



What counts as 'pyjamas'?

We all agree cream satin shorts with a matching camisole come under the pyjama category. Cotton and flannel matching sets are also a staple of the nightwear section in any department store. Polyester printed twinsets, however, are in question. Westerners place them in the sleepwear pigeonhole, but in Vietnam this does not hold true. The polyester set is actually considered to be casual fashion, more of a leisure suit than pyjamas, and may be related to the old communist blue outfits. And just to confuse the casual clothes issue, some people do sleep in them, too. Multi-purpose wear?

When are pyjamas acceptable?

As in the West, pyjamas do not appear on the list of acceptable corporate wear. Their natural place on both sides of the globe is in bed and in the home, perhaps on lazy mornings browsing the newspaper or for rainy evening movie sessions on the couch. In Vietnam, it stretches a little further. In the home, at any time of day, pyjamas can be worn — unless you have important visitors. If you work in a menial job, feel free to keep the poly on. For street sellers, the jim-jams are almost a uniform. In the city, there is a clear link with socio-economic status and pyjama attire.

Urban fashion, rural, or both?

The appeal is broad-ranging, but you are more likely to see wider segments of the rural population in pyjamas. This makes sense. As the cities modernise and globalise so does the fashion sense of the inhabitants. Country areas lag behind and daywear is more about function than fashion. For some there is also a division between the good pyjamas for outside wear and old pyjamas for sleeping in.

Is there an age limit?

This is where the urban-rural divide kicks in. In the city, the main age bracket in polyester is the 35+ year old housewife or street seller. Younger Vietnamese may run out of the house to do a quick errand in the neighbourhood in PJs, but they wouldn't consider them for a social outing. In rural areas, they are ageless, particularly in poorer areas where discretionary income and the availability of "fashionable" clothing are limited.

What's the latest style?

For the under 30s, shortie pyjamas in cotton are in fashion, paired with a matching tank top. Most hope to graduate into the satin category, as these are perceived as more sexy. Over 30, the style becomes a little more conservative, moving to longer trousers and covered shoulders, although short sleeves are still acceptable. The older you get, the longer the trousers and sleeves.

Can you mix and match?

Leopard print trousers with a geometrically styled top are not going to win you points in the fashion stakes. Pyjamas must always be worn as matching sets. A failure to do so indicates some serious forgetfulness in the morning, or the onset of mental instability. My colleagues were adamant on this point: "It must match or you are crazy".



What are the rules for men?

The majority of pyjama clad people tend to be women, but there is some leeway given to men. Over a certain age, men share the right to roam the streets in their nightwear — within limits. Cotton or flannel are the only acceptable fabrics and the age range tends to favour the over 50's. If you think this is unfair, picture an elderly man in skin-hugging polyester and you may have a better understanding.

What's the cost?

You know the etiquette, you've made your choice between cotton, satin and polyester and now it's time to spend. If you are looking for super cheap casual wear, the markets are the place to go. For the more upmarket styles, it's the supermarket. Bottom of the range sets from the supermarket cost around VND50,000. Cotton maxes out at around VND80,000, while polyester commands a slightly higher rate of VND100,000. Satin is the most expensive, with an average supermarket price of VND100,000+. In the market, however, any of these styles may start from as little as VND30,000.

What's the reaction to foreigners in this style?

Vietnamese friends seemed confused by the idea of Western people in Ho Chi Minh City going out and about in pyjamas. They expect foreigners to wear business clothes. Foreigners are here as professionals and pyjamas are for housewives. So what about foreign housewives? A resounding NO.

We put this theory to the test, sending a pyjama-clad mid 20s female, Louise, for a walk around the block in a shortie set, and the equivalent male, Stefan, in longer pyjamas for a drive around the city. Louise reported bemused and baffled looks, but no expressions of surprise. More of a, "But why?" reaction. Stefan was pointed at. He generated giggles and whispers from passers-by. Neither felt comfortable in their comfortable clothes, which somewhat defies the point.

What do Generation Y say?

For the city girls, the pyjama game may soon come to an end, as Generation Y is determined to show style and flare. When asked if she would ever wear polyester, Lieu Bich Hue, 23, says, "It's not my style. I like fashion". Trinh Thi Huong, 20, seconds this motion adding that pyjamas are not "polite wear". They are too casual and not for public view.

It seems pyjamas may soon be relegated to the home only, although both girls admit they might take the risk and dash to the shops if it's unlikely they'll run into someone they know. 