

The Casual Dress of the 1950s Woman and
the Casual Dress of Today's Woman

Joanna Woolsey

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Debra Benoit, D.Min.
Thesis Chair

Matalie Howard, M.S.
Committee Member

Lew Weider, Ed.D.
Committee Member

James H. Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

Date

Abstract

The casual dress of American women has changed dramatically from the 1950s to the present. In the 1950s, the style was undeniably feminine, with fitted waists and full skirts ending below the knee. The style of young women today has become significantly more casual and androgynous, with pants and leggings taking prevalence in casual wear. The style of dresses has also changed significantly, as has the standard of modesty. This work will discuss and evaluate the changes in casual dress from the 1950s to the present, including the influences on style in both time periods. The change from only wearing dresses to wearing mainly pants, the changes in dress designs, and the shift in the standard of modesty among young American women will be discussed.

Keywords: casual dress, 1950s, style, fashion, modesty, New Look

The Casual Dress of the 1950s Woman and the Casual Dress of Today's Woman

The casual dress of the American woman has changed distinctively from the 1950s to the present: the classic, feminine styles of the previous era have developed and transformed into a much more casual, androgynous style. The flowy, feminine fashions that were so prevalent in the 1950s among women in the United States have all but disappeared and are now reserved mainly for special occasions, if they are worn at all. The everyday style of dress among women today is significantly more casual in nature than in the 1950s, as pants, shorts, and leggings have gained prevalence over dresses and skirts. Although dresses are still worn by young women on occasion, these dresses are considerably different than the dresses worn in the 1950s in terms of general style and modesty. While in both eras, designers and celebrities have influenced fashion and what styles are popular, the specific styles promoted by these figures are vastly different. This work will examine the change in standards of dress and popular styles between the two eras, with special attention to the dresses worn both in the 1950s and today. This work will also discuss the influences on fashions of the 1950s and recent fashions and how these influences have affected what styles are popular, as well as the change in the standard of modesty between the two eras.

Style Influences in the 1950s and Today

Style and fashions do not just come into being with no influence from the outside. Style in every decade has been influenced by something to create the looks so iconic of those eras, and the main influences on style and fashions do not change drastically from decade to decade. The sources of inspiration for different fashions are often very similar; it is only the specific influences themselves that change, as well as the specific fashions

being promoted by those influences. For example, fashions of the 1950s were heavily influenced by fashion designers, as well as TV and movie stars. Likewise, today's popular styles are influenced by designers and celebrities. Thus, while both decades have been influenced by designers and celebrities of the time, these influences have changed dramatically in terms of what fashions they promote.

Style Influences of the 1950s

The main influences on style in the 1950s were designers and television or movie stars. These designers and “celebrities” of the day were responsible for pioneering the quintessential 1950s fashions seen during that decade. Designers such as Claire McCardell and especially Christian Dior created and popularized some of the most iconic styles of the decade, changing the face of fashion in the 1950s and the following years (Reed, 2012). These influences on the fashions of the 1950s helped to create the classic feminine look that is so representative of the 1950s. The styles created by these designers are also reflected by movie and television stars of the time. These stars appeared on-screen in the clothing styles that will be discussed in further sections, and caused American women to imitate their fashion sense. These movie stars included Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly, and television stars included Barbara Billingsley of *Leave It to Beaver* and Lucille Ball of *I Love Lucy* (Leaper, 2017). These celebrities were responsible for defining 1950s fashion and influencing many women to imitate their style.

Designer influences. Christian Dior played a major part in the change in style of the 1950s when he introduced the “New Look” at the end of the 1940s. This style of dress generally involved a form-fitting silhouette throughout the torso and a very fitted waist,

which then expanded into a very full, tea-length skirt. Sometimes corsets cinched in the waist and pads were used under the dress or skirt to cause the hips to appear fuller (Reed, 2012). Dior's designs directly contradicted the styles of the previous decade, as during World War II fabrics were rationed, creating a slim, sleek silhouette. As Dior's designs included up to 49 feet of fabric for day dresses and 82 feet for evening dresses, the designer often "seemed to be mocking the rationing of World War II, deliberately flaunting the strict rules of Make Do and Mend" (Worlsey, 2011, p. 110). The new designs of the 1950s represented a new time of peace and plenty. In terms of Dior's popularity, *Vogue* reported that "Dior is the new name in Paris. With his first collection he not only shot to fame, but retrieved the general situation by reviving interest in a somewhat uninspiring season" (Worlsey, 2011, p. 110). Possibly the most famous of Dior's designs was the Bar Suit, which embodied the fitted torso and full skirt style. Dior's designs, especially the New Look, would continue to dominate women's clothing styles until the mid-1950s (Laver, 2012).

