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Fashioning The 1920's: Factors Shaping A Distinct Style Of Women's Clothing

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Abstract

The 1920's are often considered a decade of immense liberation for women. The iconic flapper is the image most associated with this decade, when the post-war economy was burgeoning and many new types of industry were taking off. The purpose of this thesis is to examine what advances women did make during this decade, how they fit into the changing fabric of society, and how these changes affected the clothes that they wore. By delving more deeply into these issues, it is possible to gain a more nuanced perspective about women's lives during the 1920's. The clothes that they wore reflect both the progress that was made, and the ways in which they were still held back from full independence.

This thesis was researched through a combination of historical texts and primary sources. There were many initial assumptions about the decade that served as a starting point for research. When analyzing this decade of women's clothing, three cultural, economic, and social forces appeared to be the most relevant in terms of the changes they brought to popular dress. These are identified as the rising acceptance of women's athleticism; the increase of women joining the work force; and media and the advertising industry's impact on body perception and consumerism. Women's athleticism had a positive impact on clothing by allowing for more utilitarian, comfortable garments to become accepted and even fashionable. Athletic clothing trickled down to the masses, greatly improving women's quality of life by allowing them comfort and greater ease of movement. As more women worked to join the work force, they began appropriating traditionally masculine styles in a sort of "wishful thinking" as they sought independence. Bobbed hair, the iconic Chanel suit, and all of the other masculine details that began to appear on women's garments are results of the increased effort to be financially independent. Finally, new media and advertising allowed new beauty ideals to spread very quickly. Since the economy was strong, women were not only exposed to new products and ideas about their appearance, they also had the means to buy new products. From the influences of advertising and the film industry, changes such as the acceptance of makeup, a huge increase in dieting, and new ideas about women's sexuality came about.

The 1920's were a complex decade. This thesis seeks to understand what caused the dramatic changes to women's clothing, and to temper the assumption that women only experienced advances during these years. By examining each of the three main factors that influenced change in women's clothing, it is possible to have a more nuanced understanding of women's place in society.

Fashioning The 1920's: Factors Shaping A Distinct Style Of Women's Clothing

Almost 100 years later, the 1920's remain one of the most distinctive and identifiable decades for Western women's fashion. The slim, straight lines of the flapper's party dresses represented a huge departure from the hourglass figures of previous decades. The styles of this decade did not exist in a vacuum—they were intimately affected by the social, cultural, and economic changes taking place.

Although an array of important events affected women in the 1920's, three stand out as having the greatest impact on their clothing styles. First, a shift in late Victorian-era thinking and advances in popular science made many reconsider the idea that women were incapable of vigorous exercise. A resulting rise in women's athleticism allowed female professional athletes to gain prestige in the public eye, which led to a rise in practical, wearable athletic-inspired clothing for all women.

Second, several factors led to an increase of women in the job force, which led to increased financial independence for many. This culture of independence helped popularize both the flapper movement and feelings of sexual freedom for many young women. However, the prevalence of women in the work force was not all positive; in many cases, careers came with strings attached, such as the necessity of appearing youthful and made-up in order to retain a job. Despite these setbacks, women's clothing did change as a means to enter the work force—women began sporting more traditionally masculine, tailored clothing in an effort to be taken seriously.

Finally, media, advertising and the new culture of consumerism had many effects on women's dress and their perception of beauty ideals. In the post-war economy of the 1920's, women could afford to get their hair done at beauty salons, and purchase new products such as cosmetics. They also took cues from movies and the advertisements they were constantly bombarded with. As more demographics of women were exposed to luxury products via newspapers and magazines, they began to adjust their own clothing accordingly, and feel more pressure to conform to the newest fashions. Meanwhile, the rise of such popular institutions as the beauty contest and the dieting industry had many effects on women's self-concept—beauty ideals began to change rapidly from the voluptuous ideal of the Victorian era to the new, stick-thin flapper figure.

Typically, the 1920's are viewed as a decade of great social progress for women. Although it is true that many important social and career gains were made during this decade, the rise of rigid beauty ideals spurred on by the decade's advertising culture did place more pressure on women to conform to beauty norms. This thesis attempts to build upon existing ideas about women's liberation that took place during the 1920's by showing examples of both women's successes and setbacks.

Research for this thesis was conducted starting with the assumption that women experienced great liberation during the 1920's, and that the decade was overall very positive for women. The goal was to either prove or disprove this long-standing assumption. The flapper movement—the most iconic zeitgeist of the 1920's—proved to be a natural place to begin delving into the reality of women's lives. Drawing from historical texts and primary written documents and photos from the 1920's, the thesis built off of existing scholarly research that attempted to define women's role in society, while also analyzing firsthand accounts of women's clothing and experiences. As the complexities of women's lives became apparent, three broad and impactful themes began to emerge: the

increase in athleticism, the struggle to enter the workforce, and the effects of media and consumerism. After these three cultural forces were identified, it was possible to pinpoint the clothing trends that they affected. Image research was conducted throughout the research process. The images selected for inclusion in this thesis are all indicative of the cultural forces at work during this decade.

Cultural Shifts Prior to the 1920's

Ideological, economic, and cultural shifts were all happening prior to the 1920's, setting the stage for what was to be one of the most unique decades for women's fashion. Although progress was often slow, women were able to take strides towards claiming their own autonomy, spurred on by World War I and the many—if brief—job opportunities it provided women. The passing of the Nineteenth Amendment marked a huge victory for feminists, proving that it was possible for women to achieve great things when they worked together. Additionally, in the decades prior to the 1920's, popular ideas about women's dress came under intense scrutiny. Movements such as aesthetic dress and reformed dress, garments like the bloomer, and innovative designers such as Poiret helped begin to change perceptions about how women should look. Why women dressed the way they did, what could be done to make their clothing more practical, and how to rebel against such a deeply ingrained system all became important questions, paving the way for the trend towards freer, more utilitarian clothing in the 1920's.



Figure 1 A typical women's walking suit from 1905. This type of ensemble would be appropriate to wear year-round, regardless of heat or weather changes. By contrast, men typically enjoyed more appropriate outdoor clothing options (Hartjen, 1905).

