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Head for feminism, body for fashion: fashion and feminism

MAdeline Emke

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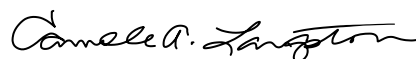
Head for Feminism, Body for Fashion:
Fashion and Feminism
Madeline Emke

HONORS THESIS
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Honors Program of St. Mary's University
San Antonio, Texas

Approved by:



Dr. Bradley W. Root
Associate Professor of History



Dr. Camille Langston
Honors Director

Abstract

Fashion and feminism have been connected for a couple of decades in the history of the United States. However, they are often looked at separately by historians. Many historians focus on the history and evolution of fashion while others research and analyze the feminist movements throughout the United States. The current state of the field for a focus on the relationship between feminism and fashion is minimal in regard to the United States. The focus lies on either fashion or feminism and not the relationship between the two. My thesis, however, focuses on the relationship between fashion and feminism and how the feminist movement in the United States used fashion as a catalyst and method to showcase change. My research begins in the 1960s, during the second wave of feminism, and continues until the 1980s, which falls at the end of the second wave and the beginning of the third wave of feminism. Using my research, my thesis showcases the dynamic between fashion and feminism and directly links fashion as an instrument of change in the feminist movements.

Introduction:

What is the relationship between fashion and feminism? Separately, both subjects have been studied by different scholars for many years. Many historians have looked at feminism through a political and historical lens to explain what feminism is, why it became a thing, and why it is important. The same could be said for fashion; students have studied fashion as a career, hobby, or outlet for stress. But is there a relationship between fashion and feminism? In my opinion, the relationship between fashion and feminism can be seen through feminism's use of fashion as a catalyst for feminist movements throughout United States history and as an outlet to defy and challenge gender norms throughout society.

The feminist movement arose because women were seen and treated as unequal to men simply because of their gender and the stereotypes placed upon them. Beginning in the 1960s, during the second wave of feminism, women began challenging gender norms in many important ways. One of the important ways was through fashion. Feminists utilized fashion in the 1960s to promote changes that empower women to take back their sexual identity and represent themselves.¹ Feminists in the 1970s took that sexual empowerment found in fashion and pushed for more equality in society in general. The 1980s, which was the final part of the second wave of feminism and the beginning of the third wave, fashion was used to

¹ Betty Luther Hillman, "Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s," *Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press*, 2015, <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=73237010-1604-3336-815a-c6bd625d262a>.

push for more equality and power in the work force.² In one way, fashion became an outlet for women to represent themselves however they wished, whether that was in a casual sense with jeans or pants or a formal sense with elegant dresses and accessories. More importantly, fashion became a catalyst and platform for feminists to broadcast their message nationwide. This thesis will look at how feminists used fashion to challenge gender norms during the second wave of feminism.

When starting my research, I looked at a number of different sources to lay out the groundwork. I discovered a number of newspaper articles or magazine excerpts that discussed prominent fashion changes or plans and demonstrations led by the feminist movement as they argued for equality.³ Eventually, I began to find sources that linked the two topics together by focusing on smaller changes in the fashion industry that began to ripple throughout society as a whole.⁴ One primary source I found discussed a fashion show supported by feminists that argued the importance of pants in everyday life for women because of the comfort jeans and

² Elaine Chalus, "Fanning the Flames: Women, Fashion, and Politics," ed. Tiffany Potter, *Women, Popular Culture, and the Eighteenth Century*, 2012, 92–112.

³ Oedipussy Tuddé, "Fashion Politics and the Fashion in Politics," *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 8 (1974): 17–19.

⁴ "Censors in Feminist Garb," November 19, 1984.

pants created for women.⁵ Other sources focused on workplace uniforms that women began developing to appear professional and fashionable on the job.⁶

Many sources began by discussing the stereotypes and boundaries placed upon women by society. The main boundary for women was the idea that the role of women was to care for the household and the children but if they were going to work in society that they should serve as caretakers in society like teachers. In the article, “Practical Feminist,” the author notes that, while working at a publishing house, her male co-workers were making more money than her because of her gender.⁷ Other sources went even further by talking about how men were often in the positions that gave them the power to control the beauty standards for women and society in general.⁸

After focusing on just the stereotypes and gender norms placed upon women, I began to read more about the arguments for change those women made using fashion as their voice. Many questioned the fashion choices made by feminists, claiming they were too masculine or unfeminine. Regardless, feminists continued to use fashion trends such as the miniskirt or pants to push their

⁵ Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton, “Fashion, Representation, Femininity,” *Feminist Review* 38 (1991): 48–66.

⁶ Annette Lynch and Katalin Medvedev, *Fashion, Agency, and Empowerment: Performing Agency, Following Script* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=2f1ff24b-d609-37ac-86dc-a2b1b441e177>.

⁷ EILEEN SHANAHAN Special to The New York Times, “Practical Feminist: Karen Lipshultz DeCrow,” October 28, 1975.

⁸ Mary-Lou Weisman, “Hers,” October 13, 1983, sec. THE Home.

messages out to the public.⁹ Even into the 1980s, when feminists began wearing power suits, they were still seen as unfeminine and masculine in society's eyes.¹⁰ This did not bother feminists because they had a bigger goal in mind: equality through fashion.

