

# Disrupting and Reimagining the Workplace through Casual Fridays

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Imagine every Monday through Friday, from nine to five every week, putting on formal business wear as you head to the office or classroom. If you are a woman, you make sure to put on your pantyhose and heels, matched with your pencil skirt and conservative button down, ironed blouse. If you are a man, you find your cuff-links, tie your tie, and make sure your suit is freshly ironed and your shoes freshly shined. As you enter into your workplace's formal atmosphere, all of your peers and superiors wear the same outfit. You immediately feel the importance of looking fancy to reflect the professionalism of the company for which you work. The person who comes in with their shirt wrinkled or their hair unkempt is stigmatized; their co-workers wonder why they would come to work in such a sloppy manner. This institutional behavior that has defined corporate America for decades has been disrupted by a folk ritual that changes the office structure.

"Casual Fridays" are a modern liminal anti-structure that deconstructs the office hierarchy. Even more so, Casual Fridays symbolize a revolution against the traditionally rigidly structured corporate and executive America that emerged in professionalism-focused post-World War II America. Today, more office environments focus on technology and skills, itself a shift from the male-dominated and image-oriented "executive" office environment. Through the vernacular creation of Casual Fridays, Americans are able to appease both the practical and traditional realities of the office, helping to construct what is considered to be "appropriate" office environment behavior.

In order to understand the power of Casual Fridays in America, one must first understand the text, texture, and context of the ritualistic performance. A "Casual Friday" is a Friday that is typically determined by upper-management to be a day where employees can dress in casual, leisurely clothing rather than rigid, formal, office clothing. These "Casual" escapes typically occur only on Fridays, a day that signifies the start to the weekend, and a celebration of the end of a long

work week. Where people dismally refer to Mondays as "a case of the Mondays" or Wednesdays as "Hump Day," Fridays are a celebratory type of day where people say "Thank God it's Friday!" or "Cheers to the Weekend!" Rebecca Black's hit song "Friday" goes: "It's Friday, Friday/ Gotta get down on Friday/ Everybody's lookin' forward to the weekend, weekend." These rhetorical references can be seen as the typical American view towards Fridays.

Employees who are at the lower levels in a company are usually not the people who decide on having a Casual Friday—it is a decision most often made by superiors, such as the office manager, CEO, or principal. There are some instances, however, where management may hold an employee vote to determine when and if a Casual Friday occurs. Normally, Casual Fridays are often seen as a "gift," "reward," or "incentive," given to the workers of the office, from management. A key point to remember is that Casual Fridays are institutionalized, a conscious effort by upper management to give their employees a morale boost. This act of "giving" to the lower ranked constitutes of the workplace symbolically reinforces the hierarchy of the organization. Although some of the supervisors creating the Casual Friday do participate, occasionally, in very conservative occupations, upper-management continues to wear business clothing. To illustrate this division, in my high school, the teachers participated in Casual Friday while the school principal and other administrators wore traditional business attire. The principal's lack of participation reinforced his place as superior to those indulging the ritual.

Although the performance is ritualized, the form varies. Some companies choose to have Casual Fridays on a weekly basis, some on a monthly basis, while others reserve Casual Fridays for special occasions. In some professions, employees are encouraged to donate a few dollars to a charity in order to participate in a Casual Friday. By tying the Casual Friday performance to a charity, a feeling of good will is created towards the participating company. Some high schools and universities encourage faculty to have "school spirit" Fridays, by wearing clothing of the institution they represent. Similarly, some unconventional institutions create "themed Fridays," or "spirit weeks" as an extension of the Casual Friday motif, encouraging even more extreme office dress such as a Pajama Friday or

Flashback Friday. In addition, Casual Fridays can be observed in an even more non-traditional ways for employees who wear a uniform. For instance, a floor of nurses and doctors may observe "Crazy Sock Friday." Casual Fridays can even be observed by students, as many schools requiring uniforms will allow a once a month or marking period Casual Friday.

Overall, Casual Fridays are not reserved for just one segment of the population or type of profession – they adapt and vary based on the institution. The multiple types of Casual Friday performances that exist reflect the informal, folkloric nature of the performance, and the fact that it varies based on the institution and people who are participating. As Lynne McNeill states in her book *Folklore Rules*, there is commonly a variation of the same tradition, and folklore does not work in a "tidy circle" where each group performs a ritual in the exact same way (7). As a folkloric ritual, a Casual Friday performance is never exactly the same between groups.

