

Humans use clothing not just as garments to keep warm, but also as symbols to project personal identity. Clothes define beauty, social status, and wealth. Cultural influences contribute a great deal to how clothing is made for each generation. Throughout the last century, culture and clothing has changed immensely in America through new technologies, concepts, and styles. To understand what some of these changes were and how they affected the lives of the times, I will analyze Chanel's "Little Black Dress" and Halston's "Ultrasuede Shirdress." I will then analyze the culture of the 2010's to create my own garment. The 1920's, 1970's, and 2010's all share a fast-paced feeling and a new viewpoint for how people should interact.

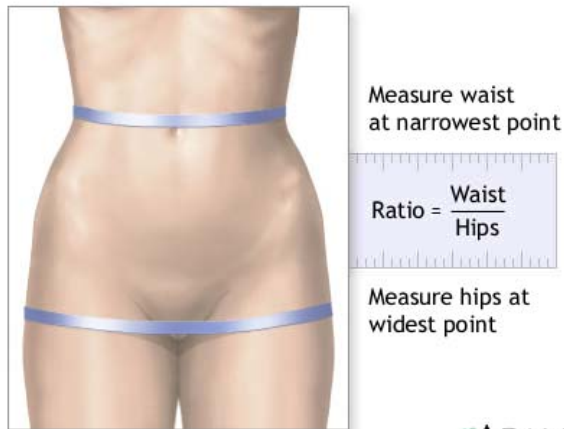
To fully understand what makes a piece of clothing desirable, one must have an understanding of beauty and how it relates to the female body. Beauty is a pleasurable quality perceived by the human senses.¹ When something is pleasurable, it is naturally attracting for a variety of reasons. There are specific attributes of the human body that are considered attractive on a global scale.

Throughout history, there has been a large variety of the slimness and largeness of the human body when considering beauty. Venus of Hohle Fels is sculpture of a very large figure. Dated at over 35,000 years old, it is considered the oldest representation of beauty known to date.



Venus of Hohle Fels

Venus at a Mirror, a Flemish painting from the 1600's is also a depiction of an overweight woman. In Rome, fat displayed wealth and leanness symbolized the working class. On the other hand, Egyptian, Chinese, and Greek depictions of beauty in the 15th century BCE are of women who are not overweight or relatively skinny. Today, notions of beauty are portrayed in the US as young, unhealthily skinny girls with large breasts, buttocks, and lips. Although it seems that all of these views of beauty are very different, in fact, they all have something in common with each other: the hip-to-waist ratio (HWR).



ADAM.

Evolutionary psychologist, Devendra Singh discovered that men are biologically programmed to be attracted to a relatively small HWR at a prime of .7, regardless of the weight of the woman. The WHR of .7 shows women are young, healthy, and fertile; when someone considers a female body to be “beautiful,” they are actually making a biological judgment of that body. A large WHR, a number larger than .7 (such as .8 or .9), signifies the woman’s fertility is impaired; similarly, a small WHR, a smaller number such as .6, shows the woman is unhealthy or starving. There are many examples of the ideal HWR, such as Marilyn Monroe (.7 WHR), Audrey Hepburn (.7 WHR), Average Playboy model (.68 WHR), Venus de Milo (.72 WHR), Venus at a Mirror (.7 WHR), Kim Kardashian (.67 WHR), Jennifer Aniston (.71 WHR), and more.²



Venus de Milo (Carved around 150 B.C.E., this is a depiction of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and Beauty.)

As people of the world become more aware of each other, body types considered culturally attractive have changed, and so have the fashions. Fashion evolved from female competition to a cultural sign of wealth, especially in Western Europe and America. Seeing the reasons behind these transitions of style can be hard for anyone who doesn’t understand the

cultural influences of the time. I will analyze two items of clothing to demonstrate the cultural impacts on fashion. Coco Chanel's "Little Black Dress" shows the influence of America in the 1920's, a time when women were finally able to vote; movies and advertisements started to become a large part of the American lifestyle, and automobiles became an important part of society. I will also analyze Halston's "Shirtwaist Dress" in the 1970's, a time when disco dancing was popular, women's rights contrasted with how they were expected to behave, and synthetic fibers became the popular fabrics to wear.



