U.S. Fashion Trends in the 1980s: Postmodern and Modern Styles of Dressing of Female College Students

Eundeok Kim* · Mary Lynn Damhorst

Department of Retail Merchandising and Product Development, Florida State University, USA*
Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University, USA
(Received November 16, 2013; Revised December 21, 2013; Accepted December 26, 2013)

Abstract The purposes of this study were to document the fashions adopted by young women in the United States in the 1980s and to explore if and how the dynamic shifts toward postmodernist values influenced those fashion trends. Fifteen U.S. women who were college students in the 1980s were interviewed for the study. In analysis of the data, we focused on social changes during the 1980s and the cultural impact of postmodernism vs. modernism as influential factors. Both postmodern and feminist ideas challenged the mainstream cultural framework of capitalism. U.S. women’s styles and behaviors concerning dress reflected characteristics of postmodern consumption patterns, which include nostalgia, ethnic dress, androgyny, eclectic and novel clothing combinations, surprising or humorous appearance, and nonconformity. Despite the critique of conformity and conservatism in dress that had emerged in the 1960s and remained in at least minority or subversive trends, the importance of brand names and designer labels increased in mainstream fashion. This study helps us better understand the dynamics of fashion as it reflects societal and value changes in a transitional time in history.

Key words cultural values, fashion, postmodernism, 1980s

Introduction

Cultural value systems are guiding principles by which humans make choices and decisions (Kaiser, 1990). However, values are not static and undergo consistent modification during socialization processes within a culture (Inglehart, 1990). Changes in values also affect changes in fashion.

For example, the 1980s in the United States are recognized as a transitional period in political, economic, and cultural arenas (Ehman, 2005), marked specifically by political conservatism, decreased job security, increasing conspicuous consumption of brand names, emphasis on individuality, tolerance of individual differences, rapid technological development, and the influence of MTV on the fashion market (Cunningham, Mangine, & Reilly, 2005; Ehman, 2005; Steele, 1997). During transitional periods in a culture or organization, variety in behaviors is likely, including styles of dress (Littrell & Evers, 1985). Farrell-Beck and Parsons (2007) summarize fashion from 1979 to 1988 as “a period with a multiplicity
of often opposing silhouettes” (p. 237) and extravagance, which are characteristics of postmodern styles reflecting the dynamic shifts toward postmodern values in the society during the decade (Morgado, 1996). Therefore, it would be a meaningful study to uncover possible impacts of social changes and postmodernism on fashion trends of the 1980s.

Though there has been some historical research on 1980s fashion, previous research (Farrell-Beck & Parsons, 2007) focused on literature and media analyses such as fashion magazines. There may be a gap between the styles presented in the media and those actually worn by women. Thus, the purposes of this study were (1) to document fashions adopted by young women within U.S. culture during the 1980s, using recollections provided by adult women who had attended college at that time; (2) to analyze the meanings of the fashions attributed by the wearers; and (3) to explore if and how dynamic shifts toward postmodernism influenced those fashion trends. In order to suit our aims, we examined the styles adopted by women who attended college during the 1980s in several areas of the U.S. and their behaviors concerning dress during that period.

This study also builds on the findings of Kim and Farrell-Beck’s (2005) study of 1970s fashion trends in the U.S. and South Korea to explore changes over time; thus, this study borrows its method from their study. The findings of this study extend historical knowledge of young women’s fashions that were actually adopted in the U.S. and put them in perspective with societal and value changes in the 1980s.

Review of Literature

Social Changes and the Influence on Fashion in the United States in the 1980s

Whereas the 1970s in the United States were socially liberal, the 1980s were characterized by Ronald Reagan’s presidency, which ushered in a socially and economically conservative spirit (Ehrman, 2005; Strauss & Howe, 1991). “Reaganomics” led to increased power for corporations while the working poor expanded (Ehrman, 2005). “Power” was a common buzzword within the corporate mindset, and “power dressing” became the standard of executive style (Steele, 1997). Padded shoulders and broad lapels were considered expressions of high rank and commercial achievement (Cunningham et al., 2005). Search for rules for dress that facilitated success in a capitalistic, modernistic goal of monetary acquisition (i.e., more is better) was common (e.g., Molloy, 1977).

The cult of success was exhibited with an ever-increasing conspicuous consumption of luxury goods (Steele, 1997), and clothing was one of many ways to display material gain (Cunningham et al., 2005). Designer brand names and labels became fashion statements, and items such as high-priced fashion jeans exploded in popularity during the ‘80s, lending an image, though not often reality, of status to brand symbol wearers (Troy, 2005).

Although political conservatism reigned, value of and focus on past ways of living and doing things did not characterize all of the 1980s. Strauss & Howe (1991) noted that there was a growing element of cynicism and questioning among young adults during that time. Notable changes during the dec-