The type of dress that constitutes a Casual Friday varies on the profession, company, and management, but there are some general consensuses. First, Casual Fridays are not meant to be *too* casual. There is a delicate balance between street clothes and office attire, and the Casual Friday participant must range somewhere in the middle. For example, wearing flip flops, pajamas, sweatpants, ripped jeans, over-the-top shirts, and overly revealing or dirty clothing would be heavily stigmatized, if not wholly unacceptable, and this person would be seen as abusing the Casual Friday tradition's established norms. Wearing clothing that is only acceptably worn during leisure time creates a stereotype that the office is not a professional place, and that the employees are not able to be taken seriously as professionals in an organization.

Conversely, if an employee chooses to continue to wear career attire while the rest of the office observes Casual Friday, they are looked at as a person who does not fit in with the rest of the culture, or a person who is a boring *goody two shoes*—someone who works too hard to impress management and follow the established rules. Because of these informal boundaries, both positive and negative, a person must consider their choice of clothing for Casual Fridays. Ironically, even on Casual Friday an employee does not want to stick out as different, or as a person who negates the

office's custom, but as a willingly conforming participant.

For conservative work environments, such as a corporation on Wall Street, a Casual Friday may only consist of women wearing slacks instead of skirts, and men ditching their ties for the day, looking less like Jordon Belfort at his desk in *Wolf of Wall Street*, and more like casual Mark Zuckerberg in the boardroom in *The Social Network*. In more casual work environments, such as schools, employees are allowed to wear jeans, and a less stiff, traditional shirt. For example, I work at a human resources office and my boss "dressing down" would be him taking off his suit jacket, wearing a collared shirt, tie, and business pants. At my high school, dressing down would consist of my teachers wearing jeans and an Oxford shirt. This shows the variation in the understanding of "casual" between various workplaces. In many workplaces, Casual Fridays are most associated with the choice to wear jeans.

Many times the managers creating a Casual Friday will outline what is or is not acceptable so that the employees are aware of their boundaries. Some magazines and blogs even have sections devoted to helping professional women wear appropriate Casual Friday outfits, such as Liana Satanstein's *Vogue* article titled "When is Casual Friday too Casual?" The general rule of thumb with Casual Fridays is to "dress down" from the traditional office attire – again, rhetorically reinforcing the top-down social dynamic. An yet, in an effort to still maintain conformity, attire that is "moderately professional," is specified, often overtly, by management. The act of remaining professional while performing the Casual Friday ritual is subjective, as many people have different ideas about what constitutes professionalism, but it all remains in context of the established office environment.

In order to make the Casual Friday ritual more relatable and understandable, one can also look at a variation of the form: the tradition as it occurs at my high school, Bermudian Springs High School in York Springs, Pennsylvania. A highly institutionalized practice, at the beginning of the school year faculty who want to participate in Casual Friday contribute 20 dollars into a scholarship fund for seniors majoring in education. For the rest of the year, faculty are allowed to wear jeans every other Friday. The ritual was created about six years ago by the previous school

principal, Russell Greenholt, and it continues on every year. Most teachers in the school participate, usually wearing dark denim and a button down, collared shirt. Sometimes, they will align the Casual Friday to fall on student spirit Fridays, and teachers are able to wear jeans and Bermudian Springs High School logoed tops. This is just one example of a workplace where the nation-wide Casual Friday ritual is organized and performed within the context of its environment.

The texture of the Casual Friday ritual is all about creating happiness and comradery amongst the employees in the workplace—an artificial and constructed community that can partake in a performance that creates informal bonds, and a shared experience. The explicit point of a Casual Friday ritual is to break up the monotony of the workplace and to do something to make the workplace less formal. This can be read as a precursor or extension of the weekend. People in popular television shows such as *Growing Pains* say “thank God it’s Friday!” and the ritual of Casual Friday helps to further amplify this common feeling. When a person gets out of bed on a Friday morning they can get excited about dressing in a more comfortable and personalized way for work, in addition to the fact that they have the entire weekend ahead of them. They are able to dress in a more individualistic way, which also creates excitement because co-workers are able to see one another on a more personal, less work-oriented level. The ritual is attributed to their managers who allow it, which helps to create positive feelings between supervisors and their employees.

This “gift” can be viewed as a kind, appreciative gesture, or it can be viewed by some as a patronizing way to keep the employees happy. Despite this, Casual Fridays are understood throughout society as a happiness-inducing ritual amongst most people, both those who participate and do not participate. People who do don’t participate in Casual Fridays at their jobs can say “Wow, your workplace really sounds like a great place to work!” when they hear a friend’s company participates in a Casual Friday. Although I have never had a job that does a “true” Casual Friday, I remember viewing it as an exciting ritual in high school because I could see how upbeat and personable my teachers were when they were wearing their jeans and looking forward to the weekend. Although a simple ritual, Casual Friday has become a staple in culture.

