

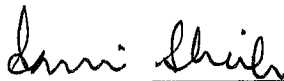
A Look Rather than a Reality:
Feminism, Bras and the Politics of Commodification

By
Cecily Larison

Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For Honors in History

April 2016

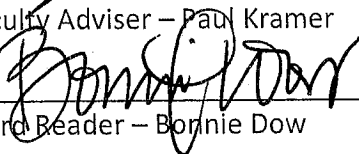
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Director of Honors – Samira Sheikh



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Introduction

"Women changed the definition of beauty, but not the desire to obtain it"

—Debra Spar¹

In 2008, NPR published a story called "Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth."²

The article chronicled the popularization of the term "bra-burner" after the 1968 Miss American Pageant Protest organized by the New York Radical Women in Atlantic City, New Jersey. That day women gathered with signs and beauty items like bras, aprons, hairspray and mascara to throw away, symbolizing their discontent with the objectification of women by the pageant and commercialization of female beauty expectations by the event's sponsorship. Carol Hanisch, a member of New York Radical Women and one of the event organizers, explained that she and others had planned to burn bras at the 1968 Miss America Pageant Protest, but ended up simply trashing them due to a fire concern. She wrote that "the media picked up the bra part" and that she often said, "if they had called us 'girdle burners,' every woman in America would have run to join us."³

"Bra-burners" was a common pejorative term for feminists in the 1970's, and the association between feminism and bras remains contested today. The term was popularized during the women's liberation movement, the period of American feminism

¹ Debra L. Spar, *Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection*, First edition. (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2013), 100.

² Nell Greenfieldboyce, "Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth," *NPR.org*, 2008. accessed October 6, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94240375>.

³ For more information on the development of the "bra-burner" myth and media coverage during women's liberation, see: Bonnie J. Dow, *Watching Women's Liberation, 1970: Feminism's Pivotal Year on the Network News* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://site.ebrary.com/lib/vanderbilt/docDetail.action?docID=10944470>.

which peaked between 1968-1972 and focused on issues of sexuality, equal pay, and consumerism. Hanisch is right to point out that the media “picked up the bra part,” emphasizing the connection between feminism and bras. However, the connection between bras and feminism was not always derogatory towards feminists. From the late 1960’s to early 1970’s, feminists used bras as a productive symbol to convey their ideas. For many movement members in 1968 and the years that followed, the choice to wear or not wear a bra, or even destroy one, was a political act. While few if any ever burned bras, radical women’s liberation groups during this time period used bras in public protest and within writings routinely, as a symbol of hegemonic femininity, problematic consumerism, or objectification of the female body. In public protests the bras were often trashed; in writings, bras or the absence of them were used as a way to talk about the “construct” of femininity in the US. For some, going without a bra was a personal statement of ideology, or a step towards reforming their identity outside the boundaries of traditional womanhood. With the spread of these protests and writings, going without a bra became shorthand for identification with women’s liberation, becoming a widespread trend throughout the US.

The negative connotations these women’s liberation groups assigned to bras affected the lingerie industry in major ways. Starting in 1970s, bra industry analysts encouraged companies to market the “no-bra” look, a design created in 1965 that had since been overlooked in the mainstream market. Starting around 1971, bra industry leaders like Maidenform debuted an entire new line of un-padded, "natural" bras, which figured prominently into marketing schemes. These bras and the marketing for them directly appropriated feminist language and imagery, and by 1973 80% of bra

purchases were lightly-lined, no bra-bras.⁴ The absorption of feminist rhetoric into new bra designs, along with the social acceptance of bare breasts as a “style,” abruptly ended feminist use of the bra as a repressive symbol along the way. The “no-bra look” lost its radical potency when it became a popular, marketed style.

The “bra-less” trend was noticed by those outside women’s liberation circles, from the press to the medical communities. The question of whether to wear or not wear the bra became the topic of a national discussion, and a way of simplifying women’s liberation into one issue. Former secretary of state Dean Acheson weighed in on the “bra-less” debate, and the Journal of the American Medical Association even published an editorial about how going without a bra could lead to early-onset “pendulous” breasts.⁵ The press often belittled or outright denounced going without a bra, while emphasizing this choice as essential to the women’s liberation movement. Constant association in the media between bras and women’s liberation diverted and downplayed issues of women’s rights. In spite of the political intention of women’s liberation activists, and the widespread “bra-less” trend that followed, the term “bra-burners” has had a lasting impact on the way feminism is labeled. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, “bra-burner” was a useful pejorative, meant to write off the activism of these women.⁶ Some feminists, especially those representing a more moderate, liberal ideology,

⁴ “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1973” (Ann Arbor, United States: ProQuest Annual Reports, 1973), 11.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/annualreports/docview/88204843/citation/113F45973C4BD6PQ/7>.

⁵ Harry F. Rosenthal, “Acheson Slips Into the Bra Question,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984), September 19, 1969.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/1635505971/abstract/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/141>; “Pendulosity a Peril,” *JAMA* 219, no. 5 (January 31, 1972): 608–608, http://jama.jamanetwork.com/data/Journals/JAMA/8321/jama_219_5_010.pdf.

⁶ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open : How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 160.

subsequently distanced themselves from the term and the act of bra destruction.⁷ This distancing has diminished the important part bras played as symbols during the women's liberation movement.

Breaking from historical narratives that understate the importance of clothing culture to the women's liberation movement, this thesis seeks to assert the socio-political significance behind women's liberation groups' use of bras as symbols from 1968-1973. Spreading out of the circles of women's liberation, contemporary national news articles and archival documents from the bra industry indicate the large-scale impact the symbolism of "no-bra" protest had on the bra industry's design and marketing. Far from an isolated trend or poorly planned protest, the destruction and rejection of bras led to changes in the available options for everyday women. The bra as a shifting symbol showcases swift changes in visual feminine identity during the period and illustrates the vibrant, cyclical interactions between material, consumer culture and feminist thought. Though the popularization of "no-bra," unlined bras by the fashion industry brought greater options for women in the early 1970s, it ultimately diluted the power of bras as feminist symbol, appropriating the ideology of self-acceptance and body-confidence women's liberation leaders had previously been using anti-bra protest to symbolize, into advertising themes.

Feminism, History and Terminology

The cultural movement for women's equality spanning the years 1968-1973 was popularly called the women's liberation movement. In feminist historiography, the

⁷ Greenfieldboyce, "Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth."

ideology of this period is commonly referred to as second-wave feminism. Issues like reproductive rights, equal-opportunity employment, and women as caretakers in the family define second-wave feminism.⁸ Life changed dramatically for all women in America between the 1960's and 1970's. With the growth of feminist activism, legal protections of personal property and against physical violence increased, and women's participation in the waged workforce passed the 50% mark in the mid 1970's.⁹ Reflecting the politics of the women's movement, the sexual revolution, and other counter-cultural movements of the 1960's, fashion flipped from the pressed, structured dresses of the 1960's to a much looser, and often even androgynous look. Beyond these important broad political movements and social changes, though, everyday women in this time period began to critique what their sexuality and gender meant. The late 1960's and early 1970's saw the growth of thousands of consciousness-raising groups where women would talk about their personal experiences and come to identify their collective issues.¹⁰ The topics included finding self-confidence, sexuality, and independent fulfillment outside of the household. Often this meant reflecting on self-image and beauty culture in everyday life – almost every periodical or leaflet contains a reflection on the meaning of beauty and beauty products to womanhood, often referring to the symbolism of bras. Women had a new critical interest in issues of sexual

⁸ My research involves many voices that were working towards those goals, defined as those of second-wave feminists in existing scholarship. However, the authors of most of the primary sources used in this project define themselves as women's liberation movement members. The term "women's liberation" evokes a specific American cultural movement, with commonly acknowledged dates from 1968-1972. In order to avoid anachronistic terminology and refer to the specific American cultural movement, I will primarily use the term women's liberation movement rather than second-wave feminism.

⁹ Barbara R. Bergmann, *The Economic Emergence of Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 34.

¹⁰ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 69.

objectification, consumerism, and gendering, and beauty products were one integral way for them to process their ideas.

Feminist Factions

Feminism is inherently political – it assumes that social and political structures have disadvantaged women throughout history, and that women deserve equal treatment as human beings. There are many ideologies within this umbrella. Roughly divided, these schools of thought during the late 1960s and early 1970s can be characterized as liberal, radical, and cultural feminisms, the categorizations I will use for this project.¹¹ Liberal groups focused on political and legal recognition through established systems. From a contemporary perspective, they overlooked many intersectional issues like social class, race, and sexuality, and often privileged legal recognition over cultural change. The most influential group was The National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in part by *Feminine Mystique* author Betty Friedan. NOW filed thousands of lawsuits on behalf of women facing employment discrimination and harassment in the early 1970s.¹² Women identifying with groups like NOW sought to establish equality through due process over time, and made tremendous progress for women's legal recognition in under a decade.

In spite of the immense diversity and internal dissent reflected by the women's liberation movement, until the 1990's many historiographies flattened this time period into a progressive narrative that overlooks or understates the significance of radical

¹¹ Jacqueline Rhodes, *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modem*, SUNY Series in Feminist Criticism and Theory. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). 2.

¹² Rosen, *The World Split Open*. 89.

feminist action and culture.¹³ Ruth Rosen's *The World Split Open* is one of several comprehensive guides to the complexities of the rise of the women's movement, managing to convey how quickly and pervasively concepts of womanhood changed.¹⁴ One event common to this narrative and others is the 1968 Miss America Pageant Protest organized by the New York Radical Women.¹⁵ Rosen is quick to point out that no bras were actually burned at this event in order to suggest how the media caricatured feminism through the term "bra-burner." Rosen writes that "at that moment, bras held little symbolic meaning for feminists," and that the media focused on this symbol for its sexiness rather than the much more symbolic aprons.¹⁶ As with the protestor from the NPR article, Rosen's understanding of clothing symbolism is colored by how radical feminists were caricatured, rather than how they self-defined themselves. She therefore incorporates the media's mockery of feminism in her analysis of bra symbolism, rather than analyzing the women's intention behind the symbolism before the media began to frame the story. Rosen's dismissal of bra symbolism sidesteps the fact that participants had every intention of burning bras until they were asked not to, purely for safety reasons, at which point the bras and other beauty products were trashed. Though the media mockery ensued exactly as Rosen claims, from the perspective of these protestors the symbolism of destroying bras was still a part of this political statement.

Failing to portray visual feminist symbolism in a credible way downplays the expansive effects feminist ideology had on gendered identity, and the rich history of

¹³ Rhodes, *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency*. 3.

¹⁴ Rosen, *The World Split Open*.

¹⁵ Robin Morgan, "Annotated Planning Notes for the Miss America Protest," *Duke Digital Collections*, 1968, http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_maddc01007/.

¹⁶ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 160.

symbolism in radical and cultural feminist writings and protest. In her book *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency*, author Jacqueline Rhodes re-asserts the value of the women's liberation movement over and against the women's rights movement, suggesting the power of rhetorical, cultural intervention to effect change.¹⁷ She writes "an uncritical history of feminism has served to contain and neutralize one of the key generative moments of public feminist discourse: the in-your-face textuality of the late-1960's radical feminists."¹⁸ By referring to the "textuality" of this movement, Rhodes emphasizes both the scale of feminist writing in this time, and its declarative, self-reflecting tone. The rhetoric these groups used had a broad, lasting impact on fashion and femininities, even if they were construed problematically in the media.

Groups to the left of liberal feminists can be broken down broadly into cultural and radical feminist groups.¹⁹ In her book *Daring to Be Bad*, on radical feminists in this period, author Alice Echols explains that these groups were diverse in their ideologies, and were just as often ideologically compatible as they were factionalized by internal schisms; Rhodes similarly describes the period as "fractious."²⁰ Though there was immense overlap, what distinguishes these groups from the more liberal groups for my purposes is that radical and cultural feminists were more concerned with symbolic, socio-cultural action. Echols, like Rosen, mentions the meaning behind feminist interactions with fashion only incidentally, rather than acknowledging the potential for clothing as meaning-making. Ideological divisions between radical groups often involved interactions with visual culture, or the ways femininity was symbolically represented in

¹⁷ Rhodes, *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*, American Culture (Minneapolis, Minn.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 54, 281.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 281; Rhodes, *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency*, 26.

society and reinforced through imagery. Radical feminists were often rooted in Marxist ideology, and viewed feminism as the best way to dismantle capitalism.²¹ Materialist radical feminists, for example, saw the money and time women had to spend on extra beauty products to look “presentable” for a job as a quantifiable financial disadvantage, often overlooked by broad legal policy. Over a lifetime, women had to spend a lot more money on beauty products in order to maintain a job and accrue social favor, what we would call a “pink tax” today.²² For these women, everyday interactions had as much to do with the oppression as systemic legal systems. Groups like Cell 16, a militant feminist group out of Boston, interpreted feminine fashion items in particular as symbolic of patriarchal and capitalistic oppression, even as they adopted a “uniform” – jeans, a white shirt, and birkenstocks. This fashion philosophy shows the ways in which this group successfully deconstructed some aspects of feminine visual culture, even while reinforcing others by adopting their own rigid uniform. Though these radical groups were most upset with capitalism and the beauty industry, the meaning they intended to convey in trashing and going without bras was lost on the general public, who instead saw the protest as an image of feminist hysteria. These interactions with visual symbolism are integral to understanding the women’s liberation movement, to address its scale and influence on the everyday level. However, Echols points out that the fringe lifestyle choices of some radical women were simply too ambitious – she writes these women often “overestimated the extent to which feminism alone would undermine

²¹ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 79.

²² The Editorial Board, “The Pink Tax,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/13/opinion/the-pink-tax.html>.

capitalism,” expecting their focus on the economic exploitation of women to expand into a revolution for all.²³

The cultural feminists during this time were united in addressing everyday aspects of women’s daily lives such as clothing and relationships. Instead of working towards women’s liberation solely through established legal systems, these groups wished to establish dramatic socio-cultural reform along the way that could shift the way people thought about gender and identity. Women practicing this type of feminism often set their goals at a community or personal level, placing greater emphasis on day-to-day changes in their relationships and actions like changing their clothing or sharing chores with their partners equally.²⁴ This type of feminism was often contested; author Alice Echols suggests “while women's culture was originally defended as a way to sustain the movement, it seemed instead to promote withdrawal from political struggle.”²⁵ This definition of politics is limited, however, as many cultural feminists at the time insisted that the personal precisely was political. Though bras are a cultural symbol, as I will show liberal, radical, and cultural feminists used them as a political metaphor.