Throughout my research, I began linking concepts from my sources to create my argument: feminists used fashion as a catalyst for societal change in traditional gender norms and an outlet for arguments to challenge the societal view of women. Overall, this thesis will look at the many ways feminists utilized fashion to argue for a change in gender norms. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the 1960s and the 1970s where feminists were arguing for opportunities to be more than the traditional female role of homemaker and to gain sexual empowerment in their daily lives. The second chapter jumps into the 1980s where the focus has shifted from challenging the traditional gender role of women to demanding equality in the work force and dressing for success.

⁹ Carrie Donovan, "Feminism's Effect on Fashion," August 28, 1977, sec. Fashions of the Times.

¹⁰ Hillman, "Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s."

Chapter 1: Introduction

The idea of feminism has changed depending on the political climate and the time period. During the 1960s, feminism focused on breaking out of the homemaker mold and branching into the workforce and public sphere. Feminists throughout the 1960s changed how they approached arguments and political statements because of their desire to break out of the homemaker mold. Some focused on using the legal system to encourage and create change in American society while others focused on society and American culture. Authors, such as Betty Luther Hillman, focus specifically on fashion. She writes, “[a]nalyzing tensions over changing fashion styles during the 1960s reveals how mainstream American notions of gender, sexuality, and class were challenged and remade in those years”.¹¹ The first obstacle in the way of cultural change, however, was the societal standard of femininity and womanhood. Society had an idea of femininity and used fashion to dictate that idea to women.¹² To combat this obstacle, women utilized multiple means to push back against society.

One important element was a change in clothing and fashion. In Western society, men have often been positions of power that let them create standards of behavior, actions, and even beauty.¹³ To feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, men

¹¹ Hillman.

¹² Times, “Practical Feminist.”

¹³ GEORGIA DULLEA Special to The New York Times, “Fashion Show For Feminists Stresses Pants: Clothes Made to Order Scissors in Her Holster,” March 24, 1974, sec. GN.

were the reason for societal beauty standards for men and women in the United States. Men and society used fashion as rules and regulations to dictate what was acceptable for women.¹⁴ According to Betty Luther Hillman, “historians have largely overlooked women’s role as cultural producers, as participants in the creation of fashion’s social significance and formal dimensions.¹⁵”

John Duka, an author at the New York Times focusing on fashion, wrote “cultural critics who have embraced fashion as a meaningful political tool, borrowing sociological and anthropological models, have examined how individuals or groups have manipulated the visual politics of style to articulate social identity or positionality.¹⁶” Feminists argued that the media and advertisements were “aimed more at men than women. They encourage men to expect women to sport all the latest trappings of sexual slavery – expectations women must then fulfill if they are to survive... one of a woman’s jobs in this society is to be an attractive sexual object, and clothes and make up are tools of the trade.” John Duka also says “taken as a whole, the feminist potential of fashion has been limited to its visual or symbolic power, distinct from any kind of meaningful material transformation of women’s lived experience.¹⁷”

¹⁴ Weisman, “Hers.”

¹⁵ Hillman, “Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s.”

¹⁶ John Duka, “Designing an Empire,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 1982, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/03/magazine/designing-an-empire.html>.

¹⁷ Duka.

Hair

The first method second wave feminists used to defy standards of femininity was hair; the ideal woman had long, beautiful hair that was brushed and styled so women began cutting their hair to shorter lengths. This worked on two different fronts: they no longer fit the standard of an ideal woman with their short hair, and they spent less money on hair products and less time creating hairdos to keep their hair in place.¹⁸ Many women even stopped shaving their legs or armpits to defy the typical ideas of femininity and save time throughout the week. Carrie Donovan said “hair is political. Short hair is a symbol of emancipation. Long hair requires effort, time-consuming and frequently expensive care.¹⁹” These simple measures were just starting places for feminist movements and quickly led to an escalation in means to defy societal standards of beauty.

Some women did not want to chop their hair short but still wanted to experience the liberation short hair provided.²⁰ Many women stopped focusing on the beautification of their hair and instead focused on wearing their hair in ways benefitting their lifestyles. Many women began wearing their hair in messy ponytails or half-up-half-down looks if they were busy around the house or

¹⁸ Deborah Anne Cohen, “Why We Look the Way We Look Now,” *The Atlantic*, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-way-we-look-now/359803/>.

¹⁹ Celia Marshik, “At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture,” *Columbia University Press*, *Modernist Latitudes*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.7312/mars17504>.

²⁰ Donovan, “Feminism’s Effect on Fashion.”

running errands.²¹ On days when they were spending more time relaxing or with friends, they would wear their hair down and maybe with simple curls. Special updos began to be reserved for special occasions and events because of the time and product required to maintain the look. This allowed women who preferred longer hair to maintain their long hair while still experiencing feminist liberation through their hair.

Skirts

The first major feminist change in women's fashion was the emergence of the miniskirt. In the 1960s, the term "miniskirt" meant any skirt where the hem length hit at the knees or higher. According to Betty Luther Hillman, "miniskirts were certainly not the first foray of young American women into sexualized styles of dress; the flappers of the 1920s, for example were equally controversial in their time. But short skirts took on new meaning in the context of the "sexual revolution" of the era.²²" Miniskirts allowed women to dress sexually by choice and in a way that showed off the figure of the woman without needing to reveal what was under the clothes.

The creation of the miniskirt allowed for a more sexual form of empowerment. Women were able to dress how they wanted, show as much skin as they wanted, in ways that were previously dictated by men. This sexual liberation

²¹ Weisman, "Hers."