The context of Casual Fridays begins in Hawaii in 1966. According to the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts, then-Bank of Hawaii president, Wilson P. Cannon Jr., allowed employees to wear Hawaiian print shirts to work on Fridays, starting the tradition of “Aloha Fridays.” In popular culture, Hawaiian shirts have the image vacation, leisure, and informality. A person wearing a Hawaiian shirt would be imagined on a beach, on the islands of Hawaii that are separate, yet still a part of American culture. By creating a tradition with a distinct Hawaiian identity, Cannon was able to create a pride and identity in a state that historically was not integrated in American culture. The idea of Hawaiian shirts contrasts with the image of working with a bank, which is distinctly removed from the concept of leisure, relaxation, and fun.

According to PIFA, Aloha Aluminum in Pittsburgh created the first Casual Friday in the continental United States in 1991 and as it spread to large corporations such as IBM, the ritual became popularized across the United States. Today, Casual Fridays occur all over the country and Christina Binkley of the *Wall Street Journal* believes this practice, although originally marginalized, has contributed toward American’s overall normalization of “business casual” style. Instead of three piece suits and dress sets, young professionals are moving towards more comfortable, relaxed styles. Almost every American can point to someone they know who has participated in Casual Fridays, and this trend has been increasingly depicted in the mass media in productions such as *The Office* and *Office Space*, as well as in memes and cartoons. While the idea of Casual Friday has spread to other countries, the context of the ritual is distinctly American, beginning with Hawaiian “Aloha Fridays.”

Three of Bascom’s folkloric functions can be directly applied to the ritual of Casual Fridays: escapism, validating culture, and social control. Combined, these all help to make Casual Fridays a folkloric performance that has an informal role in establishing and enforcing American office culture. First, a community is able to use Casual Fridays as a form of escapism, a way to get away from reality. The reality for many people is that they live in a world filled with corporate hierarchies, supervisors, and strict, rigid requirements like dress and personal conduct codes. By participating in Casual Friday, a person is able to reject the strict rules that hold them

metaphorically captive in their professions by dressing in a way that is usually "unacceptable" in the work place. By viewing their co-workers and themselves in a casual, more personal way, people are able to escape the restrictions they often feel in nine-to-five jobs where they are surrounded by chains of command, and restrained outward appearances. In addition, the office is a very sterile place that often makes people feel restrained and valued only as a means of production. Stark white walls, fluorescent yellow lights, and gray cubicle walls create an emotionless, not individualized workspace. By participating in a Casual Friday, an employee can create a personalized work experience and emotional escape from the sterilized atmosphere they work in, just as they would by hanging pictures in their cubicle or changing their desktop background.

Casual Fridays also validate culture. In the past 50 years there has been a cultural push away from the typical model of a businessman's aesthetics. Today's millennial generation rejects the idea of a boardroom filled with men in suits and ties, carrying their briefcases, looking like an amorphous group of impersonal decision-makers. Young Americans value executives who look like Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, who is almost always seen wearing jeans and a tee-shirt or sweatshirt. He often looks like a common, everyday American you would see walking down the street. Companies today seem to value the individual rather than conformity, as seen in rapid acceptance of tattoos in the work place, and the prevalence of tele-commuting. Senior managers in many occupations understand that people are more able to resonate with those that look and act like themselves, so they change their style accordingly. The "average" person is the approachable type of person that could be a neighbor or a friend who is relatable and able to be talked to on a more personal level. Therefore, Casual Fridays help to further validate the cultural value of dressing in a professional, yet approachable type of way that compliments the working class, the "average Joe," and most importantly, the individual.

Finally, Casual Fridays work as a form of social control. During a Casual Friday, it is stigmatized to wear clothing that is too casual, because that deviates from the prescribed cultural norm that is often described to employees during their orientation. It is also criticized to wear traditional business clothing on a Casual Friday,

because it shows that a person is unwilling to participate in the office culture. By creating a Casual Friday, social control is created in the occupation because clear parameters and boundaries for accepted behaviors are established. Even though Casual Fridays seemingly value the individual and break traditional office norms, they create a new type of structure where individuals are *still* informally told what is culturally conventional. Casual Fridays allow for a bit of individual difference and expression, yet they socially control individuals from breaking the parameters of "too casual" (flip flops and ripped jeans) or "not casual enough" (traditional office attire).