During both the Victorian and Edwardian eras, women's clothing styles had become so restricting and extreme that very basic activities—like taking a walk (see Figure 1) or playing golf—could barely be accomplished. Corsets were considered essential to control the waist and keep women from developing “clumsy” figures, but on a more spiritual level, they were also associated with morality—a woman who wore her corset faithfully proved she had strong character (Nelson, 2000). The combination of a tight-laced corset with huge skirts virtually incapacitated women from physical endeavors. In the late 1870s, Margaret Oliphant began writing about the need for special women's sporting clothes, pointing out that women's clothes “seldom do more in the way of ‘change’ than to add the frippery of a lawn tennis apron to a dress perhaps, but not always, a little shorter and simpler than ordinary” (Gernsheim, 1963, p. 64).



Figure 2 This illustration depicts a woman in typical aesthetic dress. The goal of aesthetic dress was to celebrate women's bodies as art, and thus liberate them (Rhead, 1894).

Several faddish clothing movements happened in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and although none had staying power in the fashion world, each movement caused Western women to evaluate new ways to wear clothing. In the 1850's, Amelia Bloomer began wearing loose Turkish trousers under a short skirt, unintentionally launching the first dress reform movement (see Figure 3). Bloomers were worn for only a few short years because feminists believed they were drawing too much attention away from the real issues of the movement. While they lasted, though, they forced Victorian society to consider the strain it put on women's bodies and comfort (Nelson, 2000). Aesthetic dress (see Figure 2)—a brief movement of the 1870's and 1880's—encouraged women to use their bodies as art forms, proclaiming their own agency and defying the role of domesticity

(Blanchard, 1995). It was an attempt to break away from the rigid conformity of Victorian styles while celebrating the beauty of the body. The aesthetic dress itself was adapted from the wrapper, a type of nightgown only worn indoors. Women seen in public wearing these long, flowing robes were considered completely immoral, their dresses viewed as shockingly intimate for the public sphere. During the mid-1880's, some women who left the house without corsets were arrested like prostitutes (Blanchard, 1995).



Figure 3 An 1851 illustration of a bloomer costume. Despite providing some additional mobility, the costume was still rather ungainly, and didn't last long as a fad (Walker, 1851).

Reformed Dress—a movement originating in 1910's Germany—advised women to wear clothing much like the aesthetic dresses, but for a different reason. Whereas Aesthetic Dress had been an effort to celebrate the body as a work of art, Reformed Dress advocates believed loose, corset-less clothing was more hygienic and would keep the body more fit for motherhood (Gernsheim, 1963). Simultaneously, Paul Poiret was scandalizing the fashion world with his Eastern-inspired designs—he outfitted women in hobble skirts, slim column dresses, and harem pants (Gernsheim, 1963). Although his hobble skirts made it just as difficult to walk as many Victorian garments had, his innovative approach to women's clothing helped usher in a new way of thinking about fashion. Clearly, by the 1910's, popular opinion was changing. In 1912, the tomboy—an androgynous and athletic figure—was branded “a new type of American girl...mentally and morally” by Good Housekeeping (Koven, 1912). This shift in public opinion, which positioned androgynous tomboys as stylish and modern, would not have occurred without the modernizing efforts of the various dress reform movements.



Figure 4 A World War I poster advertising for women's work in the war effort. The woman in the illustration is shown in an outfit reminiscent of a male soldier's (Gibson, 1918).

Although the war created mostly short-lived job opportunities for women, it did open their eyes to what a more equal society could look like. Women's active participation in the wartime effort proved their desire to leave the domestic sphere. For the first time, technical jobs were open to them—women were able to become the “technicians” of factories (see Figure 4). Most high-grade tasks, like engineering design, were left to the men who had been able to complete apprenticeships and college programs, while women workers were most often the ones producing—and overseeing the production of—wartime goods. In this increasingly female atmosphere, women were able to make the factories their own for the first time ever, bringing in feminine touches such as flowers for each worktable (Birkett, 2014). Some women were also present on the battlefield—from telephone operators to nurses, they served in any way possible to free up men for combat. In the early 1900's, many war films depicted women fighting alongside male soldiers. Although these films weren't very factual—almost no women in World War I actually fought—they did accurately portray women's enthusiasm to be involved in the war effort, and help buoy the spirits of female moviegoers (Slater, 2008).

However, this influx of jobs for women was not permanent—in 1919, as men began to return from war, the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act forced women to relinquish their jobs (Birkett, 2014). It is not surprising that women were forced back out of the workforce, considering popular Victorian ideologies that still held some merit. Many felt that keeping women within the domestic sphere was equivalent to protecting their purity—at home they could be guarded while at work they were isolated and possibly in

danger of being corrupted by men. This idea can be seen reflected in legislation at the time which drastically limited when women were allowed to work, prohibiting them from being at their jobs after nightfall (Enstad, 1995). Despite the setbacks women faced in the late 1910's, they never lost their passion for a career. Movie serials such as *What Happened to Mary*, which ran from 1912 through the early 1920's, depicted career women who were competent, resourceful, and independent. These serials were hugely popular, running for sometimes over one hundred episodes. In the case of *What Happened to Mary*, film producers attempted to follow up the successful series with a sequel detailing Mary's love life—and the sequel failed to gain adequate attention, causing it to drop out of theaters (Enstad, 1995). The existence of serials detailing women's self-sufficient work lives indicate that women of the early 1900's were desirous of that type of independence for themselves.

The Rise of Women's Athleticism

Women's interest in sports and outdoor activities was not a new phenomenon of the 1920's, but public perception about this interest did undergo many changes during the decade. Although women had always attempted to participate in athletics, their clothing was generally uncooperative (see Figure 5). Men could purchase garments made specifically for outdoors exercise, a luxury women did not get to enjoy. As women's athleticism became more accepted and, in some cases, even embraced, clothing changes could follow. The rising acceptance of women's athleticism in the 1920's helped popularize clothing that was increasingly casual and practical.