A Note on Demographics and Intersectionality

The radical and cultural feminist movements engaged with class, sexuality, gender and race more often and more directly than liberal groups – in *Separate Roads to Feminism*, author Benita Roth writes, “previous pictures of second-wave feminism have erased the

²³ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 79.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

early and substantial activism of women of color.”²⁶ The question of who made up the movement is a contentious one, defining core arguments in feminist ideology even in the modern day. The mainstream movement was mostly white, cis-gendered and middle-class, but by recognizing radical groups and disparate movements it is possible to get a somewhat more diverse picture of feminism. Many lesbian voices were prominently present throughout the movement, and various groups mention issues of class that reflect the experiences of poor women. On the other hand, to this day many radical feminists refuse to engage with non-cis-gendered women in their critique of the patriarchy.²⁷ Women’s Liberation did include and have the support of many women of color, but the primary focus of larger groups on the plight of middle-class white women encouraged many to form their own groups. In 1971 and 1973, the African-American magazine *Ebony* published articles questioning the women’s liberation movement, ultimately reporting that though there were black voices in women’s liberation, “many black people consider women's lib to be a white middle class thing.”²⁸ For women of color who had always worked, for example, white middle class women’s pursuit of fulfilling work felt like an alien issue. The *Ebony* articles were not without their detractors, though, and many black women were frustrated with being “forced to choose between being for black liberation or women's liberation.” Black leaders like Mary Berry and Shirley Chisolm marched in women’s liberation protests, and the latter suggested

²⁶ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism : Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

²⁷ Michelle Goldberg, “What Is a Woman?,” *The New Yorker*, August 4, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/04/woman-2>.

²⁸ Johnson Publishing Company, *Ebony* (Johnson Publishing Company, 1971), 73. <https://books.google.com/books?id=Oqubl8stulAC>

that the movement's focus on economic equality should be of interest to black female heads of household.²⁹

The racial and class divide endemic to the movement was noted by some white women's liberation members. A 1970 article in the Women's Liberation newspaper *Off Our Backs* entitled "Sexism/Racism" notes that the specific plight of black women was often overlooked by the movement, but this article is not necessarily representative of movement-wide trends, and scholars have on the whole condemned this period of feminism for its lack of race and class-consciousness.³⁰ Overall, it tends to be difficult to track the background of each author, as they attempted to generalize the experiences of women by adopting a "neutral," everywoman voice. Many of these everyday individuals contributed to periodicals about women's liberation under a pseudonym to thematically represent the voices of all women, without always representing these demographics in practice.³¹ The white, middle-class background of many women's liberation members is something to bear in mind when reading the often-anonymous texts from women's liberation publications.³²

Clothing as Symbolism

The critical analysis of visual symbolism absent from many historical narratives is instead present in feminist theory. A wide variety of fields study the intersection of visual culture and gender, from communications, to economics and philosophy. In terms of

²⁹ Ibid, 74.

³⁰ Martha Shelley, "Subversion in the Woman's Movement: What Is to Be Done," *Off Our Backs*, November 8, 1970.
<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/197138726/abstract/DD48FD49F25843B7PQ/15>

³¹ Rhodes, *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency*, 28.

³² Ibid, 26.

more theoretical feminist texts, this thesis fits right in between the periods examined in two seminal works: *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, first published in 1963, and *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf, published in 1990.³³ Both books situate female identity in relation to consumer goods – however, Friedan focuses on expectations for an ideal housewife from the 1950s and 1960s and Wolf focuses on beauty expectations for the more individualistic “working woman” of the 1970s and 1980s. Both directly and indirectly, Friedan and Wolf suggest that women’s freedom is undermined by consumer culture, which situates their value in aesthetic appearance. The central difference between the two theories is that women in the 1950’s and early 1960’s changed their appearance to please men, while women from the 1970’s into the 1980’s changed their appearance to bolster their own self-worth. They are historical works, but as secondary sources the ideas they put forth about women’s relation to image apply especially to the symbolism of bras. This thesis is in dialogue with the subsequent discussions created by these works, which put into question the ownership women have over their everyday choices—especially in how they dress—and how those choices in appearance reinforce socio-political meaning. Books reacting to Friedan and Wolf like *Wonder Women* by Debora Spar and *Shopping Around* by Hillary Radner take this discussion one step further, asking whether consumer culture reacts only to what women desire, and whether women can take ownership and create positive identity through feminine products.³⁴

³³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: WWNorton, 2001); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth : How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

³⁴ Spar, *Wonder Women*; Hilary Radner, *Shopping around : Feminine Culture and the Pursuit of Pleasure* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

As an everyday part of our life, clothing is often treated as innocuous and meaningless. As Ruth Rubinstein's *Dress Codes* makes abundantly clear, however, the clothes we wear and when we wear them are key elements of culture and identity construction. The book is an excellent resource to ground any sociological study of clothing, using familiar examples to point out the obvious and yet too often understudied ways in which meanings are designed and conveyed through what we wear – or don't. Rubinstein makes a number of distinctions in terminology that I will use for clarity's sake in analyzing the meaning of bra symbolism for the women's liberation movement. First, she distinguishes between fashion and clothing, citing the former as based on trends and sales, while the latter involves choices by autonomous groups and individuals.³⁵ She uses the term "tie-sign" to explain clothing that ties an individual to a group, and the term "tie-symbol" as clothing that expresses social or political agendas.³⁶ Rubinstein refers time and again to how breasts have been shaped to make meaning in culture. She analyzes the 1950's as a time when clothing emphasized women's procreative role, in contrast to how breasts have been historically obscured to emphasize women's power time and again throughout history, such as the flat-chested look made popular during the freeing 1920's.³⁷ She also discusses the growth of fitness expectations in late-twentieth century culture, directly referencing *The Beauty Myth*.³⁸ She does not focus on bras during women's liberation, but her terminology and thorough study of clothing as symbolism will be a useful framework for my analysis.

³⁵ Ruth P. Rubinstein, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 93, 98, 99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

Other writings pick up on the specific topics of bras and feminism within clothing culture. Betty Hillman's article, "The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power" gives a broad overview of how clothing was used to symbolize identity, politics, and solidarity, focusing on gendered representation and bringing up bras a number of times.³⁹ Jill Field's *An Intimate Affair* specifically analyzes intimate apparel for its political, artistic, and cultural significance in 20th century America. She suggests that undergarments' literal close proximity to sexuality makes them particularly poignant statements in our visual culture. Fields focuses on the ways "apparel both symbolizes and constructs individual and group relations to systems of power," particularly in the varied social groupings of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ Her concluding chapter, in particular, analyzes the creation and recognition of meaning in relation to second-wave and later third-wave feminism, noting that the bra became "a powerful symbol for both feminists and antifeminists." In order to convey the symbolic importance of the bra to gendered political messages, Fields focuses on feminist artists of this time and the ways in which undergarments functioned in their work, something also explored in works on feminist performance art. Though she includes in-depth analysis of feminist concepts through her analysis of second-wave-influenced art, Fields does not discuss the ways in which feminist groups interacted with undergarments as statements.

³⁹ Betty Luther Hillman, "'The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power': The Politics of Gender Presentation in the Era of Women's Liberation," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 34, no. 2 (2013): 155–85.
http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/1431924682?accountid=14816&rft_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo

⁴⁰ Jill Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 2.

Fresh Lipstick portrays the internal dissent within second-wave feminism in relation to fashion in a succinct chapter.⁴¹ Scott describes the visual difference in representation between the more professional feminist groups like NOW and the more radical groups like Cell 16 and the Redstockings. She takes a firm stance against the latter groups, suggesting that radical feminists were alienating the average woman by attacking beauty products and traditionally feminine fashion items that many women enjoyed at the time. She rightly points out the immense impact the women's liberation movement had on popular culture, so that women who were suspicious of the ideology generating the fashion culture might still try to adopt the look of radical feminists.⁴² She writes that "crude underground newspapers dedicated to feminism began to appear that consistently advocated that women cut their hair, quit shaving, stop wearing makeup, and refrain from having sex with the enemy," implying that these protests were excessive and simply a trend.⁴³ Scott further implies that the point of these protests was inherently unfair, claiming that women's magazines and industries were leaders in women's rights, and unfairly criticized by radical groups. She writes that the ways these groups protested women's magazines "illustrates the movement's habit of placing the blame for women's oppression on the media."⁴⁴ In this quote, Scott leaves out the Marxist goals of radical feminists and implies that the media and consumer industries were attempting to advance the goals of women during this time – something most feminist sources from Friedan to Echols strongly disagree with. As I will demonstrate

⁴¹ Linda M. Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴³ Linda M. Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*, 1st Palgrave Macmillan pbk. ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 284.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

through internal memos in the bra industry, those selling products to women sought to condense feminist ideology into marketable goods for profit. The political and economic aspects of feminism are integral to discussions of representation, especially in commercial capitalist media, and this is an oversight compared to other books addressing the movement. Scott's superficial approach to larger economic and political themes shows the divide between her cultural feminist analysis and that of other, more theory-based scholars.

Beyond the surface level of meaning described by these scholarly texts on aesthetics, fashion in American society functions as a part of the capitalistic system. Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism* suggests that consumer industries in the late twentieth century ultimately absorbed feminism into their product sales, to the point that many now conflate advertisements with real feminist ideology.⁴⁵ Appeasement and contentedness is in the interest of business, so much so that nearly every type of subversive, radical movement can be adapted into a product or advertising scheme. This means that when individuals are upset with some item or idea manufactured by industries, the industries are more likely to listen and adapt than ignore their concerns. The changing style of bras around the second-wave suits this model: rather than getting rid of the product altogether, designers redesigned bras to seem more comfortable and "pro-woman," with an eye on working women's preferences. Linda M. Scott explains this interaction succinctly, when she notes that radical feminists were consulted by ad agencies that wanted to make their products more feminist-friendly in order to make a

⁴⁵ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013), 211.

profit.⁴⁶ Many books and papers exist which chronicle the appropriation of feminism by advertisers. In *Disco Divas*, author Sherrie Inness writes that industries hoped to "exploit the excitement generated by the movement."⁴⁷ Ultimately, the bra industry's appropriation of feminist language and clothing symbolism into marketable goods neutralized the efficacy of this symbolism to confront those same businesses.

Chapter Guide

To begin, this project examines the ways in which women's liberation activists used bras to symbolize the problems they saw as impeding women's rights and respect for women. I break down the recurring bra-centered metaphors into three radical and cultural feminist ideologies about the central problem of women's advancement – the objectification of women by patriarchal power structures; the oppression of women by capitalism and the consumer products defining it; and narrowly defined women's culture that limited gender presentation options for individuals. In periodicals and public protests, women used bras as a striking symbol to talk about these problems, but failed to come to a consensus on their diverse ideologies. The symbol had many mixed meanings, and the messages of these groups got lost despite the ubiquity of bra symbolism. Many of the original texts in this chapter come from the Duke Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture Archive. In addition to this archive, this chapter uses periodicals, pamphlets and books from the period that were accessed through the Vanderbilt Library.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 284.

⁴⁷ Sherrie A. Inness, *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 15.

The second chapter focuses on the bra industry's reaction to women's liberation and anti-bra activism, arguing that the growth of the movement fundamentally shaped the industry in the early 1970's—which in turn appropriated women's liberation language and imagery. This chapter references most prominently the advertising designs and internal notations from two representative companies, Maidenform and Hanes. The Maidenform ads were obtained from the Maidenform Collection at the National Museum of American History Archives in Washington, D.C., and I also use public annual reports from Hanes dating to the early 1970s. The Hanes annual reports show the decline of bra sales and growth of unlined bras that emphasized the breast's natural size and shape. These documents make explicit reference to the women's liberation movement in discussing declining sales and changing product lines. The Maidenform collection contains wide range of designs, advertising documents, and internal memos from the 20th century, including documents showing industry reaction to the women's liberation movement. These records emphasize industry fear and response to the ways women's liberation groups had been portraying bras, showing how feminist anti-bra sentiment was appropriated into sales for the very same product. The imagery and language from bra advertisements from the period show attempts to capture the spirit of women's liberation through language and product design.

After chronicling the women's liberation movement's use of bras as symbol, and the industry's reaction, my project concludes by addressing the impact of "no-bra-bras" on everyday women inside and outside the women's liberation movement, which ended roughly around 1973.⁴⁸ This chapter reflects on both negative and positive aspects of the fashion industry's appropriation of women's liberation language and symbolism. The

⁴⁸ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*. 281

bra was taken up as a mocking symbol against the women's liberation movement by popular commentators looking for an easy way to diminish the seriousness of women's issues. These sources exaggerated and then lampooned the association between women's liberation and bras. They also brought in "expert" voices from doctors and businessmen to discredit the "no-bra" trend, writing it off as a business opportunity or medical issue respectively. With this negative media coverage, everyday individuals began to confuse the clothing item with the socio-political movement, arguably impeding its progress. The symbolism of bras, which started with meanings as diverse as the women who made up the movement, ultimately escaped the control of women's liberation members, becoming an empty signifier.

For everyday women, the "no-bra" trend had mixed results. As consumer businesses adapted to feminism, they provided more options for women to purchase and more diverse "types" of women in advertising for consumers to identify with. However, this process diluted the message of women's liberation activists, who saw their messages as flattened and re-packaged, manipulated into a new ideal for women to buy into.⁴⁹ As Naomi Wolf writes in *The Beauty Myth*, "'the women's movement nearly succeeded in toppling the economics of the magazines' version of femininity," but instead ended up reinforcing the connection between self-worth and beauty by replacing the male gaze with a critical self-gaze.⁵¹ These themes appeal to broader questions of the value of feminine beauty culture in American society, pointing to the fundamental question of whether beauty products ultimately empower or undervalue women.

⁴⁹ Marilyn Goldstein, "Women's Lib: 'Liberated' Ads Don't Liberate," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, July 18, 1971.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/148039527/abstract>

⁵¹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 67.

Chapter One:

Sex, Gender and Money:

What Bras Symbolized in Women's Liberation

“The politicization of hairstyles, dress, and self-presentation became central to the cultural politics of the second-wave feminist movement...”

