Deconstructing the Miniskirt Mythology: Clothing and Womanhood in 1960s London

Neva Miller

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DECONSTRUCTING THE MINISKIRT MYTHOLOGY: CLOTHING AND WOMANHOOD

IN 1960s LONDON

by

Neva Miller

A capstone thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

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Primary Advisor: Katharine Bjork
ABSTRACT

This research investigates the role of the miniskirt in reflecting the concept of femininity as understood in London and abroad throughout the 1960s and 70s. Data is drawn from primary sources from the 1960s including newspapers, advertisements, and firsthand accounts related to wearers of miniskirts in London. Particular attention is given to the supposed “revolutionary” status of Mary Quant, who is commonly credited with popularizing the miniskirt and thus ushering in an era of emancipation in female dress. While the miniskirt is preserved in historical memory as an icon of youth revolution and sexual liberation, more emphasis should be given to the wearers of the garment for transforming the miniskirt from a product of the male gaze to an active assertion of female agency. This research recognizes the miniskirt as a vehicle through which young women demonstrated their autonomy and centers the miniskirt wearers—rather than designers—as the architects of fashion and popular culture in “Swinging London.”
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A consideration of London in the 1960s likely brings to mind a few key symbols: the Beatles, fashion models such as Twiggy, and iconic clothing trends like the miniskirt. The interests of young women were crucial to constructing the city as an epicenter for fashion, art, and music. For example, the music phenomenon known as “Beatlemania” and the British Invasion that permeated the American market were thanks to the band’s success with young women and girls. Additionally, the miniskirt—largely credited to London’s own Mary Quant—was not designed arbitrarily. Rather, Quant herself admits she took cues from young women who were already wearing them.

Given that young women as historical agents and changing ideas of femininity were integral to the development of 1960s London, I use the miniskirt as a case study to explore the changing place of women in society. This chapter will detail the background of my research, as well as the personal and professional relevance of the topic.

The 1960s were undoubtedly a watershed decade in London’s history, particularly for political rights of women. The introduction of the birth control pill and the passage of the National Health Service (Family Planning) Act through parliament demonstrate how the traditionally understood role of women was moving away from that of a homemaker and child-bearer into someone who could have a career and choose whether or not to marry. Popular memory in London preserves young, miniskirt-clad women as beloved symbols of sexual revolution. This view is both romanticized and over-simplified. In reality, reactions to the miniskirt in the 1960s were divided; some viewed it as a symbol of rebellion, while others considered it further submission to the male gaze. Both of these
interpretations contain some merit, while neither one is completely true: the miniskirt was a sign of more accepting attitudes toward female sexuality to an extent, but we would be remiss to overlook its elitist and sexist connotations. The two interpretations of the garment are not in competition with each other—in fact, they coexist. For that reason, it is necessary to move back and forth between perspectives, understanding that each one belongs to a different way of seeing the world through the lenses of agency and social structure.

My approach rejects the overgeneralization of the female experience in “Swinging London,” the term used to describe the city’s youth-driven explosion of music, art, and fashion. The miniskirt will act as a case study to demonstrate how young women were simultaneously shaping the fashion industry and emerging as its byproduct. By extension, we can more accurately ascertain to what degree young women’s place in London’s social fabric was their own assertion, and conversely, in what ways they were pigeonholed by the media and persevering traditional attitudes. While the central research question focuses on the miniskirt’s contested position in London’s society, my research also explores how divisions between race, class, and gender affected the miniskirt’s popularity.

I have personal interest in studying the miniskirt under an academic lens. Throughout my upbringing, I was constantly forced to reexamine what it meant to be a girl: whether femininity was an advantage or a hindrance, whether clothing was self-expression or a shield, whether my body should be hidden away or displayed and celebrated. As I grow older, I must continuously relearn that attempting to fit into a socially constructed ideal of what it means to be a woman is a disservice to myself. After
all, there is not (and never has been) one singular correct way to exist as a woman in society.

I have long been interested in fashion as an industry—how designers take cues from consumers, the different markets that emerge, the way clothing can act as a time capsule for any given period. Still, for a long time, I did not indulge this particular interest of mine. Although tempting to dismiss the study of fashion as insipid or trite, an analysis of how and why people dress is in fact one of the most obvious indicators as to the social consciousness of a population. Clothing is best understood as a means of communication: trends do not go in and out of style arbitrarily, rather, they reflect larger social processes and the common mindsets of a particular group. In this regard, perhaps the miniskirt can be considered a symbol of sexual revolution, but the mistake lies in believing that is all it represents. On the contrary, some wearers of miniskirts were not donning the clothing as any sort of political statement, but rather simply because they liked the way it looked. Others may have been doing nothing more than following a trend. It is unrealistic to assume that everyone who wore a miniskirt in the 1960s was doing so as a political assertion, whether consciously or not.

In this analysis, I look beyond the straightforward understanding of miniskirts and investigate how they simultaneously represented more than one position: on the one hand, wearing short skirts and emphasizing femininity can be considered a further submission to male-centered understandings of womanhood. On the other hand, the miniskirt may represent a changing belief that women ought to be able to present themselves however they wanted, and that a consideration of the male gaze is both
irrelevant and unhelpful. I posit that these two understandings do not contradict each other, but instead coincide and inform one another.

I have prepared for this research through an earlier project I completed for my Historical Methods class in the spring of 2021. While my earlier research focused on the relationship between housewives and consumerism in the 1920s, my findings represented a similar paradigm: while print advertisements exploited the insecurities of women in order to sell products, a look at primary sources from advertising companies reveals that they were simultaneously conscious of the immense market power that women held. I approached my previous research expecting to find that women were considered to be financially powerless in the eyes of major companies, but their status as the primary shoppers in a family unit actually positioned them as a prime market. This knowledge gives me an understanding that young women were experiencing an emergence as central players in the fashion industry while at the same time being subjugated by its elitist assumptions.

I am thankful to be alive during a time when womanhood and femininity are not dependent on biological sex, and that the historically deep chasms separating gender roles are beginning to intertwine or disappear altogether. Still, certain issues with their roots in the 1960s persist well into the twenty-first century. To a certain extent, the 1960s saw promising social progress for women. For example, in 1967, Parliament passed the Abortion Act and legalized abortion in cases of health risks to the mother or her fetus. Interestingly, certain states in the US have recently succeeded in rolling back legislation to a state eerily similar to this landmark decision from over half a century ago.
The fact that 55 years of social progress can be undone so quickly is indicative of the ways in which sexism persists beyond any piece of legislation. Again, an overly simplistic view of the 1960s emphasizes the positive legal acts that benefited women, people of color, migrants, and the LGBTQ+ community, but fails to consider the ways in which discrimination against these groups evolved as a response. Shifts in cultural ideologies included inherently contradictory expectations of femininity and the rise of a distinct youth culture, one that intentionally positioned itself as an oppositional force to the older generation.

Existing literature tends to glamorize the miniskirt. Dress historian Deirdre Clancy makes the case that the miniskirt was created primarily because “young women no longer wanted to dress like their mothers.”[1] Betty Luther-Hillman takes a slightly different view, emphasizing the agency of the wearers as she argues that the changing fashion trends of the 1960s “implicitly illustrated a growing belief that women ought to be able to dress as they pleased, even if the fashions they picked emphasized their sexuality rather than their feminine virtue.”[2] In my view, both of these perspectives overlook the fact that young women were inadvertently becoming a product of the industry’s economic interests. Quant herself admits the true “inventors” of the miniskirt were the youth on the streets of London from whom she took inspiration.[3] At the same time, fashion advertisements appealing to the teenage consumer reinforced the beauty standards set by sensational models like Jean Shrimpton and Twiggy. We must consider the criticism of the miniskirt set forth by skeptics: one columnist wrote in a 1966 issue of

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The Sunday Telegraph that miniskirts should not be worn on someone “too fat or too old–and that means anyone over 25.” Even if written in jest, harmful attitudes like the one parroted here were deeply ingrained in common beliefs, and expose the more insidious side of miniskirts–how they furthered a belief that there was a “correct” way to look and act as a woman.

For better or worse, the minskirt became a symbol of Swinging London. The youth generation was integral to city identity, informing popular culture, music, and clothing. The miniskirt acts as a case study: understanding that the clothing does not fit neatly into one category is important to deconstruct the myth that the 1960s represented a complete sexual revolution for women. While progress was undoubtedly made, the reality is that oppression and sexism simply evolved along with the times.

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CHAPTER TWO

Historiography

Existing research tends to emphasize the importance of institutions—the state, government, and legislative body—when discussing the “revolutionary” decade 1960-69. Certain historians explain the wave of tumultuous social upheaval by examining a perceived relaxation in politics: not only were homosexuality and abortion partially decriminalized, but some politicians themselves were caught in highly publicized scandals that changed public perception of government in Britain. On the other hand, the literature that takes a critical view of this approach points to other factors, including technological advances such as birth control and multiculturalism in popular culture. These historians argue that the revolutionism of the 1960s stemmed from individuals and elicited a response from public institutions, not the other way around.

In my view, these two paradigms are not mutually exclusive. The years 1960-69 were full of nuances in Britain: for every social advance, there was a corresponding reaction. The miniskirt is one such example. Although the garment is preserved in popular memory as a symbol of liberation and freedom, a closer examination reveals that it was often used as a tool to promote elitist expectations of the female body (namely thinness and whiteness). An overview of the existing literature on social change in 1960s Britain lays the groundwork for an analysis of the miniskirt and the conditions that led to its creation.

The term permissive society, used as both criticism and praise to describe an increasingly liberal public attitude towards matters such as obscenity, nudity, homosexuality, and erotic pleasure in Britain, was examined by historian Jeffrey Weeks.
In his book *Sex, Politics, and Society*, a chapter entitled “The Permissive Moment”
discusses how the word “permissive” was originally a derogatory way of characterizing
1960s Britain, particularly London, as an epicenter of “disrespect for all that was
traditional and ‘good.’”\(^5\) Weeks’ work orients the discussion around the British
government (he points to reform in the regulation of gambling, public obscenity, and
censorship, to name a few) and interprets changes in individual behavior as a reaction to
the state’s cues. This paradigm is appropriate to a certain extent, but placing too much
emphasis on institutions as arbiters of societal behavior undermines the agency of
individuals—in this case, women and youth in 1960s London.

