

## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### Dress for success, not for debt

By SUSAN PINKER

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

**Dear Susan,** For as long as I've been in this office, which is coming up to four years, the women who work here have dressed to kill. The latest in business dress and accessories is de rigueur, and as I'm still fairly junior, I've always gone along with it. I've also found it fun until now. The cost is starting to be a problem, though. To opt out of the lunchtime retail sales outings (e-mails are circulated at work) and the daily fashion show, should I lie and say that my husband objects to my spending (which is sort of, but not strictly true), or that I do?

- *Odd Woman Out, Ontario* **Dear Odd Woman,**

You can cease and desist without giving your reasons. What you buy with your hard-earned cash is no one's business but your own - and it doesn't matter whether your budget, your husband's griping, or your own compunctions are constraining your purchases. That said, you'll now have to find other ways to keep looking good and to show you belong. Because ultimately, as Mark Twain famously quipped, "Clothes make the man," and one should definitely add, the woman.

Less famously, Twain also said "naked people have little or no influence on society," and this second phrase is more trenchant in this instance. Pretending that appearances don't count is a well-trod position but, especially in the work world, it's essentially naive.

In his recent book, *Spent*, evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller takes pains to show how designer handbags, designer water and designer credentials - such as elite MBA programs that cost more than \$100,000 - are simply updated ways to signal our fitness (read "hotness") to potential mates. It doesn't matter that you're already in a committed relationship and thus out of the mating game.

Thousands of years of evolution have ensured that we're all exquisitely primed to show that we're better looking, healthier, kinder and smarter than the competition - which in your case means the other women in your office.

Status races among women are why expensive brands such as Prada, Armani and Juicy Couture can claim a decent market share, even though, as Prof. Miller points out, straight men rarely notice whether you're wearing Manolo Blahnik or Jimmy Choo shoes. It's all about the other women, which is why, if you opt out of the spending, you should show that you still care.

Why should you bother? Because packaging matters.

"Take the exact same product and place it in either a cheap or a fancy package. Consumers will end up with

completely different quality perceptions even though the product is exactly the same," wrote Gad Saad, an associate professor of marketing at Concordia's John Molson School of Business, and author of *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption*.

In this case, the product is you and your performance, but in Dr. Saad's view, you don't need to go bankrupt to make an impression (think of the "designed for real life" Reitman clothing store ads that spoof ungainly models teetering on stilettos, followed by elegant women wrapped in less pricey but more classic duds).

Dr. Saad also pointed out a well-documented and long-standing trend: Economic downturns trigger more outré fashions, such as shorter hemlines and plunging necklines, along with runs on smaller "feel good" purchases, such as scented candles and pricey lipsticks.

Leonard Lauder, the chairman of Estée Lauder, dubbed it the Lipstick Index during the post-Sept. 11 recession, referring to the fact that women avoid big purchases during tough times, yet will give in to cheaper ways to pamper themselves and show off - especially to other women.

That might explain why you care to save face and keep up appearances. The Lipstick Index means you can join the others on sorties, while keeping your glossy lips - and your wallet zipped.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap. Her blog on the science of human relationships can be found at [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind) Send questions to: [spinker@globeandmail.com](mailto:spinker@globeandmail.com) [[spinker@globeandmail.com](mailto:spinker@globeandmail.com)].*

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