

A Study on the Transition of Power Dressing in Contemporary Fashion

Hyoju Kim*, Chonnam National University, Korea
Soojeong Bae, Chonnam National University, Korea

Keywords: Contemporary Fashion, Power Dressing, Power Shoulder, Power Suit

1. Purpose

Today, women not only lead consumer trends but also exercise influence in various fields, as a result of improved social status and economic power. Women are recognized as leaders of modern fashion and show their social and economic power through fashion. Power dressing reportedly began during the 1930s when women began to have a job and wear tailored suits, which used to be exclusive to men only. In the 1930s, shoulder pads were used for the first time for widening the shoulders, and later in the 1980s and 2000s, power suit emerged as a retro fashion. In the 21st century, more diverse types of power dressing have been found.

Although there are studies on fashion styles that resulted from increasing power of women, changes of the shapes of power shoulders, and comparison of power suits found in American movies and Korean movies. However the research on transition of power dressing from the time when it first appeared until today is not found yet. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine changes of power dressing from 1930s to present. I believe this study will help predict future changes of power dressing by reinterpreting trends in modern fashion based on history and investigating power dressing of women as a barometer of women's social power.

2. Method

As research methods, literature review and empirical study were both used. For literature review, the social and cultural background was reviewed based on relevant books, journals and papers were published. For the empirical study, qualitative analysis on power dressing between the 1930s and 2015 was conducted based on relevant books, collection catalogs, and web sites as well.

3. Result and Discussion

During the 1930s, women made effort to improve their rights as they were main sources of labor after men were involved in World War I. They began to wear tailored suits for working and activity and used shoulder pads to make their shoulders look broader like men. To emphasize the shoulders for an inverted triangle silhouette, the chest, waist, and hips were reduced, by for instance, wearing a skirt that came down to the shins. The 1929 New York Wall Street Crash and subsequent Great Depression led to worldwide economic depression in the 1930s. As a result, consumers made practical and economical purchases and many women wore dark tailored suits and white blouse like a uniform of power dressing. This probably resulted from the constant attempt and desire of women for economic participation and social consent on gender equality.

For about five decades since the 1930s, the social status of women continued to rise and, by the 1980s, the number of professional women increased and, therefore, working women emerged

as a new consumer group. At this time, women wore white blouse and achromatic tailored suits with hard and broad shoulders, which represented success and social status. Around this time, Yuppie(young urban professionals) emerged from the baby boomers. They highly valued professional success and economic wealth in the society that was dominated by materialism and consumerism, and invested much in leisure. Power shoulder was an essential part of their fashion style. The big belts were also fashionable during the 1980s for exaggerating the shoulder. Women in the 1980s completed power dressing by wearing expensive designer suits to show their economic capacity and social status.

Fast changing sociocultural values and social structure in the 21st century led to social anxiety, high technology, multi-culturalism, supernaturalism, and power of women. Fashion was raised as a symbol of individuals or groups. Power dressing in the 21st century not only symbolizes one's socioeconomic status but it also expresses one's identity and women's self-respect. In comparison to power dressing in the 1930s and 1980s that emphasized masculinity, contemporary power dressing is more feminine in the overall silhouette and style. The shoulders are showing in various shapes, including horizontal, diagonal and round using various ornaments and decorations to enhance the feminine looks. Women also complete power dressing by focusing on values and originality expressing their individuality, instead of the luxury brands.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, women during the 1930s used shoulder pads for wearing tailored suits to create broader shoulders and inverted triangle silhouette. Following the economic depression, they preferred practical and economical consumption and commonly wore simple and dark-colored tailored suits with a white blouse like a uniform. In the 1980s, also, women wore dark tailored suits with broad shoulders, which were exaggerated horizontally. During the 1980s, women boasted their economic power and status through fashion, and used luxury designer brands and logos to complete power dressing. In the 21st century, the power dressing was focused on feminine style and slim silhouette. The shoulders were made in various shapes including horizontal, diagonal, and round shapes with various decorations. However, instead of luxury brands, value-oriented products became more popular items of power dressing.

This study demonstrated the influence of sociocultural environment on power dressing of women, and transition of power dressing from the 1930s to the 21st century. It will help predict future fashion as a result of changing social status of women.

References

- Kim, H. J., Bae, S. J. (2016). A Study on the Changes of Power Shoulder Shapes in Contemporary Fashion, *Journal of fashion business*, 20(1), pp.157-172.
- Choi, H. J., Ha, J. S. (2004). Women Power Dressing Expressed in Recent Fashion, *Journal of the Korean Society of Costume*, 55(2), pp.130-142.
- Buxbaum, G. (2009). *Icons of fashion : the 20th century*. (K. Geum, Trans.). Seoul: Misulmunhwa.