The second shortcoming of Weeks’ work is his interpretation of how the sexual
libertarianism of the 1960s connects to other decades. Weeks acknowledges the sexual
revolution was not contained to the years 1960-69, yet he pushes the boundary forward
rather than tracing it back. He argues in the third edition of his work (published in 2012)
that the sexual revolution was still unfinished. Weeks fails to give significant attention to
the gradual shifts in attitudes that took place throughout the decades and generations
preceding the youth of the 1960s.

Hera Cook responds to this oversight in her book *The Long Sexual Revolution*.\(^6\)
Cook essentially argues that the shifts in gender relations and sexual behavior became
perhaps more visible in the 1960s, but were preceded by a much more gradual process of
evolving values on an individual level that corresponded to generational change. She
specifically examines birth control methods throughout the twentieth century in Britain
and argues that the pill was partially successful because it did not challenge the gendered

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\(^5\) Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (Oxfordshire: Routledge

power dynamics of sexual relations between married couples. Rather, the pill allowed for a balance between male sexual pleasure and female desire to prevent pregnancy (which Cook argues was the priority for each partner specifically). Essentially, the birth control pill may have had revolutionary effects but was not necessarily a progressive object in itself—similar to the miniskirt.

Cook’s work is useful for this research for two reasons: first, it demonstrates the length and endurance of the sexual revolution and proves its roots extended far prior to the decade 1960-69. Additionally, she orients women as active historical agents by showing how the (traditionally male-dominated) creation of sexual knowledge in Britain was constructed by individuals, not institutions, and thus open to change. These two points are imperative to a larger understanding of how individual agency interacts with broader social processes. In this case, the progressiveness of the 1960s was not an inevitable outcome. Rather, the social advances of the decade—including improved abortion access and the decriminalization of homosexuality, among others—can be interpreted as a state response to piecemeal shifts in public consciousness, a process that necessarily spans decades and generations.

The shortcoming of Cook’s research, for the purposes of this essay, is that it focuses on individuals and technology rather than individuals and popular culture. For a focus on less easily measurable units, in this case fashion trends, Becky Conekin studies the fashion industry in 1960s Britain. She argues that models themselves can be considered arbiters of clothing trends and social change; they were as essential to shaping the concept of “fashion” as the photographers who captured them. Her focus on models as historical agents, rather than simply objects to be dressed and photographed, reorients

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7 Cook, 115.
the focus away from (typically male) photographers who were thought to be the primary driving force behind fashion tastes. Her work is helpful to understand how young women were active producers of popular culture, rather than simply passive consumers.

According to Conekin, the roots of the “youthquake” movement in the clothing industry can be traced back to 1953, when British Vogue magazine introduced its section devoted specifically to youth fashion tastes. The feature served as an indication that the young people of Britain had become active participants in the formation of popular culture (in this case, specifically clothing and fashion trends). However, historian Martin Evans points to the wave of immigration that preceded the 1960s as the true “First Youthquake,” and demonstrates how many of the hallmarks of London youth culture throughout the 1960s—including their clothing—were in fact either inspired by or directly pilfered from Jewish, Jamaican, and other immigrant groups.

This discussion is particularly important to inform a deeper analysis of 1960s fashion and the miniskirt in particular. While preserved in popular memory as a symbol of revolution and social progress, the garment was also at times a tool for exclusion and racialized elitism within the fashion industry. Evans shows how clothing acts as communication: by observing one’s dress, one can often pick up on indications of identity without needing to speak a word. Evans specifically points to the schism between Mods and Rockers, two diametrically opposed groups with conflicting styles of dress. Interestingly, both groups cherry-picked different elements of Jamaican “Rude Boy” style to inform their own clothing choices.

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9 Conekin, 99.
Evans’ research examines how, although the fashion industry was dependent upon a multicultural background, it still tended toward whiteness in advertising and representation. For a more specific look at how different cultures reacted to the miniskirt, we turn to Karen Tranberg Hansen’s investigation into contemporary reactions to the miniskirt throughout the 1960s and 70s in Zambia. She argues that dress can be understood as an intermediary between self and society, and for this reason, has the power to raise larger questions about complex concepts such as gender, sexuality, and morality. Tranberg Hansen does a commendable job of pointing out how dress directly relates to “shame frontiers” that vary across cultures and generations.\(^\text{10}\) Her research perhaps provides the most nuance of the works discussed here in analyzing the relationship between individuals, institutions, and the formation of popular culture, although she examines Zambia throughout three decades rather than Britain in the miniskirt’s heyday.

A review of existing research on popular culture and societal values of 1960s Britain reveals an overarching theme: although the decade developed a number of monikers—the permissive society, the swinging sixties, the Youthquake—the wave of social and political change was not contained to the years 1960-1969. Rather, the decade represented the culmination of much more gradual shifts in attitudes and values that took place alongside generational change. Traditional beliefs regarding marriage, family, and the woman’s body did not simply dissipate. On the contrary, covert expectations and sexist attitudes evolved alongside progressive movements such as feminism and sexual liberation.

\(^\text{10}\) Tranberg Hansen, 168.
As this research will demonstrate, the miniskirt was representative of both 1960s radicalism and the more traditional values that preceded it. My research addresses the miniskirt’s role in shaping perceptions of young women throughout the 1960s in the face of unprecedented social change. Considering the garment as a means of communication allows us to investigate what messages its wearers attempted to convey. Moreover, I analyze to what extent the garment was truly a symbol of revolution compared to the elitism and exclusion it sometimes encouraged.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The miniskirt is an iconic symbol of London’s city identity, the concept of femininity, and burgeoning sexual liberation in the 1960s. Existing research on the miniskirt is somewhat simplistic, usually arguing that rising hemlines reflected a growing desire of young women to distinguish themselves from their mothers in terms of both style and personal values. This understanding of the miniskirt is accurate to a certain extent, but a discussion of the garment is incomplete without examining how reactions to the trend influenced popular perception of women. While celebrated today, the miniskirt was not immediately embraced, and criticism of the garment contained thinly-veiled (or sometimes outright) gendered expectations. For example, critics of the garment often pointed out that exposing so much leg meant only young women of a certain body type should be able to wear the miniskirt in public. The miniskirt can thus effectively act as a case study to understand how clothing and self-presentation threaten traditional perceptions of femininity.

This study focuses on nonnumerical data and answers theoretical questions about social realities. The miniskirt acts as a vehicle to analyze the changing role of women in society because of its close association with femininity in the 1960s. The garment was divisive, causing conservatives and feminists alike to argue that it was nothing more than bait for male attention. Those who defended the garment sometimes took the view that it was a symbol of liberation and self-expression, a uniform to define the youth generation. Regardless, the miniskirt’s varied reactions are cause enough for deeper questioning. The quantity of cultural commentary brought about by the miniskirt,
evident in magazines, songs, and even official statements published by the Pope, reveal a growing unease about the young woman emerging as an autonomous individual in relation to society as a whole.

This study will include perspectives of women of different races, economic backgrounds, and sexualities in order to avoid claiming a single story for all women in London during the 1960s. A common pitfall in historical writing is anachronistic judgment, or analyzing a time period based on the morals and values of today. It is necessary to conduct this research with the understanding that the 1960s was a period of social progress, but disregarding careful qualification of who benefitted from this progress—and to what extent—would sacrifice historical integrity.

The scope of my research was chosen with intention, and evolved over time. The experiences of women vary wildly based on age, socioeconomic background, race, sexual orientation, and ability. Focusing on only the most visible women in London and claiming their treatment as some sort of universal female experience is historically inaccurate and unethical. As a result, I find it more fruitful to focus on womanhood as a concept: while each subsection of women had their own unique obstacles, certain societal expectations of beauty, desirability, and morality were a shared circumstance. Investigating the ways in which reactions to the miniskirt revealed implicit attitudes regarding womanhood, even in the wake of presumed social progress, presents a more careful knowledge of womanhood and city identity in London throughout the 1960s and 70s.

Because this research concentrates on events that took place fifty to sixty years ago, most of my research was conducted through museums, libraries, and other academic
institutions in London, England. I used the British Library to access primary sources such as newspaper clippings and fashion advertisements. The Victoria and Albert museum was useful for its fashion collections, which feature designs of miniskirts and actual garments worn during the time period in question. Additionally, the museum’s exhibit on menswear helped inform my understanding of how fashion and gender interact. Studying the male perspective on clothing in the 1960s is necessary to provide a background on how men’s and women’s fashion differed. I also utilized the Fashion Museum in Bath, England. The Fashion museum presents a visual timeline of how clothing evolved from the 1600s to the present day. The interpretation of these garments set forth by the museum was indispensable in affirming my understanding of how to place the miniskirt within a larger historical context.

The exhibitions at all of these institutions were curated by historians from diverse and varied backgrounds. Many of the collections are on rotation, rather than a permanent installation, so this research was affected to a certain extent by what was displayed between June 8 and July 12 of 2022. The British Library is the exception—as the national library of the United Kingdom, the institution continuously adds publications but does not typically rotate them out. I am also indebted to the Digital Transgender Archive, which is rich with primary sources that allowed me to include perspectives that challenge the traditional notions of femininity and womanhood in relation to the miniskirt.

My research draws upon primary sources chosen to represent a range of interpretations of the miniskirt. Particular attention is given to Mary Quant, commonly credited with popularizing the miniskirt and making it available to young women and
girls. Her autobiography serves as a reference point to understand how the views of the producer may differ from and respond to its consumer base. Additionally, industry sources including fashion advertisements, opinion pieces, and magazines aimed at teen girls to understand how burgeoning consumerism and materialism communicated with the wearers of miniskirts. I also analyzed firsthand accounts from wearers and Mary Quant, an early designer of the miniskirt in London, to center the conversation around young women as historical agents. Taken together, these sources will give a more holistic perspective on the miniskirt and illuminate how it can be understood as a representation of women’s changing relationship to society in the 1960s and how these social understandings manifested materially through clothing.

The nature of history as a field encompasses everything that has happened up to the present moment. As a means of limiting the scope of what I could realistically complete within given time constraints, careful selection of primary sources was essential. This paper does not attempt to be an exhaustive body of work on the history of the miniskirt. It is my intention to focus on why the miniskirt acted as a vehicle for both new and persisting perceptions of womanhood—in other words, which stereotypes, mindsets, and thought processes we can uncover from discussions of the miniskirt in the 1960s.