Some other basic styles of the 1950s that were often worn include the shirtwaist dress and the circle skirt. Influential in these more casual dress styles was Claire McCardell, one of "the most creative designers of sports and leisure wear" (Payne, Winkaor, & Farrell-Beck, 1992, p. 604). During World War II, when certain textiles were heavily rationed, McCardell used cotton and other less-rationed fabrics to create lines of easy-to-wear sportswear designs that were classically attractive (Laver, 2012). The shirtwaist dress is one of the styles popularized by McCardell that is reminiscent of the 1950s to this day. McCardell, credited with being a pioneer of American sportswear, also

designed wrap dresses with ties and dresses with corset-hook closures as two of her other signature looks (Walford, 2012).

Movie and television stars. Both television and movie stars exemplify the 1950s style that was so prevalent in the decade. In the 1950s, clothes were very important in films and on television, because “as a reflection of the style of a new prosperous society, they helped promote that style” (Mulvey & Richards, 1998, p. 122). Famous movie stars such as Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly were instrumental in displaying the dressy style of the 1950s. This style can also be seen in television series from the decade. Popular and successful shows from the 1950s such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy* showed everyday women doing everyday things in the flowy, feminine dresses that are so iconic of the decade. Thus, media was a very popular way to showcase and influence fashions in the 1950s.

Audrey Hepburn was a British actress who starred in more than twenty films during the course of her career. She was widely regarded as a film and fashion icon, and she was named the third greatest screen legend in American cinema (American Film Institute, n.d.). She appeared in thirteen movies during the 1950s, including *Roman Holiday*, *Sabrina*, and *Funny Face*. In these films, Audrey Hepburn dressed in the latest 1950s fashion. An excellent example of this can be seen in the 1954 movie *Sabrina*, in which “Hepburn...made the LBD [little black dress] popular again” (Rubenstein, 2011, p. 28). This classic dress, worn to meet Humphrey Bogart at the end of the movie, was designed by Givenchy and featured a high neck, fitted waist, and full skirt that ended mid-calf. This silhouette is very similar to one Hepburn wears in the film *Roman Holiday*. In this film, she wears a shirtwaist-style outfit featuring a blouse tucked into a

very fitted belt and a very full skirt ending near her ankle. These slim-waisted, full-skirted styles are characteristic of the 1950s, and reflect the femininity of the decade.

Grace Kelly, an American actress, was also highly influential on American fashion during the 1950s. Although Kelly only appeared in fourteen films during her career, those films established her as one of the greatest screen legends in American cinema (American Film Institute, n.d.). Films such as *To Catch a Thief*, *Rear Window*, and *Dial M for Murder* placed Kelly on the global fashion stage. Her fame continued to increase when she left the film world behind and married Prince Rainier III of Monaco, thus becoming a princess. While her style changed to more simple and refined clothing befitting a princess, Kelly continued to be a style icon until her death in 1982. Thus, these two movie stars greatly influenced the styles of women during the 1950s because of their status and work both on- and off-screen.

Leave It to Beaver, which ran from 1957 to 1963 and received several Emmy nominations, appears on the list of *TIME Magazine*'s top 100 TV shows of all time (Poniewozik, 2007). On the show, Barbara Billingsley played June Cleaver, a typical housewife and mother who spent the majority of her time around the house doing housework such as cooking, gardening, and chores. Similarly, *I Love Lucy* featured Lucille Ball as Lucy Ricardo, an American housewife of a successful performer, whose main activities were performing household tasks and going shopping with her friends. *I Love Lucy*, which ran from 1951 to 1957, won several Emmys and was voted the best TV show of all time (Green & Gomstyn, 2012). On their popular shows, Billingsley and Ball wore classic fifties styles, which included calf-length, full-skirted dresses, often in the shirtwaist style. This style of dress "was, for a long time, the accepted uniform of the

occupation put down on the census form as ‘housewife.’ And since so many women did (and still do) take justifiable pride in that occupation, it’s not surprising that they’d want to look good on the job” (McKean, 2013, p. 111). The shirtwaist dress, one of the most popular styles of the 1950s, will be discussed further in a later section. Although Billingsley and Ball wore slacks sometimes on the show, they did not wear them outside the house, reinforcing the idea that women did not wear pants for anything other than the most casual occasions. Ball was also partially responsible for pioneering the idea of women appearing in maternity clothing on television (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). These two shows portray the popular way for American housewives to dress in the 1950s; thus, as celebrities like Billingsley, Ball, Hepburn, and Kelly adopted the new styles shown by designers, these styles gained popularity among American women (Leaper, 2017).