²² Hillman, "Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s."

via the miniskirt allowed for sexual empowerment and body positive empowerment for women.²³

Many older women and men worried about miniskirts for various reasons. The first fear was the divide miniskirts could create between younger women and older women, which would ruin the feminist movements momentum. The second fear was the legal enforcement that could be created to back a “traditional” view of female fashion in the workforce. Angeline Goreau, an author from *The Home*, wrote that “[m]iniskirts, like the pill, were imagined to be a sign of women’s newfound independence and a symbol “of the new feminine drive for full freedom and equality”²⁴.

Dresses

In addition to the new “miniskirt”, dresses began developing in ways that aligned with what women wanted rather than what men wanted. This sexual empowerment continued into the evolution of dresses with the shortening of hem lengths. The shorter hems allowed for more of a woman’s body to be seen at her discretion while also the loosening of the figure allowed for women of all shapes and sizes to feel empowered as well as comfortable.²⁵ If a woman felt more comfortable and empowered in her body, she had the option to choose a tighter and

²³ Angeline Goreau, “Hers: Sexual Revolution, It Seems, Has a Dubious History.,” December 18, 1986, sec. THE HOME.

²⁴ Goreau.

²⁵ Shira Tarrant and Marjorie Jolles, *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2012), <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=23d7bfa9-1cbf-3912-b1fc-be52cd88e1ce>.

shorter dress to show off her figure. And, because women's bodies constantly fluctuate in weight and shape, the looser and shorter dresses allowed for a woman to feel sexually empowered while still comfortable and unrestricted by the fabric of her dress.

Instead of falling below the knees, most dresses began falling just above the knees or even mid-thigh. Multiple new house dresses became popular in the 1960s such as the sheath dress, which hugged the curves while still hanging a little loose against the body, and shift dress, which only pinched in around the ribs and was loose everywhere else.²⁶ Another dress, the tent dress, was the widest fitting loose dress but often had the shortest hem length was pleated and flared throughout the entire dress but usually fell around mid-thigh.²⁷ Sun dresses became very popular in the summer when the heat became too much.

These lightweight, loose fitting, and short dresses were hits among young feminists spending their days outdoors. These dresses began focusing on how women wanted their dresses to fit: some were tighter on the body while others were looser. For feminists, this is exactly what they were looking for in fashion.²⁸

For the clothes to fit the desires and constraints of women and not the idea of

²⁶ "1960s Dress Styles | Swing, Shift, Mod, Mini Dresses," accessed September 26, 2023, <https://vintagedancer.com/1960s/1960s-dresses-colors/>.

²⁷ "1960s Dress Styles | Swing, Shift, Mod, Mini Dresses."

²⁸ José Blanco F. and Andrew Hinchcliffe Reilly, *Fashion, Dress, and Post-Postmodernism*, 1 online resource (xi, 218 pages): color illustrations vols. (London, UK; Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2736736>.

womanhood and femininity created by men. In addition to miniskirts, dresses changed to fit women's needs and wants rather than their male counterparts. The hem lengths of dresses began to shorten while the figures of the dresses were tight or loose depending on the style. This change allowed women to express themselves sexually while also granting the comfort of movement and flexibility that previous dress styles prevented.²⁹

Pants

The next items of clothing that women changed were traditionally associated with a more masculine appearance. Women began choosing jeans and pants over dresses and skirts as well as men's shirts because the longer length helped keep the shirts tucked in. The idea of a woman in the 1950s and 1960s walking around in pants or jeans was unfeminine and often caused concern over the individual's mental well-being and identity.³⁰ Betty Luther Hillman, who wrote for *Frontiers*, said that "The emergence of jeans and pants as everyday fashions for women in the 1960s presented a clearer challenge to women's traditional modes of dress"³¹. Society struggled to decide if pants and jeans were acceptable fashion choices for women in public society.³²

²⁹ Betty Luther Hillman, "'The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power': The Politics of Gender Presentation in the Era of Women's Liberation," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 34, no. 2 (2013): 155–85, <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.34.2.0155>.

³⁰ Donovan, "Feminism's Effect on Fashion."

³¹ Hillman, "Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s."

³² "Censors in Feminist Garb."

The 1960s and 1970s became known as the time of anti-fashion, when women rebelled against the traditional view of womanhood by wearing jeans and shirts as casual attire. With the creation of pants and jeans for women, fashion began to take on a more equal appearance in regard to gender that was not previously seen.³³ Pants allowed women to embrace a style that was comfortable as well as fashionable, especially for the work force and for outside events. Women could run and sit comfortably without fear of showing more than they wanted. Jeans were a comfortable choice for ordinary, everyday household chores that allowed women to move quickly and freely in ways that skirts and dresses prevented.

Additionally, women began buying clothing as separate items. Instead of just buying a dress or a set of clothing items that went together, women began buying shirts, sweaters, and jackets separately and pairing these items with pants or miniskirts.³⁴ An American designer began his business during the late 1960s and understood what women wanted: Calvin Klein. Klein became successful with clothes for women that were influenced by menswear such as pants, tailored coats, and jackets. Klein often said that women no longer had to prove themselves daring

³³ Times, "Fashion Show For Feminists Stresses Pants."