I am acutely aware that much of what we know about history is dependent upon the people who write it. This is a large responsibility, and one that is sometimes daunting to me. My research thus avoids suggesting that the experience of one woman, or one group of women, is representative of all women in London. This research attempts to generate a deeper understanding of how traditional understandings of femininity and
desirability were influenced by prejudice in the clothing industry. It must also be noted that this research largely (but not completely) focuses on English women, while I am American. This research is inherently influenced to a certain extent by my own background–as such, I put forth this study as an interpretation of facts, events, and primary sources, not a claim to absolute truth.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Magnitude of the Miniskirt

This chapter explores the miniskirt through three avenues. Particular attention is given to its wearers—primarily (though not exclusively) young women and teenage girls. Their opinions on the actual experience wearing the garment center them as active historical agents in enshrining the miniskirt as a massively popular, enduring trend. Observers, or those who were familiar with miniskirts but did not wear them, are analyzed as outside voices whose reactions to the miniskirt communicated social expectations to the wearers. Finally, designer Mary Quant’s interpretation of her garment is juxtaposed with commentary provided by its wearers, highlighting the disconnect between the designer and her consumer base. Quant’s ability to capitalize on shifts in the social culture resulted in a layered perception of the miniskirt; it indeed had multiple meanings depending on the avenue through which it was perceived.

Commonly credited with revolutionizing the marketing of women’s dress, Quant played a key role in connecting fashionable clothing with teenage consumers at affordable prices. Her ability to mass-produce trends and cater to the interests of youth, implementing bold colors, free-flowing fabric, and playful patterns, made her clothing enormously popular with teenage girls and young women. Perhaps the longest-enduring design associated with Mary Quant is the miniskirt. While preserved in historical memory as an icon of sexual liberation and female emancipation, primary sources reveal the miniskirt was not an inherently revolutionary garment. Sexist and elitist implications of the garment were furthered by fashion media and the statements of leading industry
figures—including Quant. Rather than blindly hailing the miniskirt as an icon of liberation, more productive discussion considers how young women used the garment as an assertion of autonomy in the face of a tumultuous social climate.

Quant states in her autobiography that “the whole point of fashion is to make fashionable clothes available to everyone.”11 Her statement is mostly referring to prices: Quant prided herself on selling affordable clothing. Even at an elaborate fashion show in France well into her career, Quant shared that most of her pieces hovered around the five-pound mark.12 However, in order to ascertain the extent to which Quant’s pieces were symbolic of a revolution in the clothing industry, it is necessary to establish an understanding of the fashion scene before she emerged as the de facto leader of the youth clothing industry.

Prior to the 1960s, Paris was understood as the fashion capital of the world.13 In the early half of the decade, Jacqueline Kennedy was recognized as a global fashion icon: The Saturday Evening Post ran a cover story on March 11, 1961, remarking on how popular “the national sport of watching Jackie Kennedy” had become.14 Kennedy’s clothing choices can be used as a representation of what elite women wore before Quant’s garments turned the world of “high fashion” into a more affordable, personal space.

Kennedy favored French fashion houses such as Chanel, Dior, and Givenchy, as well as the American designer Oleg Cassini. Her structured pillbox suits, sensible dresses, and knee-length skirts were quintessential symbols of elegance and class. Her outfits were often lifted directly from designers themselves, and although undeniably

12 Quant, 137.
13 Lister, 135.
stylish, her look was simply inaccessible to the average working-class woman. Fashionable clothes from major designers were viewed as an art form: the elite reputation they strove to uphold was dependent on extremely high quality and meticulous attention to detail. Beading, embroidery, and needlework on the garments were all done by hand. Predictably, the intricate designs were incredibly expensive. While Jackie Kennedy’s clothing could be observed from afar, admirers had no means of replicating the look in their own closets.


Eventually, Kennedy’s look was no longer viewed as the epitome of style. As styles and aesthetics slowly shifted, the traditional opulence favored by Kennedy became anathema to the fun-loving, carefree look of the 1960s. Coronet magazine, a general-interest publication based in Chicago, Illinois, ran a four-page article entitled “I

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don’t want to look like Jackie!” in October 1961. Poking fun at the First Lady’s style—replicated by average women to varying degrees of success—Adeline Daley writes, “Running into ‘Jackie Kennedy’ everywhere I went [...] made me feel like I was going around in circles. The right circles, you might say, but I wanted out.”

Daley’s article represents the growing disillusionment with wealthy celebrity figures the general public could not relate to, as well as the burgeoning desire for a new fashion identity that was uniquely modern and youthful. Rather than cheaply parroting the whims of elite women like Kennedy, an increasing number of younger, middle-class women craved clothing that was reflective of their own identities.

Here was Mary Quant’s niche. Her clothes represented playfulness, simplicity, and, to a certain extent, an air of classlessness that reflected the changing values of the 1960s. Social structures such as socioeconomic status did not disappear altogether, but there was a growing frustration with the youth generation with the barriers and divisions that the class system created. In Quant’s own words, “there was a real need for fashion accessories for young people chosen by people of their own age. The young were tired of wearing essentially the same as their mothers.” Perhaps the earliest indicator of this spirit, well before she started designing her own lines, was the boutique she opened in the eclectic borough of Chelsea, London on King’s Road in 1955.

Quant’s boutique, Bazaar, was unique for its unconventional business model. The shop enticed young customers with swinging jazz music audible from the sidewalk outside, as well as a restaurant where one could stop in for dinner and drinks. This strategy was a radical shift from the utilitarian system used throughout the Second World

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16 Adeline Daley, “I don’t want to look like Jackie!” Coronet, October 1961, 77.
17 Quant, 41.
War, wherein mass-produced clothing had to adhere to strict regulations in an effort to conserve materials. These practical garments had limitations on length (to the knee) and number of buttons (three), and were forbidden from including unnecessary folds. The stores they were purchased in were reflective of this restraint. While malls and department stores experimented with lectures, entertainment, and demonstrations to enhance a shopper’s experience, most stores that strictly sold clothing for middle-class consumers were mainly focused on the sale of product. These stores catered to consumers who had grown disillusioned with the frills and fuss of department stores and preferred efficient self-service.

On the other hand, high-fashion designers including Dior, Balenciaga and Givenchy emerged as architects of Britain’s rebuilt postwar economy. Their meticulously handcrafted garments were made-to-order for particularly wealthy clients such as royalty and successful business owners. Expensive materials, such as embroidery, feathers, and beading, were performed by specialists and extended the time it took to create a garment. While these intricate designs were pleasing to the eye, they were closer to works of art than functional day-to-day clothes. Only the very rich could afford a piece from one of the major fashion houses, and even then, they were typically worn to only one high-profile event.

Perhaps the best visual example of this contrast was an article published in 1966 by the Daily Mail. Titled “Odd Gear at the Palace,” journalist Charles Greville details Quant’s outfit that she wore to accept an honor from the Queen, saying “she was contributing to the photographers’ pleasure by turning up in a miniskirt (she could hardly

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do less, sorry, more).” Quant exhibited a certain amount of gall in wearing her playful clothing to an institution dominated by time-honored tradition. Her experimental style in a place as revered as Buckingham Palace was a stark representation of London’s changing values. Still, the journalist’s commentary, focusing on Quant’s body and the attention it drew, is indicative of the sexist social consciousness that prevailed.

For the teenage consumer, Bazaar reconciled the two ends of the spectrum. Her clothing was fashionable, yet affordable. Her store provided a space where youth could spend time together instead of being ushered out the door to make room for more customers. Quant emphasized that she did not want her boutique to be known as only a place to buy clothes:

We wanted to entertain people as well as sell to them and four or five times a year we would put in a window which wasn’t intended to sell anything…there would be no clothes in it. It would be some colossal, extravagant (sic) gesture meant as pure joke so that people passing by would say, ‘Good heavens! Isn’t Bazaar extraordinary!’ And it would be worth while for them to cross the road simply to see what we were up to.21

Advertisements meant simply to attract foot traffic rather than business were uncommon at the time and spoke to Quant’s niche in the clothing industry. Her unconventional style was not universally welcomed at the time, particularly by those well-established in the fashion world who Quant called “frankly beastly.”22 Her autobiography takes care to make the case that she was a scrappy newcomer in the fashion world who achieved success through a mixture of innovation, timing, and luck.

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21 Quant, 47.
22 Quant, 40.
Quant can be considered an underdog to a certain extent. Her consumer base, rather than consisting of the extremely wealthy, was primarily teenage girls who had a disposable income and time to kill. Bazaar was located in the vibrant and eclectic Chelsea area, attracting a varied consumer base consisting of college students and teenagers, but also actors and singers of moderate celebrity.\textsuperscript{23} Quant’s clothing was so quintessential to the Chelsea area of London that her 1962 collection for JCPenney was marketed as “Chelsea Girl” apparel.\textsuperscript{24}

Yet even before developing the moniker, the physical location of Bazaar on King’s Road caused a certain level of upset due to the infiltration of a younger generation

\textsuperscript{23} Quant, 56.
\textsuperscript{24} Lister, 115.
into an area that was traditionally dominated by the old and wealthy. One newspaper article from relatively early on in Quant’s career—just four years after her first shop opened—names Mary Quant as one of the forces displacing the well-established businesses on Chelsea Road. Robin Douglas-Home, writing for gossip magazine *The Tatler*, attempts to capture the clashing attitudes as a younger generation moved into the area. “And what have they done with Old Chelsea, these invaders?” quips Douglas-Home, “They have given the place a Young Face.” He foreshadows the wave of youth-centered culture that would become integral to the city identity of Swinging London, but does not portray this movement in a flattering light. Douglas-Home relentlessly critiques the hedonism of the newcomers, detailing their “extravagantly prepared dinners” and “exaggerated fashion.” On Quant, he writes, “At *Bazaar*, Mary Quant (Mrs. Alexander Plunket-Green) does the window displays, finds time to amuse a youthful kibitzer.”

This succinct description sums up one facet of Quant’s job, but glosses over some of her other responsibilities as detailed in her autobiography. Even before she started designing herself, Quant served as the sole buyer for *Bazaar* and had to make all decisions regarding quantity, stock, and pricing of the products. Douglas-Home’s article exemplifies the wall of traditional, indeed sometimes snobbish attitudes that Quant had to combat as a female business owner in the early 1960s. Perhaps the most threatening aspect of *Bazaar* was its mixed consumer base: as Quant stated, duchesses and typists

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25 Quant, 36.
28 Douglas-Home, 423. This article was accompanied by a photograph of Quant sitting in the window display and showing a mannequin’s hand to a child on the sidewalk (below).
29 Quant, 41.
were fighting over the same dress. The blurring of class differences in her consumer base foreshadowed a wave of social mobility soon to overtake London.