-Betty Hillman¹

Introduction

Many, if not most narratives of the second-wave feminist movement (roughly 1968-1972) are quick to assert that feminists during this time period never actually burned bras, and downplay any significant association with bras. As the term “bra-burner” functioned as an easy pejorative to write off the actions of contemporary women’s liberation activists at the time, it is understandable that these narratives seek to distance themselves from bra-burning. If bras were burned, this would somehow “prove” the problematic pejorative term, and disqualify the significance of women’s activism for women’s rights. However, this analysis relies on the often mocking reactions to these symbols that originated outside feminist groups, rather than analyzing the original intent of the individuals making use of them.

Clothing is the most easily recognizable symbol of gendered expression, a visual clue to an individual’s identity.² Women’s liberation writers and protesters used the bra to pose questions about how gender is constructed and regulated in western society. Bras were used to frame what each liberal, radical, and cultural feminists saw as the central problems for feminism. These problems overlapped, but placed different

¹ Betty Luther Hillman, “The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power.”

² Rubinstein, *Dress Codes*, 7.

emphasis on objectification, consumer culture, and feminine gendering. Bras were destroyed or rejected in public ways by radical feminist groups in events like the Women's Strike for Equality in D.C. in 1970, where federal employees who could not march threw away their bras on the sidelines to express their solidarity.³ In feminist periodicals and newspapers, bras were used as a metaphor for ideas about consumerism, gendering, and objectification. Many women felt limited to roles as mothers or sexualized objects, only defined in their relation to men, and saw visual symbols like the bra as an excellent way to communicate their frustration. To the women who were making these choices intentionally, the way they dressed or discarded clothing was a means of everyday socio-political action. Women's liberation activists routinely used bras to emphasize important points about rigid gendered identity formation and consumerist pressures to buy feminine products. Apart from public displays, bras were used as shorthand in the texts of women's liberation activists, to represent compliant femininity or a synecdoche for problematic consumerism. With the popularization of this symbol, foregoing the bra or symbolically rejecting it was a way of identifying with the women's liberation movement for many everyday women. During the women's liberation movement, bra symbolism thus played an important role in shifting gendered identity standards and exemplifying feminist concerns in public protest, women's lib writings, and everyday dress.

³ Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.*, Women in American History, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 1.

The Problem is Legal Recognition: The Liberal Line on Bras

For centrist feminist groups like NOW, or the ACLU Women's Rights Project, the first problem to address was women's lack of legal recognition before the law and in the workplace. These organizations filed thousands of lawsuits on behalf of women facing workplace discrimination, who were victims of sexual assault, or both.⁴ Their gains in just the first few years were staggering, and feminists of all ideological backgrounds were paying attention to these quick changes. Women's participation in the paid workforce surpassed 50% in the 1970s, and many legal shifts coincided with this massive demographic change.⁵

That being said, on the whole, these groups were much more focused on formal reform than subversive, action in terms of dress and appearance. The most well-known liberal feminist group, NOW, focused on legal policy for advancing women's rights, most often from the perspective of middle-class white women. Images of NOW members show groups of smartly-dressed women in tailored frocks, stockings, and heels, sitting neatly—a stark contrast to the wild hair, baggy clothing, and flat sandals displayed by more radical groups.

Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), was the leader of NOW for much of the 1960s. *The Feminine Mystique* was a massively influential text, setting the tone for many discussions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the text, Friedan made several references to brassieres as markers of femininity and sexuality.⁶ One particular reference noted that in the 1960s, “manufacturers put out brassieres with

⁴ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 5.

⁵ Bergmann, *The Economic Emergence of Women*, 34.

⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

false bosoms of foam rubber for little girls of ten.”⁷ She included this anecdote to emphasize her central themes about consumerism and the marketing of female sexuality. The alarmingly young age of the girls wearing the bras indicated the pressures girls felt at an early age to transform themselves into women, defined as objects of heterosexual male desire. By putting on these padded bras, the young girls were emulating the breasts that “define” womanhood visually, and emphasize them as bodies more than minds. She expanded on this theme in her section “Sex-Directed Educators,” where she talked about how young women are indoctrinated into an identity that emphasizes their sex role above all else. She wrote “though many have noting yet with which to fill a brassiere, they are told archly not to wear a sweater without one.”⁸ Girls were taught to be constantly conscious of their sexuality and secondary-sex body parts, no matter their age and size. Friedan ties bras into her larger critique of gendered consumer products and the objectification of women. The bras have been purchased in order to attain this ideal, as part of the “feminine mystique” marketing scheme central to Friedan’s thesis. For Friedan, the socio-consumerist pressures to attain a feminine ideal above all else prevent women’s advancement—succinctly evidenced by this rubber-padded bra.

Friedan’s analysis of the bra shows that she was able to conceive of clothing as an integral part of the feminine mystique, or the creation and marketing of femininity in American society. However, though Friedan uses this symbol in *The Feminine Mystique*, she was part of an older generation. As Betty Hillman points out in “The Clothes I Wear Help Me Know My Own Power,” the younger generation of feminists

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ Ibid., 162.

challenged the legal focus of centrist groups like NOW.”⁹ Friedan’s critical analysis of feminine clothing was relegated to the page when these women’s liberation groups were expressing the ideas in their everyday appearance choices. Her critique suggests a preliminary examination of women’s clothing, but does not outright propose any radical changes in everyday dress.

The Problem is Objectification: Bras and the Patriarchy in Radical Feminist Protest

Radical feminists picked up where Friedan’s preliminary critique of bras left off. One of the most common ideological concepts backing the women’s liberation movement was that sexual objectification, as perpetuated by a patriarchal society, was the number one issue facing women. Radical women’s liberation members from Boston to San Francisco and from many different backgrounds and experiences adopted this ideology. Writing in 1969, one anonymous writer from Boston’s radical group Cell 16 explained that the traditional woman “WAS her body and therefore took expensive care to decorate herself in order to offer herself and in order to give herself a sense of worth.”¹⁰ The author defined femininity, fashion, and beauty products specifically in relation to male expectation and objectification of the female body. Many women used clothing to express their frustration with objectification, and refused to wear fashion items they saw as sexualizing. A 1969 article in *Life Magazine* explained the concept of fashion as political statement to lay readers, that “women’s liberation members avoid makeup,

⁹ Betty Luther Hillman, “The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power,” 1.

¹⁰ “The Oppression of the Male Today,” *No More Fun and Games*, February 1969, 69, Women’s Liberation Movement Print Culture, Duke University Library, http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlmms01029/

fancy hair styles and seductive clothes. If they go without bras, it is to be natural, not erotic.” The natural-ness is an essential statement that the women wanted to take ownership in their bodies as they were, and not as society said they should be.¹¹

For these activists, women were restricted in their identity formation and personhood as they were little more than decorated bodies, sexualized objects. They similarly critiqued restrictive gender norms, but saw patriarchal oppression as the integral factor behind it all. By re-defining their identity without these products, these women were trying to create a space of confidence outside of their experience as sexualized objects. In all of these articles, the central theme is personal confidence, to define one’s own self worth and live in defiance of an impossible ideal meant to please men. These women rejected feminine beauty products and fashions as a means of defining femininity outside the scope of traditional womanhood, and of finding a better sense of self—a process that bra-based symbolism began to play a larger role in.

In 1968, anti-Vietnam War protesters from the Jeannette Rankin Brigade, affiliated with The New York Radical Women, staged a performance piece to illustrate the ideological rejection of traditional femininities.¹² The group had its origins in the New Left, and formed when women from an anti-Vietnam War group split off to focus on women’s liberation. That January, the radical women constructed a larger-than-life, papier-mâché figure representing “Traditional Womanhood,” which they proceeded to bury in Arlington National Cemetery. The figure was a caricature of expectations for women, with exaggerated curves, blonde hair, and a pageant sash. Notably, the figure

¹¹ Sara Davidson, “An Oppressed Majority Demands Its Rights,” *Life Magazine*, 1969. For another contemporary example of this type of feminist thought, see: “Letter from staff,” *It Ain’t Me Babe*. (1970), 5, Vanderbilt University Special Collections and University Archive Library.

¹² Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 56.

was “draped in bras and girdles,” emphasizing these objects as part of traditional womanhood.¹³ This was one of the earliest recorded instances where bras were employed by women’s liberation activists symbolically to emphasize problematic sexualization and objectification.

In the oration for the public protest, the author, prominent radical feminist Kathie Amatniek (now known as Kathie Sarachild, adopting her mother’s name), suggested that traditional womanhood, and therefore all women, had until this day been limited to a merely sexual function.¹⁴ She specifically named the sexualization of women by patriarchal power structures as the problem. The speech stated “As human beings, both men and women were sexual creatures and they shared their sexuality. But the other areas of humanity were closed off to traditional womanhood...”¹⁵ It is this limitation that the caricatured figure draped in bras and girdles was to represent. These women were not protesting other women, or even sexuality, but rather the limitation of traditional womanhood where women were seen as peaceful wives and mothers. In order to confront the visual basis of objectification and exploitation, the protest centered on a larger-than-life caricature and physical beauty products – the bras and girdles. Sexual objectification was part of the problem, and the bras were supposed to emphasize this point.

¹³ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴ Sarachild was a prominent radical feminist figure in the late 1960s and 1970s. She remains committed to the ideology that patriarchy benefits men and is the chief problem for women, much to the chagrin of transgender advocates and gender scholars. Goldberg, “What Is a Woman?”

¹⁵ Kathy Amatniek, “Funeral Oration for the Burial of Traditional Womanhood,” in New York Radical Women, “Notes from the First Year” 1968, 22, Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture, Duke University Library.

<http://contentdm.lib.duke.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15957coll6/id/650/rec/1>.

On the second page of a September 1970 edition of the Berkeley, California newspaper “*It Ain’t Me Babe*,” there is a striking image—a brick in a bra.¹⁶

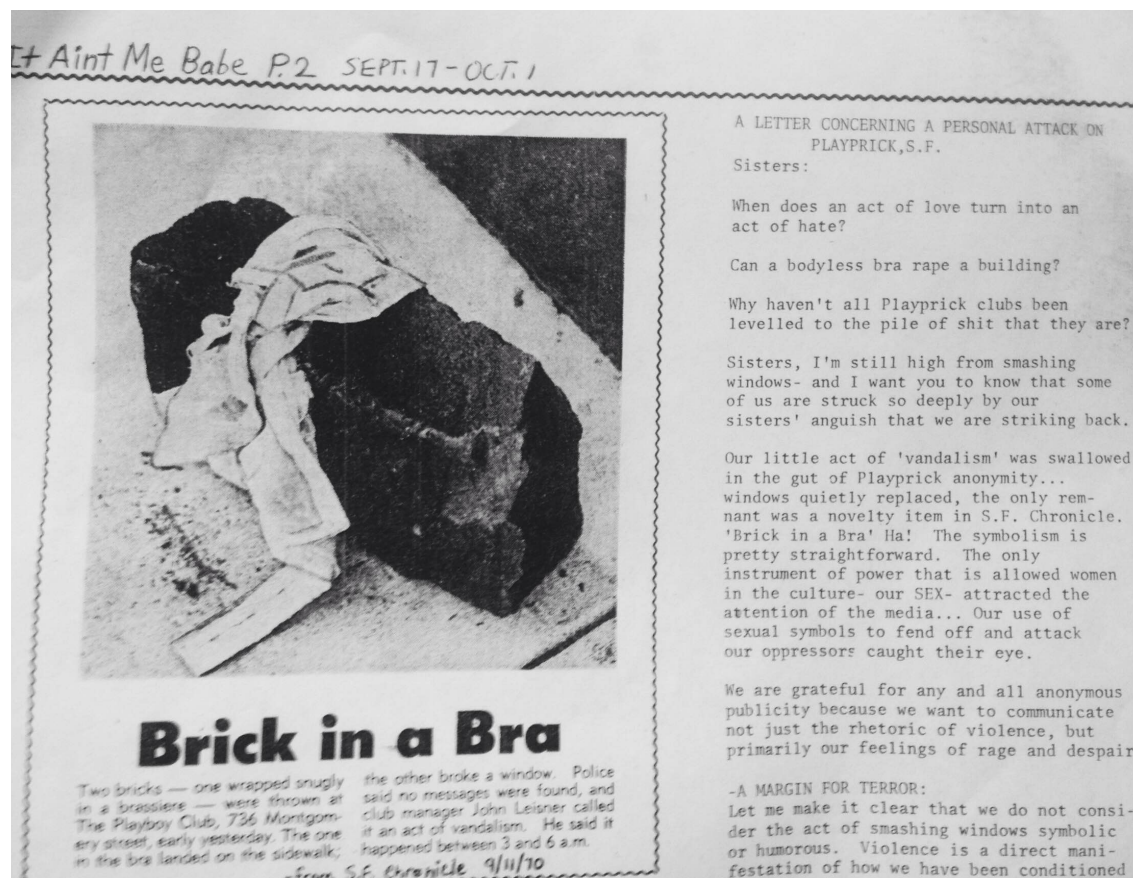


Fig. 1 The “brick in a bra” pictured in a 1970 edition of *It Ain’t Me Babe*

According to the paper, this brick was thrown into the “Playprick” [read: Playboy] mansion. The Playboy mansion was an obvious target for protestors who focused on objectification, since the *Playboy* empire was known for profiting off images of women to arouse men. By throwing the brick-in-a-bra into the mansion, the protestor was rejecting that objectification and quite literally tossing it back to this institution.

In the article that mentions the incident, the author included a sardonic brief explanation of why the brick was attached to a bra, stating “the only instrument of power

¹⁶ “Venceremos,” “Brick in a Bra,” *It Ain’t Me Babe*, September 1970, Vanderbilt University Special Collections and University Archive Library.

that is allowed women in this culture (is) our sex."¹⁷ Again, the author was critiquing the way women were marginalized by their sexuality, so that it became the one and only measure of a woman's worth. No explanatory note was attached to the bra however – its attachment to the brick was supposed to stand in for this critique. It was a synecdoche for larger concerns about the ways society creates femininity or controls and exploits sexuality. As in the Burial of Traditional Womanhood, the author bemoaned reducing a woman's personhood to her sexuality. In this action the bra is specifically meant to convey the protester's frustration with sexualization, instead of being an accessory to a larger symbol. By itself it stands for the larger cultural problem these activists seek to address.