³⁴ Donovan, "Feminism's Effect on Fashion."

or proving they were secure in themselves through clothes but rather wanted to look feminine and soft in pants and jeans.³⁵

While pants were definitely more popular among younger feminists, many older feminists found it hard to wear pants because of the way the body changes as one ages. Pants, especially jeans, were seen as unflattering and uncomfortable for many older feminists.³⁶ Eventually, in the 1970s, pants became wider and looser, as well as being made from stretchy material, to accommodate the growing and changing body of older feminists. The adaptation of the culottes to be wider and looser helped many older feminists feel more comfortable wearing pants in public while the tight, high waisted pants were seen as more fashionable and trendier for younger feminists.³⁷

The styles of pants ranged from bell bottoms to culottes, with blue jeans and cigarette pants falling in between. The wide variety of styles for pants allowed for a diversity of fashionable looks and styles among feminists. Bell bottoms became a staple of the youth and the hippie movement.³⁸ Blue jeans also gained popularity with younger feminists. Older feminists wearing blue jeans were usually at outdoor events while younger feminists wore blue jeans whenever they could. Cigarette pants were the more fashionable style of pants because of the nicer fabric and

³⁵ Donovan.

³⁶ Times, "Fashion Show For Feminists Stresses Pants."

³⁷ "1960s Fashion Pants," accessed September 26, 2023, <https://fiftiesweb.com/fashion/1960s-fashion-pants/>.

³⁸ "1960s Fashion Pants."

structure. They were slim-fitting, but straight-legged pants made of stretchy but finer fabrics usually reserved for evening attire.³⁹ Finally, culottes were a middle ground between skirts and pants by reaching mid-shin in length but flaring out to appear like a skirt when not moving. In fact, Hillman writes “much of the controversy surrounding pants for women was the concern that pants were simply not feminine enough for women to wear as common attire”⁴⁰. Many people linked pants and miniskirts into the same category, usually with tones of disgust. Again, Hillman states “Both styles, in different ways, challenged previous conceptions of feminine dress and seemed to symbolize deeper changes in societal definitions of womanhood”⁴¹.

Traditional Womanhood

All these changes led to a change in the view of traditional womanhood and femininity and also allowed for women to take on a new understanding of empowerment. With the creation of pants, women began taking on more masculine understandings of empowerment. They became empowered in their movements and lifestyles because of the freedom of their movement and mobility.

Additionally, the more egalitarian appearance helped women feel more comfortable and powerful in their work.⁴² Jeans, even though they were more

³⁹ “1960s Fashion Pants.”

⁴⁰ Hillman, “Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s.”

⁴¹ Hillman.

⁴² Times, “Practical Feminist.”

casual, allowed women the freedom and power to move quickly and freely during outdoor activities like picnics and festivals.

In 1970, when fashion designers introduced longer skirts known as “midi” or “maxi” skirts to replace “miniskirts”, feminists rejected these skirts because they believed fashion designers were just dictating what women should wear instead of listening to their message. In other words, they thought society was placing the focus on fashion and the idea of “feminine” rather than letting women decide what was fashionable and feminine. To feminists, “[j]ust as women deserved to choose their own careers and – in the context of the sexual revolution – their own sexual partners, they also deserved to be able to choose their mode of dress.⁴³” The point of the specific fashion changes made by feminists was to illustrate that women had the right to choose how to dress and how to present themselves rather than dictate and change fashion in general. Women wanted the clothes they chose to wear to represent their power and femininity without being dictated or molded to fit a certain stereotype or standard created by society. Hillman writes “These supporters of women’s pantsuits argued that women deserved the freedom of choice to dress as they wished”⁴⁴. These changes in fashion signified changes in gender roles and challenges to traditional views of womanhood. “For younger women, however,

⁴³ Nina Hyde, “Comfortable Classiness - The Washington Post,” *Washington Post*, March 24, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1983/03/25/comfortable-classiness/80536bd8-27da-4f8a-84c2-1a3645038eea/>.

⁴⁴ Hillman, “Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s.”

these styles symbolized fashion, fun, and freedom – a freedom they embraced despite the consternation of adults” as quoted by Betty Luther Hillman.⁴⁵

Many antifeminists attempted to argue that just because feminists were asking for equal rights did not mean that men and women should be able to dress the same. However, what feminists who chose to wear pants were arguing for was simply equal rights and did not focus on the idea of men and women wearing the same clothing. Often, “advocates of pants also adopted arguments about the importance of freedom of choice in one’s dress” as noted by Hillman.⁴⁶ These choices began to be known as an “androgynous uniform” and helped promote the idea of a society without gender distinctions and dissolve the idea that men and women looked different from each other. This also stemmed from the anthropological and psychological breakthroughs in defining sex roles and gender in biology and society. “Growing numbers of women working jobs outside of the home fostered social anxieties that women would abandon their “traditional” roles as wives and mothers for professions and lifestyles previously designated for men. Changes in self-presentation for women fueled these concerns, with social commentators worrying that women dressing in new styles, and men dress in styles similar to those previously reserved for women, could further erode traditional

⁴⁵ Hillman.

⁴⁶ Hillman.

gender roles” as noted by Betty Luther Hillman.⁴⁷ However, the “androgynous uniform” was just one way to look at women wearing pants in the public sphere.