Fig. 3 Quant in the window at Bazaar, waving a mannequin hand at a child on the sidewalk. This image ran alongside Douglas-Home’s article. (Photograph by Tom Hustler in The Tatler; May 20, 1959.)

Quant notes that most press coverage in the early days “was two or three paragraphs in the social columns…rather awful paragraphs headed something like ‘Alexander Plunket Greene, kinsman of the Duke of Bedford, opens shop in Chelsea.’ The trade ignored us. They laughed at us openly.” Quant ostensibly points this headline out as an example of the scorn and doubt cast upon her by established voices in the industry, but the article in question does not seem to support this view. Writing for the Daily Herald, journalist Daphne Guinness calls Quant “London’s brightest woman designer,” and points out that “Princess Margaret bought honeymoon clothes from her.”

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30 Quant, 67.
31 Quant, 42.
This article was notably written in 1960, at a point where Quant’s name was recognizable in London but not yet a hallmark of fashion internationally. Using such positive superlatives to describe her work and linking her name with royalty does not seem to align with Quant’s own interpretation of her press coverage.

This contradiction suggests that Quant intentionally highlighted the unlikelihood of her success and her presumed plucky underdog status even after her name was firmly rooted within the fashion industry. In one section of her autobiography, Quant describes being honored at an award ceremony in front of three thousand people, composed of “all the top people of the fashion industry of the world, including all our competitors.” She places herself alongside her wearers by emphasizing the luxury and grandeur of the fashion industry that she sought to rally against. However, taking this stance in her autobiography raises the question of whether this contrast was real or contrived, considering that Quant was already commercially successful by this time. Aligning herself with her consumer base was an effective marketing tactic, as young women and girls saw their own identities manifested materially through clothing. This strategy turned out to be a favorite tool of Quant’s. Although she was slightly older than her consumer base, Quant followed their lead—as she did in manufacturing the miniskirt—and integrated their views into her advertising. Appearing progressive and daring was essential to the brand identity. Understanding that Quant took cues from young women, not the other way around, demonstrates their agency and power as a collective.

Describing a show that took place just weeks after, Quant notes “although [the other designers] were showing expensive couture clothes, none of my things cost more than twelve guineas and most of them were around the five pound mark! I had to keep

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33 Quant, 133.
reminding myself that this was the whole point of what we were doing.”

Quant had a seemingly uncanny ability to exist in two worlds at once: even after attaining international recognition, her identity as an unlikely self-made success story—as well as the fact that her prices remained more or less affordable, despite her global success—kept her in the good graces of teenagers and young women, her most reliable consumer base. Armed with their support, Quant stepped on to the international fashion scene as a champion of youth, revolution, and city identity in 1960s London.

In April 1968, *Time* Magazine ran a cover story dubbing London “the Swinging City.” Detailing the city’s status as an epicenter of culture, the article calls the shifting values of London “a bloodless revolution.” The wave of change was a cultural one: the most influential figures in Britain were younger than ever and came from working-class backgrounds, skyrocketing people into success who “could never before find room at the top.”

This paradigm bled into nearly every facet of life, including politics, art, media, and fashion. Quant, the daughter of two teachers, was part of this wave as an entirely self-made brand rather than a descendant of an already-established fashion house.

Quant has been recognized as not only a symbol of the youth-led cultural revolution, but one of its architects. A 1973 article in *The Fulham Chronicle* portrayed Mary Quant as one of the designers “probably owed more credit than any other names for making London the swinging fashion city of the sixties and seventies.” While her youth-centered approach to commerce represented Quant’s forward-thinking business acumen, one of her most significant and enduring contributions to clothing was her

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34 Quant, 134.
36 Quant, 8.
mass-production and popularization of the miniskirt. A staple of many closets even today, the miniskirt cannot be solely credited to a single designer. André Courrèges (another prominent designer of the 1960s) claims that he was the first to produce a miniskirt, whereas Quant “only commercialized the idea.” Quant instead points to young women on the streets of London from whom she pulled inspiration as the true inventors of the miniskirt.

Regardless of who truly “created” the garment, Quant surely played an indispensable role in popularizing it. Her simple designs were perhaps more easily consumable by the teenage generation than Courreges’ work, which is notable for pulling inspiration from science fiction and outer space. Indeed, the miniskirt and Quant herself became synonymous with the emergent ideals of youth and femininity in 1960s London. Quant wrote in 1966 that “every girl with a hope of getting away with it is aiming to look not only under voting age but under the age of consent. [...] Their aim is to look childishy young, naively unsophisticated.” Here, we can see Quant’s revolutionary ideas taken to an extreme. She indeed designed for young women who wanted to dress for their own age rather than their mothers’, but Quant’s comments about sexuality and ignorance suggest the pendulum swung too far in the other direction. The quest for a unique identity is a natural part of teenage girlhood, but Quant—who was 36 years old at the time—argues that youthfulness oto the point of being childlike was the new beauty standard.

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40 Quant, 152.
41 Breward, Gilbert and Lister, 88.
42 Quant, 255.
Quant’s view wasn’t viewed as particularly controversial. The youthful, even androgynous look was widely desired as the epitome of fashion and attractiveness in the 1960s. The wide eyes, skinny limbs, and boyish haircut of fashion model Lesley Hornby catapulted her to become the “face of 1966” at just sixteen years old under the moniker of Twiggy.

London was an epicenter of popular culture, churning out trends, models, and music, but the miniskirt craze was not contained to the city. International reactions provide a clue as to how different cultures interpreted the garment. The founder of Elle magazine, Hélène Lazareff, said in an interview that the permissive British attitude allowed the miniskirt to thrive in London in a way Paris would not accept. She opined,

All the latest British fashion has a sexual implication [...] Frenchmen are too fond of women to want them to go to such extremes. They don’t like them to draw attention to themselves with provocative clothes. This, naturally, springs from the age-old idea—that hasn’t been altered in France—that a woman should stay where she belongs. Many are independent and do interesting work, but still play second fiddle to the male. This suits the French temperament.

Lazareff’s comments are an example of the antiquated viewpoint that the London youth were openly spurning—namely, a gendered hierarchy that she believed was visible in fashion. After all, Lazareff was well into her fifties at the time her statements were published. Still, the article recognizes and preemptively answers this viewpoint.

Defending her age, journalist Poppy Richard insists “she’s no stodge—and has backed

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43 Lister, 69.
some of the most kooky and livewire fashion ideas of all time.” If her age truly played no part in her scrutiny toward the trend of rising hemlines, it suggests she rejected the idea of London replacing Paris as the international fashion capital of the world. The miniskirt was symbolic of the urge to try something different, but Lazareff was content to keep the world of high fashion as it was.

Lazareff also argues that women’s clothing could be understood as a reaction to male opinion. British girls dressed provocatively to gain the approval of lewd and unsophisticated men. Frenchmen, on the other hand, respected the demure modesty of women and would in fact be repulsed by such outrageous clothing as the miniskirt. Notably, in a January 1967 edition of the popular Rave youth magazine, a sixteen-year-old French girl lists her “likes” as follows: “dancing, mini-skirts, Stones, Small Faces, Who, Question Mark, Beatles, Four Tops.”

Regardless of whether Lazareff’s view held any credence, her position as one of the most powerful voices in fashion at the time reveals implicit assumptions within the industry—namely, that the reason for the miniskirt’s popularity was its role in garnering male attention. The miniskirt thus played an active role in the ongoing debate over women’s bodies and how best to navigate the politics of self-presentation in a period of social revolution.

As for Quant herself, she admitted that men played a role in how women dressed, whether they cared to admit it or not. She wrote, “Women have denied for years that they choose clothes with an eye to man appeal. I think—and I am sure all switched on girls

46 Richard, 15.
48 Richard, 15.
will agree with me—that sex appeal has absolutely Number One priority.”

Here lies yet another paradox within Quant’s work. Although resolute in her stance that she designed clothes to promote the autonomy of young women in society, Quant’s belief that sex appeal is the top priority in choosing an outfit suggests she believed male attention played a significant role in the development of personal style or self-expression. She rejects the idea that a stylish woman could dress according to her own tastes and instead places a heavy emphasis on what men would think of the outfit. Quant does not take the traditional route and shame women for wanting male attention—in fact, she seems to celebrate it as a sign of modern autonomy. Still, giving more importance to sex appeal than self-confidence was a view that ostensibly informed her designs.

An attempt at an explanation behind the role of sexuality in the miniskirt’s popularity came from James Laver, a fashion historian who frequently gave commentary on clothing trends throughout the 1960s. In an interview with the Birmingham Daily Post, he stated, “Woman as a whole is a desirable object. But the mind of man is too weak to take it all in at once and therefore he has to concentrate on one part of the body. For this reason fashion has to highlight this erogenous zone, put coloured lights around it until it becomes a bore and then the erogenous zone shifts.” Laver put forth the belief that young women’s legs—more specifically, their knees—were the new focal point to gauge female beauty. Indeed, this phenomenon exploded onto the fashion scene to great success: runway shows, advertisements, and even entire outfits were developed to showcase the knee.

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49 Quant, 92.
50 Quant, 41.
The miniskirt became a vehicle through which three concepts were bizarrely linked: youth as a beauty standard, femininity in dress, and the knee as an object of sexual desirability. French fashion designer Louis Feraud was quoted in 1968 as saying longer skirts would not go back in style so long as “the knee remains the most beautiful conquest of the fashion designers.”\(^5\) His views of course reflect a shift in the opinion of the French fashion world—Hélène Lazareff’s theory that miniskirts would not enjoy success in Paris was ultimately disproved. Still, he agreed that women were wearing the garment as a way to assert their feminine desirability.

Sure enough, the increased fascination with knees is visible throughout the 1960s. In a 1968 article detailing a “Miss Youth” competition in southeast England, the *Thanet Times* highlighted the ubiquity of “miniskirts, those leg-exposing gladenners of the male eye” at the event. The winner of the Miss Youth title—a sixteen year old—wore a dress “with a hemline hovering 11 ½ inches above the knee.”\(^5\) Notably, the contest rules (also published in the *Thanet Times*, a month prior to the competition) specify that a miniskirt or mini-dress were in fact *required* in order for a contestant to be considered eligible for the title.\(^5\) Similarly, in 1965, the *Liverpool Echo* devoted an entire article to the importance of knees: “you only have to follow the line of vision of those rapt male faces at rush hour to realise that a Rolling Stone age patella is currently notching up the same mystic fascination as a Victorian ankle,” quipped journalist Anne Batt.\(^5\) These articles taken together, given that they were all published during the heyday of the miniskirt,

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\(^5\) “Miss Youth’ in a miniskirt.” *Thanet Times*, May 28, 1968, 1.