In both examples and many others not mentioned here, bras functioned prominently as a means of protest against objectification. They are a meaningful critique, not simply discarded clothing items. By using the bras to talk about objectification these protestors are highlighting their association with female secondary sex characteristics. The implication was that bras are used to shape breasts in an unnatural way in order to make women more sexually alluring – one author writing in Nashville in 1969 compares the process to scrutinizing the udders of "blue ribbon cows."¹⁸ By invoking the prized cow imagery, this author suggests that women were not simply eroticized, but objectified into trophy objects to convey a man's status through their bodies' desirability. The display of bras off of women's bodies was meant to imply the separation of their bodies from that process of sexualization. By taking the bras

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Southern Student Organizing Committee and Vanauken, "Freedom for Movement Girls - Now," 1969, 1, Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture, Duke University Library. <http://cdm15957.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15957coll6/id/693/rec/1>.

outside the situation of wearing them, the women were emphasizing that their bodies could – and did—exist without sexualizing products. It was the clothing items that were objects, rather than complex individuals intended to wear them. This meaning was among the most common ways bras were used as symbolism within women’s liberation.

The Problem is Consumerism: Bras in Materialist Radical Feminist Critique

Objectification was, however, not the only meaning behind bra-symbolism. Radical women’s liberation groups with roots in Marxist thought often sought to protest consumer products as the root cause of gendered repression, rather than as a method of delivery. These women were often frustrated with sexualization as well, but saw it as symptomatic of the larger structure of capitalism. Historians often connect the various social movements of the 1960s into a family tree of sorts, and rightly so—many Women’s Liberation movement members had roots in far left groups, and had previously protested to end the Vietnam War. They were schooled in social change, and united by the idea that the distribution of wealth had the ultimate power to change social rights. These protests and writings still rejected feminine symbols, but from a distinctly anti-consumerist lens. In putting the emphasis on the consumerism inherent in production of American femininities, these women rooted their protest in a materialist tradition, holding that everyday access and opportunity determined women’s success and fulfillment. Apart from the significant pay gap experienced by working women in the 1960s and 1970s, the pressures to “buy-into” a certain look were seen as a means of preventing women’s advancement. In a 1970 issue of “It Ain’t Me Babe,” an author named Judy from the Gay Women’s Liberation group in San Francisco explained the

necessity of looking a certain way by purchasing products in order to keep a job. She wrote: “Our rules depend on our money being spent for many products we would never volunteer for: like stockings, girdles, & crippling shoes which have become necessities in most women's jobs.”¹⁹ Feminine consumer culture required a woman to spend money on beauty products in order to merely subsist.

Amongst the many aspects of consumerism – product creation, money exchange, accessibility—advertisements became a central point of contention due to their creation of unattainable ideals.²⁰ In another, artistic towards protest piece dating to 1969, The Cleveland Radical Women’s group constructed a piecemeal play made up of scraps of advertisements entitled “Sweet 16 to Soggy 36,” examining the archetypes created by these ads.²¹ Whether they wrote, performed, or boycotted, there was a strong precedent in women’s liberation circles for being suspicious of advertisement materials.

Though women’s liberation groups protested consumer items from magazines to cigarettes, bras were a central and reoccurring symbol of feminine products. The Miss America Pageant protestors’ quick decision to symbolically trash, rather than burn, beauty items in a “freedom trashcan,” can be seen in a written annotation on the original planning document.²²

¹⁹ Judy, “Lesbians as Women,” *It Ain’t Me Babe*, July 1970, Vanderbilt University Special Collections and University Archive Library.

²⁰ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*. 134.

²¹ Cleveland Radical Women’s Group, “Sweet 16 to Soggy 36: Saga of American Womanhood” 1969, Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture, Duke University Library. <http://contentdm.lib.duke.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15957coll6/id/553/rec/1>.

²² Morgan, “Annotated Planning Notes for the Miss America Protest.”

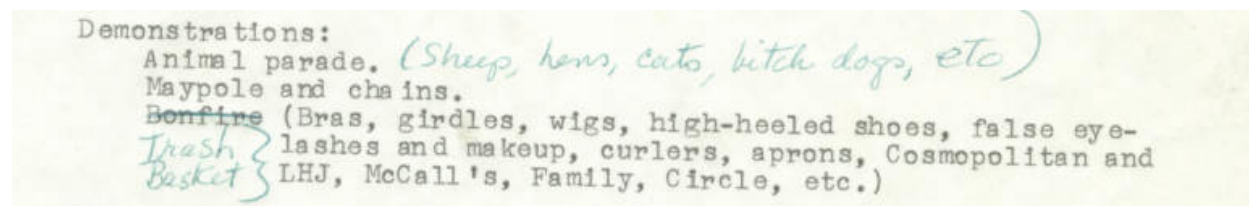


Fig. 2: Annotated notes from the Miss America Pageant Protest, showing switch from bonfire to trash basket

Through fire or symbolic trashing, it was key to the metaphor that beauty products—bras first on the list—were discarded and destroyed visibly. This document and others from the planning and execution of the protest clearly show that the beauty items disposed of that day were meant to be a commentary on the ways gender roles were created and enforced by the social pressure to buy products.²³ According to the protestors, the pressure to look a certain feminine way was a scheme created by the ad industry, so that women would be forced into spending more money on products. The fact that the universal standard of acceptable beauty in society took so many products to achieve, meant that women *had* to spend a great deal of their income in order to simply be presentable. Thus, the destruction of bras and other beauty products was central to a critique of gendered consumerism. The organizers had a specific point to make about the pageant as a marketing tool, in order to push more beauty products on the masses.

Though the Pageant Protest is among the most recognizable use of bras as a critique of consumerism, this type of symbolism appears in print as well. For example, two essays entitled “The Mask of Beauty” by women’s liberation writer Una Stannard and “Pretty” by an author known only as Alta talked specifically about bras as

²³ New York Radical Women, “Protest Songs for the Miss America Protest,” 1968, Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture, Duke University Library.
http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_maddc01006/.

problematic consumer products. In “The Mask of Beauty,” Stannard described the products she had to buy in order to achieve acceptable status in society, and how the standards were constantly in flux, costing ever more money. The essay started by asserting the malleability of beauty standards, saying “though at present women increase the size of their breasts with internal or external falsies, if it became fashionable to be flat-chested women would... have a plastic surgeon transform their breasts into the fashionable size.”²⁴ Here Stannard suggested market forces directly shaped women’s physicality, and that the tides of fashion drove women to pay to have their bodies, specifically breasts, shaped a certain way. The transactional element is central – according to the quote, women felt some sort of pressure to meet a standard, and are willing to pay for attachments or surgeries in order to meet the standard. Stannard later wrote “every ad for bras tells a woman that her breasts need lifting, every ad for padded bras that what she's got isn't big enough, every ad for girdles that her belly sags and her hips are too wide...”²⁵ In discussing the ad’s rhetoric, Stannard was emphasizing the ways in which marketing creates an unattainable gendered identity. The words “tells” and “need” suggested these ads were inherently manipulative, coaxing women into a belief and thus a purchase. For Stannard, companies who marketed bras to sell were manipulating a woman’s self-image for profit. By demeaning her natural body, they created a need for products that would remake her in an attempt to meet impossible standards of beauty. This form of reasoning thus faults consumerism and the capitalist system as a whole for manipulating women’s self-image for profit, though it uses bras specifically to exemplify this system. To writers like Stannard, sexist

²⁴ Gornick, *Woman in Sexist Society; Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, 190.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

representations of women were not only problematic, they were also symptomatic of the inherent issues of capitalism.

In her essay, a woman with the penname “Alta” took a different approach to the same theme of how much women paid to achieve a certain look.²⁶ In a two-page long diatribe, she wrote about the expectations placed on her appearance, and the costs to achieve this desired effect. The products and services ranged from clothing to cosmetic products to surgery. She included bras as one such cost, and wrote that someone needs to “drive me to try on 7 different bras to nurse so my boobs wouldn't hang low.”²⁷ Though Alta did not outright reject the process of consumerism like Stannard, she still suggested that she has to exert undue cost and effort in order to reform her body. Again, the author saw the bra as a method to reform her to suit an ideal, and not a pleasant process for herself. She suggested that her breasts would naturally “hang low” and are instead molded by the bras, with the added effort of driving to a store and trying on different bras in order to conform with this image. The stream-of-consciousness prose of this text emphasizes the author’s exasperation with this process, feeling that it is a Sisyphean task to reform her body beyond its natural tendencies.

The Problem is Feminine Gendering: Bras and Cultural Feminists

Women’s liberation activists approached the question of gender creation from a multiplicity of perspectives. Cultural feminists in particular were concerned with how they were “gendered,” or taught to be women, in everyday, problematic ways. The famous slogan “the personal is political” is a great way to define the ideology these

²⁶ Gornick, *Woman in Sexist Society*, 35–36.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

women ascribed to, as they politicized gender norms such as the work women did in the house. Everyday interpersonal interactions and self-reflection defined their feminism, and many sought to reform gender categories. Most notable among these voices were lesbian groups, who “visually displayed their political goal of creating a society free of gender distinctions” through their dress.²⁸ These individuals took issue with restrictive feminine culture, not just objectification by the male gaze. Militant radical groups like Cell 16 went so far as to suggest “women’s interest in sex, fashion, make-up, and children demonstrate[s] not only the extent to which they were damaged, but the extent to which they collaborated with the system.”²⁹ Other women’s liberation participants, especially those associated with the “free-love” or hippie movements, sought a “return” to naturalism in order to celebrate womanhood. These individuals appealed to images of bare-breasted goddesses, an Arcadian idealization of women’s political and religious power in ancient societies.³⁰ No matter their premises, each of the women representing these ideologies were frustrated by the narrow definition of femininity in 1960s America, and certain that more ways of defining womanhood had to be created. When they decided to symbolically reject bras, their decision was decidedly personal, an everyday choice in individual identity construction.

An author from the radical lesbian feminist group The Furies took a decidedly anti-bra stance in an anonymous 1972 article.³¹ Emphasizing the concept of restrictive traditional femininity through clothing, “Women: Weak or Strong,” used bras as a way to

²⁸ Betty Luther Hillman, “The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power,” 40.

²⁹ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 160.

³⁰ For an excellent example of goddess symbolism in these publications, see “It Ain’t Me Babe,” (Berkeley, Calif: Last Gasp Ecofunnies, 1970), Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

³¹ The Furies Collective and Charlotte Bunch, “The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly (v. 1)” January 1972, Women’s Liberation Movement Print Culture, Duke University Library. <http://contentdm.lib.duke.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15957coll6/id/279/rec/1>.

discuss how women are kept “soft,” inhibited by clothing from developing muscles, constricting their bodies’ development. The author bemoaned the young age that bras were “slapped” on women, and asserted that “by wearing a bra your breast muscles are never allowed to develop and your breasts remain weak and soft—just the way men like them. F**k that sh*t! Strong, firm breasts are wonderful.” She then went on to discuss her workout routine, asserting her pride at pursuing something that makes her feel good even if it is outside of gender norms. For the author of this particular article, rejecting bras was part of a transformation not just of her appearance, but of her gendered identity. She sought to transform her body underneath the clothing in order to form her identity outside of what is considered traditionally feminine. The angry language echoed her frustration, and declared her refusal to be relegated to feminine standards. She suggested she was not only gendered but also physically restrained when wearing the item. Two years before the development of the first sports bra, this author categorized bras as a means of control, preventing women from developing their bodies for themselves through exercise.

As the women’s liberation movement peaked in the early 1970’s, bras were mentioned more often and more directly in feminist publications as markers of women’s gender and sexuality. In the popular anonymous text “Barbarous Rituals: 84 Ways to Feminize Humans” from 1970, which is found in many collections of feminist essays from the time, the anonymous author used bras to discuss a form of indoctrination into women’s culture, radicalizing ideas from *The Feminine Mystique*.³² Among the “barbarous” steps taken to “feminize” a human, the author listed “dying of shame

³² “Barbarous Rituals: 84 Ways to Feminize Humans,” 1969, Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture, Duke University Library. <http://contentdm.lib.duke.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15957coll6/id/783/rec/1>.

because your mother makes you wear a training bra, but there's nothing to train” as a feminizing experience. On the next line, however, she conversely listed “dying of shame because your mother won't let you wear a bra and your breasts are bigger than other girls' your age and they flop when you run and you sit all the time with your arms folded over your chest” as another. Both examples involve pressures within feminine culture to attain a certain ideal with regards to one's breasts. The first experience, told from the perspective of a girl made to wear a bra before she felt she needed one, was indicative of pressures from the mother to wear a feminine item before it is even practical. The woman felt inadequate in recalling this experience, as she did not live up to the form of expected, traditional femininity that includes having full breasts to fill a bra. Conversely, the second example indicates a girl's need for a bra, but suggests the mother identifies bras as an emblem of feminine, and thus sexual maturity instead of a practical option for her daughter. Again, the “shame” is in relation to other girls, and measuring one's body against theirs. This text does not outright reject bras, but importantly indicates the ways they function as markers of femininity, sexuality and maturity rather than as practical, functional tools. Neither mother is concerned with the actual need for the bra in relation to the girl and her body, but instead is interested in the bra's symbolism in terms of moving to feminize the girl or being afraid to sexualize the girl. For the author of the article, the bra is thus emblematic of worries about traditional womanhood and turned into a socio-political marker of feminizing and shaming, not simply an uncharged item for practical body needs.

Many women's liberation activists concerned with gender thus conceived of societal expectations to wear bras or girdles and conform one's body to a certain shape

as a regulation of gender, a form of socio-political compliance rather than simply a fashion choice. Thus putting on a bra for the first time was a moment of gendering, not simply a practical, physical act. These authors framed clothing items like bras as symbols of constrictive femininity, a means of social control in how they could express their identities.

Conclusion

Contrary to narratives that downplay the political meaning of bras during women's liberation, it is clear that bras were an important and recurring symbol throughout the late 1960's and early 1970's. From these pages and protests bra-less-ness expanded into popular culture, becoming a tie-sign to express belonging to feminist circles, and a tie-symbol to express one's feminist politics. The next two chapters will explore how the connection between bras and feminism was expanded and exploited by the clothing industry and the media, and how it was read and applied by the masses.