Chanel's "Little Black Dress," 1926



Halston's "Shirtwaist Dress," 1972

After the 19th Amendment in 1920 allowed women to vote, women experienced a lot more freedom, not only in what they were able to do, but in how they presented themselves. They were able to have active lives. Women started participating in activities that were more pleasurable to them, like taking “joy rides” in automobiles, going to social gatherings, and seeing films on a weekly basis. Having a different outfit for every occasion would have been extremely expensive, and because women now held steady jobs, men were less likely to pay for an excessive amount of clothing. Hence, “the cocktail dress” was born—a dress that could be universally worn to any social event. This dress displayed distinctive class and luxury. Also, as women gained more rights and freedom to do what they pleased, they took on the image of power and prestige, which at the time, was the man’s suit. They wore men’s suits with pants and suits, and soon there were women’s tailors making women’s suits and skirts that weren’t too large or heavy.

Defining the materials used to make the dress is a key component to understanding the social climate of the time. The “Little Black Dress” was made from black silk chiffon and loosely hanging black piets. (Piets are flat round shiny plastic discs where sequins are bents inwards in a hexagon shape.) Piets, along with beads, fur, feathers, and lace were very popular accessories in the 20’s³. This is because the idea of luxury boomed in the 20’s through advertising and the automobile industry. GM started producing annual models of cars, and created smaller divisions that were separated by price, stature, and degree of luxury. Advertisements and movies displayed images of what they deemed the ideal beauty, and with these ideals came notions of luxury and prestige.⁴

The most luxurious part of the “Little Black Dress” was the fabric it was made from: chiffon. Chiffon, meaning “cloth” in French, is considered an elegant fabric with a soft drape, a slight stretch to it, and a crepe-like feeling. The individual fibers of the silk are shaped in a

triangular prism structure to reflect light from different angles. This fabric has low absorbency, making it quite comfortable to wear in warm environments; yet, because of its low conductivity, it keeps warm air close to the skin in lower temperatures. It can be made with a soft or stiff finish and is highly durable, even though it is a very light fabric.⁵ Not only was this fabric shiny, it had a soft finish and was considered elegant. Chiffon was a fabric used on clothing that was considered beautiful and luxurious.

Women drawn to this dress were called “flappers.” Flappers were northern, young, urban, single, middle to higher-class women, who usually held steady jobs in the growing economy. These jobs included: clerks, phone operators, and department store saleswomen. At night, these young ladies engaged in an extensive nightlife.⁶ Because the Woman’s Suffrage Movement had just won a major battle, allowing women to vote in 1920, women were now allowed to work steady paying jobs. The “respectable woman” gave way to the “drinking woman,” who drank cocktails and enjoyed evenings in mixed company. Their social lives started in private cocktail soirées and lounges, where the concept of “the cocktail dress” was created and mixed with an assortment of gloves, hats, and other accessories. These women attended jazz clubs and vaudeville shows, developing a carefree attitude towards prohibition. They started consuming alcohol and smoking, ironically, around the same time that the Temperance Movement reached a national amendment.



1920's Flappers

The condom was invented in 1920 to stop the contraction of venereal diseases by soldiers.⁷ That plus Sigmund Freud’s comment that “the libido is one of the most natural human needs” took away the flapper’s hesitation to experiment with and enjoy sex. This new social acceptability to freely have sex brought along the idea of showing skin of the lower legs and chest to stimulate men. Thus the cocktail dress represented social, political, and economic freedoms for women.

