

Student number :1702779

Student name: Nicole Wallace

Course : Surface Pattern Design

Lecturer: Julia Lockhart

Dissertation Proposal : Women's role in Fashion and body image

Word count: 2396

Key Words : Power , body image, society/culture

Introduction

In this essay I am going to be exploring women's fashion in particular, and highlighting some of the struggles they face in society when it comes to their socially accepted image and the clothes they have chosen and been forced to wear. My main focus points will be the power of clothing and how it can affect the status of a women in society, the idealisation and expectation of a women's body, and how cultural beliefs and differences can affect how a woman decides what to wear. I will be researching how Coco Chanel's invention of 'the suit' became a pivotal point in women's fashion and how it expressed a change in their role in society. As well as highlighting how fashion is a lot more relaxed than it used to be by mentioning about John Galiano's recent spring collection.

Power

In the world of design, men are often considered more superior than women, particularly when it comes to work uniforms and equipment. This can have many effects on women's mentality as a whole. In jobs that are usually associated with men, for example the police force and the military, women's differing body shapes are not as well accommodated for, "from police stab vests that don't account for breasts, to safety goggles too large for womens faces" BBC news (2019). The fact that the safety and comfort level of a womens attire is not important enough to be adapted accordingly, shows that men are preferred for the job, they have a lot more power and there is a sense of belittling women and making them feel unwelcome. Former police detective Malcolm young states how the "invasion of females, into a strongly masculine group leads to the attempt to androgynise females and subject them to informal ridicule. Dress is a vehicle for political authority subjecting the individual to its power" (Barnes and Eicher 1997). This supports the idea that making women wear items of clothing made for men, takes away their power, control and their extension of the self/ personality and shows that clothing can sometimes be more powerful than you as a person. It is also an attempt to disguise women's femininity, which can result in a lack of confidence, feeling inable and feeling ashamed of being in this gender group. By forcing women to wear clothes designed for men , it is quite clearly an attempt to eliminate womanhood by making both gender groups into one, i.e male. I want to highlight how not giving a lady the option to wear clothing fit for their body type can make women feel weak ,and how freedom of choice with clothing can give a person strength.

In this day and age it is more acceptable for women to wear suits than men to wear dresses, this could imply that being male is more acceptable in our society than being female. A suit is commonly thought of as an attire for a man, due to it's masculine fit, however many women are now opting to wear them too. As women are now choosing to wear something considered masculine it could suggest that men are highly thought of in society. A suit can give off the impression of importance, power, higher class ,authority and the need for respect. Society hints at these attributes applying to men because suits are made to fit and look good on the male body. " The women's suit is plagiarised masculinity in an attempt to normalise and/or assimilate women in a male dominated workplace" (Kirkham 1966). Women wearing suits could be an attempt to gain the same recognition as men, the fact that they feel the need to copy this certain style suggests a sense of vulnerability when dressing as a women which can make them feel uncomfortable and out of place. Plummer Caplan explains the benefits of wearing a suit in the book called ' The gendered Object' , " It may control, restrict and inhibit but simultaneously offer comfort, security and assuredness" (Kirkham 1966) . He refers to the inability to move around and do certain physical things in a suit, however he also highlights the comfort women can feel from wearing them.

In 1916 Coco Chanel introduced 'the chanel suit' into the world of women's fashion, "Chanel loved adding masculine elements to her feminine designs because she said it empowered women" (littleblackdress.co.uk, 2019). This highlights my point that clothing can have a big effect on the way we feel and are perceived, and that men's clothing is considered more powerful than women's. This could be because men during the Victorian times were not pressured into wearing body-altering garments like corsets and were 'free' to wear and look the way they wanted, therefore they had more power than women back then. Chanel's introduction to this new style of garment, which had been worn by 'free' men for many many years gave women a sense of liberation and equality as it was now acceptable for them to wear the same as men.