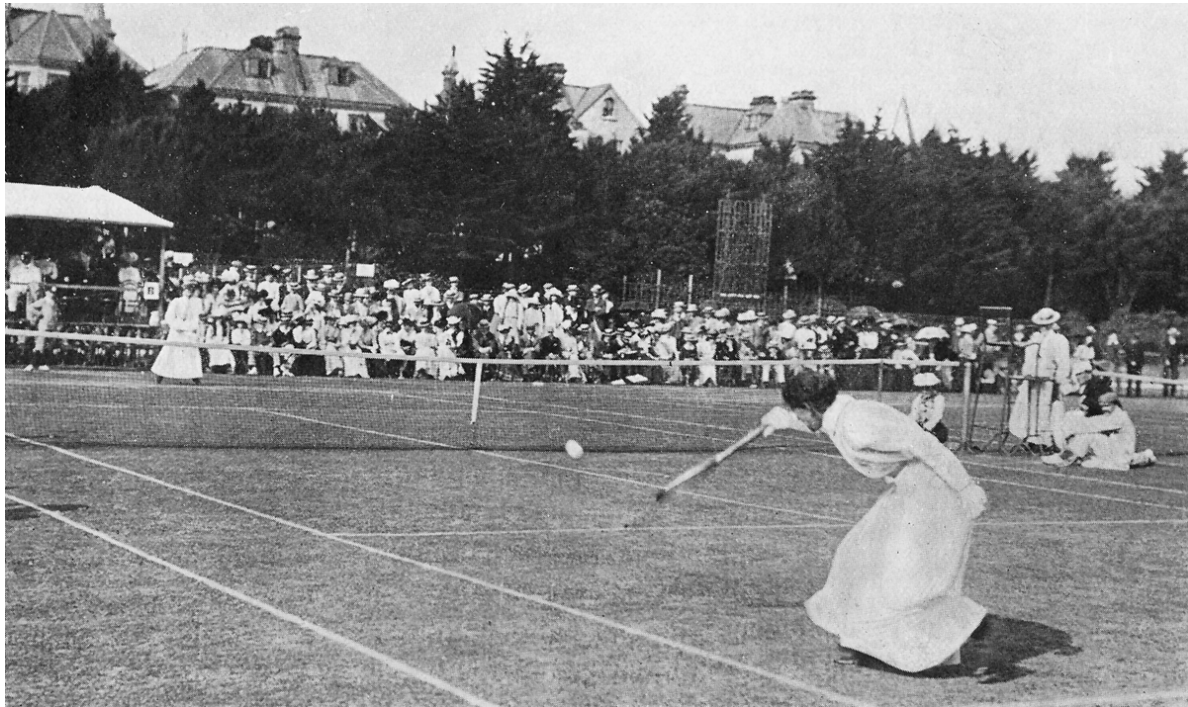


Figure 5 A 1903 Wimbledon match between Charlotte Cooper Sterry and Blanche Bingley Hillyard. At this time, social norms dictate long sleeves and skirts while playing tennis (Myers, 1903).

Starting in the 1890's, several British scientists—Karl Pearson, Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson—created an area of inquiry called “sexology,” which essentially asked why the two genders were treated so differently. Although their movement never gained much traction, the questions they posed would help set the stage for the changing gender roles of the early 1900's (Hall, 2004). These scientists helped change public opinion that women were incapable of vigorous exercise, leading to a huge upswing in women's sports participation. The trend towards athleticism was a freeing one that benefited not just women athletes—who were able to gain popularity and public acclaim in the 1920's for the first time—but the general population as well. Women's visibility in the arena of team sports allowed for an acceptance of the female body that would have previously been considered vulgar. This acceptance allowed for women to gain greater self-sufficiency than previous generations had enjoyed as well as access to many more practical and freeing clothing options.

A subtle shift in perception took place over several decades, which positioned the 1920's as the perfect time for women's sports to flourish. Victorian ideology portrayed women's bodies as weak. Magazine columns supported faddish—and often ridiculous—exercise regimens, such as rolling over 250 times each morning to maintain a trim figure. In this same vein, beauty lore insisted that women needed to remain calm and serene to stay youthful, avoiding any significant mental or physical exertion (Banner, 1983). However, by the early 1900's, popular science began to affirm that women were capable of physical exertion on a scale similar to men. It was not uncommon to see books such as *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood* making claims about the beneficence of vigorous workouts, and these books were no longer being met with public ridicule. Many women also exercised outdoors, including riding their bicycles as a means of transportation (Zeit, 2006). The ability to ride a bike without any backlash was actually quite an achievement—in the 1900's, Mrs. C. S. Peel recounted how shocked her family was upon seeing two women bike into town, adding that “some women were so scandalized they threw stones at them” (Gernsheim, 1963, p. 81).

The 1920's saw sportswomen rise to celebrity status, surpassed only in popularity by film stars. Excluding boxing and football, each major sport had a female star that most could recognize by name. These women were able to use their celebrity influence to support and wear utilitarian clothing that could then gain traction off the sports field (see Figure 6). Helen Wills, America's most beloved female tennis player, frequently wrote newspaper articles advocating shorter skirts and sleeveless tops as a necessary aid for athletic improvement (Banner, 1983). Extremely talented yet relatable, Wills used her appeal to help normalize the idea that women could be both feminine and athletically gifted. In a magazine column published in 1932, Wills reminisced on how far her gender had come, stating that her fellow players “have conquered dress and the game as well...It has not made them less feminine, nor has it detracted from their good looks. Of this there is ample proof” (Wills, 1932, p. 29).



Figure 6 Suzanne Lenglen, a French tennis player, at a match in the 1920's. Her sleeveless top, flowing skirt, and practical shoes made it possible to fully use her body while playing sports (Worsley, 2012).

Meanwhile, women were creating a quiet revolution in the pages of sports columns for the first time in journalism history. Their writing contributions helped to further publicize the careers of female athletes, and by the end of the decade, 34 women were writing sports columns for major newspapers. The first was Margaret Goss, whose spirited voice and support of female athletics set her apart in a world of male journalists (Kaszuba, 2013). Goss frequently rallied young women around the cause of athleticism in an attempt to dispel the continuing idea that sports were not ladylike. “We have known outdoor exercise to do feminine figures a world of good, but if being out is responsible for tough, leathery faces, then may we [women] die tough and leathery,” she wrote (Kaszuba, 2013, p. 14). As innocuous as this statement may seem today, Goss was thinking and writing in a radical way for the time. Her advocacy of sports even at the cost of personal appearance was a total rejection of Victorian ideals, and an important step forward for female athletes.