From its origin in women's liberation, however, this bra-symbolism had varied and overlapping meanings, ranging from rejecting patriarchal objectification, to materialist protest and gendered identity construction. These varied meanings made it difficult for the reading public to understand one clear women's liberation message in anti-bra protest, as I will explore in the third chapter. Moreover, they caused dissent within women's liberation. In 1973, one feminist and Equal Rights Amendment supporter asked rhetorically "what has the urgent need to erase these discriminations got to do with whether women wear bras?"³³ Clothing was a contentious topic in feminist groups on the whole, and its symbolism lead to disagreement and misunderstanding.

³³ Betty Luther Hillman, "The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power," 42.

Even amongst radical groups, there are accounts of women's liberation groups banishing anyone presenting as masculine, or simply un-feminine from their meetings.³⁴ To those women dressing less feminine, the choice was liberating – to others, it was reinforcing that patriarchal “looks” were powerful. The precise meaning of clothing-culture remained subjective, and even as the no-bra idea spread its purpose remained ultimately ambiguous, reflecting the ideological factions plaguing the Women's Liberation Movement as a whole.

³⁴ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 161.

Chapter Two: Bras and the “Natural Look:” Appropriating Women’s Liberation Dialogue into the Fashion Industry

“Sexuality follows fashion, which follows politics”

- Naomi Wolf¹

Introduction: Commercializing the Natural Look

Naomi Wolf’s observation about the connection between fashion, sexuality, and politics is an excellent way to conceptualize the impact feminism had on the bra industry. For many of these women the personal was political, and their everyday lifestyle choices resonated their ideologies out into the world. The politics of women’s liberation and the “no-bra” movement inspired by it had a far-reaching impact on bra manufacture and advertising which, in turn, affected what everyday women wore and how they felt.

Whether in industry-wide leaflets or in company specific annual reports to investors, the industry directly blamed women’s liberation for the drop in sales or changing styles.²

Every major company publically acknowledged the “no-bra” trend, and many expressed different tones to the public as compared with internal reports. According to an Annual Report from Hanes in 1973, in the early 1970s bra sales declined up to 7% after a decade of rising profits, resulting in millions of dollars of losses and the consolidation of

¹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 133.

² “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1973”; “70’s Planning Guide” (True Form Foundations Inc., 1970), 585, Box 41, File 5, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

a few brands.³ Even accounting for external fluctuations in the economy, Hanes and other companies lost millions as they attempted to adapt to styles for the “liberated” woman. They assured worried investors that through careful market analysis, “no-bra fashion becomes a look rather than the reality for the young.”⁴ From Maidenform to Vanity Fair and Warnaco, each big brand in the industry responded by creating more types of thin or unlined bras that gave little support to the breasts and made the wearer look like she was not wearing a bra. Companies had the statistics to back up creating more of the lightly-lined style—up to 80% of bras purchased during this time were these thin, “no-bras.”⁵

Even though women’s liberation influenced and affected the industry, the influence went both ways. The appropriation of “no-bra” imagery and protest into the fashion world was both problematic and productive for women. On one hand, popularizing a more “natural” image of femininity broadened the ways in which women could express their identity acceptably in American society. As the shape of actual breasts became less taboo, women could dress and display their bodies more comfortably. Furthermore, diverse types of product options could suit the preferences of different women. Even so, the popularization of the style privileged a certain type of small figure, foreshadowing the problematic trend towards “thin looks” chronicled in books like *The Beauty Myth* and *Wonder Women*.⁶

More poignantly, the quickest effect of the bra industry’s response to the women’s liberation movement was one of silencing. With the popularization of women’s liberation

³ “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1973.”

⁴ True Form Foundations Inc., “70’s Planning Guide,” 5.

⁵ “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1973.”

⁶ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*; Spar, *Wonder Women*.

in bra industry imagery and rhetoric, bras became an empty signifier for the women's liberation movement. With Maidenform and its competitors, women's liberation themes were broken down and synthesized into new products and advertising schemes centered around ideas of "natural-ness," and self-empowerment terminology, a process outlined in Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism*.⁷ Fraser argues that feminism during this time period "unwittingly" contributed to "the new spirit of capitalism," so much so that it became integral to consumerism in the late 20th century.⁸ She suggests that the rebellious aspects of feminism, which had set to critique "andro-centric, state-organized capitalism" was instead thoroughly analyzed and categorized into cultural trends, and then condensed into a new marketing scheme built to accommodate these trends. The 1970's bra industry thoroughly exemplifies this process in its product offerings and advertising schema. The industry appropriated women's liberation language and imagery into a highly successful campaign of unlined bras promising a "natural look," right at the peak of the women's liberation movement. This chapter includes annual reports from undergarment manufacturer Hanes and original advertisements from Maidenform to track these trends. Both companies were large, representative producers in the intimate apparel market. As thin, unlined bras meant to emphasize one's natural breasts were sold prominently in stores as early as 1971, natural breasts into the mid-1970's became a passé symbol or a fashion theme rather than a poignant protest against sexualization and objectification.⁹ The claims by women's liberation groups that bras contorted one's natural breasts were empty once bras were designed precisely to

⁷ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013).

⁸ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 210.

⁹See: "Maidenform Product Listing 1971" (Maidenform, 1971), Collection 585 Box 29 File 2, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

emphasize one's natural breasts, and even the display of female nipples lost its contemporarily rebellious meaning as it grew commonplace. What it meant to be and look natural became entwined with product purchase. Though the popularization of "no-bra," unlined bras by the fashion industry brought greater options for women in the early 1970s, it ultimately diluted the ideology of self-acceptance and body-confidence women's liberation leaders had previously been using anti-bra protest to symbolize into advertising themes. In an ironic twist, bra companies began to use the word "natural" to sell their products, suggesting that bra-less-ness was not a reality, but a look of breasts shaped by a lightly-lined bra. Bras became a way to achieve "the natural look," and in the same way companies began to speak to and for feminist goals in their marketing language.

Industry Origin in The "Mod" Look

Thin, un-lined bras first hit the market in 1965, when eccentric American designer Rudi Gernreich designed the "no-bra" and began marketing it to a middle-class audience.¹⁰ Gernreich was a European-born American designer, known for his eccentric and sexualized stylings.¹¹ He became popular for his mod designs, a type of fashion that emphasized svelte, youthful forms made famous by the model Twiggy.¹² At the time, the fashion industry was just starting to market big-name designers to middle class clients,

¹⁰ Bernadine Morris, "Gernreich's At It Again With the Bra That Isn't," *New York Times*, May 20, 1965.
<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/117179805/abstract/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/7>

¹¹ Brenda Polan, *The Great Fashion Designers*, (Oxford ; New York: Berg Publishers, 2009), 108.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

the origins of today's fast fashion industry.¹³ Gernreich's "no-bra" was marketed in a 1965 edition of *Playgirl*—a women's fashion magazine different from the 1980's version—as an exemplification of the mod look, emphasizing a boyish, almost androgynous figure and youthful lines.¹⁴ The four-page ad was a puff piece, meant to expand the designer's image into a middle-class market to purchase these "no-bras." The bra was designed for "the playgirl," playing upon the idea of a smaller, unlined bra showing more skin and thus offering more sex-appeal. The models have heavy eyeliner and tight clothing, emphasizing the bra's high fashion origin.

Gernreich's "no-bra" look gained more attention in the late 1960's among wealthy circles. *Vogue Magazine* published an article on the "no-bra" look in 1968 by Diana Vreeland, then the sitting editor of the magazine. Gernreich's "no-bra" and emphasis on an androgynous figure is considered to have directly influenced this high fashion trend in the late 1960s.¹⁵ In "The Perfect Bosom," Vreeland declared that in the late 1960s, "the bare breast is passing from the realm of the outré into that of the chic."¹⁶ Like the 1965 advertisement for the "no-bra," *Vogue's* take on the trend was highly commercialized and sexualized, and was far from engaging with the movement towards women accepting their own bodies for themselves. Instead the magazine was quick to suggest the trend came about only because modern medicine has allowed women to

¹³ Polan, *The Great Fashion Designers*. 120

¹⁴ "Rudi Gernreich's No Bra," *Playgirl*, October 1965. <http://blog.modernmechanix.com/rudi-gernreichs-no-bra-bra-comes-in-threes-slightly-nsfw/>

¹⁵ Interestingly, Polan suggests Gernreich's homosexuality, along with designers like Yves Saint Laurent, was the reasoning behind their emphasis on flattened breasts. Lithe figures with flattened breasts created a boyish look on women. Polan, *The Great Fashion Designers*. 108.

¹⁶ Diana Vreeland, ed., "Beauty: The Perfect Bosom," *Vogue* 152, no. 1 (1968): 91. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/vogue/docview/897855791/citation/4B486F82FC464CDEPQ/1>

get achieve “prettier breasts” that were now worthy of display.¹⁷ Up to half of the article focused on “mammaplasty” options, suggesting women can have their breasts altered like any other clothing accessory. Vreeland pointed out women can have issues with the size, shape, and perk of their breasts, for which “plastic surgery has made great strides in the past ten years.”¹⁸ She talked through the surgery and options, finishing with a discussion of price points.

The article’s emphasis on surgery made going bra-less a transactional, fashionable, status statement. From this vantage point, breasts were simply another way of adorning oneself to meet the era’s fashions. Breast enhancement surgery at the time was prohibitively expensive, not to mention invasive, as the article notes.¹⁹ *Vogue’s* analysis on bearing breasts is directed to fashion-conscious women of means, not everyday consumers or those wishing to simply accept their bodies through women’s liberation ideology. Even though the “no-bra” was marketed as high-fashion culture for the everyday public, the unlined “no-bra” style remained overlooked until the early 1970s in the realm of ready-to-wear fashion.

The Data: Case Study on Bra Company Annual Reports

While there was a fashion precedent for the no-bra look in the mid-1960s, the annual reports from public bra companies in the early 1970s indicate that the trend of going without a bra directly lead to a significant dip in bra sales, and changed the top-selling styles to thin, “no-bra” bras. The explosion of thin-lined bra designs certainly signal a major market change, but the annual reports from public companies indicate the scope

¹⁷ Ibid., 114.

¹⁸ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹ Vreeland, “Beauty,” 92.

and specific effects of this market trend. From Hanes to Vanity Fair and Warnaco, all major intimate apparel brands reflect some dip in bra sales in the early 1970s. In 1970 “the Warnaco group of companies in intimate apparel faced difficult market conditions” – so difficult, in fact, that they were out of most of the lingerie business in 1972, due to “exposure to losses but not much opportunity for satisfactory profits.”²⁰ While this brand simply consolidated its sales, other companies’ annual reports elucidate efforts to “get contemporary” while sales fluctuated and fell from year to year. Clearly the bra industry was a tough business to be in no matter the brand.

Annual reports from the Hanes Corporation from 1968 to 1974 have all the signs of a corporate tragedy, with ups and downs not reflected by cheery media coverage. The brand marketed to middle and lower-class consumers in popular publications from *Ebony* to local newspapers. Hanes bought out the bra brand at the end of 1971, and immediately “major emphasis” was placed on developing Bali’s first seamless bra.²² Bali was a popular, recognizable brand in department stores, but the combined total sales after the merger between Hanes and Bali in 1971 was still one million less than Hanes’ sales alone for 1970. This suggests that Bali had been bought out after a significant decline in sales.

²⁰ “Warnaco Annual Report -- 1970” (Ann Arbor, United States: ProQuest Annual Reports, 1970), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/annualreports/docview/88200889/citation/113FBF45973C4BD6PQ/10>; “Warnaco Annual Report -- 1972” (Ann Arbor, United States: ProQuest Annual Reports, 1972), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/annualreports/docview/88204235/citation/113FBF45973C4BD6PQ/2>.

²² “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1971” (Ann Arbor, United States: ProQuest Annual Reports, 1971), 9, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/annualreports/docview/88200755/citation/113FBF45973C4BD6PQ/1>.

Throughout annual reports in the early 1970s, the company constantly reiterates its resolve to get a handle on contemporary culture, and increase its “soft-cup” styles. The company’s decision to emphasize “soft-cup” and lightly lined bra styles was well-chosen – these bras had come to dominate the market. After the revenue fall in 1971, bra sales were up again in 1972, with primary credit given to “the successful introduction of a number of contemporary, soft cup styles” or unlined bras.²³ In 1973 the Hanes annual report stated “80% of industry sales were in soft cup, less-structured styles.²⁴” With these bras taking up a majority of the market, it is clear that a significant shift in women’s dress had taken place. The majority of consumers purchasing bras had moved completely away from structure and were almost exclusively buying bras that emphasized the breast’s natural shape and size. This suggests a popular cultural movement towards “the natural look,” as emphasized by women’s liberation.

²³ “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1972” (Ann Arbor, United States: ProQuest Annual Reports, 1972), 6, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/annualreports/docview/88202358/citation/113FBF45973C4BD6PQ/69>.

²⁴ “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1973,” 11.

How to wear a bra and look like you're not.



The latest news in fashion is the soft, bra-less look. If you're like most women, you probably love the look but you're just not about to shed your bra. So maybe you tried one of the new soft bras that promised to make you look like you weren't wearing

them sag when they're supposed to shape. And others make you look like you're wearing a bra—so why buy a soft bra in the first place?

That's where Bali comes in. With bras that have been carefully designed for just one reason. To make you look and feel like you're not wearing one. Really.

There's our new Step-n-Stretch bra, for instance. Wear it with your clingiest knit and your naughtiest smile and everyone will think you're getting away with nothing.

Or wear Bali's new Backdown bra under the most revealing outfit you have. You'll never reveal the bra. It's designed to show as much you as womanly possible. The straps fasten in umpteen different ways to hide under just about everything.

We also have the Little Bit—a wispy little tricot bra that feels like nothing and makes you look like something else.

And there's the Flower Bali-Lo, our new décolleté bra. With a soft, natural cup that really minimizes the fuller figure.

Bali's quality and fit have always

Figure 3: A Bali bra ad placed in Ebony Magazine, October 1970.