In addition, Casual Fridays can in some cases provide social control for the performers of the ritual because they are given this tradition in a patronizing, belittling sort of way. An employee may not be happy with their company's management, but because they are given a Casual Friday tradition to enjoy, some of the employer's misgivings can be forgiven, and they can have a positive outlook towards the company that they would not normally have. Management can make workers feel more positively towards their jobs and institution, simply by changing the dress code once a week, reinforcing the supervisor regulating the employee, office hierarchy.

It is important to look at what texts are combined to create the overall folkloric performance of Casual Fridays. First, the tradition is set in a formal, structured environment (typically the office), with people who are in formalized occupations. The office is not a place that many would typically find folkloric, but the Casual Friday ritual and tradition is able to emerge from the conventionally structured office environment. Many other office traditions emerge in a similar way, as Alan Dundes contends in his work, *Urban Folklore From the Paperwork Empire*. Casual clothes are not a folk object, but the way they are used creates a folk performance. Fridays are an institutional part of culture, but Casual Fridays allow them to contribute to the folk performance. People combine their informal usage of clothing with their informal usage of a day of the week in order to create a ritual in a traditionally formal environment, the office.

Casual Fridays are able to be considered rituals because they are routines that are given power in an irrational way, just as George Gmelch highlights when discussing rituals in baseball. People's spirits are uplifted through Casual Fridays,



although nothing spectacular is happening besides a slight change of clothing. However, this change of clothing allows people to feel that they have power in the occupational hierarchy that they would normally not have. The ritual of Casual Fridays grows from success—every week people enjoy them and they create a more positive atmosphere, so the ritual continues. Overall, the convergence of formalized objects being used in an informal way within a formal atmosphere helps to create a powerful ritual and folk performance. Casual Friday is a ritual that utilizes a *communitas*—a term Victor Turner describes as community who has a sacred attribute from going through a liminal experience as a group (360). Turner explains that during a liminal stage, there is a removal of social structure, causing personal interactions to change as a group of individuals emerge from a lower status to a higher status (361). Participants in the ritual believe they are empowering themselves beyond society's norms by putting themselves in a liminal state, solely identifiable by their dress. However, the participants are being told that they can empower themselves through this ritual, making it more of a prescribed performance than one created independently.

The office community enters into the liminal period as a structured and regimented group, following societal standards set forth by decades of corporate culture. During the liminal period the group enters a period of transition where the social structure is broken through the shared change in dress. Instead of entering into work and seeing everyone dressed in a monotonous, prescribed manner that the employees see as “normal,” everyone comes in dressed more as they would outside of work, with an individualized style that reflects who they are. All preconceived notions and office manual inoculations are overturned, and the employees have a new understanding of one another. The boss is still the boss, but now on Casual Friday, the boss and his employees remove their clothing-based hierarchy.

Upon re-entering the society, the office hierarchy is reconstructed and changed, with (ideally) more comradery and a sense of equality and individualism upon the employees. The participants give the ritual power by enjoying it and making it a requested and anticipated activity that symbolizes the celebration of the end of a work week. As a ritual utilizing liminal *communitas*, power is invested in Casual Fridays through the

typically middle class workers who enjoy, and request the ritual as a push against the hegemony they experience, creating a more equal work environment.

An important thing to keep in mind is that Casual Fridays are most often associated with middle-aged individuals working in corporate environments, because they are most often depicted in the media this way in shows like *The Office* or movies like *Office Space*. Many young people are not yet qualified for jobs in an office or professional occupation; therefore the people who most often participate in Casual Fridays are individuals who are a bit older, and more established in their careers. The result is that Casual Fridays are not usually celebrated by children, young adults, or senior citizens. Participants are most often not at the top of the office totem pole, because they are the intended audience rather than “allowing” or creating the tradition. Therefore, Casual Fridays are usually given power by this middle-aged, or mid-career working class. This position of being in the “middle” creates an anxiety in the group to have some sense of control of their jobs, rather than having their fates predetermined by their supervisors. This group attempts to resist the hegemony of corporate culture, thus empowering the lower level “cogs in the machine” to a more equal standing of those in higher positions. However, hegemony ultimately wins as upper management begins to participate in and embrace the Casual Friday, making the tradition a part of corporate culture.