Style Influences Today

Today, style is influenced by designers and celebrities, similarly to the influences in the 1950s. These two factors are the main influences on both standards of dress and the types of clothing widely worn and accepted in today’s society. Designers such as Ralph Lauren and Alexander McQueen have been greatly influential in the development of today’s styles. The most influential celebrities include singers such as Rihanna and Beyoncé, reality TV stars such as Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian, and political figures such as the Duchess of Sussex, the Duchess of Cambridge, and former First Lady Michelle Obama. These figures are currently instrumental in determining what is popular for young American women (Lyst, 2018; Tortora & Marcketti, 2015).

Designer influences. Ralph Lauren is a very influential designer in today’s culture. His designs represent the classic American style that is so well known. Lauren

has received several CFDA and Coty awards for his designs. His basic style is shaped by the clothing worn at American Ivy-League schools such as Harvard and Yale: navy blazers, ties, and school crests (Thomas, 2015). This classic style developed into a style that is worn by everyone, not just Ivy-League students. The classic styles pioneered by Lauren have influenced many designers' creations for decades. Ralph Lauren designed the Team USA uniforms for the 2008 and 2012 Olympics, and the fame created by these events "enabled the brand to represent the American look on a world stage and incorporate some of the preppy design elements Polo Ralph Lauren is known for" (Thomas, 2015). Ralph Lauren has inspired many of the classic looks seen today.

Another designer that has greatly influenced American fashion today is Alexander McQueen. McQueen has won the British Fashion Awards' British Designer of the Year four times and the CFDA Award for Best International Designer, as well as been honored by the Queen of England for his contributions to fashion (Women's Wear Daily, 2010). McQueen has effectively combined feminine and masculine styles in his designs to create a style that is recognizable as Alexander McQueen (Women's Wear Daily, 2010). His style was eclectic and very androgynous. The current creative director of the brand, Sarah Burton, continues to move forward with this style, which has influenced the androgynous styles of today. Thus, these two designers, along with many others, have greatly influenced what styles are popular in today's society.

Celebrity influences. Currently there are many celebrity figures that influence style of dress among young American women. These include singers, actresses, and political figures both in America and internationally. One resource used to determine what figures currently influence American style is Lyst. To determine these influences,

Lyst monitors spikes in demand and mentions on social media generated by celebrities around the globe throughout the year in question and monitors spikes in sales and searches of the fashions and outfits worn by these influencers (Lyst, 2018). According to Lyst, Rihanna was “the most powerful celebrity fashion influencer” in 2017, and also among the top ten influencers in 2018 (Lyst, 2017; Lyst, 2018). This famous singer, originally from Barbados, began her musical career in America and is now one of the best-selling musical artists of all time. Her style influence includes red carpet events as well as her own beauty and clothing company, Fenty. Another great influence on style from the musical world is Beyoncé. This American singer is another of the world’s best-selling musical artists of all time, and her style influence includes red carpet events, music videos, and concert outfits. These two singers have inspired a huge following, and so the clothing they wear sells out very quickly after they are seen in it.

Lyst’s inventory of style influences also extends to reality TV stars, and counts Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian as the two most influential celebrities globally in 2018 (Lyst, 2018). Jenner and Kardashian got their reality TV start on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, which began in 2007. Today, they are very influential in the world of fashion and lifestyle. They have amassed a huge following, and promote both their own brands and those they enjoy wearing. Kardashian and Jenner have been influential in the adaption of the bodycon dress style, which will be discussed in a following section. Kardashian and Jenner have also impacted the adoption of more and more revealing outfits among young women, as they themselves wear these styles (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). All four of these women make a substantial amount of money for various brands

every year as they are seen and photographed in clothing from those brands. Thus, they have been able to influence the currently accepted styles of today.

Political influences. Other celebrity influencers today include political figures, both in the United States and internationally. The position of First Lady has long been a position of influence in terms of style, and many First Ladies have greatly influenced fashions of their time, from Jacqueline Kennedy to Michelle Obama. American women look to the wife of the most powerful man in America to determine the current styles of the nation, and the First Lady is influential in popularizing many designers and brands that have been previously unknown (Bratskeir, 2017). The First Lady has also been responsible for popularizing various styles of dress, including pillbox hats by Jacqueline Kennedy and sleeveless dresses by Michelle Obama. As fashion is “the most potentially viral item in the subliminal political toolbox” (Friedman, 2017), the First Lady has great power over the international fashion market. The most influential First Lady in recent years in terms of style has been Michelle Obama. Other figures that influence style include Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex. Catherine, although not American, represents the fairytale many women seek: a commoner meeting a prince, falling in love, and becoming royalty (Fogle, 2019). Meghan meets this ideal even more, as she is American, with a story that harkens back to Grace Kelly (Hall, 2018). Thus, these two women are very influential to American women’s style.

