The Idea Of Power Dressing And Its Relevance In Today's Society

By recognising how apparel has enabled individuals to establish confidence, the essay investigates the symbolism of dominance and power that men and women's power dressing has acquired throughout the years. I argue how this approach to dressing continues to be practiced as an effective form of differentiation.

Introduction

Power Dressing is known as a style that has been brought to life to enable individuals to look important and essentially stand out from everyone else, it also "…refers to a style of clothing and hair intended to make wearers seem authoritative and competent." Is this still the case in terms of power dressing in the 21st century? Does "Power Dressing" still hold the same meaning and symbol of domination and power, just as it did when it had first been conceived?

This essay carries out investigation through relevant journals, articles, books and more upon the symbol of stance in power dressing which has been carried with this phrase throughout the entirety of its lifetime. With main focus being on two main components of power dressing; being shoulder pads and pinched waists, secondly with focus on what politicians are wearing today compared to previous years and lastly on how power dressing has developed, referencing recent events and goings-on in the world of power dressing today.

The Beginning of Power Dressing

It is generally held that post World War One society grew to be different, as the 1940s drifted in and World War Two began and gender roles started to change, as men were forced out to war, the women of the 40s then had to step up to fill the males job vacancies. The female attire then also shifted and developed traits of the men's military attire. Women then went out to their new jobs in their more masculine looking attire. As the men then returned from war, the women were forced to give up their jobs again and retreat back to their "housewife" duties, though the amount of working women had still increased. Women then were advised and decided to dress accordingly for the jobs they wanted by dressing to match their male colleagues. "..working women in the US received a plethora of advice in magazines, books and newspapers to dress appropriately in the workplace." This would carry the idea and symbolism that they were no less entitled to these jobs roles than the male employees were. "Advice about business dress reflected expected career paths. Women were encouraged to follow such advice to communicate their professional aspirations and (presumably) earn success within the workplace."3. Power dressing was developed from the idea of women equating to men in the workplace, so arguably, why did women feel as though they should have to hide their bodies in this more "boxy" frame in order for people to take them seriously? And why has this constant policing of women's bodies and restrictions seem to always be in effect on the amount femininity and sexuality a woman can have to be deemed as "professional". John Molloy released a book titled "Dress for Success" in the 1970s. After Molloy's book grew popular and was awarded bestseller, he then released a follow up book named, "Women's Dress for

Success". "The 1970s Dress for Success book popularised the concept of "power dressing". These books promoted the concept of Power Dressing and we could look upon this as the "birth" of Power Dressing. John Molloy stated in his book that nothing that draws too much attention to the bust should be worn. In fact, neck scarves were worn to draw attention away from the bust and draw more attention to the face instead.

Power Dressing in Politics

Margaret Thatcher was an icon in of power dressing, always wearing suits and dressing up her very best (Appendix 1). Margaret Thatcher is wearing the typical 80s style suit. The padded shoulder, below knee length skirt, we can see the big buttons and lapels also taking aspects of the military uniform. Thatcher stated in an article on Belfast Telegraph that the reason for her wearing these suits is that she feels an element of safety in them.5 We all have items of clothing in which we feel safe in and have our "go to" pieces of clothing that make us feel motivated for the day, we may see this in the 21st century as our type of power dressing. There may be different types of power dressing nowadays.

Arlene Foster and Theresa May wear similar outfits, both in long pencil skirts and tailored blazers contrasting in colour (Appendix 2). Comparing the garments of May and Foster to Margaret Thatcher's dress, it is along similar lines in that all three women are suited – Foster and May in more modern day power suits. This gives the impression that not a lot has actually changed in the prospect of fashion in politics. There is a certain dress code in politics. BBC NEWS states "Nowadays, male and female MPs are expected to wear formal businesslike clothes, which includes a jacket and tie for men." Members of parliament must adhere to this particular dress code when on-duty. Quite recently The Independent have released an article on The Labour MP, Tracy Brabin's "off-the-shoulder dress". The MP wore an off-the-shoulder dress to Parliament, which then received an abundance of upsetting and cruel comments in backlash for dressing "inappropriately". Brabin spoke out about this as read on The Independent7, stating that the reaction to her outfit choice was "like a handmaid's take gone mad." In this day and age we may not hear of these scenarios happen very often. This may be seen as sexist behaviour by some in that why does showing a shoulder have any effect on anyone else or the work that Tracy Brabin does?, while others may feel that this dress choice was not appropriate to wear to parliament backed up by the argument that which suggests that if men are expected to wear a suit and tie, women should be expected to adhere to a dress code also.

The History of Shoulder Pads

Designer Elsa Schiaparelli was the first designer known to bring shoulder pads into the women's wardrobe (Appendix 3). She showed them in 1931 in her autumn/winter collection. Women's shoulder pads were retrieved from the male suit, as are many other components in women's Power Dressing. They were "invented in 1877 by a Princeton football player and (were) used in American football" The design of the jackets with heavily padded shoulders hid the true shape of the female body and ensured to distract the male gaze. The Power Dressing look always typically had heavily padded shoulders as one of the main elements. Throughout the years females proudly wore these as a symbol of high stance and equality. In "Working Girl" Mel Griffith's "iconic" look brought the 1980s "working women" symbolic silhouette into the mainstream (Appendix 4). The typical power dressing look in the film took this "Working

Girl” look and inspired many more women to take part in wearing these symbols of status.