But was defying societal standards the only way? No, many older feminists focused on enacting legal change through legislation rather than fashion. A great example of legal change was the amendment on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or Title VII, which banned employment discrimination based on sex as well as race. Additionally, feminist groups petitioned, carried out investigations, and filed lawsuits based on complaints from women in the workplace. But fashion united different causes such as civil rights and feminism in ways that just focusing on legal routes did not. Additionally, feminism and fashion looked different for groups. Some feminist groups, composed of men and women, utilized clothing viewed as traditionally feminine, such as men wearing skirts and growing their hair out, to fight against gender discrimination. Other groups chose to use the “androgynous uniform” to showcase the lack of differences between men and women. Betty Luther Hillman writes “Fashion and style can take on political, cultural, and societal meanings, signifying messages about the individual wearer and creating a nonverbal discourse on the messages contained in individual choices

⁴⁷ Hillman.

of style”⁴⁸. Women wanted clothing that was comfortable and fashionable without having to compromise on either aspect.

⁴⁸ Hillman.

Chapter 2: Introduction

Most people are familiar with fashion from the 1980s. From the bright workout video outfits to the neon blazers with shoulder pads, fashion went through numerous transformations. However, fashion was not the only thing that transformed during the 1980s. While feminism was evolving into its third wave, women began using fashion to gain smaller victories in their daily lives rather than just for larger movements.

A new workplace uniform for women began to emerge as more women began dressing in professional clothing for their jobs. This uniform included knee-length skirts, wide-legged slacks, a matching blazer, a blouse of a different color, and kitten-heeled shoes.⁴⁹

The 1980s were a turning point in fashion for feminism that focused on continuing the changes to pants and skirts that allowed for sexual expression and professional comfort to accommodate the growing and changing bodies of feminists who were no longer in their early 20s.

However, power dressing, or establishing one's power through clothing, was not just used to promote female success and professionalism in the workplace. Power dressing also became a staple for feminist fights for sexual positivity. Feminists focused on sexual freedom and liberation from the media as means to

⁴⁹ Hyde, "Comfortable Classiness - The Washington Post."

advertise or promote various products or corporations. This included using women as advertisements for airlines, brands, and companies. Most feminists hated the objectification of women in these advertisements, especially due to the outfits the companies placed them in.⁵⁰ Airlines pictured slim women in tight outfits that left little to the imagination of potential customers.

The portrayal of women in this way led to a feeling of objectification and inferiority because women were not seen as professional unless they fit a certain body type and dressed a certain way. Many feminists argued that this advertising pressured young women to fit certain ideals and also put a clock on their professional careers because of their bodies. In other words, once they stopped looking young and slim, they ceased to be beautiful enough to work. To combat this, feminists began utilizing power dressing as a means to fit professional dress attire without having to be confined to sexualized clothing.⁵¹ For some, stepping away from sexualized clothing meant switching from the short, tight miniskirts in favor of the slightly tight but longer pencil skirts when dressing for work. For others, this meant stepping away from skirts all together and choosing to wear pantsuits and dressing more masculine. Power dressing became a standard practice

⁵⁰ Tarrant and Jolles, *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style*.

⁵¹ Angella d'Avignon, "The Power Suit's Subversive Legacy," *The Atlantic*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/12/the-power-suits-subversive-legacy/549200/>.

for feminists in all aspects of their argument because it allowed women to be comfortable while also looking professional.

Fashion in the 1980s also began to focus on gender minimalism. Clothing was designed and worn in ways that minimized the importance of gender through more unisex or gender-specific attire. Women wore clothing that was designed to be worn by both men and women, or they often turned to men's fashion instead. This included the widespread fashion of sweaters, especially turtlenecks, crew necks, and V-necks, for everyday wear and business professional styling.⁵² A lot of the fashion of the early 1980s focused on formal and professional fashion, especially with women in the work force becoming more common.⁵³

The comfort of the genderless uniform also helped women feel the power felt by men when wearing suits. And, by adding blazers or jackets for the workplace, women felt sexually empowered by not being seen as different or just feminine among their coworkers.⁵⁴

Skirts

If a corporation included a dress code for female employees in the 1980s, the dress code usually stated a preference for women wearing skirts rather than pants.⁵⁵

⁵² "Purloined Sweater: A Case of Who Copied Whom First," accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/12/the-power-suits-subversive-legacy/549200/>.

⁵³ "Comfortable Classiness - The Washington Post."

⁵⁴ Kelly Aliano, "Power Dressing," *Women & the American Story* (blog), accessed September 20, 2023, <https://wams.nyhistory.org/end-of-the-twentieth-century/a-conservative-turn/power-dressing/>.

⁵⁵ Hillman, "'The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power.'"

While many feminists of the 1960s and 1970s embraced the short, tight miniskirts, feminists and female professionals in the 1980s wanted to overcome the sexualized feeling associated with miniskirts in the workplace. Because of this, pencil skirts became the more work-friendly choice for many women.

Pencil skirts were looser than their miniskirt counterpart throughout the length of the skirt rather than molding perfectly to the shape of the body, but they were tighter than most other skirts. Pencil skirts became a happy medium for feminists who wanted to promote body positivity but not a sexualized work environment.⁵⁶ Pencil skirts also accommodated the changing body of women. The looser fit and longer length helped older women feel comfortable and powerful in the work force. Overall, changes in skirt styles gave women more comfort and confidence in the workplace.

