

Dior to disco: Second wave feminism and fashion

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This research strives to identify ways in which second wave feminism triggered lasting change in fashionable dress, and to distinguish these instances of significant change from the natural ebb and flow of the fashion cycle. Mainstream women's fashion changed dramatically during a 25 year period starting in the 1950s; the silhouette shifted from the ultra-feminized and rigid hourglass figure promulgated by Christian Dior, to a boyishly thin figure donning Mary Quant's mini-dress in the 1960s, to a 1970s androgynous yet sexualized physique. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the street-style hippie movement existed alongside fashions that had increasing focus on career dress for women. Mainstream women lived in a social culture that presumed opposition between sexuality, domesticity, and intellectual prowess. Research questions are derived from a grounded theory methodology: In what ways, if any, was fashionable dress impacted by widely read feminist-based texts and the celebrity image of their well-known authors during the years 1950-1979? Did fashions with increasingly more body exposure contradict or reinforce feminist concepts of independence and personal agency?

Second wave feminism was part of mainstream culture, with widely known authors such as Gloria Steinem(1963), Betty Friedan (1963), and Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1961). This research uses these texts, as well as more contemporary analyses of these writings (Mosmann, 2016; Paoletti, 2015), to better understand the social context of this time span and how the fashion system worked during it. Additionally, an assessment of fashionable dress between the

years of 1950 and 1979 is created through a content analysis of *Vogue* magazines. March and September issues between 1950 and 1979 are reviewed to identify aspects of dress that support general conclusions about an era's tendencies.

Findings indicate that some silhouettes reflecting the messaging of the era, such as lack of foundation garments, were part of a fashion cycle, which may have created different structures upon women. For example, restrictive diets and physical fitness regimes were needed to develop and maintain the desirable body type. While ideal body type shifted slightly over the years, the growing acceptance and use of pants by women was resolute. Of course, bifurcated garments had been suggested for fashionable and functional use by the 19th century dress reform movement and then the Suffragettes in the early 20th century. However, pants did not grab hold in culture until second wave feminism solidified a lasting path for women with contemporary functionality.

The tension between second wave feminism and the idealized beauty of the fashion system is a point of departure in plying apart contradictions between hedonic power and a dominant male culture. There is indication that second wave feminism did play a role in shifting fashionable trends. Individual agency and willingness to experiment with gender stereotypes struggled against a desire to appear as an idealized woman.

References

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