The Pinched Waist

The pinched waist is another main component in women’s power dressing and tailored fitting clothes. The pinched waist brings femininity to the look especially using it along with the over padded shoulders to strengthen and equalise the look. There is a possibility that the idea of a pinched waist may have been derived from the Victorian eras corsets. A tiny waist on a female has always been desirable and seen has very feminine. Although the corset is no longer being used in fashion, the pinched waist silhouette is still as popular today.

On comparing The Christian Dior Haute Couture Coat from the 2012 Autumn/ Winter Dior Heritage collection, The Christian Dior Haute Couture Éscarlete Afternoon Dress, Autumn/Winter 1955 The Christian Dior Haute Couture Bar Suit from the Spring/Summer 1947 Collection (Appendix 5), I notice the same theme trending between the three. On coming back from the military style war clothing, Dior introduces back the pinched waist in collections. The pinched waist remains in the through all outfits along the years. Although the technique of which the waist is pulled in differs, observing the corset-style is replaced with a remarkable bow, which then again is replaced a number of years later with a more simplistic and modern contrasting belt.

Giorgio Armani’s “Power Suit”

The female power suit in most cases during the 80s was an exaggeration of the male power suit (Appendix 6). Designer Georgio Armani created a design which camouflaged the female body in this more manly silhouette. This attire symbolised females being equal to males in the work setting while stipulating honour and authority. The female uniform of the power suit now is symbolic of an “era of international economic boom”. In an interview with Armani Armani stated that his power suit was not all to do with feminism but he also seen a need in the fashion market, “I soon realised that women, with their increasingly busy working life, needed clothes that were as comfortable as men’s. They needed something that would give them dignity, an attitude that helped them cope with their professional life without giving up being women.” 11 This quote offers the possibility that Armani decided there was a need in the market for women to have clothes that they could wear within their working environment that made them feel as “comfortable” as men do – in that emotionally they feel the value and confidence that men feel when they are at work, while still getting to express their feminine side through their garments. The suits that Armani created were also loose fitting which would also have ensured comfort to their wearer, making his designs comfortable physically and personally.

Women’s bodies as “sexualised items”

“Dressing for success” now is a lot different from past eras of power dressing. Arguably, it has modernised. The idea of power dressing for Individuals today ranges across a multitude of outfits for both men and women’s wear. While the dimension of outfits has widened, some components of the original concepts in power dressing remain. Perhaps they never left? Something that has most definitely remained invariable is the fact that women’s bodies are characterised as “sexualised items” it is a constant battle for women to keep up a “perfect” body image. In today’s society, there are cases where women still feel as though they need

power dressing to be recognised and heard in some industries, and to be taken seriously. For example, in large power structures such as churches; men still posses most of the power. Another political example could be that America is yet to have a female president. Margaret Thatcher used a very old fashioned approach to power dressing. The independent newspaper released an article based on Margaret Thatchers impact on clothing. The article gives an insight into why the political icon followed such an outdated style, in a statement from a lecturer from Central St. Martin's Art School London – opined that "our tendency to scrutinise what women wear is a reflection of a sexist society that draws away from the real work they do in politics." Independent have noted that this lecturer also argued that the reason Thatchers style was this way is because she used it as a "power tool" to basically project political values.

The New Power Dressing

Everyone does have their different opinions about what they feel power dressing in today's society is. Power dressing may not have become outdated per se. The meaning just seems to have changed from using the style to prove authority over individuals, to simply show casing true personality and having the power to express yourself. It is putting something on your body that reminds how amazing and capable a person is motivates one, no matter what item of clothing it may be. This is why we see more and more designers come out with unique and more prominent designs. Power dressing runways today, tend to take elements from past fashion power dressing trends and use these to create the most extravagant pieces of attire. Eg; 'Gareth Pugh's London Fashion Week Show 2018'. (Appendix 8) 'According to the liner notes for Gareth Pugh's Fall show, the new collection was designed "for women who accept zero bullshit." Pugh has simply taken the 80s power dressing style; exaggerated and manipulated it into this modern day heroic runway show. Business of Fashion describes the collection as a "Fashion Battlefield". We can tell by the eccentricity of these designs that Pugh clearly has came from costume design, as confirmed by James Tustins visual research journal . According to Tustins research journal on Pugh, his demographic states he designs for "Fashion forward individuals who want to express themselves through their clothing choices. People who want to push the boundaries of gender stereotypes and binary oppositions." In recent news a female tailor has opened her own female tailor suit shop (The Deck) on Savile Row, which has been offering high end male tailoring since the 18th Century and has entered the lexicon as a by word for sartorial elegance. This tailor believed that things were changing, so she created her own iconic moment in history by opening the first female bespoke tailors. 'First Women-only tailor's opens on Savile Row' BBC NEWS Jamie Moreland Oct 2020." This is a huge example of power dressing changing. More woman are wearing trouser suits nowadays and the fact that a young female tailor has chose to place her women's suit shop in the middle of a "men only" for so long tailoring street, proves a shift in power dressing and equality. After researching some of the styles of suits online that The Deck have to offer, the designs are fresh, colourful and modern (Appendix 9).

Conclusion

To conclude, the essay has demonstrated research which stands to prove that Power Dressing is still being used in today's society as an effective form of differentiation. The essay has argued through comprehensive research that the symbol of stance behind this form of dressing remains intact, however with more freedom and has developed to become something with collective meaning, not only to show dominance over other individuals, but to motivate each

person to wear what makes them feel powerful within themselves and to feel strong taking on the day ahead, whether that be inside or outside of the workplace.