



We wore “sloppy sweaters [and] tweed skirts.”¹ Proposed styles for the wartime college woman

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By Fall 1943 about half of all U. S. college students were women as men left the campuses to fight in World War II. Because of this shift many U.S. colleges tailored their courses and programs to female students.² National periodicals also focused attention on the co-eds. The purpose of this study was to examine proposed styles for college women during WWII to help historians analyze and put into context dress worn by college women during the war. This study aids in understanding of home front life and U.S. consumer behavior during WWII.

We examined fashion editorials and manufacturer/retailer advertisements that targeted college women in issues of *Glamour*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Look*, *McCall's*, and *Vogue* between December 1941 and August 1945.³ We searched articles and editorials that included information on college women's dress to record information about garment type, manufacturer/retailer, and when present we recorded cost, fabric type, color and where the garment was intended to be worn. Information was located on 354 garments.⁴ Dresses were pictured most frequently (n=65, 18.4%), followed by suits (n=47, 13.3%), coats (n=42, 11.9%), skirts (n=41, 11.6%), blouses (n=34, 9.6%), sweaters (n=30, 8.5%), jackets (n=18, 5%), slacks (n=12, 3.4%), jumpers (n=12, 3.4%), formal gowns (n=11, 3%) and other (n=42, 11.9%). These figures are similar to the recommendations made by *McCall's* editor: “Every good college wardrobe starts off with a boxy coat, [a suit, a skirt] and all the sweaters you can lay your hands on.” Other “must-haves” included two dresses, slacks, an extra jacket, warm sleeping pajamas, a woolly robe, and for housework, a pinafore.⁵

Garments were made from wool, cotton, rayon or blends. Popular fabrics included flannel, corduroy, crepe, jersey, velveteen and tweed. In August 1942 a *Vogue* editor explained that “tweed [was] for campus, jersey for town, velveteen for Occasions.”⁶ Popular colors included beige, brown, red, black, green and grey. Garments were available from a range of retailers and prices varied. Reported clothing budgets also varied. One survey conducted by *Design for Living: The Magazine for Young Moderns* reported the “average college girl” spent \$240.33 a year on clothing.⁷ This may have been high, as both *Look* and *Vogue* editors explained that the key wardrobe pieces for the 1942 college woman cost around \$100.⁸ This difference may reflect belt-tightening as the nation prepared for war and rationing.

Early in the war authors of dress related articles focused on ways to get the most out of one's clothes, ways to care for clothing and to update garments from one's wardrobe. Some ideas included: “Dye your coat and make a hood collar of plaid wool; put felt or velveteen revers, buttons or pocket flaps on your suits, plaid ribbon down the front of a wool dress; make a patchwork wool skirt.”⁹ New apparel purchases needed to be made wisely; clothing needed to be high quality and long lasting.¹⁰ Sometimes campus clothing was described as “smart,” “practical,” “versatile” or perfect for the “penny-wise” buyer.¹¹ It was important that elements of the college wardrobe be versatile. Coats often had removable linings, and suits, dresses and

jumpers had to go from day to evening. For example, jumpers could be worn with “a sweater . . . and it's something sporting for campus. . . [but worn with a] blouse . . . it's all dressed up.”¹² Separates were popular; sweaters or blouses could be worn under a jumper or suit or with a skirt.

Wartime college women were a viable consumer segment with “definite ideas about their clothes.” A *Look* editor explained that manufacturers and retailers “now conduct high-school and college advisory boards and fashion forums to help crystalize their customers’ ideas.”¹³ Apparel retailers and manufacturers appear to have been aware of co-eds conflicting feelings concerning the pressure to participate in the war effort or the financial lure of wartime employment as they suggested their clothes could be appropriate for college students *or* career women. Editors and writers of women’s and fashion periodicals started to offer advice for co-eds in addition to picturing the latest campus fashions. For example, *Look* published “12 Do’s and Don’t’s for College Girls” in February 1942. Do’s included loving one’s “country, its institutions, traditions and aspirations;” the primary “don’t” was a warning to college women to not “be in too great a hurry to prepare yourself for a job. You may make a bad choice or atrophy your best talents.”¹⁴ Editorials suggested female students stay in school, as their education was important to their roles as future wives and mothers.

Historic collections may be full of wartime garments worn by college women, but these collections often lack adequate provenance. Analyzing proposed fashions is one way to study the wartime consumer. The “college-girl look” primarily consisted of sweaters and skirts. Bush and London hypothesized that less “variability of clothing styles in a society, the more enduring, clearly defined, and conflict-free are the social roles of individuals in that society.”¹⁵ In other words, the appearance of college women illustrated the limited roles and responsibilities for women in the 1940s.

¹ *Look*, “College Girl 1942” June 16, 1942 p. 46.

² *120 Years of American Education*, 1993, p. 65.

³ These periodicals were read by college women in the 1940s. Jennifer M. Mower (2011). “Pretty and Patriotic: Women’s consumption of apparel during World War II” (PhD dissertation, Oregon State University), p. 72.

⁴ *Vogue* (n=205); *Glamour* (n=106); *McCall’s* (n=26); *Ladies’ Home Journal* (n=16); *Look* (n=1). Suits were recorded as one unit; skirts and tops were recorded separately.

⁵ Corey, “College Life Has Changed,” *McCall’s*, August 1943, p. 93.

⁶ *Vogue*, “Virtue in Skirts” August 15, 1942, p. 53.

⁷ “Miss Average College Girl, 1941” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/tweed/miss-average-college-girl-1941/21010> (accessed June 10, 2012).

⁸ *Look*, “College Girl 1942” June 16, 1942 p. 45; *Vogue* “Campus Wardrobe” August 15, 1942, 58.

⁹ *Ladies’ Home Journal*, “Wear Last Year’s Clothes for a Change” August 1942, p. 80.

¹⁰ *Glamour*, “Summa cum Laude” August 1942, p. 35.

¹¹ *Glamour*, August 1943, p. 109.

¹² *McCall’s*, September 1944, p. 136.

¹³ *Look*, “College Girl 1942” June 16, 1942, p. 45.

¹⁴ *Look*, “12 Do’s and Don’t’s for College Girls” February 24, 1942, p. 56-59.

¹⁵ George Bush and Perry London, “On the Disappearance of Knickers: Hypotheses for the Functional Analysis of the Psychology of Clothing,” in *Dress and Identity*, ed. M. E. Roach-Higgins, J. B. Eicher and K. K. P. Johnson. (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1995), 108.