A more physical freedom for women was the neckline. The neck is a sensitive area, especially the back of the neck as it is the connection between the brain and body, and it has a lot of nerve endings. As a method of comfort, people like to have something cover the back of their

neck to feel protected. At the same time, it is instinctive that people will want to stroke or cover the back of the neck with their hands, especially when active. Under stress, the body requires a certain amount of hand to body touching, rubbing, and stroking, especially on places of the body that are important for survival such as the head and neck.⁸ While dancing, cocktailing, or doing something else active and displaying feminine freedom and luxury, having the back of the neck covered by fabric and not being able to touch it would feel restrictive. The square cut neckline allowed the wearer to quickly and easily touch her neck, bringing more comfort. The neckline of the “Little Black Dress” was very comforting because it had a square neckline. This was a popular neckline at the time because women were experimenting with their sexuality and how much skin they were showing. This dress was a party dress because the fabric allowed one to be active without getting too hot; the square neckline allowed sweat to quickly evaporate off the chest, allowing women to dance and have a good time for as long as they wanted to.

Another part of the dress that brought comfort to the wearer was the color – black. Wearing black became a major part of the American culture in the 1920’s because of all the deaths of family members in WWI. Black was easily reproducible and helped contrast the pale faces of the middle and higher class white Americans, turning black from a color of mourning into a color of luxury. Henry Ford told his customers that they could have any color of car they wanted, as long as it was black. Black was associated with all things sleek, shiny, and sexy. It was easily washable and was the color that showed the least amount of stains on it. This was great for any American woman, because it was during the 20’s that the dishwasher, laundry machine, and other household appliances were created; and with these appliances, standards of cleanliness rose.⁹

With women gaining more rights, freely enjoying sex, and having the ability to smoke and drink in public, it wasn’t a surprise that the silhouette of the dress changed as well. During the early 1900’s and 1910’s women had needed a different outfit for every activity they did. Not only did they change four or five times a day, women wore intensely suffocating corsets to show off the chest and waistline. It was impossible for women to breathe during active activities, such as tennis or horseback riding, which were common sports at the time. WWI turned out to be a blessing in disguise for American women because the steel that was needed for corsets was also needed for the war; corsets became less popular as women discovered how easy it was to breathe without them. The decline in wearing corsets¹⁰ helped the progression of the “Little Black Dress” and women’s suits.

Progressing from corsets to suits made women appear manlier, as the suit was the sign of power, usually worn by dominating man. Wrapping long strips of fabric around the breasts multiple times flattened women’s chests, and their waistlines were lowered to the hips, where they were almost lost all together, making a smaller waist to hip ratio and, therefore, an increased appeal.¹¹ Shoulders became squared, and turned the curves of the female body into more of a rectangle or masculine shape. Squared shoulders and the removal of corsets gave women a lot more freedom in dress.¹²

Much like the cultural changes of the 1920’s, the 1970’s were a time of change and roaring excitement. There were many scandals and anger brewing, such as the Watergate Scandal and the fight for Environmental Awareness with the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970.¹³ In the beginning of the 70’s America was still processing the Civil Rights Movement and a multitude of sufferings. Crime rates were high, drugs were abundantly sold on the streets, and there was a high amount of prostitution. There was the Watergate scandal, the end of the war in Vietnam, the death of Elvis. Everyone was cynical and there was a feeling of impending doom.

How did people react to the feeling that the world was on fire? They had a giant party where everything was excessive and over the top.¹⁴ The first hand-held calculator was invented, *Star Wars* was released, Mother Theresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and Sony introduced the Walkman.¹⁵ There was a prevalence of disco dancing, TV ads, and sex. Everyone wanted to be part of this extremely energized luxurious party.