\(^5\) “17 Girls want to be ‘Miss Youth.’” *Thanet Times*, April 23, 1968, 2.

suggest that the garment was one of the primary reasons young women’s knees and legs emerged as an apparently erogenous zone.

Indeed, the consensus within fashion media suggested miniskirts had an inherently erogenous quality which married youth, femininity, and sexuality into one garment. Moreover, Laver, Quant, and Lazareff—three leading voices in the industry—all seemed to agree that women’s clothing was primarily an invitation for, and response to, male attention. With this understanding in mind, we can more effectively analyze the ways in which miniskirts acted as a tool for exclusion and careful qualification—in other words, promoting a very specific idea of femininity and beauty.

Writing for *New York* magazine in 1971, Caroline Seebohm penned an article detailing the adjustment that English women experienced upon moving to America. In Seebohm’s view, New York City was far more exciting than London, but you could clearly identify the difference between Americans and Brits. She notes that the idea of King’s Road, where Mary Quant opened shop, brought to mind “an endless frieze of mini-skirted, booted, fair-haired angular angels, each one inviting with her eyes and her smiles the flash-popping tourist to wrest her from her pedestal and trap her for eternity between the sheets…of the photograph album.”

The diction chosen by Seebohm reveals several ideals about womanhood and desirability that were closely associated with the miniskirt: describing the wearers as “angular angels” promotes the standard of thinness while simultaneously suggesting innocence and virtue. Moreover, taking care to describe them as “fair-haired” suggests whiteness without saying it outright. Positioning these standards as the recipe to create the perfect archetypal British girl points to the centrality

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of the miniskirt to communicating a very rigid idea of beauty. Moreover, Seebohm’s evocative metaphor of literally trapping a woman between (photograph album) sheets hints at the tie between clothing and sexual violence that emerged as a common criticism of revealing garments in later decades. Seebohm seems to agree that the miniskirt invited male attention without the need to verbally communicate consent or desire. Although lauded as a sign that a new, open-minded generation was finding their own voice through clothing, the applications of the miniskirt reveal the avenues in which social progress still had yet to be made.

Perhaps even more telling than Seebohm’s article itself was the artwork that ran alongside it. Ostensibly depicting a British girl who had migrated to New York, the figure is shockingly youthful. Her full cheeks and huge eyes are almost infantile. She is indeed clad in a minidress, with tall heeled boots exposing the ever-tantalizing knee and thigh. In fact, her skirt is so short that a bit of buttock is visible underneath it. This overexaggerated caricature of young British women can be read as a visual representation of the beauty ideals that British women were expected to fulfill. The fact that the miniskirt is considered of paramount importance to the quintessential British girl shows the extent to which Mary Quant had become a pioneer of youth culture. However, the garment itself came with implicit yet clearly understood connotations: its wearers were young, skinny, beautiful girls. It was as if the mods were keyed-in on some sort of carefree, modern mindset that could only be achieved through clothing. Perhaps, as Mary Quant put it, it is because they understood that “fashion is not frivolous, it is a part of being alive today.”

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57 Quant, 91.
Fig. 4. Illustration accompanying Caroline Seebohm’s article “English Girls in New York: They Don’t Go Home Again.” Artwork by Wendy Frost in New York magazine, July 19, 1971, 35.
Indeed, despite being lauded as a pioneer for increasing accessibility in fashion, Quant was painstakingly specific about the type of woman she envisioned wearing her clothing. Perhaps more significant than her description of the “Mods”—the term Quant uses throughout her autobiography to describe her consumer base—is her description of other girls.58 Quant is straightforward in her belief that “fashion should be important to a woman,” and divides those who disagree into two camps: intellectuals and squares.59 Her description of these other women, who are either uninterested in clothing or simply too boring to keep up with trends, reveals implicit beliefs about womanhood that inform her motivations behind her designs for the miniskirt.

Quant believes that intellectual girls are not necessarily brighter than women who place importance in their appearance; they are simply ignorant of how relevant fashion is in the modern era. In Quant’s view, the intellectual girl

has only limited intelligence. The old idea that a woman is either sexually attractive and destined for motherhood or an intellectual, has gone. A blue-stocking attitude—if such a thing is possible these days—is the pitfall of the young intellectual who does not realize that the clothes she wears express her personality and that many people will judge her on these externals only.60

This statement reveals Quant’s intriguing views on the role of women in a changing society. She argues that intellectuals missed the tide of progress sweeping over Britain; their view of fashion as vapid or trite reflects an antiquated, behind-the-times understanding of a woman’s “proper” place. In this regard, Quant can be considered progressive to a certain extent, demonstrating her belief that the interests of young

58 Quant, 76
59 Quant, 91.
60 ibid.
women and girls could hold real credence rather than being dismissed as unimportant. Still, placing a mocking “intellectual” label over all women uninterested in fashion and dismissing them as obsolete shows Quant’s tendency toward exclusion and ostracization. In her view, she had done sufficient work in making fashionable clothing for comparatively low prices, so there was really no reason not to indulge.

Quant also discusses “squares,” or girls who attempt to keep up with fashionable clothing but are usually behind the times or not daring enough. Writing with a note of pity, Quant goes on for seven paragraphs in her autobiography describing the hapless square:

She is a little low on nerve. She is utterly resigned to never being right in fashion at the right moment; she would rather like to be but she is always finding out that just as she had got to like some feckless innovation, it is suddenly older than time. [...] Curiously, quite a number of the women who are awarded the annual title of “one of the world’s best dressed women” are square. At any party the most elegant there may well be “square.” But the most exciting will be Mods.61

Here, Quant pokes fun at women who have not yet come around to her bold, modern clothing style. The fashion scene before Quant exploded with popularity was, in her eyes, boring and bland. Regardless, some women still adhered to that style, whether due to convenience or personal taste. Quant recognizes that the sophisticated, structured style reminiscent of Jackie Kennedy’s era is indeed tasteful and refined—yet immediately dismisses it as obsolete. Her mindset seems to indicate that, due to the affordability of her clothing, all girls could wear a Mary Quant miniskirt—but perhaps not every girl should.

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61 Quant, 91-92.
This exclusivity also served as a marketing technique, increasing the demand for miniskirts by promoting the desirability of being a Mod.

The idea that only girls with certain body types could wear miniskirts was not a particularly controversial one at the time. Many fashion publications in the 1960s promoted this view and offered quasi-helpful tips to girls who did not necessarily have the ideal look. In the fashion section of the *Liverpool Echo* published on March 24, 1965, Anne Batt attempts to do just that. Girls with “jolly hockey stick knees” were advised to “only tell half the story. Keep to a mid-knee hemline that will emphasise the narrowing below the kneecap.” And, although the ultra-skinny look popularized by Twiggy was in style, thin girls were warned “unless you want to look like an emaciated crane, avoid the super-short look.” These parameters, setting very clear boundaries as to what shape of leg would fit correctly into a miniskirt, appear antithetical to Mary Quant’s mission of promoting accessibility in the fashion industry. If popular media promoted the message that only thin girls looked good in miniskirts, did Quant truly achieve her goal of bringing fashionable clothes to the masses?

While probably only a small percentage of England’s young women regularly read the *Liverpool Echo*, much more of them consumed the hugely popular *Rave* magazine, marketed specifically to their age range all over the country. The August 1966 edition ran a two-page spread encouraging teenage girls to make their legs more palatable for the general public to view: “Short skirts reveal a lot. Yet far too many girls adopt the idea that what is visible beyond the hem of her mini-skirt is none of her business and there’s not much she can do about it anyway. It is, and she can.” The article goes on to

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62 Lister, 69.
63 Batt, 5.
64 “Look at your legs…other people have to!” *Rave* magazine, August 1966, 54.
identify a number of features that they find problematic in a young woman’s legs, including fat thighs, fat calves, fat ankles, blotchiness, gooseflesh, spots and blackheads, dry skin, and visible body hair. The article is accompanied by exercises to try and products that could fix the issues. It even explicitly states, “Until you’ve slimmed down, [miniskirts] are not for you!”

Predictably, the view put forth in major publications was widely accepted by the general public. In an interview with war veterans conducted in 1968, one man comments, “I like to see girls in mini-skirts, unless they’ve got knock knees of course.” The age of the man is not mentioned, but other participants were in their seventies and eighties. Even Quant herself admits that there was indeed a certain body type she envisioned wearing her clothing. In choosing models, she notes her preference for “long, lean legs, rather like [Jean] Shrimpton’s.” Indeed, both Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton were often used for Quant campaigns—notably, both models had nicknames referring to their size. Lesley Hornby became known as Twiggy for her twig-like limbs, and Shrimpton was dubbed “The Shrimp” due to her small stature.

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65 Ibid, 55.
66 Edward Matthews, “Chelsea Wasn’t Always Like This,” Illustrated London News, April 6, 1968, 22.
67 Quant, 46.
68 Conekin, 99.
The question, then, is to what extent the miniskirt was truly a symbol of revolution in the fashion industry or otherwise. We can use Quant’s comments as a clue: although often equated with female emancipation, she did not consider the cause particularly important to her own life. She spoke candidly about the movement in 1974, stating “I’m very torn about it. I’m spoiled and protected by two men and I wouldn’t want it any other way. Most Women’s Libbers are women who have lost their men, aren’t they?” Again, the centrality of male opinion to Quant’s beliefs reveals she did not consider herself a champion of feminism or sexual liberation at all. Further, her explicit conviction that sex appeal was the most important factor in women’s clothing undoubtedly informed her designs. While Quant was not necessarily advocating for a

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complete embrace of antiquated gender roles, she recognizes that she is perfectly content with the rights and privileges women had in the 1970s.

This position raises questions about the commonly held perception of the miniskirt as an icon of sexual liberation or female emancipation. While Quant was extremely competent in producing trendy and affordable clothing for young women, she should not be uncritically credited for ushering in a wave of social change through her designs. In fact, looking to the wearers themselves provides a more accurate depiction of how the miniskirt came to symbolize the Swinging Sixties.