This ad was placed in a 1970 issue of Ebony Magazine, a publication targeting middle-class African Americans.²⁵ The magazine had taken a stance against women's liberation, but this advertisement by Bali incorporates “no-bra” bra language, emphasizing a product that makes the wearer look like she's wearing nothing

²⁵ “Bali bra ad,” *Ebony* (Johnson Publishing Company, 1970), 99. <https://books.google.com/books?id=Oqubi8stulAC>

underneath a blouse.²⁶ The language and concepts are a bit confused, and the ad seems to be making many, potentially oxymoronic claims at once. The ad suggested most women “are not ready to give up bras,” while still conceding that there may be an impulse to simply not wear a bra, instead of buying a bra to look like one is not wearing a bra. By directly posing the question, “So why buy a soft-cup bra in the first place?” it is clear that the industry had to explain the need for their product, that it was no longer an obvious sell. Continuing, the ad mentioned four differently-named “soft-cup” bras, each which promise to both “shape” the wearer and make her look like she is not wearing one. Beyond its confused language, the ad begins to expand the company’s focus, inserting it into a discussion of what women’s natural bodies mean and should look like. The bras claim to do everything from “minimize the fuller figure” to “make you look like something else,” at the same time as emphasizing natural-ness. Since the natural, nude body is factually one without added articles of clothing, clearly the word “natural” is being expanded and transformed to only suggest its original meaning. The ad only ran once in *Ebony*.

In 1973 the company directly pointed towards women’s liberation in talking about their lightly-lined bra designs and marketing. Even with this big change in style, total industry bra sales from 1970-1971 were unsatisfactory. In explaining diminished returns to investors, Hanes pointed to the movement as the cause, saying “Unit sales of bras by the total industry increased only 1% from 1970 to 1971. The 'no-bra' movement was

²⁶ Throughout 1971 there is a debate about black women and women’s liberation, though the magazine comes down against the movement. See for example: King, Helen H. “Black Women and Women’s Lib” *Ebony*, 1971, 68–76. <https://books.google.com/books?id=Oqubl8stulAC>

receiving much notoriety.”²⁷ The cheery language the company had directed to investors in previous years must not have reflected the true state of bra sales, as an entirely new strategy was unveiled in 1973 emphasizing marketing rather than cutting production costs. Instead of diversifying their product line or cutting costs in making the bras, the company decided to emphasize a different tone when speaking to female customers to make more profit. Hanes debuted the “Sensuale” bra by Bali in May 1973, “a garment that is better fitting than the non-structured, no-bra look popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s.” This bra was meant “to speak to these younger women in their own language” and satisfy a working woman “with a strong desire to please herself.”²⁸ In writing that young women sought to please themselves, Hanes marketers were indirectly naming women who adhered to feminist principles, and were suspicious of items that changed their appearance for others. The bra met sales objectives by the end of 1973, and Hanes felt confident assuring its investors that “in spite of much ‘no-bra’ talk, [young women] continued to have a great deal of interest in bras.”²⁹ The author of the report did not give data for this assertion, but instead suggests the decline could be neutralized by updating marketing language to reach customers.

Unfortunately for the “Sensuale” design and marketing team, the positive sales trend declined sharply in 1974.³⁰ Total industry sales declined 7%, and the annual report

²⁷ “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1973” (Ann Arbor, United States: ProQuest Annual Reports, 1973), 11, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/annualreports/docview/88204843/citation/113FBF45973C4BD6PQ/7>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Hanes Corporation Annual Report -- 1974” (Ann Arbor, United States: ProQuest Annual Reports, 1974), 5, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/annualreports/docview/88202225/citation/113FBF45973C4BD6PQ/14>.

notes that Bali “declined only 4%.”³¹ The entire industry was struggling, and the best reassurance the company could offer was to suggest they struggled less. The Sensuale line so celebrated only a year before was named as the central culprit of the sales decline, in spite of industry-wide declines. Far too much stock was ordered, and the price had to be slashed later in the season. The company lost around one million dollars on just this specific bra line, and industry-wide sales indicate there was a pronounced decrease in demand for bras on the whole.

The Language: Case Study on “No-Bra” Advertisements

Incorporating themes of “natural-ness” and “independence” was a larger, industry-wide trend that had been carefully tracked by market analysts. A 1970 pamphlet on industry trends published by True Form Foundations Inc., a bra materials manufacturer, reveals the worries common to the bra industry over women’s liberation, and spells out the industry-wide response a year before Maidenform released their major unlined bra product line.³² Under its “trends that matter page,” the True Form pamphlet declared “The Freedom Movement” to be an integral influence on undergarment fashion. Though the pamphlet used “freedom” as a synonym for “liberation,” it never outright referenced women’s liberation. The use of synonym is deliberate – the marketing analysts do not confront the women’s liberation movement directly, but translate into a diluted theme of “freedom.” The bra industry categorized aspects of women’s liberation ideology as they related to selling a product—if women wanted freedom and independence, then one

³¹ Ibid., 5.

³² True Form Foundations, Inc., “70’s Planning Guide.”

should give them more product options and emphasize self-confidence in advertising language.

The space the pamphlet spent reassuring those reading it that women will still buy bras speaks to the worry industry leaders had about women's liberation—and thus to its influence. Bra manufacturers were striving to match their products to the anti-bra ethos they saw in the news, in order to simply stay profitable. The pamphlet assured concerned bra manufacturers following the bra-less-ness trend in bold text that “no-bra fashion becomes a look rather than the reality for the young.”³³ These analysts suggest women were not truly rejecting beauty products, but merely searching for a “look” referencing natural-ness. The marketing of the look was meant to make women feel they must appear to look effortlessly perfect instead of perfect by design. One page even pointed out that “big girls and big sizes mean big profits,” and suggests that women with “figure problems” will pay more to “fix” them.³⁴ The “natural look” privileged certain slim body types, and many women would need body-shaping products to look like the models. The next page encouraged bra companies to “stop worrying about the youth who may or may not wear undergarments, and focus on those who do,” promising “the selling seventies” will actually lead to better profits in the bra industry than ever before.³⁵ This is in part due to the correct prediction by industry analysts that the large number of women now entering the workforce would have greater control over their disposable income, leading to higher sales in products for women. In the 1970s, women's participation in the labor force passed the 50% mark, massively reshaping the

³³ Ibid. 3.

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.

identity of the American consumer.³⁶ The pamphlet encouraged the industry to support a working girl “and she’ll share her salary with you” for years to come.³⁷ If these companies conformed to the need for independence and self-acceptance of newly financially independent women, they could develop relationships with them and claim a chunk of women’s growing personal disposable income. They only needed to emphasize that women had a choice, though the company decided what the choices would be.

Women’s liberation anti-bra protest directly affected the realm of popular, department store fashion through companies like Maidenform. The world of high fashion undeniably played some part in the growth of unlined bra looks, but Maidenform’s campaign shows a clear awareness of and focus on women’s liberation themes. After a few years of watching the women’s liberation movement and anti-bra language spread in popular culture, company heads wanted to make un-lined, “natural” bras the central selling focus in 1971. In 1968, the same year the *Vogue* article was published, Maidenform had no unlined bras in their adult line, instead focusing on conical bras meant to elongate the shape of the breast to make them appear larger. However, by 1971 – right around the peak of the women’s liberation movement – they had up to ten different types of unlined bras, all marketed with language about achieving a natural look.³⁸ Sales guides encouraged the intimate apparel sellers in department stores to display these unlined bras prominently, as the centerpiece of the 1971 collection. One guide tells sellers to focus on the “Little Me” bra, “the big new next-to-nothings on the

³⁶ Bergmann, *The Economic Emergence of Women*. 34

³⁷ “70’s Planning Guide,” 4.

³⁸ “Seller’s Guide,” 1971, 585, Box 41, File 9, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

market!”³⁹ Unlined bras are on the first four pages of the 1971 fall product guide, and the displays and bra packages come with incentives like majolica pearls and eyeshadow.⁴⁰

Apart from the sheer number of these unlined bras on its product line, Maidenform’s advertising schema uses the sort of body-positive language one would find in a women’s liberation article. A Maidenform selling guide similarly encourages individuals in lingerie sales to make “today’s new customer” feel like she is making the choice for herself.⁴¹ This was meant to make women feel more independent and self-sufficient, in that choices were left to them. In the guide, each individual woman is merely a type, and her desire for independence and self-definition are merely wishes to be satiated through a different type of consumer experience. In terms of product lines, one item called the “Swingy Little Me Bra” promises it “shapes you as you are naturally.”⁴² Instead of trying to create a better body out of the consumer’s own, this advertisement proposes to compliment the woman’s own natural body for herself, “swingy” and all. Another ad from the Maidenform 1971 Spring Collection goes so far as to propose unlined bras will “let you be yourself.”⁴³ In the ad it is the bra that is giving the permission, not the woman herself. Language of self-empowerment and self-acceptance immediately connote women’s liberation texts on the same themes. What is important is they were now being used by the fashion industry, which had heretofore promised to make women’s bodies “better” than they naturally were, for others to look at. The entire promise of beauty

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Buy Yourself a Pretty Body... and Get a Pair of Pretty Eyes Free,” 1971, 585, Box 41, File 9, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

⁴¹ “Maidenform Selling Guide,” circa 1970, 585, Box 27, File 7, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

⁴² “Swingy Little Me,” 1971, 585, Box 41, File 9, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

⁴³ “The Sea Dream Collection: It’s Merely Me,” 1971, 585, Box 41, File 9, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

products changed from creating beauty on the body as an object to “merely” enhancing or supporting a woman’s own body as part of her emotional growth.⁴⁴

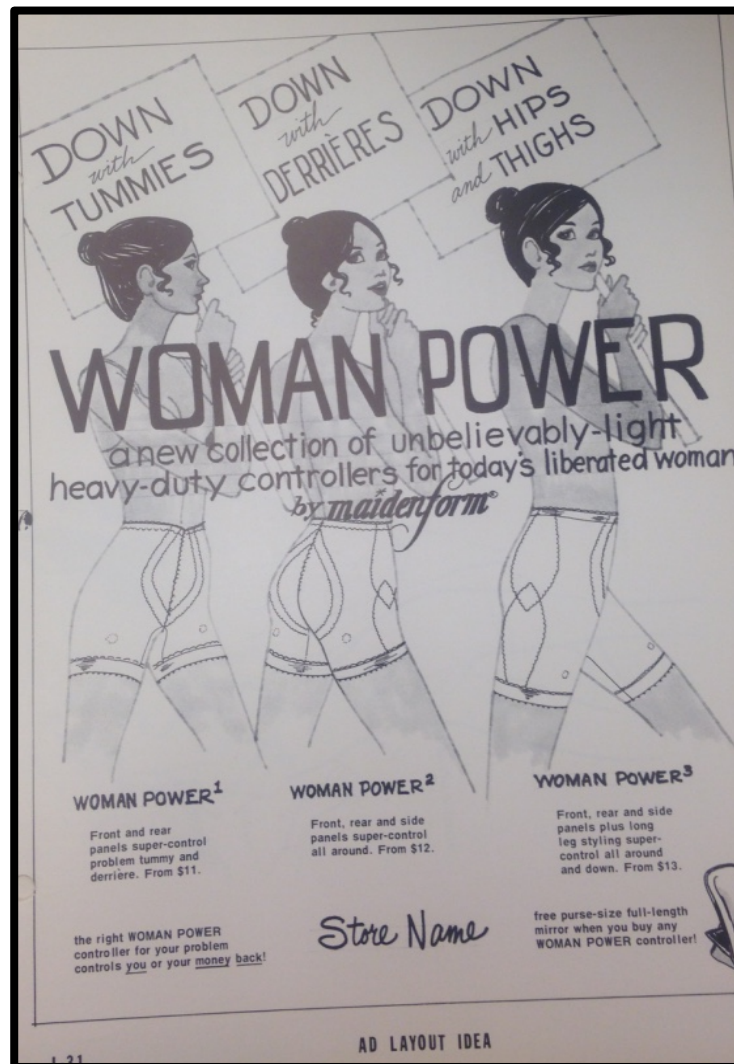


Figure 4: A mock-up for ad by Maidenform, showing their “woman power” girdles

Not all advertising language in Maidenform’s product line campaigns focused on accepting one’s body as is, however. As seen above, in the same season a Maidenform girdle advertisement with the tagline “Woman Power” had faux women’s liberation protesters holding signs that say “down with tummies” and “down with derrières” –

⁴⁴ Ibid.

appropriating the imagery of women's liberation without the theme of body-acceptance.⁴⁵ In an ironic twist, the ad used women's liberation caricatures that are protesting their own bodies as not good enough and declaring they are in need of girdles. The marketing team used the language and imagery of feminist demands to create a scene in which women demand access to a consumer product, which cultural and radical feminists had originally sought to distance themselves from. To quote Fraser, in this ad feminist language has been used to "legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society."⁴⁶ The ad shows that the Maidenform marketing team was hoping to incorporate women's liberation imagery, even into a product that could not represent women's liberation themes easily. While not every Maidenform ad aligns thematically with the next, each of these examples appropriate aspects of the women's liberation movement. The language of natural-ness, empowerment, and accepting one's own body were used along with visual representations of women's liberation protesters, showing the Maidenform marketing team to be clearly conscious of women's liberation influence.

⁴⁵ "Woman Power," 1971, 585, Box 41, File 9, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

⁴⁶ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 211.



Figure 5: Another mock-up Maidenform ad for local publication, featuring “The Un-Bra”

Seen above, Maidenform’s “un-bra,” seemingly a take-off on Gernreich’s earlier “no-bra,” uses this same, nearly contradictory, idea. The ad connotes the idea of being bare-breasted and “natural,” but still encourages the customer to be natural through a

bra that is named as “un-bra.”⁴⁷ The very name of the product negates its existence and purpose. In a bizarre twist, the advertising language suggests the clothing items can lead to better form of nudity, that one needs to wear the clothing article to look and feel like one is not wearing it. Furthermore, the bras themselves are downplayed as “barely there,” suggesting they are unobtrusive and specifically not doing anything to restructure the body’s shape. These ideas are established in order to suggest bras are not the enemy of body acceptance, and indeed are compatible and even beneficial in an empowered woman’s pursuit of feeling “natural.” The products and advertising emphasized themes of self-empowerment and downplayed the very existence of lingerie products they were trying to sell in order to acclimate to women’s liberation ideology.