This party wouldn't have been nearly as funky as it was without the crazy clothing of the 70's. Disco was on the rise, and with it, stretchy, shiny, synthetic fibers such as Trevira, Viscose Rayon, and Sanitized Polyester.¹⁶ People needed clothing that would glow or flash under ultraviolet lights, because disco clubs had become scrupulous about whom they would let in. At Studio 54, the hottest disco club in New York, the manager would come out and select people who could go inside depending on the outfits they were wearing,¹⁷ and no outfit was groovier than a Halston dress. Halston's shirtwaist dress was his greatest hit, and the fabric he used to make it was called "Ultrasuede." In 1970, Dr. Miyoshi Okamoto invented the first ultra microfiber, which is a fiber so small that the human eye can't see it. He was able to process it into a new kind of fabric that wasn't woven; it combined luxury with performance. This material was extremely soft and durable and had the visual characteristics of animal suede; furthermore, it remained resistant to stains and discoloration and was machine-washable.¹⁸

Ultrasuede was a perfect fabric for the 70's because it was shiny, stretchy, breathable, and comfortable to wear, which meant the girl who wore this dress could party as long as she wanted without overheating or compromising her clothing. Also, accidentally spilling a drink on this dress wouldn't be a problem in the fast-paced lifestyle of the partier. While partying, one had to have pastel and earthy colors, as they were the popular colors of the time.¹⁹ The pastel colors were in large demand because they went along with the themes of disco and the nightlife of partying, while the earthy colors related more towards the fighters for environmental awareness and hippies. Although it seemed that everyone could obtain garments like Halston's, which were in high demand, only the higher classes could buy these outfits because they were so expensive. The overwhelming prices of the most sought after clothing illustrated the desire for prestige and splendor in the 70's. A common companion of the desire of luxury was the desire for sex, and there was certainly a prominent desire for sex in this decade.

The neckline of the dress mimicked the attitude of the era in that it showed off a woman's curvaceous body, giving her a higher sex appeal. The deep V neckline cut straight into the buttons, leading one to assume the wearer was wearing nothing underneath. The deep V neckline also gave a slimming affect.²⁰ The neckline matched the silhouette of the time period, which emphasized skinny body-types, but didn't overemphasize the waist²¹, thereby creating a smaller waist to hip ratio. Also, bellbottoms and oversized collars brought the eyes straight into the midsection of the body – from the chest to the hips. Sound familiar? This small WHR made the female body extremely attractive to men, no matter how unattractive those 70's "mom pants" were. Women were skinny and sexy. They danced, drank, and smoked enough to keep their slim figures while having fun, making them more attractive to the men of the time.

This giant party defined by drugs and dancing wasn't all that large in comparison to the massive revolution of sex that was going on. Lady's magazines featured many articles about pleasuring a man and obtaining the legendary orgasm. Clubs and parties were the places to go where ladies could flaunt their bodies. Most important, the major revolution of sex was of the "new" sexuality where premarital sex was more attractive than marital sex. LGBTQ's were on the rise, and it was socially acceptable for women to have sexual desires. What better medium to display this revolution than the television?

Although TV was previously considered a family medium, in the 1970's American TV was "wallowing in sex."²² TV had thousands of sexual references such as a young girl in *Dawn: Portrait of a Teenage Runaway* advertising *Deep Throat*, a frustrated housewife looking at *Orgasm and You* in her local library in *Mary Hartman*, and disco dancers dancing on *The Love Boat*'s Acapulco Lounge. Television contributed to sex, making phrases such "Would you like to come back to my cabin for a nightcap?" common and unambiguous. They also displayed women who were mindlessly into sex to enhance their attractiveness and show male dominance.

Another way television displayed male dominance was through female action heroines such as *Charlie's Angels* and *Wonder Woman*. These empowered figures seemed liberated through their careers of saving the world and fighting crime, but they were also objects of sexual desire, wearing revealing outfits and taking on sexy undercover characters. These qualities illustrated to the viewers that no matter how independent or strong a woman was, she was still expected to dress a certain way. This duality conflicted with uprising movements of the acceptability for women to be like men.²³ The producers for all of these TV shows and ads were trying to keep the responsibility of the social roles of women in tact.