In the later few years of the decade, women in 1960s London began to question the idea that their miniskirts were inherently sexual—or sinful. As the trend diffused throughout the city, one newspaper article mentioned that by 1966 miniskirts were “almost as numerous as the pigeons in Trafalgar Square.” Indeed, although the mystical, apparently erogenous knee was bared to varying degrees of uproar, the young women who wore miniskirts did not always agree with the standpoint that the garment had any inherent sexual quality.

On the contrary, while the miniskirt served as a tool for exclusion within elite fashion circles, for the wearers it began as more of an experimentation in autonomy. In 1966, the Newcastle Journal conducted an interview with several young women aged fifteen to eighteen to gauge how the miniskirt was being received in Northeast England. One wearer, Jeanette Robinson, decided to try out the style “just to see what [she] looked like.” This simple assertion stands in stark contrast to comments set forth by Quant, Lazareff, and Laver. Robinson’s confession that putting on a miniskirt stemmed from curiosity and experimentation in self-presentation challenges the notion that the garment

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was primarily a tool to gain male attention. In fact, Robinson confessed that the compliments she received while wearing one made her uncomfortable.\footnote{Height of fashion,” 5.}

Fifteen-year-old Theresa McDonnell said in the same article that she did not consider her above-the-knee skirts to be miniskirts, per se. She noted that she had been wearing her skirts in such a way for a while, simply because she liked the way they fit—McDonnell’s only skirt that still hit below the knee was part of a school uniform.\footnote{ibid.} Again, the comments of young women regarding their miniskirts reveal that the desire to wear one was self-motivated. McDonnell did not mention whether other people found her attractive or if her knee was the right shape to be wearing one—presumably because these extraneous factors had little relevance to her.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{jeannette-robinson.jpg}
\caption{Photo of Jeannette Robinson published in the \textit{Newcastle Journal}. Photographer unknown, July 8, 1966.}
\end{figure}
A different interview, with slightly older participants, was conducted a year later by the Liverpool Echo. 24-year-old Maureen Armstrong quipped, “It’s because of rotten legs and not the stares of men that a girl shouldn’t wear a mini-skirt.” Armstrong seems to agree with the view that only a certain body type was acceptable in a miniskirt, but openly shuns the idea that sex appeal had any impact on her choice to wear one or not. Joan Davis, 20 years old, put it bluntly: It’s got nothing to do with the men. Why on earth should a girl not be allowed to wear what she pleases?” Armstrong’s and Davis’ convictions that the miniskirt was primarily a form of self expression demonstrates how, although they did not intend to wear the garment as an act of social protest, their simple decision to dress as they pleased represented a marked shift in the values of the 1960s youth generation.

Indeed, Mary Quant’s definition and infiltration of the teenage market had an unintended side effect. Young women were arguably more harshly scrutinized for their clothing choices than ever before (as evidenced by the abundance of newspaper articles detailing fascination with the trend), but at the same time, they were able to reclaim the narrative. Some women, like Jeanette Robinson, experimented with miniskirts and decided they were not worth the not worth the tumult, deciding to put them back on the rack in favor of more modest styles of dress. Others, including McDonnell, discovered they enjoyed wearing miniskirts and felt confident with one on. Regardless of whether a teenage girl wore one or not, her power lay in the fact that she had a choice. McDonnell may have been considered a “square” by Quant’s standards; regardless, she had the ability to experiment with clothing and choose what suited her best rather than adhering to traditional expectations set forth by the older generation. In this regard miniskirts

73 “Like the man said: I’m 100 per cent for mini-skirts.” Liverpool Echo, September 7, 1967: 7.
represented an irrevocable step away from the more rigid rules of decorum that dictated how young women dressed in years prior.

Quant’s dissimilarities to her consumer base did not end with their difference in opinion on the presumed relevance of sex appeal on female dress. Throughout the sixties, the miniskirt was equated with icons of youth revolution and counterculture such as the Beatles and social protests. Quant did not necessarily envision this outcome—in her autobiography, she writes that the young women wearing her clothing “are not silly or flirtatious or militant. Being militant and aggressive is as ridiculous to them as being coy and deliberately seductive.”

However, as Quant would come to find out, she had little power over what miniskirted girls did once they left Bazaar.

Indeed, incidents of miniskirts and protests appearing together popped up with increasing frequency. One such case was in 1967, when a newspaper article detailed “two mini-skirted girls and a man with a beard” protesting the Vietnam War during Vice President Hubert Humphrey’s visit to England. The fact that the journalist took care to detail the appearance of the protesters demonstrates how certain styles of dress—including the miniskirt—had evolved into the quintessential uniform for the youth generation. Spurning the well-groomed, traditional appearances indicative of their parents’ age group was viewed by the journalist as an expression of dissent in itself.

Still, it would be a mistake to assume that all youth believed the garment was a symbol of a new, forward-thinking generation. Analyzing student-operated newspapers gives insight into how young adults interpreted the miniskirt. A popular view expressed in multiple publications is that the garment was an intentional ploy for male attention. At

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74 Quant, 75.
the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, the student newspaper republished a piece by humor columnist Dick West entitled “Minis cause knee addiction.”⁷⁶ The 1969 reprint calls for scientific observation of the process through which men grow addicted to seeing women’s knees, and laments the increasing popularity of maxi skirts, which reach all the way to the floor. “I must confess that I myself have become a hard core knee addict,” West writes. “If I don’t see my quota of female knees every day, I simply fall apart.”⁷⁷ He goes on to argue that rather than jumping directly from mini to maxi skirts, it was only fair to taper off slowly so that men did not have to quit the knee “cold turkey.”⁷⁸ Considering he was a humorist, West’s words were not meant as serious social commentary—yet they still reveal telling societal values. After all, certain cultural anxieties are detectable in the humor and punchlines of any given time period. West’s assertion that male preference should be of paramount importance in how women choose to dress themselves suggests a certain sense of entitlement to the female body.

Even within the supposedly progressive youth generation, nuance in opinion exists. Eight years after West’s piece was published, his quasi-lighthearted claim to the female body was still detectable in humor columns. Bowling Green State University’s newspaper reprinted a humor column by Art Buchwald in 1977, again pointing out how women’s clothing choices were “unfair to men.”⁷⁹ Buchwald’s piece details a conversation he had with a friend regarding whether or not women were intentionally trying to sexually frustrate men by baring their knees in public. He expresses his belief that the way women dress is “a subconscious thing, having to do with the mating

⁷⁷ ibid.
⁷⁸ ibid.
instinct.” Buchwald goes on to snidely remark that women likely experience comparable feelings of lust, yet he pins the miniskirt as a tool for sexual control over men, pointing out that members of his gender didn’t intentionally arouse women by wearing tight or revealing clothing.

Conservative views of the garment, whether expressed explicitly or in jest, still contained nuance that we would be remiss to overlook. For example, California’s Pacific Union College ran an opinion section in their newspaper, The Campus Chronicle, asking students simply “What do you think of miniskirts?” One interviewee, David Yates, observed “To an extent, the miniskirt is an indication of the self-expression and individualism which characterizes the contemporary era. In the elevated framework of Christian standards and modesty, the question is not so much about miniskirts [...] as it is how this individualism can be more effectively channeled.” This remark is more complex than the other takes in the paper, which comment on male opinion and the morality of wearing the garment in public. The institution was affiliated with the Seventh-Day Adventist church, so many of the students argued the miniskirt was against Christian ethics. While this was still important to Yates, he also expressed the importance of identity and individuality in the seemingly new era of the 1960s. Notably, two months after this article was published, the miniskirt again sparked religious skepticism when Italian movie star Claudia Cardinale wore one to a meeting with the Pope. The Vatican published a newsletter stating that this incident—which they believed stemmed from ignorance rather than disrespect—did not “constitute ecclesiastical approval of the new fashion.”

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80 ibid.
While the opinions of students are varied, one newspaper also interviewed three faculty members for their take on miniskirts. Assistant professor of design James T. Watts was skeptical of the “individuality” aspect of the trend. Watts, who had earned his degree only four years before the publication date of the newspaper, commented that students “adopt the new modes because they want to conform in order to be accepted by their peers.” In Watts’ view, fads such as the miniskirt in fact represent a desire to fit in, not stand out.

This point harkens back to Tranberg Hansen’s research, which analyzes clothing as an intermediary between self and society. The manner in which one chooses to dress themself carries inherent meaning: Tranberg Hansen refers to clothing as “social skin” or “the body of the body.” In her view, the dressed body is the first form of communication shaping interpersonal interactions, sending cultural messages before a person even opens their mouth. Indeed, the miniskirt carried connotations that were both shaped by, and had a role in shaping, societal expectations of femininity, the standard of beauty, and the young woman’s body. Those who fit the clearly defined mold of girls who were “allowed” to wear miniskirts thus joined an elite inner circle; a community that was empowering to its members but ostracized everyone else.

Throughout the last two decades, social psychologists have developed a term for the influence of clothing on one’s thought patterns and how it impacts the way we understand ourselves. The theory of “enclothed cognition” was first introduced in 2012 by Hajo Adam and Adam D. Galinsky. Their research found that when wearing a white

84 Tranberg Hansen, 167.
lab coat that was described as a doctor’s coat, subjects were more attentive to details. Those who wore an identical garment, referred to as a painter’s coat, were less attentive. In other words, participants’ self-perception was altered by their clothing. As such, Adam and Galinsky posit that the communication imparted by a piece of clothing is dependent on two factors: “both the symbolic meaning and the physical experience of wearing the clothes.”\textsuperscript{86} To those who did not wear miniskirts, interpretation was based on the first factor alone. The symbolic meaning of miniskirts varied, but was generally marked by conversation regarding sexuality, independence, morality, and male opinion. Wearers, however, benefitted from the added experience of actually feeling the garment on their bodies and deciding for themselves whether baring the knee was a liberating experience—or one that left them uncomfortably vulnerable.

Part of the appeal of miniskirts to young women was a symbolic meaning unique to its wearers, blending Adam’s and Galinsky’s two factors. Quant was not shy about her belief that she envisioned a certain type of girl wearing her clothing:

The Chelsea girl, the original leather-booted, black-stockinged girl who came out of the King’s Road looking like some contemporary counterpart of a gay musketeer, began to be copied by the rest of London and watched with interest by others all over the country. Soon the ‘look’ was to be copied internationally. This girl’s challenging clothes were accepted as a challenge. It was she who established the fact that this latter half of the twentieth century belongs to Youth.\textsuperscript{87}

The message was simple: fun and cool girls wore miniskirts. Following the theory of enclothed cognition, it’s likely that young women thought they could \textit{become} a fun and

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{87} Quant, 73.
cool girl simply by wearing one, joining the ranks of Quant’s beloved mods. She realized a practical impact of her creation, positioning her wearers as daring, forward-thinking experimenters who challenged the status quo and unapologetically rebelled against traditional expectations of womanhood and femininity.