The theme of natural, bare breasts and the need to sell bras led to a few other oxymoronic instances in these marketing schemas. One ad, playing upon Maidenform’s classic “you’ll dream” campaign, declared “you’ll dream you’re not even wearing your un-underwear.”⁴⁸ While the explanatory text suggests the unlined bra is “next to nothing,” it simultaneously encourages wearing the bra is “so much better than nothing.”⁴⁹ Thus the consumer receives a mixed message – she should be comfortable in her own body without wearing anything, but should also purchase the product in order to look like she’s wearing nothing. Beyond the consumer’s reaction, we see that the companies are attempting to engage in a political discussion in the pursuit of further profit. By appropriating feminist language and imagery into their marketing schemes,

⁴⁷ “The Un-Bra,” 1970, 585, Box 41, File 5, Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

⁴⁸ “Collection, Archives Center, Nationg Your Un-Underwear,es Center, National Museum ofMaidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

these companies begin to speak not just to customers but for them. Thematically, feminist critiques of capitalism, constraining femininity and objectification became fragmented when they were absorbed into hegemonic imagery. When self-acceptance and naturalness were incorporated into marketing, they could not represent opposition to it.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In bra design and marketing, industry leaders began to capture the growing popularity of women's liberation themes into products that promised to display a woman's own "natural" body. The 1970's bra industry is a specific example of Fraser's thesis about feminism becoming a new language for economic interests and corporate gain. Through this industry's language and imagery, it is evident that brands picked apart feminist ideology and categorized them under themes for better sales. In appropriating themes of natural-ness, nudity, and body-acceptance, and turning a profit on this appropriation, the bra industry successfully categorized and commercialized women's liberation ideology. When women's liberation leaders wrote and demonstrated against being over-sexualized, and for greater self-definition and body-acceptance, the bra industry responded by developing a wide range of lightly-lined products for women to choose from and that could accentuate one's natural breasts. Marketing teams added and emphasized words like "natural" and terms connoting self-possession to suggest women's quest for self-acceptance and self-definition was compatible with their products, and indeed could be enhanced by these products.

⁵⁰ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 211.

The results of this process for everyday women were arguably mixed—there was now greater choice and seeming representation in the bra market. However, industry analysts set the “choice” of bra selection, and women were given a variety of “lightly-lined” bra options rather than a number of different styles. Less constricted breasts, as created by lightly-lined bras, became commonplace and changed the wardrobes and self-image of women across the United States. This brought the “no-bra” look to new audiences, and created an everyday debate amongst individuals far from the front lines of women’s liberation, as I will explore in the next chapter. Alongside this public discussion, with the growth of self-empowering language and natural aesthetics in the bra market, women’s liberation leaders could no longer use bras as an effective symbol of sexism and sexualization. Many feminists found their own ideologies co-opted by the very product they had been protesting.

Chapter Three: “They Find the No-Bra Look Unsupportable:” Bras and the Ridicule of Women’s Liberation

"As feminist ideas trickled through the ether of American society, they were translated into a vague credo of beauty as power, or at least an implicit belief that powerful women could, and therefore should, still look great"

Debora Spar¹

In the late 1960s, bra symbolism started out as something owned and propagated by the women’s liberation movement. Bras were used to talk about the problems different types of women’s liberation groups saw in society – namely patriarchal objectification, the cult of “femininity,” and gendered consumerism. By the mid-1970s, though, the movement slowed down and at the same time distanced itself from bras, emblematic of broader internal conflict over feminist ideology.

Bras became an easy object of ridicule used to attack women’s liberation. Commentators used them as a buzzword to imply the pettiness of women’s liberation issues. Newspaper articles repeatedly employed sarcastic tones and puns to exaggerate and mock women’s relationships with their undergarments. On the other side of the spectrum of press coverage, everyone from doctors to political leaders were called in by reporters to condemn the “no-bra” look as crude, unhealthy, and potentially even illegal in the workplace. Moreover, the association of bras with secondary sex body parts resulted in the immediate sexualization of women who went without bras, even as they had thought they were escaping the sexualization created by bras.

¹ Spar, *Wonder Women*, 99.

Reactions ranged from dismay to mockery, but on the whole bras were often used to distract the non-women's liberation reading public from the material, economic and social issues of feminists. The popular coverage of this topic by national and local newspapers transformed bras into a conversation for the everyday public. To wear or not wear a bra became a common question, far beyond the specific symbolism connected to its origin. Many women took up the "no-bra look," but with varying degrees of ideological intent.

The "No-Bra" Trend: Popular Press Coverage of Women's Liberation

Articles from the early to mid-1970s on the no-bra trend indicate a clear cultural anxiety about women's bodies. The press coverage had trends of its own, namely calling in experts on business and medicine to contain and label this choice in appearance. Several articles, in outlets varying from the *Washington Post* to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, used medical experts to outline the potential harm caused by going without a bra. This method of critique creates an alarmist tone about the trend, bringing in doctors to talk about the best ways to keep women's breasts looking perky. Many other articles went directly to bra industry representatives to quantify and qualify the trend as something that could be shaped and exploited by the business world, instead of something for women to decide themselves. In both cases, the press called in mostly male "experts" to invalidate this choice in appearance. Even though these articles as a whole tend to indicate that the "no-bra" trend worried the public, the ultimate effect of them was that bra-less-ness became a problematic synecdoche for the entire women's liberation movement. The more doctors,

businessmen, and reporters focused on whether women were or were not wearing bras, the more the public flattened a complex movement into a caricature of the “bra-less women’s libber.” Bra-less-ness became a common jeer against feminists, suggesting that these women were unreasonable about their appearance and fixated on matters of the bra in order to ignore the substantive and pressing issues truly central to the movement.

In 1972, a medical doctor called on JAMA to issue an advisory warning about the effects of going without a bra. The journal published an editorial in response to the query entitled “Pendulosity a Peril,” declining to broadcast an official warning due to the lack of real health risk and instead advising “more frequent showings of African travelogues” to discourage women from going bra-less.² In the editorial, two surgeons analyzed the question of the effects of bra-less-ness on breasts, emphasizing how it would change breast ligaments.³ One surgeon cautioned “despite hopeful legend, no amount of exercise will restore a pristine mammary profile.”⁴ Though no institutional warning was issued by JAMA, it was a physician who raised the question as to whether women should be advised to wear bras medically – contextualizing women’s appearance as a public health issue.⁵ The contemporary cultural anxiety over women’s bodies is further exemplified by the fact that these two surgeons took the time to focus on an issue of women’s appearance with admittedly “no known medical harm,” and the

² “Pendulosity a Peril.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “No-Bra Effects Outlined by Doctors: ‘Whether the AMA Should Issue a Warning about the Effect of Braless- Ness...Calls for Special Finesse in the Realm Social rather than Scientific,’” *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, February 1, 1972. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/hnpwashingtonpost/docview/148179049/abstract/D45F18A3DB254523PQ/3?>

fact that newspapers immediately turned to this institutionalized analysis.⁶ An Associated Press story published in *The Washington Post* and *Boston Herald* expanded on the JAMA editorial, contacting a Dr. Edgerton at the University of Virginia Medical Center for further commentary. Clearly this trend was worthy of popular attention, once the medical worry over women's figures was introduced.

Newspapers also tended to focus on the "no-bra" story from the angle of business – how the bra industry was coping with and outsmarting bra-less women. As early as 1969, an article in *The Atlanta Constitution* suggested "Bras May Soon Go the Way of Hats and Handkerchiefs," while in *The Los Angeles Times*, another refuted "Bras are Here to Stay."⁷ No matter the life or death of bras long-term, it was clear that "Women's Lib Affects Fashion Decisions," and reporters called industry leaders to explain their strategy and shore up investor confidence.⁸ In 1972 the President of Playtex told *The New York Times* that "the no bra look has helped sales," though he then qualifies that his main demographic is women "over the age of 25."⁹

Numerous articles address the choice to go without a bra, and the vast majority of them ascribe the choice to a simple fashion trend. Many newspapers tracked fashion

⁶ Ibid.; "It Figures--No-Bra Look Has Faults, Doctors Say," *Boston Globe (1960-1984)*, February 1, 1972.

http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cv_1733709/docview/518822944/abstract/8DDE1CBFCCC44093PQ/2

⁷ Celestine Sibley, "Bras May Soon Go the Way Of Hats and Handkerchiefs," *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, August 17, 1969.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/1636111550/abstract/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/19>; Olga Erteszek, "Bras Are Here to Stay," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, August 31, 1969.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/156281423/citation/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/21>

⁸ Isadore Barmash, "Women's Lib Affects Fashion Decisions," *New York Times*, May 7, 1972. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/119567630/abstract?>

⁹ Herbert Koshetz, "Brassieres: The Soft Look," *New York Times*, July 30, 1972.

[http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/119489546/abstract?.](http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/119489546/abstract?)

industry reactions and said little of women's liberation. Though the women's liberation activists and their supporters on the sidelines of staged protests had a specific ideology tied to their clothing choices, something even the industry had acknowledged, these newspaper articles are quick to define the no-bra choice as a purely aesthetic one. "Bra Manufacturers Claim 'Nude Look' Will Actually Boost Sales," one such article published in a 1968 edition of *The Washington Post*, amusedly tracked the ways bra industry leaders were reacting to anti-bra themes.¹⁰ The title itself sets the industry against individuals, with the term "actually" implying the industry was conquering a seemingly autonomous trend. In the article, the President of Warner's, a major US brassiere company, explained "the raw bosom is not in its idealized form" and that "bras coax the body into a natural look."¹¹ That the "raw bosom" was the actual natural look is not the point—naturalness was something to be achieved through products. He further predicts "more women will buy new bras" in order to obtain the "soft look."¹² Leaders of Maidenform and Bali struck similarly cheery tones in the piece. Out of all the business commentators in the article, though, no consumers were interviewed, and the trend is only contextualized in terms of profit margins. Through this media coverage, bra-lessness began to be appropriated beyond its original consumerist and gendered symbolism, culminating in the introduction of a new form of bra, a product meant to achieve "the natural look" better than actual natural breasts.

¹⁰ "Bra Manufacturers Claim the 'Nude Look' Actually Will Boost Sales," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, September 7, 1968.
<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/hnpwashingtonpost/docview/143354691/abstract/D45F18A3DB254523PQ/1?>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

While the “no-bra” trend was taken seriously from medical and business perspectives, the vast majority of articles covering bras employed humorous tones and an incredible number of puns. The no-bra look was “unsupportable” and sales were “sagging,” while the battle of the bra was “shaping up.” One article entitled “Take Firm Stand on Bras” was written by a woman, and she took a paragraph to “get the puns out of the way” before insisting that this is an issue of comfort for women to be decided by women and not open for popular debate.¹³ Though the incessant editorial puns come across as light humor, they reflect a more insidious tone of mockery directed towards the movement. Bras became immensely demeaning tactic to attack feminists, characterizing a sexualized media spectacle and resulting in an empty signifier for everyday women.

“1,500 Cheer Free Thinking Women on Bra-less Friday,” an article from *The Chicago Tribune* dated September 6, 1969 exemplifies a more vicious takedown of feminists through a staged, bra-centered, women’s liberation protest.¹⁴ The title, tone, and numbers themselves all come together to engage in a complete mockery of the women. According to the article, the event was a public demonstration sponsored by “a group of progressive thinkers seeking to free women of their encumbrances,” publicized by a radio station and held at the Marina City buildings in Chicago.¹⁵ Based on this text, which separates the “progressive thinkers” from women, along with a cross-reference

¹³ Erma Bombeck, “Take Firm Stand on Bras,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, October 19, 1969.
<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/1554824716/abstract/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/38>

¹⁴ Michael Kilian, “1,500 Cheer Free Thinking Women on Bra-Less Friday,” *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, September 6, 1969.
<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/169768771/abstract/B60F1F4CEA544ECAPQ/108>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 500.

from the Marina City official website, it does not seem like the event was organized by any actual feminists, but that it was instead a sort of publicity stunt to coax women to take off their bras in front of men.¹⁶ According to the author, a thousand men watched only fourteen women throw away their bras symbolically, catcalling and joking throughout the short scene. One woman was described as a “strip dancer” and the other stated vaguely she felt “everyone should make a contribution to something.”¹⁷ Any power on the women’s side to embody feminist symbolism—and especially to convey it to the public—was neutralized by the sheer size of the crowd. The mocking event both objectified the women and suggested their own silly actions were at fault for the objectification. Certainly the number of men who came out to watch women simply throw away their bras with so much anticipation strikes the reader as silly in and of itself, but the true crux of the spectacle still rests with the fourteen women. The organization of the event and sponsorship by the radio station rather than by a feminist group suggests it was meant to be an exploitative display from the start. By the sheer numbers of the crowd alone casting off their bras left these women vulnerable and hardly raised their respect quotient amongst the ogling men. Though this incident seemingly took much more effort than the simple puns in news articles, again it functions to create a mockery out of women’s liberation protest, emphasizing and sexualizing the issue of bras to write off women’s liberation on the whole.

¹⁶ Steven Dahlman, “Braless Friday,” *Marinacity.org*, accessed March 13, 2016. http://www.marinacity.org/history/story/braless_friday.htm.

¹⁷ Kilian, “1,500 Cheer Free Thinking Women on Bra-Less Friday,” 500.

Public Reaction

While the press put certain emphasis and spin on the no-bra movement, the public responded in kind. Bras became a synecdoche for women's liberation, a way to condense a complex movement into one cosmetic issue. One angry reader in 1970 wrote to the *LA Times* that the public discussion of bras was entirely indecent, so much so that he has a hard time digesting his breakfast.¹⁸ Another woman worriedly wrote to her local "Dear Ann" column in 1972, "Ann, please tell your readers that going braless may give them a feeling of liberation but it will result in sagging breasts."¹⁹ In 1969 even Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave his opinion on "the bra question," stating that women used bras to "seduce men" and therefore had no right to blame men for them.²⁰ Internationally, the Malaysian government even threatened to deport women not wearing bras (along with men who had long, unkempt hair).²¹ Perhaps most poignantly, the 1970 Miss California's stance on bras succinctly captures the public sentiment—"asked if there was anything that she was particularly opposed to that Women's Lib groups advocate 'Yes,' she said 'I like to wear bras'."²² Miss California would not change

¹⁸ Douglas K. Stewart, "Bras for Breakfast," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, November 15, 1970.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/156621704/citation/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/14>

¹⁹ Ann Landers, "Ann Landers: Bras," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, August 28, 1972.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/148232352/citation/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/10>

²⁰ Rosenthal, "Acheson Slips Into the Bra Question."