Michelle Obama has been perhaps one of the most memorable and influential First Ladies in terms of style and fashion. Her influence alone as First Lady caused outfits and pieces she wore to sell out instantly, and she was instrumental in bringing unknown designers to international spotlight based on her choice of outfits. When she wore Jason

Wu's designs to the first inaugural ball in 2009, he rose to immediate international fame, whereas he had been previously unknown in most circles (Wilson, 2009). In fact, in 2009, Mrs. Obama won the Council of Fashion Designers of America's Board of Directors' Special Tribute "for her work promoting lesser-known designers from diverse backgrounds, and vocal enthusiasm for fashion in general" (Binkley, 2019, para. 14). Mrs. Obama used clothing to bridge the gap between American and international fashion, as well as between the rich and famous and the average American budget (Freidman, 2017). Mrs. Obama wore specific designers to meet with officials from specific countries, such as Vera Wang, a Chinese-American designer, to meet with the Chinese president. She also mixed high-end designers with more budget-friendly options, such as J.Crew, causing low-end fashion brands to experience a spike in both sales and stock prices, as a study by a New York University professor found (Yermack, 2010). Mrs. Obama was also a pioneer of wearing sleeveless dresses in the political arena, as many First Ladies and female politicians had previously shied away from the controversial arm-baring statement (Ibanga, 2009). She also helped to bring the cardigan back into style, as it was one of her signature pieces, worn with many both casual and more formal outfits (Betts, 2011). Mrs. Obama greatly influenced American fashion during her eight years in the White House, and will certainly continue to influence the many loyal fans she gathered during her time there.

Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, rose to worldwide fame after her engagement to Prince William, and her style influence quickly rose with her. Previously unknown in the fashion world, Catherine can now cause a brand to sell out minutes after wearing it (Harwood, 2017). Similarly, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, has caused websites to crash

and brands to sell out. Both women increase the desirability of British brands in the United States by nearly 40 percent (Friedman, 2018). Even though these young women are the royalty of another nation, their popularity in the United States cannot be denied. Because of their status as royalty, the Duchesses wear classic, proper styles that do not reflect the typical dress of young American women; however, these styles may become more popular and contribute to the spike toward modest fashion seen today, as both duchesses' wedding dresses were praised for their modesty (Jones, 2015). This would indicate a change in the standards of dress in today's society, directly opposite to the shift seen since the 1950s.

Changes in Standards of Dress

The standard of modesty has changed greatly from the 1950s to today. Dresses and skirts today are much shorter; it is rare to see a skirt that ends below the knee. In addition, many dresses today are fitted throughout the body instead of just in the torso, unlike the typical style of 1950s dresses. Many shirts and other garments are also very tight fitting. The neckline of clothing is also a significant detail that has changed between the 1950s and today. In the 1950s, necklines were high, rarely dipping lower than the collarbone. Today, necklines have dropped significantly, showing much more of the décolletage than in past years. As noted by Lennon, Johnson, and Rudd (2017), "Beliefs about what comprises a modest appearance change over time, as illustrated by the amount of skin covered or revealed in Western women's dress over the last two centuries, and even in the last two decades" (p. 26).

One constant among today's casual clothing versus the casual clothing of the 1950s is that the standard of modesty has dropped, both literally and figuratively. In the

1950s, most necklines were either round or square and ended close to the neck (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). Even if an outfit was more formal, the neckline still rarely dipped much lower than the collarbone. However, today's casual clothes are typically much lower-cut, showcasing the shoulders and décolletage. Many dresses and tops require either special undergarments or an undershirt to keep from revealing too much of the body. Even the very casual clothing of today's young women does not take into account the modest desires that some young women have (Jones, 2015). Similarly, everyday dresses and skirts today are significantly shorter than any of the dresses or skirts in the 1950s. As previously stated, the typical style of the 1950s involved skirts that reached from just below the knee to the lower calf. However, today's casual dresses and skirts almost always end mid-thigh or end just above the knee. It is rare to find a skirt or dress that reaches the knee, and even more rare to find one that extends below the knee. In fact, when such a garment is seen, it is sometimes hailed as vintage because that style is so reminiscent of the 1950s.