Participation in both physical education classes and sporting events increased for female students in the 1920's. Students at Smith College became so comfortable in their knickers—worn to facilitate easier exercise—that they began wearing them frequently in public, to the dismay of administrators who failed in their attempts to limit the garment (Cleave, 2009, p. 7). Although team sports had been an acceptable women's activity for several decades, there were many societal restrictions on where these team events could

take place. Prior to the 1920's, team sporting events could only be held within school grounds, with other female students in attendance. These restrictions were seemingly put in place to "protect" students from the male gaze, reinforcing the stigma that there was something improper about women participating in vigorous group exercise. However, around the beginning of the decade, many women's sports tournaments were held in public venues, such as high-school basketball games complete with ticket sales and outside spectators (Grundy, 2000, p. 125). This gradual acceptance of sporting culture helped cement the idea that there was, in fact, nothing subversive about women competing in athletic events (see Figure 7).



Figure 7 A young woman competing in a track competition. In the 1920's, public sporting events experienced a boost in popularity for women (Unknown, 1925).

Although women were admitted into the 1900 Paris Olympics, their participation was very minimal. By 1920, several more women's sports had been introduced, including swimming and fencing. Sport was an issue close to the hearts of many; one golfer said "American women, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, have won two rights: the right of exercising suffrage and the right of participation in sport" (Dyreson, 2003, p. 436). Comparisons between sports and suffrage were actually not uncommon and show just how crucial it was for women to be included in the growing culture of athletics. The Olympics were especially important for female athletes because unlike men's sporting events, which tended to center around tournaments or leagues, women's sports tended to be much less publicized (Dyreson, 2003). The first American women Olympians, in the mid-1912s, were swimmers—although they were immensely talented, they had previously had no public venue from which to showcase their skill.

Popular culture mimicked the rise of the athletic woman, turning her into an ideal to strive for. *The Great Gatsby's* Jordan Baker was a professional golfer as well as a member of New York's upper class; she had a "hard, jaunty body" and "wore her evening-dress, all her dresses, like sports clothes" (F. S. Fitzgerald, 1925, pp. 43, 38). It would have been

unthinkable in the Victorian era to perceive a lean, muscular female body as beautiful, yet Fitzgerald portrayed Ms. Baker as cool, chic and unattainable. Characters like Jordan Baker proved that a definite shift in beauty tastes had occurred since the Victorian Era. In the sphere of fashion, Coco Chanel was producing styles that were simple and sporty. Undoubtedly influenced by the string of sportsmen lovers she had taken early in life, Chanel had both a love of athletics and a desire to break traditional gender rules. This led to her use of innovative materials like jersey—previously restricted to menswear—to produce women's clothing that was comfortable yet stylish (Banner, 1983). Fashion's embrace of simple, sporty clothing showed that women like Helen Wills had been successful in popularizing clothing practicality for women, both on and off the sports field (see Figure 8).



Figure 8 A 1920 illustration by Ethelbert White. This illustration features an ensemble from Williams Sportswear, a clothing company based out of Paris. Featuring a button up-cardigan—a traditionally male garment—this outfit is practical and androgynous (White, 1920).

The rise of athleticism while beneficial for the women's movement in many ways, did not take place without some backlash. Many conservative critics believed vigorous exercise caused women to lose moral control, allowing them to unleash hidden sexuality and desires (Kerber, 2003). These outdated ideas based on Victorian-era "science" created moral qualms for many. More insidious than the idea of sexual deviance, however, was the growing use of athletics to promote objectification of young women's bodies. Beauty contests typically featured a swimsuit portion that implied that each contestant was a practiced swimmer (Banner, 1983). In reality, these new beauty contests provided an

acceptable way to judge and rank young women's bodies in public, an occurrence that was previously unheard of. Similar objectification occurred in media coverage of the Olympics. While male swimmers were always shown in action poses and discussed according to their athletic merits, female swimmers were generally shown in posed stances emphasizing their physique. Their appearance was generally all that was commented upon (Dyreson, 2003). In a similar vein, cheerleading rose to popularity as an appropriate type of sport for female students, but cheerleaders tended to be much more valued for their appearance than athletic capability (Grundy, 2000).



Figure 9 Two debutantes sit at a tennis court. Even for women who didn't participate in professional or team sports, the new, sporty clothes of the 1920's were comfortable and practical to wear (Unknown, 1924-1928).

Ultimately, the acceptance of women's involvement in sports and other physical activities was a force for good. Athleticism and health began to be viewed as positive interests for women, which helped change assumptions that as a gender, they were too frail to participate in sports. Even for those who chose not to be involved on a sports team, the benefits of more comfortable, utilitarian clothes—championed by many female athletes like Helen Wills—could not be denied (see Figure 9). Additionally, activities like bike riding would have remained stigmatized if it weren't for the changes in opinion about women's physical activities. Although these changes were not without their critics, it is clear that without a shift towards women's physical health, the clothing of the 1920's would not have changed nearly as dramatically.

Women in the Workforce

In the 1920's, women began to appropriate many traditionally masculine styles. From bobbed hair to the iconic Chanel suit, it became socially acceptable for this first time for women to look boyish. This trend towards masculinity is intimately tied to women's

attempts to cement their place in the work force. The ability to hold a job and bring in one's own income was one of the most significant lifestyle changes women enjoyed in the 1920's. Although college attendance was still relatively rare for women, the numbers were on the rise—between 1920 and 1930, the percentage of American women attending college rose from 7 to 10. As more women began to attend college, it became more socially acceptable for all—including lower-income and minority women (Cleave, 2009). This decade was a period of huge expansion for career women—by 1920, there were twice as many white-collar women workers as there had been in 1900 (Kerber, 2003). After winning the fight for suffrage, many women felt empowered to make other meaningful changes, and one way to do this was by entering the work force. By the end of the decade, almost 40% would qualify as white-collar (Zeitz, 2006). This raised the total number of working women in the United States from 8.5 million in 1920 to 10.7 million by the end of the decade, representing an unprecedented leap forward for women's autonomy (Lemons, 2001). When transitioning from the home sphere to the professional world, clothing changes were necessary.