Pants

After pants became extremely popular in the 1960s, many older women and feminists began to complain that they did not feel the empowerment that these younger feminists proclaimed. This was because pants did not always accommodate body changes women experienced.⁵⁷ Fashion designers heard the complaints and decided to listen and appease their customers. They began making

⁵⁶ Aliano, "Power Dressing."

⁵⁷ Nina Hyde, "Fashion: After Jeans . . . What?," *Washington Post*, March 24, 1981, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1981/03/24/fashion-after-jeans-what/f25a2f01-3dda-4c74-8c1f-e490152a03b4/>.

and selling pants that were looser and more appealing to the aging body. This included shorter lengths and looser waistbands for many popular styles including professional pants and jeans. Pants in the 1980s moved away from the flare seen in the 1970s and instead focused on straight leg trousers.⁵⁸

While pants shifted to be more appropriate for work, they still allowed for the comfort and fashionableness that was first seen in the 1960s. Pants became less about showing off the feminine figure and more on offering universality in comfort and style by widening pant legs to include the ever-changing feminine figure. After these changes, women and feminists of all ages, shapes, and sizes began to feel the power first felt by younger feminists. By pairing pants with a blazer or jacket, fashion created a suit similar to those worn by men but in styles and colors that were more commonly seen by women.⁵⁹

Power Suits

During the 1980s, fashion designers shifted their focus from the younger generation to the older generations because of the latter's financial stability. Power dressing became the way women stood out professionally in the work force as more women, especially mothers, joined the work force and held professional

⁵⁸ Hyde.

⁵⁹ "Power Dressing - Do Women Still Need a Power Suit?," LEVO, March 6, 2014, <https://www.levo.com/posts/power-suit-fashion-women/>.

degrees.⁶⁰ The increase of women in the corporate world and fashion trends of the 1980s combined to create the trend of power suits.

Power dressing focused on imitating the masculine physique by broadening the shoulders with shoulder pads, larger sleeves to imitate muscled arms, above the ankle length pants to seem taller, and sometimes ballet flat dress shoes instead of heels.⁶¹ By adapting to styles of male behavior in a work environment, this also included the clothes men wore. Women's power suits, based on the male fashion trend of suits for the work force, combined tailored jackets and narrow pencil skirts to establish a professional yet fashionable ensemble that women would wear to work. The idea of power suits focused on the idea of "dressing for the job you want, not the job you have" as stated by John T. Molloy in his book *Woman's Dress for Success*.⁶² While Molloy believed financial success constrained women to fulfill only the "sexy" aspects of jobs and was against pantsuits as a uniform; this idea became the core for power dressing and power suits.

There was one small problem with power suits in the eyes of the everyday woman: power suits seemed too masculine.⁶³ And, in some ways, power suits began as a way for feminists to dress masculine. The tailored jackets incorporated

⁶⁰ d'Avignon, "The Power Suit's Subversive Legacy."

⁶¹ Nina Hyde, "Refining the Look," *Washington Post*, October 22, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1983/10/22/refining-the-look/5262e3e1-7b68-4852-bcdb-218da47f86b0/>.

⁶² John T. Molloy, *The Woman's Dress for Success Book* (New York: Warner Books, 1978).

⁶³ Hillman, "Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s."

shoulder pads to create the appearance of women having broader shoulders like men and could only be found in suit colors commonly worn by men: black, brown, and gray. However, as power suits and power dressing quickly grew in popularity, many fashion designers began promoting a more feminine approach to power suits.

The second change to power dressing that allowed it to be more feminine was the introduction of more colors for power suits. Instead of just creating power suits in the standard black and gray, many designers began creating power suits in colors like blue, pink, or purple.⁶⁴ These colors helped women stand out from their male counterparts through the vibrancy of their clothes, not because of the sexualization of their body.

The most prominent icon for power dressing was Margaret Thatcher, whose signature power suit quickly became a fashion staple in the United Kingdom and the United States.⁶⁵ Her suits were usually a single-color tone with a matching hat, jacket, and skirt that ended below the knee. The jacket usually had wider shoulders and shoulder pads.⁶⁶ A pearl necklace and kitten heels were accessorized with every outfit.

⁶⁴ Aliano, "Power Dressing."

⁶⁵ John Duka, "British Fashion: How It Shifted into High Gear," *New York Times*, March 24, 1984, sec. 1.

⁶⁶ John Duka, "Notes on Fashion," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/12/28/style/notes-on-fashion.html>.

Power dressing became a popular trend, especially in the work force, as women worked for career advancements.⁶⁷ Since they wanted to fit into higher management levels, women began emulating a more masculine appearance through fashion in the hopes of promotions.

Shoes

In addition to the changes in pants and skirts, shoes also saw a change in the 1980s. Traditionally, heels were worn for elegant and formal occasions. However, as more women began wearing them in their daily lives as part of their work uniform, heels began to shorten and change shape to offer more comfort and universal utility in examples like the kitten heels. Kitten heels are short stiletto heels, usually only one or two inches in height, with a slight curve along the back to set the heel slightly in from the back edge of the shoe. These heels were far more comfortable and practical than the original stiletto heel, which is a shoe with a long, thin, high heel and usually ranges from one to ten inches in height depending on the platform height of the sole.⁶⁸ Kitten heels helped women feel more empowered in the work force. The shorter heels and more comfortable shape allowed women to enjoy the feeling and power of heels while not hurting constantly throughout the workday.

⁶⁷ "Power Dressing - Do Women Still Need a Power Suit?"