In the 1950s, the bikini was introduced by French engineer Lous Réard, and it immediately gained extreme popularity in Europe (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). However, American women did not adopt the trend and continued to wear more modest one-piece or two-piece suits that covered more of the body. Many bathing suits were cut with bottoms like shorts or skirts, and some had full bloomers (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). Bikinis were not accepted at all in the United States until the late 1960s, and even then they took a while to gain popularity. However, today, the bikini is the most popular form of swimwear among most young American women (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). While one-piece swimsuits do exist, they often reveal nearly as much skin as a bikini, with

cutouts, plunging necklines, and high-cut legs. Thus, the bathing suit is another indicator of the changes in standards of modesty between the 1950s and today.

The word “modesty” is often associated with extremely religious groups, such as Muslims and the Amish (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd, 2017). There are also a lot of negative connotations with the word “modesty.” In fact, Lennon, Johnson, and Rudd (2017) define modesty as “covering certain body parts out of a sense of shame or embarrassment” (p. 26). *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.), however, defines the word as “propriety in dress, speech, or conduct.” Thus, while being modest is often thought of as old-fashioned or frumpy, the fashions of the 1950s were modest without being either of those things. While the “New Look” styles of the 1950s emphasized the figure, it was not by wearing less clothing, but rather by tailoring the clothing to the shape of the woman. The hourglass figure was achieved by corsets to pull in the waist and hip pads to make the figure more curvaceous (Worlsey, 2011). Thus, the styles of the 1950s emphasized the curves of the body while simultaneously covering them, proving that modesty and looking good are compatible.

As seen with the lower necklines and higher hemlines, and especially with the bodycon dress that is popular today, the attitude of today’s fashion industry is “if you’ve got it, flaunt it; leave as little to the imagination as possible” (Mohler, 2004, p. 6). However, women are called to avoid being a stumbling block for men in terms of modesty (Vaughan & Vaughan, 2005), and it is fairly evident that many of the everyday dresses of the 1950s go further in fulfilling that goal than many of today’s casual dresses. However, this standard is not just for Christians. As Sarah Gould (2013) points out, “both male and female bodies have inherent dignity far beyond the mere physical and, because

of that dignity present in each man and woman, it is not fitting for the body to be uncovered for all the world to see.” While there are no specific guidelines for all women to follow regarding modesty, low-cut dresses with short skirts that barely cover any part of the body often fall short. The higher necklines and longer skirts of the 1950s definitely fall more within this modest category. Women must take responsibility for their appearance, and for the messages the clothing they wear sends out to others (Vaughan & Vaughan, 2005). This is not to say that all everyday dresses in today’s society are immodest and that young women should return to the styles showcased in the 1950s; however, perhaps designers should take a hint from the fashions of the past in terms of modesty and decency.

While among most women in America, modesty has declined significantly, there is market research suggesting that modest clothing is gaining traction again in American society. In February 2017, London hosted the first-ever Modest Fashion Week, and research indicates that modest fashion is being purchased by both religious and nonreligious women (Weinswig, 2017). Many fashion brands such as ModLi offer many modest clothing options for women who want to remain fashionable while also keeping their dignity intact. Many traditional brands, including Nike, Oscar de la Renta, and Dolce & Gabbana have also begun to offer modest clothing for both religious and nonreligious women (Weinswig, 2017). Similarly, “skinny jeans” have begun to go out of style again, and a return to looser styles known as “mom jeans” has been seen, with searches for this style up 105 percent in a year (Bergstein, 2018). This trend toward more modest clothing may indicate a partial return to a more modest lifestyle and a turn away from the revealing clothing that has become so prevalent in today’s society.

Changes in Casual Dress

During the 1950s, young women in America did not dress casually as the word would be defined today. According to Payne, Winakor, and Farrell-Beck (1992), “Elegance was the word for women’s dress during this period” (p. 601). Gloves and earrings were worn much of the time to emphasize women’s elegance and social status. Whether to school, work, or simply at home, women wore dresses a majority of the time. If pants were worn, they were mainly reserved for use in the home, as it was not considered ladylike to wear pants out unless doing some kind of physical labor where it would not be feasible to wear a dress or skirt. Today, pants are worn much more frequently. In fact, unless it is a special occasion or a business setting, it is rare to see younger women wearing a dress or skirt of any sort. For example, it has been found that women wearing more masculine clothing are often perceived as more competent in the workplace than those wearing skirts or dresses (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd, 2017). The emergence of pants, especially jeans, and leggings has nearly replaced the everyday dress of the American woman (Clemente, 2015).