Gaining entry into the work force was a battle for women, but many hard-earned victories were won during the decade. Women successfully fought for legislation changes restricting maximum hours they had to work in a week, and protecting children against exploitative labor situations (Lemons, 2001). Some gained access to contraceptives thanks to Margaret Sanger and her newly launched Planned Parenthood organization. Sanger believed that family planning allowed women to achieve "the greatest possible expression and fulfillment of their desires upon the highest possible plane" (Zeitz, 2006, p. 67). Although this philosophy would face bitter opposition throughout the years, Sanger nevertheless was able to positively influence many women's outlooks on their career. Striking increased in popularity, which helped women gain entry into labor unions to protect their working rights. Tellingly, strikers wore overalls—a traditionally male garment—while picketing. They understood that to gain entry into careers previously denied to them, they must adopt masculine appearances (see Figure 10). In a more subtle way, Coco Chanel's clothing appropriated popular men's styles like boxy cardigans, giving women an appearance of power at their places of work (Clemente, 2006). Women who bobbed their hair were nicknamed "garçonnes," perhaps adopting this masculine appearance as a way to be taken more seriously at work. This trend of bobbed hair is reminiscent of women's adaptation of masculine clothing during World War I—the use of a masculine style allowed women to symbolically claim their own independence and self-sufficiency. The same could be said for the bob, although the style wasn't without its critics. Clément Vautel—a vocal French cartoonist—hypothesized that if too many women bobbed their hair and became independent, traditional femininity and home life would eventually become illegal (Roberts, 1993).

Women enjoyed more freedom than ever during this decade, and this freedom allowed them to pursue both careers for themselves and a greater level of personal expression. Starting at a young age, girls could go out with friends unchaperoned, talk on the telephone, and ride in automobiles—sometimes even with young men (Brumberg, 1997). Even for those living under more conservative conditions, there were subtle ways to break social norms—some women bobbed their hair and kept what they'd cut off, braiding it and pinning it into hats to give the appearance of long hair (Ress, 2009). For some women, however, newfound freedoms had to be maintained with financial help from men.

“Treating”—a dating practice where men invited women out, paid for everything, and generally expected to get something in return—became commonplace among young working women. Although treating was not stigmatized in the same way that prostitution was, it nevertheless created a group of “charity girls” who could only afford to have social lives at the expense of their body’s autonomy (Reinsch, 2013). The atmosphere of freedom which many women experienced was still tempered with these sorts of consequences.



Figure 10 A messenger girl for the National Women's Party, shortly after the group switched over to an all-female staff. This messenger girl is sporting a traditionally masculine outfit, perhaps because she is working a job traditionally relegated to boys (Unknown, 1922b).

Zelda Fitzgerald is perhaps the most well known example of a 1920's woman working for independence, yet still stifled by cultural demands. She helped to give voice to the trend through the many magazine articles she wrote, giving fashion advice and insights into her fabulous life (see Figure 11). Many saw her as the original flapper thanks to her husband's literary exploration of the subject. It is interesting to note, then, that her ideas of flapper-dom sometimes varied greatly from the general consensus. Many saw the flapper as a beacon of sexual freedom, free from the bonds of marriage. However, Zelda viewed the trend as a way to entice men, writing “we are developing a class of pretty yet respectable young women, whose sole functions are to amuse and to make growing old a more enjoyable process for some men and staying young an easier one for others” (Z. Fitzgerald, 1991, p. 398).

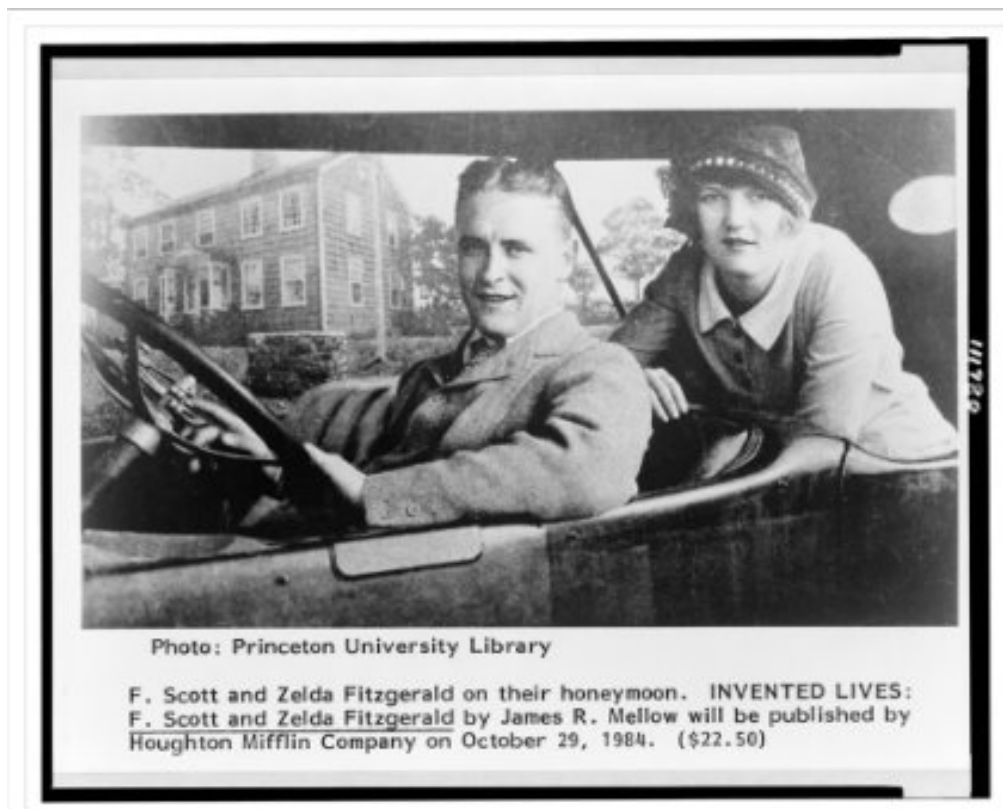


Figure 11 Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald on their honeymoon in 1920. Although revered by many and considered a fashion icon, Zelda Fitzgerald eventually stifled her writing career due to her husband's wishes (Unknown, 1920).

Her observation that women were attempting independence as a way to garner male attention may have reflected more upon her own tumultuous relationship with F. Scott Fitzgerald than it did on the flapper trend. “Knowing that I’ll always be yours—that you really own me...is such a relief,” she wrote to him prior to their marriage, in a statement typical of her many letters (Z. Fitzgerald, 1991, p. 446). She belonged to her husband in manners of business as well—F. Scott persuaded her not to publish the novel she had written because he felt it covered too many of the same events as his own work, *Tender is the Night*. As much as Zelda personified the glamour and mystique of the flapper, she was still the one possessed in her own great love story. She could create a vision of fashionable liberation for her readers, but she did not experience that reality.