It has become clear that fashion for both men and women in present day has become a lot more relaxed than it used to be. In previous years women have been portrayed as less powerful than men, particularly by the way they were expected to look and dress. John Galiano is now celebrating aspects of women's clothing in his new spring collection for men, which proves that gender roles are becoming more and more equal. He incorporates corsets, satin and shiny pink ribbons, which are aspects of fashion that society associated to be worn by women. "The designer urged men to learn from women how to be classy and comfortable" (fashionunited.uk, 2019). This implies that women are no longer considered weak in society as the previously overruling gender 'men' are now given the option to wear clothes designed for females.



Body Image

Corsets were worn by women in the 20th century in an attempt to make their waist look smaller, and their hips look bigger. Although this accentuated the shape of a women's body, it did not celebrate a natural women's body but instead celebrated society's idea of what it wanted them to look like. The fact that women wore these garments to adjust their natural body shape rather than embracing what they were born with, supports Albert Bandura's assumption that people learn from the environment through the process of observational learning. In his theory he states that at a young age we watch how our role models behave and identify the rewards received from behaving in this certain way. "The effects that modeled activities have on behavioural restraints are largely determined by observation of rewarding and punishing consequences accompanying the actions" (Bandura, 1974). This theory can be associated with our relationship with fashion and body image. Back in the 20th century women observed that having a small waist and big hips was perceived as the 'ideal' body image. They saw that by altering their body into this idealised shape they would be rewarded with the feeling of accomplishment, acceptance and confidence. "When women beautify themselves it is largely to adjust to the prevailing ideal" (Thesander 1997), this quote shows how much power society has over our thoughts about our body image and that we aim to please society in order to be content and pleased with ourselves."

An example of the idea of an 'ideal body image' still occurring today is the Victoria Secret Fashion Show. We only ever see super skinny models with little amount of curves walking their catwalk. Most of them being at an unhealthy weight which is very unrealistic for many average women to naturally achieve. Having only one standard shape and size of women being glorified on the runway, can leave many feeling ashamed and insecure about their bodies. "The constant barrage of unrealistically skinny images can stir up feeling of inadequacy, anxiety and depression" (women, 2019). These feelings can often lead to more dangerous things like eating disorders, or cosmetic surgery which often come with many side effects like eating disorders.

The 'body ideal' is most prominent within the world of fashion. This is because Fashion designers and marketing teams have discovered their target customers thirst to fit into society's body standards. They do this by using unrealistically shaped mannequins and photoshopped images to promote their clothing. Mannequins have become a way of representing what the 'ideal body shape is during every era and uses them to show customers that this is how a person should look wearing these items of clothing "Everywhere in magazines and catalogues the images signal what the fashionable body should look like" (Thesander .M 1997) . As there are more magazines targeted for women, we can assume that they are the biggest targets for influencing society's idea on body image. Suggesting that women are easily influenced and put under more pressure to look a

certain way than men. Society's focus on being skinny rather than curvaceous could be because of the positive attributes we associate with it. Being skinny suggests that you have a control over what and how much food you eat. "A thin body shape is associated with success personally, socially and professionally" (Wykes and Gunter 2005). A person may feel personal success from being skinny because they are fitting into society's body ideal, which could in turn help them to become professionally successful within jobs specially focused on beauty and body image, for example modeling.

Society/ Culture

Fashion for women has become a very important part of society in both positive and negative ways. It can be a way to portray your personality and identity as well as express the way you are feeling, but can also be a way to be controlled by society and to conceal your true self. In the book 'The Fashioned body' by Joanne Entwistle it states, "dress or adornment is one of the means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity" (Entwistle 2000). This shows the importance of clothing on the body and how much power and control we have over how we want to be perceived. It suggests that we are not defined by our bodies but through our clothes.