In this regard, sex and male opinion diminish in relevance. The pressure to alter one’s outward form in order to visually fit a given mold is arguably more intense for women, who notoriously have higher rates of eating disorders\(^88\) and are more likely to get plastic surgery\(^89\). Clothing and appearance can thus be read as mediums through which a woman views herself, interprets her place in society, and attempts to reconcile the two.

Up to this point, the terms “women” and “girls” have mostly been used to refer to those assigned female at birth, as was the case during the time period in question. Yet the benefit of hindsight allows us to acknowledge that there is no singular, correct way to be a woman, regardless of one’s biological sex. Indeed, the miniskirt was popular with those who today possibly (although not definitively) may have identified as genderqueer or transgender. Drag shows were popular forms of entertainment in the United Kingdom and abroad, and keeping with the current trends, many of the artists wore miniskirts in their acts. One publication depicts a person assigned male at birth donning the garment in 1960, well before Quant had begun manufacturing it\(^90\).

Quant’s views on gender—specifically, the traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity—were ostensibly open-minded. After branching into the world of cosmetics, her company even featured an advertisement of a man wearing makeup. In 1974, one of

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\(^90\) Breward, 157.
her distributors commented, “plenty of men are already wearing makeup. Take a walk on Third Avenue and look around. They’re wearing it, they might as well buy ours.” Still, neither of these instances were directly from Quant, and it’s completely possible that the inclusion of a man wearing makeup in the advertisement was nothing more than a marketing technique. Later on in the article, distributor Jack Winters states that male makeup was simply a trend—not unlike the miniskirt—rather than an indicator of sexuality. This view is comparatively progressive, as Winters realizes that mediums of self-presentation, such as clothing or cosmetics, are not inherently gendered. The Quant brand aligned itself with people—both consumers and employees—who believed fashion should be daring and push the boundaries of what was considered acceptable.

Fig. 8. Cover of Transvestia vol. 1 no. 6. Nov. 1960. Accessed via the Transgender Archives, University of Victoria. United Kingdom.

The phenomenon of people assigned male at birth dressing in women’s clothing became more commonly acknowledged throughout the 1960s. One article published in *The People* newspaper turns to a psychologist to explain why some people may be inclined to engage in such behavior: “There is a great coming together of the sexes,” John Cohen states. “Men are less insistent on their image of male masculinity. They are prepared to accept this feminised image of themselves. Just look at the feminsation of men’s clothes—the frills and fancy shirts and all the other feminine garment’s they now adopt.”\(^{93}\) Cohen’s statement again points to the importance of clothing in regards to gender identity, and how this relationship shifted throughout the 1960s. Indeed, the clearly marked line dividing elements of dress that were acceptable for *either* males or females was beginning to blur. Androgyny became an interesting tool for youth to experiment with, as evidenced by Quant’s and Twiggy’s ultra-short haircuts, or the phrase “borrowed from the boys” used to advertise women’s pants and hats.\(^{94}\)

Writing for *Other Scenes* magazine—described as "a revolutionary newsletter concerned with art, politics, sociology, sex and the creation of a more equitable society"---Lita Eliscu expressed similar beliefs that the traditional separate spheres of masculinity and femininity were blurring. In her view, the 1960s represented a turning point in which

little boys grow up wanting to be adults and little girls can also grow up wanting the same thing. What a relief, what a pleasure, what a nice privilege and responsibility all in one, all over again to be able to choose and from twice as

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\(^{94}\) Guinness, 11.
many instead of the idiotic “other half” which exists on some irrational basis of Barbie doll miniskirt and Ken 3-button suits.95

Eliscu, interestingly, ties the miniskirt to the past (and thus, to a clear gender divide). Her interpretation of the garment is that it is indeed indicative of a time period in which women were restrained by gendered expectations of clothing and self-presentation. While not as as stuffy as the Jackie Kennedy-era pillbox suits of the decade prior, which communicated a demure, respectable woman, the miniskirt was a sign of oppression on the other end of the spectrum: it invited and encouraged sexualization of the female body

Regardless of whether the miniskirt was a symbol of liberation or oppression, it was presented in all accounts as an unquestionably feminine garment. Still, Mary Quant was known to incorporate elements of menswear in her designs. In 1967, she designed an

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ensemble she entitled the “overdraft” waistcoat and “chequebook” skirt. The design played with androgyny in several ways: first, it was made of wool and featured a waistcoat, both far more common for men’s suits than womenswear. The titles of the garments poke fun at the male-centered world of finance, as well as alluding to the gender inequality of the business realm: credit cards had been introduced in Britain the year prior, but women were unable to access them without a male acting as a co-signer. Interestingly, the chequebook skirt fell just above the knee—in this regard, although meant to be professional enough to wear to work, the garment can be considered a miniskirt. Quant thus calls into question the relationship between ultra-femininity and professionalism, hinting that the two realms need not be mutually exclusive.

Thus far, the miniskirt has been explored through the lens of several different identities, including age, gender, and class status, but in all of these cases the representation has been overwhelmingly white. This research would be remiss to not acknowledge the diversity of ethnic groups that contributed to mod culture, and thus, to the miniskirt. Historian Martin Evans points to the influence of Jewish immigrants on the Youthquake, particularly in the realm of clothing. He notes that by the turn of the twentieth century, 60% of Jewish men living in Britain worked in the tailoring industry. The result, as Evans puts it, was “a revolution.” The Jewish community—perhaps more than any other—can be credited with making ready-to-wear clothing more accessible to the middle- and working-classes. Familiar names driving the Youthquake include Vidal Sassoon, who worked in the same building as Quant and gave her the iconic “five-point” haircut. On a different floor was Lotte Berk’s studio, where she created a then-novel

96 Evans, 76.
97 Ibid.
exercise trend based on ballet techniques known as barre. The practice has since been commercialized and is still extremely popular with women today looking to replicate the lean, toned look of a ballerina.

Fig. 11. Mary Quant and Vidal Sassoon, with Quant sporting the “Five-Point Cut.” April 1964. Victoria & Albert Museum.

While the 1960s was certainly a period of racial progress, in terms of both legislation and representation, the modeling industry suffered from a lack of diversity. Quant herself made some questionable comments about people of color. The only mention of any nonwhite figure in her autobiography is a nameless woman who drove Quant and her husband in a taxi while they visited Washington D.C. Described as “the most enormous coloured woman,” Quant goes on to describe how the driver brought them to “the most marvellous negro clubs that keep going all night with terrific swinging
jazz.**98 Despite the quasi-praising of Black culture, which Quant enthusiastically took part in and enjoyed, a tone of superiority is detectable in her words. While other background characters float in and out of her autobiography with first and last names, the only person of color in Quant’s work has no identity outside of how she served Quant and her husband.

Mary Quant was perhaps more indebted to Black culture than she realized. Historian Martin Evans points out that many hallmarks of Mod clothing can be traced back to a Jamaican subculture known as the “rude boy” look. As he puts it, their “influence was palpable, even if there were no black mods.”**99 The tendency for white people to pilfer from Black cultures, repackage their ideas as something new, and mass-produce it to tremendous success was not a new phenomenon of the 1960s (and in fact is a practice that continues today). Perhaps it is for this reason that a June 16, 1969 edition of The Great Speckled Bird pointed out the power of the white teenager to popularize Black culture, for better or for worse. The article is focused on the renewed demand for jazz music throughout the 1960s, but also takes care to characterize the miniskirt as “not a fashion, [but] a tribal costume.”**100 The article does not elaborate on this view, but it is ostensibly a critique of the rigid beautify standards that came to be associated with the miniskirt. Even Quant herself, carefully detailing the qualities of the Mods who wore her clothing, inadvertently demonstrated how clothing can be a type of costume or uniform. By wearing a miniskirt, girls aligned themselves with the Mods without needing to use words.

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98 Quant, 121.
99 Evans, 79.
Still, Quant’s brand rested on the perception that she was a forward-thinking revolutionary. Even if Mary Quant did not explicitly voice her support for racial equality, the “Mary Quant” enterprise did. Models of color featured in several of her advertisements: Kellie Wilson, for example, modeled a purple satin dress for one of Quant’s new campaigns in November 1967. The year before, she was asked to provide an advertisement to be placed in a program for a charity fashion show. The event was presented by the Africa Bureau and the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination. Her advertisement featured a highly successful Black model by the name of Donyale Luna; Quant’s husband Alexander Plunket-Greene boasted that they bought out a full page to support the cause. After all, in the eyes of the *Daily Mirror*, Quant was “Glad to support any movement which aims to ease the tension between black and white.”

Even so, it is necessary to understand that Mary Quant was first and foremost a businesswoman. Each decision she made with regard to her enterprise was intentional and carefully thought-out. As previously discussed, Quant had a particular talent for understanding her teenage consumer base and meticulously catering her brand image to their tastes. As miniskirts became seemingly synonymous with the forward-thinking, progressive generation, Quant understood she had to keep up with the causes they cared about or risk becoming a member of the obsolete, traditional-minded cohort she had built her empire upon rallying against.

It is possible, then, that Quant’s displays of activism could be considered primarily a marketing technique. As the May 1970 edition of *Ebony* magazine puts it, Black models were “now in the stage where in many cases [their] presence is merely tokenism, a gesture and indeed a reluctant one on the part of many firms to ‘show it like

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Rather than seeking out more models of color to advance representation in her campaigns and in the industry, Quant simply cherry-picked the Black models who had already proven themselves successful and would have gotten work regardless. Still, we must place Quant’s choices in context: many people who matched her status as a straight, white, incredibly privileged upper class woman would likely have remained comfortable not making any potentially controversial decisions and risk losing business.