In order to truly understand the ritual of Casual Fridays, we must look at how the tradition has manifested itself in the mass media. In the popular television sitcom *The Office*, there is an episode titled “Casual Friday.” The entire office is disrupted by the ritual, with Toby, the company's HR representative, ultimately canceling Casual Friday because of the chaos that is created. In the episode, Angela, the uptight accountant complains to Toby about her co-worker wearing sandals that expose his feet to the office, and Meredith wears an extremely revealing dress with no undergarments underneath it, exposing herself to the office. Overall, the episode is extremely comedic, as the characters who improperly participate in the ritual create mayhem. This popular culture reference shows us that in an office environment people want to express themselves, yet if a person gets too personal it crosses the line, the folkloric boundary,

and causes discomfort among co-workers. Casual Fridays are able to serve as a social reinforcement, creating the line between pushing against the corporate structure, fighting for individuality, and acting in a way that is unprofessional and intolerable. At the end of the episode, all of the employees are very disappointed that Casual Fridays are canceled, thus reinforcing the perceived surge of morale that the ritual brings to its participants.

In addition to mass media, Casual Fridays are often the subject of jokes in popular culture through cartoons and memes. There are a variety of Someecards, online e-cards that parody traditional greeting cards, which create punchlines about Casual Fridays. One reads: "In addition to Casual Friday I propose the following: Punch a Co-worker Monday, No Pants/Shirt Tuesday, Drunk at Work Wednesday, and Call in Sick Thursday"; another: "I wish Casual Friday meant we could show up to work drunk"; while yet another says, "If showing up in a robe and tiara with a box of wine is wrong, then maybe I don't fully comprehend how casual Friday actually works." All three of these Someecards discuss drinking in the workplace, a practice that is taboo and ridiculed in many work environments. These jokes about Casual Fridays disrupt the monotony, professionalism, and focus on productivity normally seen in the workplace. They combine outside of work, leisure time, with the idea of being stuck in the office.

Jokes about being stuck in the office resonate with so many people that they are widely shared across social media. One Someecard that reads "I'd rather enter the Hunger Games than enter the office on Mondays" has been shared by over 31,300 people (Someecards). Through Casual Fridays, the office is re-imagined as a less rigid and work focused, and more fun, and recreational place to be. We can conclude that Casual Fridays are effectively a mini-revolution against the strictness of the office, pushing a typically inappropriate behavior against the typical hierarchy of a work place. While "drunk at work Friday" would be an outlandish and unprofessional ritual, "Casual Friday" is a milder way of allowing employees to step over the line between work and leisure.

To further the point, the fashion blogger Dawn Wood says, "If you work in an office environment, the chances are that for four days of the week you are required to wear smart and sometimes restrictive clothing, right? Of course if

you're working for a corporate company such as a law firm or an accountancy practice, maintaining etiquette and formal dress are paramount."

Etiquette, formalities, and overt restriction are destroyed, even if temporarily, through a Casual Friday performance. Casual Fridays are a ritualistic outcry of the middle class voices of America. In the United States, corporations, tiered organizational structures, and offices are the environments that many people find themselves spending 40 hours a week, at least 50 weeks a year working in. People working in these structured, professional work environments have little self-expression, are stifled with answering to a chain of command, and often choose their occupations for the sole purpose of money. People often complain about being "corporate drones," "living in their cubicles," or being pushed down by "the man." The need to subvert these restrictions or express individuality is allowed to manifest in this ritualistic performance. In support of this idea that workers actively look for ways to escape institutional restrictions, one can see that "Hump Day" has become another folkloric performance. Although not an overt ritual like Casual Friday, we can see in cartoons and media that "Hump Day" is a fun and comedic way of describing the mid-week slump, another aspect of Monday-Fridays spent in a structured atmosphere.

Instead of simply feeling bored, oppressed, and dissatisfied in their work, traditions like Casual Friday give employees the ability to cry out against their organizations, staging a weekly mock rebellion celebrating their 2 days of weekend freedom that are about to start. These sanctioned rebellions, Casual Fridays, create a neutered anti-structure where middle-class employees are able to come together as comrades in a liminal state and fight against the hierarchies that oppress them. While Casual Fridays are not demonstrations that permanently create change, they generate morale and a sense that overcoming a rigid social structure is possible. The workers in an office are able to take something that their supervisors have given them – a day of casual dress to celebrate the weekend – as a revolution against the positions they hold. Even the most obedient employees are able to embrace one day of disrupting the structure of their workplace. However, this disruption is staged, since it is a ritual often *given* to the employees by management as a way to improve moral, ultimately reinforcing the traditional business hierarchy of upper management having control of the workplace. Regardless, Casual

Friday is a powerful American ritual that is here to stay, as long as people continue to give it power. The next time a person discusses their excitement for a Casual Friday, consider the three functions the ritual performs in society, the power the ritual is given, as well as the disruption Casual Fridays create in a company's hierarchy. Casual Fridays are a folkloric performance that seemingly reimagines the work place, ultimately reinforcing the middle class's role in the hierarchy of American business culture, through the weekly disruption of the traditional office environment.

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