During World War II, women were asked to do their part on the home front and help out in factories while the men were overseas fighting. As such, it was not possible for them to wear dresses in the factories, and so jeans and sturdy pants for women were developed. Clothes rationing was also prevalent during the 1940s, and so fabric was very limited. Thus, the resulting silhouette had short, narrow skirts with limited pockets and no trimmings (Steele, 1997). Women were discouraged from wearing pants outside of work situations, but many did because of the ease of dress and freedom pants offered (Steele, 1997). Thus, the main style of the 1940s was slim, short, and sparse. The clothing worn

by women in the 1940s was very androgynous and did not resemble the styles worn in the following decade.

The 1950s brought peace and prosperity that meant that women could dress in the feminine way in which they wanted. Therefore, the 1950s brought a style which was more formal and elegant than past casual styles, simply because it was now possible. Dior dressed his women like flowers, and Antonia Fraser, a best-selling historian, attributes his success to the lack of available glamour and femininity during World War II. She notes, “At the time, we felt so starved of glamour...And suddenly Dior’s New Look arrives and makes us dream” (Fraser-Cavassoni, 2014, p. 20). Even for casual occasions, American women in the 1950s did not wear casual clothing by today’s standards, but rather wore glamorous clothing that they could not wear in previous years. Everyone dressed in feminine clothing that would be considered almost formal by today’s standards. Thus, the glamour and femininity of the 1950s cannot be denied, whereas today, casual and androgynous styles are much more common.

In terms of sportswear, in the 1950s, skirts were still worn for many sports activities. If shorts were worn, they were Bermuda shorts reaching to the knee, and these styles were often worn with sweater sets or blouses (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). These styles were much more dressy than any type of sportswear worn today. In more recent years, skirts are never worn for sporting events, with the exception of events such as tennis, golf, or field hockey. Women typically wear mid-thigh-length shorts or leggings for sports today, and t-shirts, tank tops, or just sports bras are the shirt of choice. These garments are also worn when women are not attending sporting events, to everyday activities such as grocery shopping and running errands (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015).

Thus, leisure clothing has also experienced a trend toward more casual styles since the 1950s.

Another way in which the shift toward casual dress is seen is in what people currently wear to church. In the 1950s, and even twenty years ago, people dressed in their nicest clothing to go to church, as evidenced by the phrase “Sunday best.” However, within the last few decades, the formality of dress has all but disappeared, and few churchgoers bother to dress up anymore. Very few women wear dresses, and jeans are very prevalent among both men and women at church. T-shirts and casual sandals are also worn frequently. Even many pastors do not wear a dress coat or tie, but rather a more casual outfit to appeal to more people. As Bloom (2017) notes, “These changes in what people wear to church reflect the wider cultural changes over the past fifty years regarding clothing. The whole of American culture has dressed down” (What Should We Wear to Church? section, para. 4). In other words, the dressy styles worn on an everyday basis in the 1950s are not seen today, even in church. Fancy styles are reserved for only the most special of occasions, and church is no longer seen as one of them. Therefore, the urge to dress up for any occasion has all but disappeared, replaced by the desire for comfortable, casual clothing for all occasions.

One example of casual dress among young women today is blue jeans. Jeans, “an icon of American culture, and quite possibly the world’s most popular article of clothing” (Stromberg, 2011, para. 1), are the most popular style of pants among nearly everyone today. Blue jeans became very popular in World War II for factory workers, but did not really reach the height of their popularity until the 1960s and 70s (Stromberg, 2011). Blue jeans have remained extremely popular to this day among all ages and demographics.

They are now seen as the quintessential casual pant, and the variety of jeans that are available is astounding, in all colors, sizes, and styles. Jeans are worn for nearly every occasion, and are even worn at the workplace on “casual Fridays” or even in a business casual setting (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). There is likely not a single person in America who does not own a pair of jeans, and this reflects the casual nature of today’s wardrobe.

Another very popular pant in today’s society is leggings. The word “leggings” used to refer to leg coverings worn by Native Americans or a heavy pair of tights or stockings (Waxman & Chan, 2017). The reason for these garments was to keep the ankles covered, and to add an extra layer of modesty. They were also used as garments in hunting and battle under tunics for men (Waxman & Chan, 2017). By the 1980s, leggings began to be worn as pants, especially in workout culture. Wearing leggings as pants has come under fire many times in the past few years, especially in schools, and most recently on airplanes (Waxman & Chan, 2017). The reason for this is that leggings are often very see-through and tight, and are therefore not considered modest by many standards. During the 1950s, pants were barely worn, much less leggings, as they cling completely to the leg and can be see-through. Today, however, online leggings sales have increased significantly, with the volume of leggings orders surpassing even the number of denim orders among women (Waxman & Chan, 2017). Thus, leggings are an example of how the standards of modesty have changed since the 1950s.