To a certain extent, Mary Quant did inspire a clothing revolution. Her designs questioned authority and playfully pushed the boundaries of what was traditionally accepted for young women and girls’ dress in the 1950s and 60s. But more significant than her contributions to clothing was her ability to recognize the potential for a teenage market. Quant’s determination to stay on the pulse of youth culture helped her rise to become one of the best-known names in fashion throughout the sixties, and her inexpensive prices made her clothing near omnipresent on the streets of London. In this regard, her bold, out-there ideas became the norm. However, placing too much emphasis on Quant’s supposed “creation” of the miniskirt minimizes the agency of the young women and girls for whom she designed. After all, even Quant herself recognizes that she did not truly invent the miniskirt—she merely mass-produced it. Moreover, a layer of complication is added when considering the view that the miniskirt was an inherently sexual garment. The benefits of the miniskirt came with corresponding pitfalls: Quant’s clothing was more affordable, but not every girl was encouraged to wear it. Miniskirts did allow women to dress more freely, but also oriented conversation of their clothing around men. Understanding that teenagers chose to wear miniskirts (or chose not to) as primarily

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103 Lister, 126.
an expression of self rather than an invitation for external perceptions gives credence to
the power of young women as a collective.

The historically preserved image of miniskirted women picketing against the war
effort and promoting free love was not necessarily an accurate interpretation. The
revolutionism of the garment stems from the advancement and oppression of women
occurring simultaneously: although the 1960s and 70s were a period of rapid social
change, certain expectations stayed firmly in place, as evidenced by the strict standards
for women’s bodies set forth in fashion publications. As such, the miniskirt can be
considered a material manifestation of conflicting attitudes toward the young woman’s
body, both externally and from within.

Fig. 12. A group of young women protest against the fashion house Dior not including any miniskirts in
their runway show. 1966. Photo by Larry Ellis.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

As I began researching this project, I was met with a sneaking, unexpected sense of shame. Telling people that I planned to research the miniskirt was an uncomfortable experience, one that often resulted in polite disinterest or open skepticism. I understood why some might not understand the rationale behind choosing such a quasi-frivolous topic. After all, the field of history is so expansive—is an analysis of the miniskirt really worth further questioning? I realized that the embarrassment I felt about my research was indicative of the very pattern which I sought to expose: the interests of young women being dismissed as frivolous, even as they simultaneously dictate popular culture.

Although this research focused on the 1960s and 70s, it resonates with implications for the present day. In “Swinging London,” the miniskirt emerged as an organic trend that was created by young women on the high streets. After Mary Quant mass-produced the garment, making it accessible to more (but not all) teenage consumers, voices in the fashion industry used it as a tool to prey on their insecurities. The miniskirt was advertised as a garment only for women who had slim legs and sought male attention. This exploitation undermined the inherent power of the miniskirt: its origin as a simple expression of self-assurance.

This pattern has repeated itself both before and since the 1960s. Countless terms have been developed to mock young women for their lifestyle, regardless of whether they follow popular culture or not. If a girl partakes in trends, she is basic. If she doesn’t, she’s a try-hard or a pick-me. The flippant dismissal is reminiscent of Mary Quant’s “squares” and “intellectuals.” The girls who followed trends (in this case, the miniskirt) were
grouped into one category and chastised for dressing in an outlandish manner, presumably to gain male favor; on the other hand, those who favored more conservative styles of dress were ostracized for being behind the times in terms of both fashion and social progress. This dichotomy is representative of the existential vise grip that women are born into: they are expected to be desirable, yet still respectable; sexually attractive, but subtly so. Often, the myriad roles that women attempt to fulfill are mutually exclusive from each other.

Although fashion is this study’s focus, music also provides an enduring example of how the interests of young women are dismissed even if undeniably formative to popular culture, as the miniskirt is. The term “boyband,” for instance, is a relatively new term used to describe a pop group of young men who are marketed toward a teenage audience. These boy bands, such as BTS, One Direction, and The Backstreet Boys, are widely dismissed by the general public, often viewed as a manufactured scheme for money rather than “real” musicians. Meanwhile, their massive fanbase is openly ridiculed for its fanaticism. The Beatles, arguably the most popular band of the 1960s, witnessed such a pattern; the fervor of their largely female fanbase was termed “Beatlemania” and mocked by commentators. While Beatlemania was indeed an intense and arguably unprecedented phenomenon at the time, so too was the positive impact the fanbase had on the band’s success. Both the miniskirt and the Beatles are proof of the lasting impact that young women can have in leaving indelible marks on society during any given time period.

Indeed, an important aspect of “girl power” that does not go unnoticed is their spending power. In the music realm, the same stadiums used to house sporting events can
be packed full of teenage girls who show up to support their favorite boybands—two of the top twenty highest-grossing tours in the 2010s were none other than One Direction and Paul McCartney. Moreover, in the clothing industry, the teenage consumer base that skyrocketed Mary Quant to an icon of 1960s fashion has only gotten larger and increasingly sought-after in the last sixty years. Fashion publications continue to be a primary avenue through which implicit expectations of beauty and femininity are communicated to young women.

Arguably one of the most popular clothing brands with teenagers today is Brandy Melville, a European company that has found considerable success with young women in America. Brandy Melville is infamous for its “one size fits most” policy: all of its clothing is manufactured in only one or two sizes under the guise of promoting environmentally conscious and cost-effective fashion. A closer look at the company’s ethos reveals a *modus operandi* reminiscent of Mary Quant’s method of business: trends are lifted directly from girls who come into the stores to shop, then mass-produced for low prices and catered to a very specific body type. Like Quant’s brand, models employed for Brandy Melville are sometimes handpicked directly from shoppers who come into the store and are usually still in their teenage years, reflecting the enduring pattern of young women as dictators of style. Both companies found this model to be extremely lucrative, but whereas Quant was celebrated for it, Brandy Melville faces intense scrutiny a half century later.104

Marketing a brand exclusively to only a select group of consumers could be either a benefit or disadvantage. The miniskirt did represent an era of liberation and inclusion to

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a certain extent, but the thin white models used to advertise the brand in fashion shows and print promoted the understanding that only certain girls had the body type to wear Quant’s clothing. Similarly, Brandy Melville—a company that also sells miniskirts—has come under fire not only for their sizing but also due to the whitewashing and lack of diversity in their fashion campaigns. By narrowing the scope of who the target consumer base is, the brand effectively increases its exclusivity and elite reputation. It follows, then, that young teenage girls (who are at a particularly vulnerable age in terms of identity and self-esteem) gain an increased sense of satisfaction from fitting in—and an even harsher backlash if they don’t. The key difference between Quant’s and Brandy Melville’s brands lies within the sixty years of advancement in terms of both diversity and body image that has taken place in the fashion and advertising industries since the miniskirt exploded onto the scene.

The knee may no longer be the ideal representation of feminine mystique, but the tie between sexuality and dress endures. Society still has a difficult time separating the ideas of “revealing” clothing and sex appeal as separate entities that can, but do not always, coexist. Certain mindsets prevailing from the 1960s are startling. We can see parallels, for example, in attitudes towards women’s dress: similar to how the miniskirt was viewed as an invitation for male attention sixty years ago, opinion polls reveal a majority of people still believe clothing plays an important role in the likelihood of sexual assault. The Independent reported in 2019 that 55% of men in the United Kingdom agreed with the statement, “the more revealing the clothes a woman wears, the more likely it is that she will be harassed or assaulted.”

105 Maya Oppenheim, “Majority of men believe women more likely to be sexually assaulted if wearing revealing clothes, study suggests,” The Independent, February 23, 2019.
act as consent for sexual attention is not new. In the 1960s, it was hard to believe that a woman could wear a miniskirt simply for herself; still today, society seems dubious that wearing revealing clothing does not warrant nonconsensual advances.

Analyzing reactions to the miniskirt in the 1960s reveals disturbing viewpoints that still impact how women present and view themselves in modern society. Perhaps the most significant implication of this research is the ease with which the autonomy and agency of young women can be minimized. The miniskirt was understood during its heyday as an invitation for male attention; today, its close links with the sexual liberation movement suggest it has an inherent tie to sexuality. In reality, the most effective understanding of the garment recognizes that it was borne of young women’s desire to create a style uniquely their own, and that any real or perceived relationship to sexual attention from males was, at least in the beginning, wholly irrelevant. Orienting women’s clothing as intrinsically connected to outside opinion strips their autonomy in situations as minute as choosing an outfit in the morning.

Still, we would be remiss to ignore the manufactured relevance of sex appeal in women's fashion. Clothing and sexuality have a particularly significant link in the discussion of sexual assault: short skirts and low-cut shirts often appear in cases of rape or abuse as evidence of implicit consent. In other words, clothing was used until relatively recently to determine whether or not a victim was inviting sexual attention, regardless of whether or not they verbally consented. In reality, one’s outfit does not impact their likelihood of being assaulted—rape happens just as often to people wearing conservative styles of dress as those in tight jeans or a low-cut top.106 The myth that

wearing revealing clothing is somehow a veiled request for sexual attention is artificially disseminated by the same societal forces that insist youth, whiteness, and thinness are the epitomized standards of beauty.

Overall, in order to truly understand the significance of the miniskirt, one must begin with a consideration of what it is: a piece of fabric. In the dawn of its heyday, the miniskirt represented nothing more or less. Young women who wore miniskirts were not necessarily trying to make a rebellious statement, rather, they found themselves in an era of liberation and social progress conducive to experimentation in their own generation’s style of dress. Mary Quant, rather than inventing this era of dress, merely caught wind of it—and had the good business sense to mass-produce the trends already being worn by teenage girls on the streets of London. The real revolution was that young women continued to wear miniskirts as a conscious assertion of self despite being sexualized, ostracized, and mocked.

Placing the miniskirt in the historical context of the 1960s reveals that the concept of “womanhood” differed between generations. Using clothing as a vehicle, we can understand how the politics of self-presentation resonated with the youth who understood that women should not have to choose between feeling safe or confident. Generational differences have long been understood, but the key findings of this research lie within demonstrating how clothing acts as communication, and can be misconstrued and pejorated over time.

I do not present this research as a comprehensive history of the miniskirt, or an attempt to identify one definitive explanation for social change. Rather, I seek to use the garment as a vehicle for deeper understanding of how society simultaneously shapes, and
is shaped by, young women and girls. While the miniskirt began as a generational expression of identity, its imparted meaning was dizzyingly complex. In its prime, and still today, the garment was equated with social change, a new wave of cultural architects, and perhaps even a societal revolution.

The miniskirt has become simultaneously a symbol of liberation and oppression, representing both how far women have come and how much progress is yet to be made. What started as experimentation in self-presentation was exploited into a sex symbol and tool for oppression, reflecting how major industries (most notably, fashion) prey on women’s insecurities to make money. Still, the miniskirt has been reclaimed to a certain extent, as a new generation of feminists recognize that clothing does not invite sexual attention under any circumstance. The garment is no longer simply a piece of fabric, rather, it is a testament to the power of young women as a collective.
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