Despite being able to alter the way we are perceived by simply changing what we are wearing, it is not always this easy due to cultural rules and beliefs. Many people are not given as much freedom to wear what they want because of their cultures harsh rules, regulations and pressures to follow a certain religion. For example in islamic countries many women are forced to wear the hijab or Burqa because of certain laws put in place. In an article about why muslim women conceal parts of their body it states "Head coverings act as a show of obedience to the qur'an and Allah as well as being a symbol of modesty and womanhood" This shows how clothing can sometimes be used to symbolise certain personality traits in order to fit in with expectations of a certain culture, and how it can also make a group distinguishable to the outerworld. This can be seen as a way of isolating a group of people, either making them feel out of place in society or giving them a feeling of being superior to everyone else. From looking around in the street it is quite easy to point out who believes in the muslim faith by looking at what they are wearing. "Conventions of dress attempt to transform flesh into something recognisable and meaningful to a culture; a body that does not conform to cultural codes, is likely to cause offence and outrage and be met with scorn or incredulity" (Entwistle,2000). This highlights how much pressure there is on people to dress a certain way, and how making a mistake in fashion can lead to harsh judgements in society and religious groups. The words 'transformed flesh' used in that quote suggests that clothing is an aim to completely change how we are naturally, and supports the view that fashion can be a form of altering or concealing our true identity and personality. Thus highlighting how society and culture can have a massive impact on the way we present ourselves.



The picture above is a good example of the big impact cultures expectations has on our self esteem and how It can lead many of us to feeling inadequate and inferior to those around us. This can develop into things much worse. In a book about self acceptance it mentions some of the effects self doubt can develop into, “ a cycle of self consciousness, self abuse, self deprecation and self destruction” (Capri King, 2008). All of these factors can have harmful effects on our identity particularly as these feelings encourage us to change who we really are, which will eventually lead to little differentiation in the human race. Giddens Social theory approach highlights how ‘the self’ can be changed and refined into what we want it to be, by removing any unwanted elements of our identity “ the self is not fixed and unchangeable and is an ongoing process of refinement (Giddens, 1991). This suggests that the human body is a working progress and is never going to stay the same due to cultures constant updates, and our dedication to follow them.

From researching these 3 keywords I have come to the conclusion that society has a lot of control over a woman's mental state, doing so by brainwashing them in to thinking a certain way which results in them acting upon these thoughts. This has a massive impact on the decisions they make about the clothes they wear and how they think of themselves and their body as I have proved in this essay. In my dissertation I would like to develop further my knowledge on why women make certain choices about their clothes and how this has an effect on their gender as a whole. I would like to explore and look at into more depth the psychological reasons as to why we automatically try to fit in with society's expectations by studying different approaches relating to this topic. Therefore I have come up with the question ‘What are society's expectations of women’s body image/ dress and how does this have a psychological effect on women as a whole ?’

Bibliography

Bandura, A. (1974). *Psychological modeling*. New York: Lieber-Atherton.

Barnes, R. and Eicher, J. (1997). *Dress and gender*. Providence: Berg.

Entwistle, J. (n.d.). *The fashioned body*.

Littleblackdress.co.uk. (2019). *Find out how Coco designed the Chanel Suit | Little Black Dress*. [online] Available at: <https://www.littleblackdress.co.uk/life-of-chanel/the-chanel-suit.html>

King, D. (2008). *Body image*. [Place of publication not identified]: Publishamerica Inc.

Kirkham, P. (1996). *The gendered object*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Fashionunited.uk. (2019). *Liberate men with satin and corsets: fashion icon Galliano*. [online] Available at: <https://fashionunited.uk/news/fashion/liberate-men-with-satin-and-corsets-fashion-icon-galliano/2018062330370>

BBC News. (2019). *Seven ways the world is not designed for women*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-47725946>

Sparrow, M. (2019). *Understanding the Veil: A Primer in Muslim Women's Head Coverings [Photo Gallery] - International Mission Board*. [online] International Mission Board. Available at: <https://www.imb.org/2018/07/09/muslim-womens-head-coverings/> [Accessed 8 May 2019].

Thesander, M. (1997). *The feminine ideal*. London: Reaktion Books.

Changingpeople.co.uk. (2019). *Which Bit of Your Body Would You Change? | Changing People Blog Changing People Blog*. [online] Available at: <https://www.changingpeople.co.uk/2017/which-bit-of-your-body-would-you-change/>

Women, B. (2019). *The Media and Body Image*. [online] Mirror-mirror.org. Available at: <https://www.mirror-mirror.org/the-media-and-body-image.htm> [

Wykes, M. and Gunter, B. (2007). *The media and body image: if looks could kill*. Los Angeles, Calif: Sage.