Women weren't just wearing clothing that was made for women, such as the "Ultrasuede" dress, and engaging in activities such as partying or having lots of premarital sex because they wanted to, but because they were also expected to by men and by their associates. All of these actions and items of clothing added to the attractive qualities of the woman because it was implied by television, advertisements, and the social norms of the time that they should do so.

Now, in the American culture, men and women are bombarded with media and advertisements from every angle. The clothing one wears, the car one drives, the technology one owns, the size of one's body, the intelligence one has, the background one has, the accomplishments one has done, and the list goes on. When a person doesn't see himself or herself as perfect, they believe they have to suffer. People also suffer because of their imperfections. One connotation of suffering and pain is barbed wire. Barbed wire is used in my dress to display pain and suffering—how people seek out those feelings. Barbed wire is used to keep others out of private property; it is painful to the touch. When a person blocks others out to him or herself, this person puts themselves in a state of solitude, which is considered a form of suffering if one is in this state for too long. When they get into a bad mood they have less motivation to help themselves, which usually makes their mood worse, gives them negative views on themselves, and makes them more depressed. People also think pain will make them better people. Pain is a sign that is assumed to show illness or disease that can be cured, and there are many traditional and religious beliefs that pain is a method of cleansing one's self.²⁴

A less painful way of cleansing is through comforting the body with something soft or soothing. Crushed velvet is very soft. It is considered a classy fabric because it is soft and comforting. Comfort is something that every American strives for—one with power is comforted because they know they have complete control. A girl feels comforted in a big fuzzy blanket because she feels safe and protected by that blanket. The crushed velvet I am using is particularly comforting because it is green. Green is the second easiest color to see because of how little it strains the muscles in the eyes. Gaining comfort allows one to enjoy themselves a little more and hide themselves from simple truths they fear.

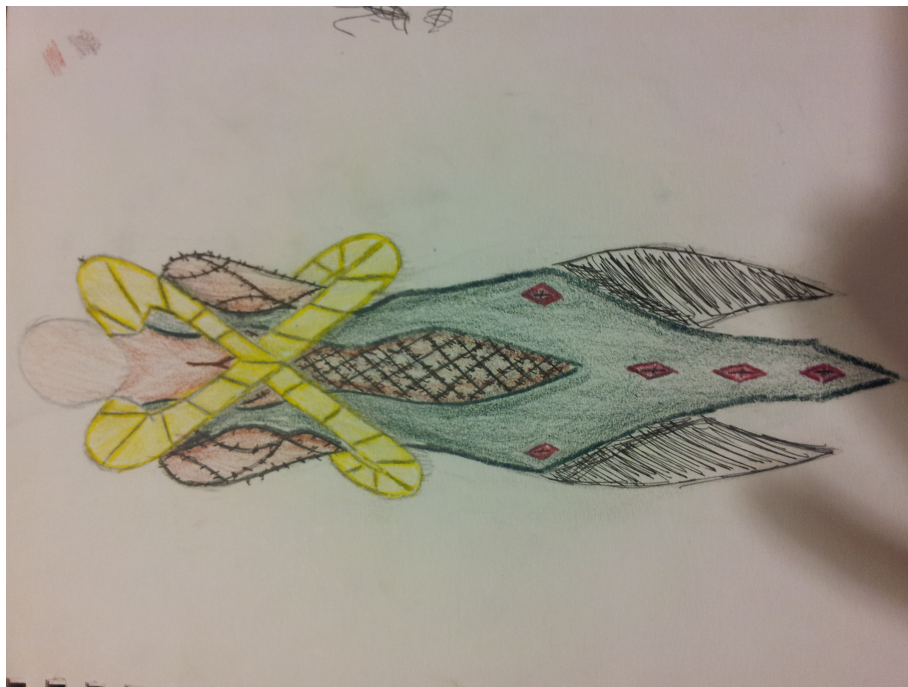
Eco-Fashion consists of products produced by paying particular attention to the social and environmental impacts of those products. Americans know that we are hurting the environment around us through greenhouse gasses, fossil fuels, and other toxic ingredients. By

shopping for eco-friendly products, one will spend more of their money so they can feel that they are helping the environment. A perfect example of this is the Toyota Prius. Not only is the Prius environmentally harmful (with production involving over eight countries to make a single car), it also comes with a premium price that is unlikely to be recouped, even after several years of driving it.²⁵ Yet, it is still in a high demand, showing that people will spend more of their time and energy trying to hide from simple truths than trying to solve them.