⁶⁸ "Kitten Heels on Michelle Obama and Suri Cruise - WSJ," accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704852004575258711099282390>.

Accessories

Many unisex accessories became popular in the 1980s as well. For jewelry, earrings became popular amongst young men and women alike. Thin bracelets made of a jelly material or metal, called bangles, were popular with young women and were worn in mass quantities on one's wrist.⁶⁹ Additionally, designer jewelry such as diamonds and pearls became popular for beauty and symbolism of wealth and power amongst older generations.⁷⁰ Watches became a popular accessory for men and women throughout the 1980s. In the beginning, the trend was digital watches but eventually the popularity of dial watches returned with brands like Cartier, Rolex, and Swatch leading the charge to return to dial watches.⁷¹ Even glasses changed in the 1980s with large, plastic frames becoming fashionable before returning to small metal framed glasses and eventually glasses with a tortoise-shell coloring becoming the fashion trend.⁷² The tortoise-shell coloring is best seen on Ray-Ban Wayfarers, which are sunglasses with a brown tortoise-shell coloring, and worn by celebrities and shown in movies like *Risky Business*.⁷³

The equal and genderless accessories, such as bangles and watches furthered the empowerment found in anonymity when dressing for work. Additionally,

⁶⁹ "1980s Fashion: Styles, Trends & History," accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.retrowaste.com/1980s/fashion-in-the-1980s/>.

⁷⁰ Hyde, "Comfortable Classiness - The Washington Post."

⁷¹ "The Guide to United States Popular Culture - Google Books," accessed October 10, 2023, <https://books.google.com/books?id=U3rJxPYT32MC&pg=PA357#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

⁷² "1989 Sears Wishbook," accessed October 10, 2023,

http://www.wishbookweb.com/FB/1989_Sears_Wishbook/files/assets/basic-html/page-202.html#.

⁷³ "The Guide to United States Popular Culture - Google Books."

accessories such as bangles and watches provided older women ways to showcase status and wealth through other modes instead of just jewelry like diamonds and pearls. Even accessories like jewelry and watches changed to fit this more androgynous uniform.⁷⁴ Bracelets made from a jelly material were worn by young men and women alike while the metal counterpart, called bangles, were more popular amongst older women. Watches became more popular and fashionable for men and women in the 1980s with prominent brands like Cartier and Rolex offering styles for both men and women, an equality option not seen before.

Sexual Empowerment

Eventually, women were able to expand boundaries and gain opportunities in the workforce while also having the freedom to choose their own style. In office environments, such as the offices of The Los Angeles Herald Examiner, women even began earning titled positions as editors and managers.⁷⁵ This meant that women were in positions of power and influence in corporations that were previously male dominated. Women came wearing pantsuits, pencil skirts, or even suits to work and were comfortable and professional in the workplace. Many feminists felt proud of the work they accomplished and ecstatically resumed their

⁷⁴ Duka, "Notes on Fashion."

⁷⁵ "NISM Failed: As Editor of a Major Newspaper, the Author Made Sure to Back Other Women. But They Embraced the Worst of Male Ways. FEMINISM - History - ProQuest," accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/history/docview/110536159/8E9B42DBD9EC4FD5PQ/3?accountid=7076&parentSessionId=%2Frd8SmdMelCOj5jlpv8AwVs4Y2LKNlYnTcZi0d4M%2FHm%3D&parentSessionId=tkSiT3DbK%2FuSZDub7AQ%2FEHGoX0nWIXqjw8RDmYW%2FK0%3D>.

day-to-day life in their careers and homes.⁷⁶ It seemed like the women's movement had accomplished their goal: women were seemingly perceived as equal in the workforce and had even begun receiving promotions and power positions over male and female coworkers.

However, not everything was perfect once women fully entered the workforce. Even though there was the unity of feminism, many women began changing. In many work environments, women and men began sharing power positions and changing their personalities along with the power they received. Regardless of gender, individuals began taking on aspects of a stereotypical corporate ladder-climbing male.⁷⁷ In some corporate settings, this looked like pre-meetings and post-meetings, fear of not knowing information, and fighting over the best office space.⁷⁸ Many women, a few self-proclaimed feminists included, avoided dealing with confrontation or open conversations and often looked for the nearest male authority figure to deal with the confrontation.⁷⁹ Many coworkers saw these female managers as unyielding and power-hungry. Many people felt that these females began taking on male ideals in the workplace by emphasizing power

⁷⁶ "A Voice for Working Women: Turning Points for a Publisher and a Magazine. - History - ProQuest," accessed October 3, 2023,

<https://www.proquest.com/history/docview/110485848/8E9B42DBD9EC4FD5PQ/60?accountid=7076>.

⁷⁷ "NISM Failed: As Editor of a Major Newspaper, the Author Made Sure to Back Other Women. But They Embraced the Worst of Male Ways. FEMINISM - History - ProQuest."

⁷⁸ Lise Heinzerling, "Eternal Vigilance Is the Price of Feminism," letter_to_editor (New York, N.Y., United States, November 1, 1987), <https://www.proquest.com/history/docview/110718453/abstract/EFE0449D39E24BA8PQ/1>.

⁷⁹ "NISM Failed: As Editor of a Major Newspaper, the Author Made Sure to Back Other Women. But They Embraced the Worst of Male Ways. FEMINISM - History - ProQuest."

and prestige over community and relationships unlike how feminists had previously interacted with each other.