Perhaps, after all, Zelda does encapsulate the flapper better than anyone: a woman who was powerful, independent and glamorous—who had access to all the best luxuries and clothes the world could offer—and yet was not above societal pressures to acquiesce to her husband’s wishes. Although the flapper trend was brief, it encapsulated perfectly the spirit of the decade: women fighting, in a social atmosphere that was at times hostile, to gain freedom to do as they pleased. Zelda had a career and social life that was almost unparalleled for her time, and yet she still felt the need to stifle her writing career according to her husband’s wishes.

Although record numbers of women were able to enter the work force, they still experienced a vastly different work culture than men, facing obstacles that men never

encountered. At first glance, it seems like a great victory that so many women were able to have white-collar jobs—the reality, however, was that the average female worker was single, quite young, and tended to assume her work situation would be temporary (Lemons, 2001). These women were exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation; they typically had to accept lower salaries, sometimes only 10 to 25% of what a man in the same position earned. Additionally, they were most often placed in positions which required little to no qualification, with simple and repetitive tasks (Reinsch, 2013). The importance of masculine dress in order to retain even the simplest of jobs was underscored in popular movies. In one scene in *Orchids and Ermine*, the young female protagonist secured a job as a switchboard receptionist because she was dressed plainly, and the boss was tired of interviewing ‘chiffon girls’ (Sharot, 2010). Comments like this make it clear that femininity in the work force was considered decidedly negative.

It was common and expected that women leave their job once married, and those who wished to stay could actually be fired from their job thanks to “marriage bar” laws throughout the United States and England. Marriage bars made it illegal for married women to continue working in a variety of different professions, but most significantly in the field of teaching. School teaching was one of the few job paths composed of predominantly women, which meant that a majority of college graduates—for example, 62% of Girton University graduates in 1920—went into this field (Thane, 2004). However, these college-educated women would legally be fired from their positions as soon as they married, forcing them to stay at home.

The realm of politics was an area where women continued to face glass ceilings, even after the battle for suffrage was won. Although theoretically women could begin running for office and participating in politics on both the local and national scale, very few were actually able to do so. One key reason for women’s failure to enter into politics was the viewpoint towards career ambition they had been raised with. Middle-class women in the 1920’s had grown up in a culture that expected them to serve others and work for humanitarian causes, rather than be personally ambitious or career-oriented (Perry, 1993). This socialization against career success was so strong that even women who did create powerful careers for themselves often referred to their job status as something they fell into, or something that happened to them by chance. An emphasis on luck, rather than skill, can even be seen in Eleanor Roosevelt’s memoir, arguably one of the most powerful American women of the century (Webb, 2012). When describing her life’s work, she humbly said that she “just did what [she] had to do as things came along” (Freedman, 1993, p. 160).

Some women felt unsure of how to enter the arena of politics, even if they desired to do so. Even declaring oneself to a political party was a hard choice—after all, suffragists had claimed that their gender was “unsullied by the corruption of political parties” as a way to win the vote (Dumenil, 2007, p. 23). Local government, with its variety of nonpartisan positions, was the area where women saw most success. Although both political parties attempted to woo women’s votes, they did little to follow through and issue any of the reforms women sought, such as safer child labor laws (Dumenil, 2007). Party leaders took advantage of the women on their teams, using them as publicity tools without ever considering them qualified candidates to run for office. It was still too far out of the public imagination to consider a woman candidate qualified to run in an election; instead, women interested in politics were expected to help elect men (Perry, 1993). Dividing into separate

political parties and fighting for a diverse array of causes significantly weakened the women's rights movement, as they were no longer united around the huge fight for suffrage.

In this atmosphere of extreme workforce change, women made many advances but still faced glass ceilings. Their newfound freedoms—autonomy, personal style, and finances—gave many a sense of confidence that helped propel them into the work force. However, inequality was rampant in terms of both wages and tasks assigned to women. Additionally, the victory of suffrage was soon replaced with a harsh reality where much of the political world was still closed off from women's participation. Progress would be incremental, and in the mean time, some women traded their financial autonomy for active social lives with men. Despite these setbacks, the entry of women into the workforce in the 1920's proved that women were ready to start seizing their own autonomy, a sentiment that was also expressed through clothing changes.

Coco Chanel's rise to fame can be attributed in part to the fact that she dressed women to go to work. Her empire was founded during this time of distinct social change, and her aesthetic perfectly meshed with women's new needs. Chanel was an early innovator—she bobbed her hair in 1916, long before most women thought about adopting the trend. She was known for dressing like a man in the company of her friends and family (Roberts, 1993). Perhaps the most important contribution she made to 1920's fashion were her work-ready clothing designs which imparted a sense of power in their wearers—she created a “visual fantasy of liberation” for her customers (Roberts, 1993, p. 681). Despite the important career strides women collectively made in this decade, they still faced many setbacks. To fit into corporate atmospheres and be taken seriously, women needed to adopt masculine clothing styles, which Chanel was happy to create. Her boyish styles included ties, collars, long tailor-cut jackets, and pajamas worn as everyday clothing. She began using jersey—a fabric previously relegated to men's clothing—to create loose lines and an easy, classless look to her designs. Chanel's clothes combined masculinity and ease of wear in a way that hadn't been done before, making her one of the principle innovators of women's work wear. Perhaps the most lasting example of her design innovation is her women's suit—this iconic jacket-and-skirt combination continues to be produced almost 100 years later (see Figure 12). Although decidedly feminine due to the skirt, this suit encapsulated women's changing clothing needs as white-collar workers.

Women have always been interested in working, and during World War I, they were given a brief chance to work at technical jobs for the first time in history. Despite the many setbacks they faced in the 1920's, such as discrimination and laws like the marriage bar, women did make strides forward, and their clothing reflected this. Much in the same way that World War I women donned men's overalls at work, women of the 1920's began subtly appropriating men's clothing styles in an effort to be taken more seriously. Styles like the bobbed haircut and the iconic Chanel suit were masculine, yet still stylish and innovative, making them perfect for the modern career woman. Although not all women were able to secure—or keep—the careers they desired, changes in clothing throughout the decade show that they were prepared to dress for the occasion.



Figure 12 An iconic Chanel suit from 1929. By adapting a traditionally masculine silhouette, this suit allowed its wearer to be taken seriously at a time when femininity was considered a negative attribute in the work force (Chanel, 1929).

