akogareta Otoko-tachi* ("The Lineage of Dandyism: Men Admired by Other Men," Shinchosha). She began her career as a writer at the age of nineteen and completed her undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Tokyo, followed by a period as a visiting scholar at Cambridge University, and is now a specially appointed professor at the School of Global Studies, Meiji University.  
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