Changes in Dress Styles

Not only has the formality of clothing changed since the 1950s, the actual styles of dresses worn have changed as well. The dresses of the 1950s reflected the growing prosperity after World War II. The dresses also had a very specific shape, typically with

higher necklines, fitted bodices and waists, and very full skirts ending below the knee. The entire image was very feminine. While there is not a single style that prevails today, the most common silhouettes of dresses worn by younger women today are the T-shirt dress and the bodycon dress. These dresses are either very loose throughout the dress or very tight throughout, respectively. As stated previously, these dresses typically end above the knee. Thus, the styles of dresses worn have changed dramatically since the 1950s.

Everyday Dresses in the 1950s

During World War II, resources were few, and clothing styles reflected that. Skirts were slim and shorter, ending just below the knee. However, after the war was over, resources became more plentiful, and skirts became fuller and longer. The introduction of Christian Dior's New Look at the end of the 1940s, the "antithesis of militaristic wartime fashions" (Palmer, 2010, para. 8), reflected this change in style. The general style of the 1950s was very feminine, with natural shoulders, a fitted waist, a prominent bust, and long, full skirts (Lazaro, 2015). As women left the factories that required their work during World War II and returned to "perfecting domestic life" (Condra, 2008, p.155), the fashions changed to reflect that return to femininity. After the war, there was a great emphasis on conformity in fashion and the abundance of resources; "women wanted to look 'right' and had the means to do so" (Condra, 2008, p. 154).

The basic style of the 1950s was extremely feminine, which contrasted greatly with the stiffer, militaristic style of the World War II era. Dresses and skirts were typically "tea-length," ranging from just below the knee to mid- or low-calf, and were very full (Payne, Winakor, & Farrell-Beck, 1992). A quote from Hubert de Givenchy

recalls that “The New Look was first and foremost about the fullness of its skirts! And then of course, the cinched waists” (Benaïm & Müller, 2015, p. 32). Bodices also contributed to the feminine image, with “small shoulders, cinched waists, and rounded hips” (Payne, Winakor, & Farrell-Beck, 1992, p. 603). Breasts were emphasized, and hips were padded to exaggerate the elegant feminine persona. The silhouette was an hourglass shape to the extreme. The goal was to slim the body without losing the waist in the process (Benaïm & Müller, 2015). In the 1950s, women wanted to seem elegant, sophisticated, and mature (Laver, 2012). Teenagers dressed like their parents to also seem mature.

The new feminine ideal promoted by Dior’s New Look extended into the late 1950s as women sought the sophistication and elegance that could not previously be achieved because of wartime shortages. “A well-formed body rises from a narrow waist, with an emphasized bust, rounded hips under voluminous skirts, slender shoulders, hidden calves, and a neat head. This was fashion according to Dior, in all its soft curves, resurrecting femininity” (Benaïm & Müller, 2015, p. 89). This sharply contrasted with the styles of the previous decade, in which women wore shorter, slimmer skirts to conserve fabric for the war effort, resulting in a masculine, very tailored silhouette (Mackrell, 1997). Dior completely rejected this masculinity to launch the feminine look of the 1950s with “models who were not too tall, to emphasize their well-fed, fertile shapeliness, in contrast with the lean wartime silhouette” (Wilcox, 2008, p. 39).

One specific style that was extremely popular during the 1950s was the shirtwaist dress. Claire McCardell is typically credited with the design of the shirtwaist dress, which quickly rose to popularity among young American housewives (McKean, 2013).

According to Heather Vaughan (2009), the shirtwaist “encompasses the 1950s ideal of conformity and domesticity” and reveals the idealized 1950s housewife that was so popular during the era. Media of the time helped to promote this feminine ideal, as television and movies, as well as newspaper and magazine advertisements, showed many women as normal housewives doing everyday activities in their full-skirted shirtwaist dresses. Magazines were also one of the strongest influences on women’s fashion, particularly in promoting the shirtwaist dress (Vaughan, 2009). In the 1950s, “American popular culture adopted the shirtdress as part of its uniform, and housewives made their version of the housecoat dress respectable” (Fitzgerald & Taylor, 2014, p. 72).

The typical shirtwaist dress was a “cotton button-front shirtwaist with a collar, short sleeves, and a very full skirt” (McKean, 2013, p. 111). It basically resembled a man’s button-down shirt, fitted throughout the torso and then expanding into a full skirt. It was sometimes belted at the waist or had various trims and decorations to revitalize the basic style. The most popular sleeve style was the cap sleeve, and any longer sleeves fit very closely to the arm (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). While the shirtwaist had existed before the 1950s, this era was when it enjoyed its greatest popularity. Dior also contributed to the design of the shirtwaist dress, as his focus on the fitted waist and full skirt made the shirtwaist dress something both practical and beautiful (Vaughan, 2009). And, as McKean points out, since so many women took such pride in their occupations as housewives, it makes sense that they would want to have something to wear that made them look beautiful while working (McKean, 2013). The shirtwaist dress was the perfect casual dress that blended practicality and beauty and perfectly exemplified the dressy casual style of the 1950s.