Media, Body Perception and Consumerism

Commercial culture helped create pressures to conform, which placed new burdens on women's appearances in the 1920's. New media like the film industry helped to quickly spread beauty ideals. As ideologies about women's appearances changed, so too did those about women's sexuality, as evidenced by the flapper and her penchant for showing skin in public (Sharot, 2010). Outward forms of body control—such as the corset—were replaced in part by more insidious trends such as dieting, weight watching, and cosmetic use. In the booming post-war economy, women were willing and able to purchase these new products in an effort to become more conventionally attractive. In 1923, an anonymous female author described the “beautiful woman of today” as “svelte and at times petite... [she] should not be more than five feet four inches in height” (McGee, 2008, p. 638). This vision of the ideal woman was so entrenched in popular culture that theories such as somatotyping—the idea that body type reflected on personality—came into popularity during this decade (Marcellus, 2005). This is in stark contrast to the Victorian era, when it was considered “sinful” and “shallow” to care about one's looks—by the 1920's, these perceptions had long since faded away, leaving women to pour more time and effort than ever before into their appearances (Brumberg, 1997, p. 105).

For the first time in history, women had the means to monitor their own weight at home, and faced pressure to do so by both popular science and fashion. Prior to the 1920's, women could generally only find scales at drugstores or county fairs. Because the Victorian beauty ideal favored plumper bodies, being weighed in public tended not to have negative connotations (Brumberg, 1997). It was common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for female students to host "spreads," where they enjoyed many different types of homemade food, potluck style, with friends. Eating was a source of pleasure, not something to be stigmatized. Although women corseted themselves, they did not feel a need to exercise internal control over their bodies (Lowe, 1995).

By the time home scales were readily marketed and available to women—around 1918—popular culture was more critical of women's bodies than ever. A culture of dieting developed quickly. This is in stark contrast with the values of the Victorian era, where plumpness was considered a sign of both wealth and vitality. At the same time home scales took off, so too did the sale of diet books, with titles such as *Food and Life: Eat Right and Be Normal* (Carmen N Keist, 2013). Dieting suddenly became the best way to mold one's body to the trim beauty ideal of the time. It became so popular at Smith College that bulk food purchases for the school's dining halls actually needed to be lessened (Lowe, 1995). Magazines helped propagate the need to lose weight: at the beginning of the 20th century, it was already common for magazines to print the measurements of famous women, effectively opening their bodies up to critique (Banner, 1983). These manifold advertising influences, combined with a clothing trend towards sleek, boyish silhouettes, created an environment in which women's bodies became objects of intense scrutiny.

The rise of standardized size systems for clothing made it difficult for some women to obtain clothing that fit properly. In the previous decades, women either made their own clothes or had them made, preventing them from unease about "standard" body types (Cleave, 2005). The need to fit into a specific size could no longer be avoided if one wanted to shop the newest styles. For plus-size women, an array of new challenges began to present themselves. Although some thin women had abandoned the corset by 1920, overweight women continued to wear them while simultaneously attempting to manipulate their bodies through weight loss. Corset advertisements now began referring to plumper body types as "problems" that could be fixed with the right undergarments. By the middle of the decade, plus-sized women made up the vast majority of the corset market (Carmen N Keist, 2013). Worryingly enough, adolescent girls also became a targeted and growing market in the corset industry, with some undergarment manufacturers creating special names for their youth lines, such as Carter Brand's "Snugs" girdle (Jane Farrell-Beck, 2004). It was impossible for every woman to attain the slender, waifish silhouette so cherished during the 1920's, so for many shaping undergarments felt necessary (see Figure 13). If slenderness couldn't be achieved, at least straightness could (Lowe, 1995). For this reason, combination undergarments called corselettes came in to popularity—these came in many different styles, such as a combination corset and bra, or a bodice, hip belt and pantalon all in one. Although undoubtedly uncomfortable, these corselettes did a passable job of slimming down women's bodies to the requisite straight ideal (Willet, 1992).



Figure 13 An American-made corset from 1918-19. This corset shows the new, slim silhouette women were attempting to achieve. This is in stark contrast to Victorian corsets, which created a dramatic, curvy figure (O'Connor, 1918-1919).

Not only did marketers suggest the necessity of a slender body; thinness could sometimes be a necessity in order to be accepted in public. A boyish, straight figure was a necessary element of the “look” of the 1920’s; although there was an increase in body acceptance during this decade, women who didn’t fit the norm could still face public judgment. Dress codes were common, and legally, women could actually be penalized for disobeying them. In a particularly dramatic 1921 case, Louis Rosine, a popular novelist (who also happened to be single and obese) broke the dress code at a Los Angeles beach by rolling her socks down to reveal her knees. Officers asked her to roll the socks back up and she refused, a confrontation that quickly escalated and landed her in jail. In her cell, Rosine stripped down naked to get relief from the heat, causing frustrated wardens to force other inmates into covering her cell with blankets (Ress, 2009). It’s clear that women’s bodies—and perhaps especially those bodies that didn’t meet societal beauty standards—were seen as something to be covered and controlled. Incidents like this show prove that women who did not fit the fashionable, slender ideal could often face actual consequences for showing their bodies in public.

Both film stars and the rising institution of the beauty contest helped normalize the public scrutiny of women’s bodies. Actresses such as Clara Bow—with her plucked eyebrows and penchant for dark lipstick—represented unapologetic female sexuality. Although men were drawn to her films because they found her attractive, women were also paying attention and reinventing themselves accordingly (Sharot, 2010). Turning women’s

beauty into a public spectacle was a primary reason for many film's success, and the same could be said for the beauty contest. The beauty contest was advertised as a way for women to gain independence by through opportunities for fame and wealth, but this came at the price of having one's personhood judged solely on appearance. The Miss America pageants of the 1920's had extremely rigorous evaluation requirements, including height, weight, and age restrictions. Once chosen to participate in these events, women would compete sometimes wearing nothing but swimsuits and heels (Grout, 2013). In this way, beauty contests quickly became an appropriate way to judge women based off of only their physical attributes (see Figure 14). Although judging women's bodies was certainly nothing new, even scientists of the 1920's began to weigh in—in this decade, the theory of somatotyping was invented, which states that a person's physical appearance is indicative of their personality traits (Marcellus, 2005).



Figure 14 The prizewinners at a bathing suit contest held in Galveston, Texas in 1929. Although beauty contests often offered modeling contracts or money as rewards, they still came at the price of being publicly objectified (Maurer, 1929).