Many researchers and scholars believed that the reason behind the change in women in power was due to the women's movement. Because of the emphasis placed on the materialism afforded to men but not women, many women focused on being able to attain the same materials and power afforded to men.⁸⁰ To be clear, the materials reserved for men did not only include freedom in clothes and style but also included the ability to go work and make money for themselves. Feminists shifted away from the ideals of strength and sisterhood and instead focused on personal success, especially in the workplace, which allowed them to feel the independence and success men often felt at work.⁸¹ However, even with promotions and titles, women still changed into more masculine versions, including through their style, to gain more power. Other feminists began to worry that the movement was shifting. While some feminists in the 1980s wanted to gain access to the male world of power and money, others simply wanted to redefine the societal standards pressed upon them.⁸² In other words, some feminists wanted to help reshape the idea of womanhood and femininity through fashion alongside

⁸⁰ "NISM Failed: As Editor of a Major Newspaper, the Author Made Sure to Back Other Women. But They Embraced the Worst of Male Ways. FEMINISM - History - ProQuest."

⁸¹ Heinzerling, "Eternal Vigilance Is the Price of Feminism," November 1, 1987.

⁸² Goreau, "Hers."

their male counterparts instead of adapting to certain styles of male behavior in the work force.

Conclusion

Fashion and feminism are linked because individuals often take social cues from fashion and use the cues to reshape ideas and appearances of feminism especially during the second and third waves of feminism. Gender politics and fashion truly began overlapping during the 1960s when feminists began fighting for equality through clothing. The beginning of this fight was about specific stereotypical gender norms such as hair length, but the scope of the challenges began to grow and broaden through fashion. This is because changes in fashion were an important way feminists challenged and changed gender norms throughout the second and third wave of feminism.

In the 1960s, the feminist movement focused on gaining sexual empowerment in their everyday lives. This empowerment could be showcased through fashion styles such as jeans or even miniskirts. In order to achieve sexual empowerment, feminists utilized fashion as an essential component for sexual empowerment and an outlet for the feminist movement in general. Jeans became a symbol of comfort and sexuality for women in ways that allowed them to participate in outdoor activities, perform household chores, or even just sit or lounge comfortably. Other common fashion items such as skirts and dresses began

to take on more sexual appearances as well. Short dresses and miniskirts were the fashion key for embracing one's sexuality and sexual power. Eventually, women began to experience sexual empowerment because of the fashion changes made that allowed feminists to carry their messages with them in their daily lives.

After working towards sexual empowerment, feminists turned their attention towards gaining more equality in society. During the 1970s, more women began to grow tired of staying home and just performing household chores. Women decided they wanted to return to work, and they used fashion to help them reach this goal. They began dressing for work, applying for jobs, and overall, just pushing for more equality. However, fashion also played another role in the feminist push for equality. While fashion had helped women achieve sexual empowerment, there were generations of feminists that felt left out of the sexual empowerment movement because of their age and their body. To truly achieve equality among women, fashion styles changed in the 1970s to accommodate all body types and all ages of women through common staples like pants, dresses, and even skirts. While younger feminists still enjoyed blue jeans and miniskirts, older feminists began to enjoy looser pants, longer dresses, and different styles of skirts that helped them feel confident and equal to their younger feminist counterparts.

Women in the 1980s wanted to establish a more masculine sense of power to showcase in the workplace. Because women were just beginning to establish a

permanent identity in the work force, many feminists shifted their focus from fighting for women's equality to gaining more power and respect in the workplace. For fashion, this shift meant creating an appropriate yet stylish "uniform" for women in the work force. This "uniform" included pants, skirts, dresses, and jackets as methods for staying close to the feminist movement while still being perceived as fashionable members of the workplace. Skirt lengths grew longer while still remaining tight, leading to the creation of the pencil skirt as a work appropriate yet femininely empowered version of the miniskirt. Even accessories evolved to showcase wealth, comfort, and style in different ways. In general, fashion changes from the 1960s and through the 1980s were both methods and achievements of feminists and women throughout the United States.

Of course, the connection between fashion and feminism did not end with the 1980s. Even in more recent years, women continue to fight for their individuality, feminism, and equality through fashion. While political figures like Hillary Clinton have been fashion staples with pantsuits and power outfits for decades, they are still not seen as equal to their male counterparts in politics.⁸³ To combat this, feminist politicians utilize makeup, fashion, and accessories to empower themselves in their fight for equality and feminism throughout society and especially in politics today. Because of their connection, fashion and feminism

⁸³ Tuddé, "Fashion Politics and the Fashion in Politics."

continue to evolve and shape how society appears. Fashion is still an important outlet for shaping perceptions of who we are. And the struggles of the feminist movement are still at play in politics and society today. Future historians must focus on more than political views, legal applications, and cultural aspects to continually record and preserve the connections between fashion and feminism.

Feminism has been a catalyst and resource for fashion's continual evolution within the United States' society. Similarly, fashion has been a source and outlet for feminist changes within changing gender stereotypes. Overall, however, fashion has been an essential component of femininity in ways that just scratch the surface of what has been seen so far. And femininity continues to grow and change as the years progress. Both femininity and fashion will continue to evolve because people, especially feminists, utilize fashion to fight for changes in gender stereotypes and political changes in society.

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