During the latter half of the decade, dresses were “still somewhat structured but [were] inspired by the drop-waist twenties silhouette” (Condra, 2008, p. 157). These dresses were much more relaxed in style than those of the New Look, but they still drew attention to the figure. These dresses became shorter, but still hit at or below the knee, and skirts became slimmer. The sack dress, introduced by Balenciaga in 1956, was one of the more popular silhouettes of the latter half of the decade (Bigelow & Kushino, 1979). This dress was similar to the 1920s style in that it was straight-skirted, but it was also tight in the back of the skirt. Although many designers began to show looser, unfitted dresses toward the end of the decade, these styles were not really accepted until the mid to late 1960s (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). Thus, the New Look was the prevailing style of the 1950s.

Modern Everyday Dresses

As previously stated, young American women do not wear dresses on most everyday occasions. It is rare to see young women wear dresses for anything other than special occasions or business occasions. However, when casual dresses are worn, they look very different from the everyday dresses of the 1950s. There is not one particular style that is the “typical style” of today’s casual dresses (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015), but the two basic silhouettes are either very tight or very loose, contrasting with the silhouette of the 1950s, which was fitted throughout the torso with a full, shaped skirt. The bodycon and T-shirt dress styles so popular today are often worn to parties or other special occasions.

The tight silhouette is called a bodycon, short for “body-conscious,” and is very fitted throughout the entire body. Usually this type of dress is either mid-thigh length or

ends just below the knee and is made of a very stretchy fabric to accentuate every curve (Mooney, 2015). This contrasts with the 1950s style of everyday dresses, which consisted of a fitted torso but then exploded out into a very full skirt. The bodycon is simply fitted throughout the entire body. This style of dresses was made “all the more popular in society when celebrities like [Kim] Kardashian and [Kylie] Jenner and others began sporting variations of the fitted clothing” (Mooney, 2015, para. 7). This style also reflects how standards of modesty have changed since the 1950s, as the bodycon style is made very tight to accentuate every curve of the body. The bodycon style of dress is one example of how dress styles have changed since the 1950s.

The second common casual dress style of today’s young woman is the T-shirt dress, which is also called the sack dress. The T-shirt dress can be anything from what looks like an actual oversized T-shirt to a loose flowy dress with no waist or definition. This dress is typically not fitted at all, and simply flows from the shoulder seams down to the hem (Elongated, 2018). Although the T-shirt dress began to be produced in the 1960s (Laver, 2012), it can belong to any modern era, as it is basically an elongated T-shirt. While some of these casual dresses look like an actual T-shirt, some have slightly more structure in the fabric or at the waist and side seams. The most defining aspect of the T-shirt dress is that it is loose and flowy and typically ends above the knee (Elongated, 2018). This contrasts greatly to the dresses at the beginning of the 1950s, when dresses emphasized the figure. T-shirt dresses do not do that at all. Thus, the T-shirt dress is another example of how dress styles have changed since the 1950s.

Conclusion

Casual dress has changed dramatically since the 1950s. Where once it was considered improper for a woman to wear pants outside the home, today it is rare to see a woman wear a dress or skirt for anything less than a special occasion. Jeans and leggings are the most popular clothing of choice for women today. Styles in the 1950s were influenced by designers such as Christian Dior and Claire McCardell, as well as television and movie stars such as Barbara Billingsley, Lucille Ball, Audrey Hepburn, and Grace Kelly. Today, style is influenced by designers such as Ralph Lauren and Alexander McQueen. Celebrities and political figures such as Rihanna, Beyoncé, Kylie Jenner, the Duchess of Sussex, and Michelle Obama also greatly influence style today. The standard of modesty has also changed dramatically since the 1950s. While in the 1950s, necklines were high and hemlines were low, today the opposite seems to be true, with hemlines rising and necklines dropping. However, research indicates that perhaps modesty may be coming back into style. The style of dresses worn has also changed. While it is rare to see a woman wear a dress today, those dresses seen do not at all resemble the dresses of the 1950s in terms of style. Thus, while the sources of influence on style remain the same from the 1950s to the present day, what was considered casual dress in the 1950s differs greatly from what is considered casual dress today, both in terms of the styles themselves and the modesty of the two eras.

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