Women's weight was not the only new factor of concern. Although previously worn only by prostitutes and film stars, makeup began to gain popularity among average women around 1910 (Banner, 1983). This change was doubtlessly spurred on by the increasing popularity of the film industry. By the end of the decade, industry analysts estimated that "90 percent of adult women used face powder, 83 percent used talcum, 73 percent applied perfume, and 55 percent used rouge" (Zeitz, 2006, p. 205). Women began to carry compact mirrors for the first time so that they could scrutinize and re-apply their makeup at a moment's notice; correspondingly, dermatology became a huge industry, with many beauty parlors claiming they could safely smooth skin and incise acne (Brumberg, 1997). Cosmetics ranked only behind the food industry in terms of money spent on advertising (Banner, 1983). These advertisements were not only widespread, but also coercive and often paranoid. One nail polish advertisement asked "Do you realize how often eyes are

fastened upon your nailed? Are you willing to be judged by them?" Similarly, another claimed that "Men are especially sensitive to little deficiencies in a woman's appearance" (Forde, 2002, p. 181). Advertisements such as this seemed intended to convince women that a perfect physical appearance was necessary in order to gain a man's affection.

With so much focus and scrutiny on women's bodies, it is unsurprising that ideas about sexuality began to change as well (see Figure 15). The flapper trend, arguably the most distinctive face of 1920's fashion, was able to come about because of the increasing acceptance of women's autonomy and sexuality, combined with the potent advertising culture of the time. The growing acceptance of women's sexuality could be seen in the changes her undergarments went through—for the first time, in the 1920's, colored underwear came into vogue. Prior to this decade, strictly white undergarments were the norm for both genders. The 1920's saw an increase in silky, brightly colored undergarments for women, as well as sensuously draped, Oriental-inspired sleepwear (Willet, 1992). Other accessories, like flirtatiously embellished garters to hold up sheer stockings, would have been considered far too scandalous to consider in the Victorian Era (Langley, 2006). Flappers purchased and wore these products with pride, creating an iconic style by embracing the current of societal changes around them. Even their bobbed hair seemed, to some, a symbol of their loss of innocence—critics of the style argued that without long hair to let down in the privacy of their homes, the intimacy of home life would be ruined (Roberts, 1993).



Figure 15 Changing ideas about sexuality allowed women more freedom to show skin. This 1922 portrait of a woman in sleepwear would have been considered vulgar even ten years prior (Unknown, 1922a).

The idea that extensive grooming could lead to love, acceptance, and sexual prowess set a dangerous precedent for women—specifically young, impressionable girls. Even the bobbed haircut, seen by many as a symbol of youthful freedom, came with its own burdens—the style needed to be washed, set and trimmed more often, leading to extra trips to the beauty parlor. The rise of consumerism had special ramifications for women, who began to view their beauty products and clothing as part of their identities (Cleave, 2009). Although women's beauty ideals have always fluctuated, never before the 1920's had a climate of such strong consumerism merged with such an unattainable standard of women's appearances (see Figure 16). At a time when women seemed to be making great social gains, they still experienced pressure to conform.



Figure 16 This illustration of a flapper shows the ideal body type of the decade--long, lean, and boyish. The rising popularity of dieting allowed women a means to try and manage their weight as they attempted to achieve this ideal silhouette (Patterson, 192-?).

There is perhaps no other factor that created such widespread change as that of media, and the culture of consumerism that it created. The way women chose to wear their hair and makeup and the ways that they manipulated their bodies are as much a part of fashion as the clothing they chose to wear. Society's ideas about how women should look, act, and dress were all profoundly affected by the advertising culture that blossomed in the 1920's. To many, the 1920's are seen as a liberating decade for women because some were able to abandon their corsets. However, more insidious forces came into effect during the decade, such as the new need to diet in order to remain thin and fit into standardized clothing sizes. It is difficult to argue that women became freer during this decade, considering that for the first time, they were encouraged to wear makeup in order to look presentable. Although women's clothes did become more utilitarian—especially compared to the restricting styles of the Victorian era—the influences of media and the rise of consumerism created a whole new set of restrictions on women's appearances. The flapper could not have come in to popularity otherwise.

Conclusion

The 1920's were a decade of immense social and economic gains for women, evidenced by the freer styles of clothing they began to wear. The changes that took place can be categorized into three broad categories: an increase in women's athleticism; women's changing role in the work force; and the rise of media and advertising culture, which facilitated consumerism. Each of these forces altered women's place in society and, as a result, the way they presented themselves.

When fashions change, people adapt more than just the clothing they wear. This can be seen in the changing ideals regarding body types, dieting, makeup, and hairstyles of the decade. Although some women were freed from the corset, and all from the ungainly skirts of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, newer and more insidious restrictions on appearance began to take place. The 1920's saw, for the first time, a trend towards women controlling their body through internal rather than external methods—the diet replaced the tight-laced dress, and makeup replaced the natural look of prior decades. In these ways, women were not completely freed. However, movement became much easier thanks to the growing popularity of sporty attire, like sleeveless shirt dresses and swingy tennis skirts. Additionally, women began to adapt masculine clothing styles in a sort of wishful thinking as they attempted to secure careers equal to their male counterparts.

After researching this thesis, it became clear that the 1920's were a complex decade in women's history. Although many positive strides were made, these advances were tempered by issues such as the difficulty of creating a career and the pressures of media and advertising. There is more to the women of the 1920's than simply the iconic flapper girl. This decade was a time of huge economic expansion, changing gender roles, technologies, and ideologies. Clothing does not exist in a vacuum; it must be analyzed and understood in the context of its time. The women of the 1920's experienced both successes and setbacks, and these are mirrored in their dress. The implication of this research is that it is necessary to have a more moderate viewpoint of the women's rights movement of the 1920's, as well as to understand how these various cultural, social, and economic factors were intertwined. All three of the factors discussed were intimately intertwined—for example, media influenced athleticism, and women's appropriation of masculine styles influenced the media. This research is also relevant when attempting to understand modern women's role in society. Many of the issues facing women today—such as the prevalence of edited photos creating unattainable standards for women's bodies—have their roots in the 1920's, when new pressures began to be placed on women's appearances. The goal of this thesis was to either prove or refute the notion that 1920's women were experiencing unprecedented amounts of social progress. The truth proved to be complex and nuanced, showing that women have always managed to make strides forward even as they face cultural adversity.

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