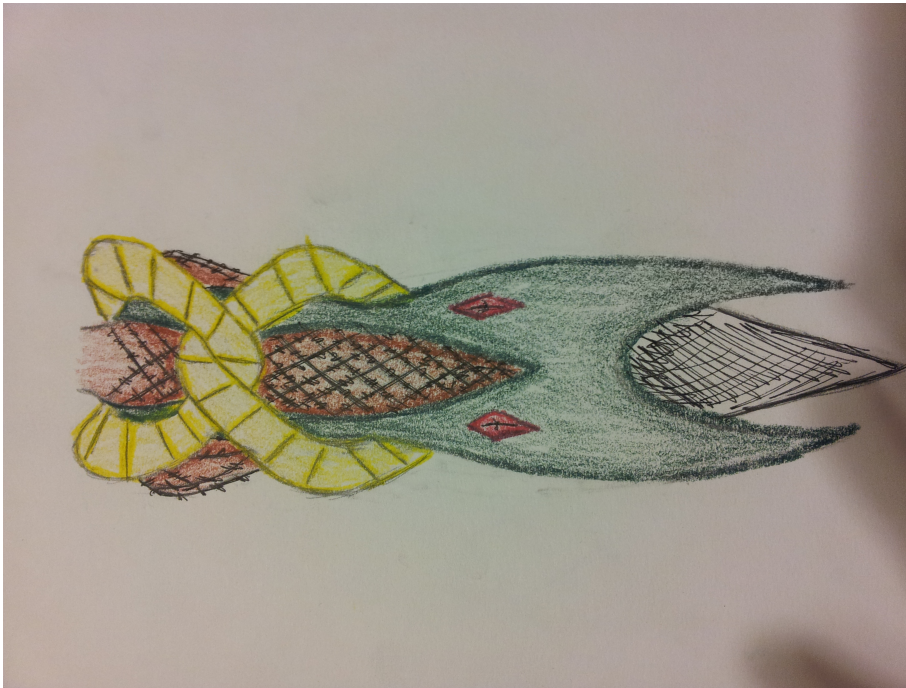
I have used recycled materials wrapped in a single strand around the dress, to show that problems like Eco-Fashion will be a problem the average citizen will hide from for as long as they can. People feel comforted through buying products that make them feel like they are helping to fix these problems; whether they are actually helping is irrelevant.

A part of my dress that will be comforting for the wearer is the silhouette. The dress is draped on a size 6 mannequin with a WHR of .7. This is comforting because any girl wearing this dress would be skinny with a fertile body. In America, the female body is considered attractive when it is extremely skinny with an ample chest. An example of this lusted-after body is an average playboy bunny, Jennifer Anniston, any female supermodel, and Keira Knightley. To add to that, the neckline of my dress is similar to a Deep V, where it has a slimming effect on the body, making the silhouette of the dress look even slimmer and more attractive.

When looking at how fashion is designed, one must look at the cultural influences that could be associated with all parts of that design. From fabric, to color, to neckline, to silhouette, culture influences all of these factors. Now more than ever, we are able to understand the psychological and subconscious choices designers might make in order to complete an outfit. I have given examples of these choices through analysis of Chanel and Halston. We use fashion as a means of beauty, social stature, and self-expression. By seeing the reasons why people are attracted to particular fashions, one can make connections about the transitions that took place in this country.



Front



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