²¹ "Malaysia Will Deport Women Without Bras," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, February 16, 1974.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/157408142/citation/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/41>

²² "New Miss California Opts for Bras, Men," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, June 25, 1970.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/156495944/abstract/D0F873D2C46942D2PQ/1>

her stance on feminism if it meant having to give up her bra. The scope and tone of these comments suggest that to wear or not wear a bra had become a popular point of discussion throughout the USA. But even more so, they show that the association between women's liberation and bras was becoming ironclad, so that to endorse women's liberation one had to go without a bra.

Everyday women who were not directly involved in women's liberation were still directly affected by the "no-bra" trend, in terms of the bra options available to them and the way it "labeled" them.²³ "Bra-less" became a shorthand term for describing a women's politics – a *Life Magazine* article about women's liberation describes one activist as "a pretty, soft-featured brunette who wore a loose gray sweater and no bra."²⁴ For those outside of women's liberation, the choice of large numbers of women not to wear bras was alarming to at the very worst, and repeatedly newsworthy at the very least. In 1969 *The Washington Post* ran an article entitled "Downward Trend for the Upward Look," chronicling reactions to the no-bra trend.²⁵ The reporter takes a lively tone to the topic, describing each individual she interviews with colorful terms. One woman wrote off those who go without bras as simply not well-endowed.²⁶ Another recalled a similar trend in the 1920s, when girls would bind their breasts to achieve a

²³See also: W. Stewart Pinkerton Jr., "Getting Things Off Their Chests Girls Take to No-Bra Fad: Trend Draws Housewives, Models and Secretaries; But Not Helen Gurley Brown," *Wall Street Journal (1923 - Current File)*, August 11, 1969. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/133375694/abstract/B60F1F4CEA544ECAPQ/117>; Sarah Booth Conroy Washington Post Staff Writer, "Trenny Robb: Model With a 'Natural Look,'" *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, September 23, 1968, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/143356135/abstract/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/77>.

²⁴ Sara Davidson, "An Oppressed Majority Demands Its Rights," *Life Magazine*, 1969.

²⁵ Myra MacPherson, "Downward Trend for the Uplift Look: No-Bra Trend," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, August 21, 1969.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/147626247/abstract>.

²⁶ Ibid.

“boyish” look.²⁷ These interviewees were quite skeptical of the “trend,” but the reporter included anecdotes from the Pageant Protest and San Francisco “No-Bra Day” to show the bra-less choice was gaining momentum.²⁸ She interviewed a Georgetown student currently choosing to go without a bra, who explained that they made her “look artificial” and that they impede her breathing.²⁹ The Georgetown student clearly associated bras with discomfort and artificiality, though she did not directly appeal to the women’s liberation movement. Instead of focusing on body-shaping and style, the student described her fashion choice in terms of comfort and natural-ness. In this particular case and the anecdotes appealed to at the start of the article, the reader gets a feel for shifting concepts in the everyday choices of women’s self-presentation through clothing. Like many others, the Georgetown student seemed to see going bra-less as a tie-sign to express her association with liberation.

Legal Questions

While the issue of wearing bras was one for casual debate in everyday life, the question of decency in the workplace framed bra-less-ness with legal seriousness. An employer survey in 1972 by the Administrative Management Society found that while 91% of managers now accepted pantsuits in the workplace, most did not approve of going without a bra and the latter issue “drew the most comments from the companies surveyed” though most were “flippant.”³⁰ Beyond the “flippancy,” though, many

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Hotpants, No; Bras, Yes, Survey Finds,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, January 13, 1972.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/156859293/abstract/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/25>

employers rightly sensed a change – women’s appearance and presence in the workplace was changing irrevocably in the 1970s. In this formal space questions of female identity and public pressures came to a head, suggesting that behind the puns, going without a bra remained a political choice with repercussions.

The employers’ flippancy in tone translated into much more serious action, several times over. In the early 1970s, several women were fired for not wearing bras in the workplace and filed lawsuits. In one 1972 case, a woman lost her job as a machine operator when her supervisor feared her breasts would get caught in the machinery.³¹ In another 1969 case, Jane M. Andre, a supervisor at welding company, sued after being fired for not wearing a bra and advocating for a “no-bra Friday.”³² She filed a \$1.4 million dollar lawsuit against her employer, General Dynamics Inc. in Los Angeles.³³ The case was later dropped after Ms. Andre failed to pursue prosecution in a timely manner.³⁴ With the resulting legal trouble, the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Chicago briefly considered whether or not bras were required workplace garb, although the article does not follow up on their conclusions.³⁵ However as employers could institute mandatory dress codes, regulating women’s dress in the workplace did have a legal basis.

Going bra-less was an issue for students as well. Many individuals who grew up around the US at the time recount second-hand stories of “pencil tests,” where a pencil

³¹ “Are Bras Necessary Job Garb?” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, December 12, 1974.

³² “Fired for Not Wearing a Bra, Sues Company,” *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, September 4, 1969.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/1617360790/citation/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/15>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Andre v. General Dynamics, Inc.* (Court of Appeal, Second District, Division 1, California 1975). Accessed through WestLaw.

³⁵ “Are Bras Necessary Job Garb?”

was placed beneath a girl's breast to determine whether or not she needed to wear a bra. Similar tactics resulted in a legal case in West Palm Beach, when a Florida school came under fire in 1970 after allegations that the Dean of Girls made high school-age girls jump in front of her to check if they were wearing bras.³⁶ The principal denied the allegations, but said several high school girls were sent home by the Dean of Girls for not wearing bras.

These legal questions reframe the question of bras exactly where the women's liberation movement meant to – as a question of control over women's appearance. Each employment case pits an individual woman's choice to represent herself against those who control her income or education, privately and publically. Both her employer and the state addressed these issues, but they did not become seminal moments in the women's liberation movement. In the case of the young students, their breasts were being assessed by a power figure, whether there was an actual "test" or not. Each case was a clear instance of bra-based symbolism in actual conflict against state law, seemingly the perfect stories for women's liberation movement groups to pick up and back. And yet, these stories only had passing news coverage, and did not inspire any significant counter-backlash by women's liberation. By the mid-1970s, many members of women's liberation were instead distancing themselves from the question of appearance, and particularly from bras.

³⁶ "'Bra Test' to Get Court Test," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, September 25, 1970.
<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/147925279/abstract/B60F1F4CEA544ECAPQ/123>

The Bra as an Empty Signifier: Women's Liberation Movement Perspective

With the popularization of the “no-bra look” in the stores and on newsstands, many women's liberation members feared a singular clothing item was belittling their movement. “It's taken a while for us to destroy the great bra burning myth of women's liberation” Joanna Martin, member of Chicago's NOW Chapter, explained in 1971.³⁷ Though NOW represented more centrist feminist views, some radical feminists also wanted to distance themselves from the confines of a single stereotype, the “bra-less” working girl. Many feminists identified bras with myths about feminism and media misrepresentation. From troublesome tropes to belittling buzzwords, bras and what to do with them had begun to distract from the true purpose of the movement for many women's libbers. The adoption of women's liberation themes by the bra industry, along with alarmist language by the popular press, quickly diluted the meaning of a once powerful symbol and threatened to undermine the movement's seriousness for some.

In 1971 *The Washington Post* published an article entitled “Women's Lib: Liberated Ads Don't Liberate.”³⁸ The article explained that many feminists, from centrist women's rights activists to more radical women's liberation protesters, felt their movement was “being ripped off” by advertisers who were only seeking to capitalize on the next big thing.³⁹ One interviewee in the article complained “This is a human rights movement and they're making jokes about it,” referencing products like a Scotch designed to make ambitious women feel included in men's drinking habits, or a sexy

³⁷ Terri Schultz, “Bra-Burner Tactics Out as Lawsuits Gain Ground: Women's Lib: Lawsuits Replace Bra-Burning,” *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, June 28, 1971. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/169093618/abstract/B60F1F4CEA544ECAPQ/121>

³⁸ Goldstein, “Women's Lib.”

³⁹ Ibid.

nightgown named for *The Feminine Mystique*.⁴⁰ The article pointed out the marketing campaigns somewhat silence women's liberation members, explaining they "can no longer claim they're being ignored" even as the products made light of their movement.⁴¹ From the perspective of the activists, however, being heard incorrectly by businesses was hardly better than being ignored.

Using the same pattern of analysis, *Off Our Backs* contributing authors and radical feminists Kathy Fiske and Bobby Goldstone specifically condemned the "legerdemain feat" companies accomplished by "extolling the virtues of the no-bra bra" in magazines.⁴² They described the vapid dream of "bra-less employment in a hip capitalist firm," associating bra-less-ness with a weak form of surface-level feminism.⁴³ They wrote it off as another problematic form of "mind candy for the feminist masses."⁴⁴ As radical feminists, they saw the "no-bra" as a picture-perfect example of the lengths companies will go to stay in business. Yet at the same time they acknowledged that they enjoy these magazines and will likely continue to consume them "after the revolution." In this article the connection between femininity, feminism and clothing is more nuanced, both condemning an exploitative industry while at the same time enjoying what it produces.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bobbie Goldstone and Kathy Fiske, "Mlle Is a Four-Letter Word," *Off Our Backs*, April 25, 1970.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/197135461/abstract/DD48FD49F25843B7PQ/17>

⁴³ "Union Women Unite," *Off Our Backs*, January 31, 1974.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/197151400/abstract/DD48FD49F25843B7PQ/8>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

For the editors of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, a women's health information book published in Boston starting in the early 1970's, clothing choices simply came down to practicality rather than social meaning. Addressing the every day choices common to cultural feminists, in the 1973 edition they wrote off high heels, tight clothes, short as well as very long skirts, and pants.⁴⁵ As for bras, they had this to say:

"The bra debate goes on. The breasts consist of glandular connective tissue with muscles behind. Some people argue that wearing no bra helps to strengthen those muscles and keep the breasts high and firm. (It's certainly comfortable for small breasted women). Others argue that going braless causes the connective tissue to break down and will eventually lead to sagging breasts. That's all we know!"

As the last line indicates, these women attempted to get at the roots of clothing's functionality, and simply made choices based on what they knew to be true. Certainly, their focus on practicality carried its own ideological implications—that one should be practical and comfortable above all else. Still, this analysis seeks to simplify the social meanings of clothes to a choice for individual women, even as “the debate goes on.” In this way they were distancing themselves from symbolic social engagement with clothing, suggesting that its public meaning was less essential than its functionality.

Clothing on the whole put feminists in constant ideological conflict between each other, as they struggled to come to a common conclusion on the meaning of fashion. Marilyn Terry's 1970 article entitled “Consumerism: Dress to Go Human In” from the women's liberation newspaper *Everywoman* thoughtfully examines beauty culture

⁴⁵ Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; A Touchstone Book (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1973), 85.

contradictions. While she acknowledges that “it may seem ironic for women seeking liberation to regress to that old hangup 'what should I wear?’” she insisted women cannot escape “their oppressive physicality without first obliterating their old image.” Like the authors of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, she suggested a neutral, plain look to avoid appropriating either masculine or feminine norms of dress, though she does not fully elucidate what this would look like.

Clearly there were inherent contradictions on what constitutes productive, acceptable femininity from within the movement, and contemporaneously to its development. From the beginning, some had been skeptical of the importance of fashion in expressing their own or identifying another’s politics. In the 1969 article “An Oppressed Majority Demands Its Rights,” *Life Magazine* author Sara Davidson illustrates the contradictions that came with policing dress within the women’s liberation movement.⁴⁶ She points to the potentially paradoxical practices within women’s liberation groups, where the women condemn some aspects of femininity like bras while maintaining other practices, like knitting and shaving. In the article Davidson explains “while they condemn seductiveness, many want to look attractive.” The point seems to be about ownership as “women’s liberation rejects the glossy magazines’ vision of the liberated girl,” but still seek to create their own visual representation of women’s liberation.

While so many feminists debated the meaning of consumerism and clothing identity, some proceeded to capitalize on the growing market of feminist-conscious fashion. Jacqui Cellabos, who served as the president of NOW’s New York chapter in 1971, opened her own public relations business with her partner Jean Phillips, called

⁴⁶ Davidson, “An Oppressed Majority Demands Its Rights.”

Ceballos & Phillips.⁴⁷ In 1976 she helped advise an event called “Celebrating 200 Years of Women’s Undergarments” in partnership with Hanes. Prominent women, from the vice president for ABC television news to writers for *Ms. Magazine* and medical doctors, attended the event that was meant to market “underalls,” an underwear and hosiery all-in-one. The product was notably “called [a] liberating product,” and the ad campaign correlated less-restrictive undergarments with women’s socio-political progress throughout history.⁴⁸ Hanes used the tagline that women wearing underalls “were free to be, to do, to wear what they choose.” The product did not take off, but the event and message are indicative of how tightly clothing products were associated with liberation and identity for American women, only a few years after the women’s liberation movement. These distinguished women were brought together for a kitsch marketing event, and the product tagline suggested that a new type of pantyhose would “free” them. Even if the product was comfortable and practical, it clearly used feminist ideology to add to its mystique and profitability – Hanes’ marketing teams sought out a former leader in NOW to ensure that.

As the lines between “authentic” feminist dress and that created by business grew increasingly blurred, it became harder and harder to determine how to visually indicate one’s politics through clothing. Many contemporary women’s liberation activists understood beauty culture as inherently obstructive and almost impossible to combat. Others simply did not wish to combat it, seeing self-expression through clothing as integral to their identity. On the whole, though, when everyone was going bra-less, its

⁴⁷ Georgia Dullea, “An Overview of Underwear: It’s More Than Fluff or Lace,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1976.
http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cv_1733709/docview/122605285/abstract/FF99ED375337472APQ/11

⁴⁸ Ibid.

political meaning was lessened, and women's questions of clothing and gender were overlooked for issues considered more serious. As one women's liberation member put it, "women's lib consists of burning issues rather than burning bras."⁴⁹ Instead, the "no-bra" look only instigated a new style norm, one which happened to privilege smaller bodies and profited off larger women with "figure problems."⁵⁰ Bras went from a thoughtful feminist symbol to a popular buzzword and visual trope, expanding the influence of the women's liberation movement in often unintended and indirect ways.

Conclusion

To some degree, women's liberation members were wise to suspect the implications of incorporating feminist language into the fashion industry. Apart from the derisive ads, the most dramatic legacy of the bra industry's appropriation of feminist language and imagery was the way in which product advertisements used language to suggest a woman's natural body was integral to her self-confidence. The fashion industry's co-option of women's empowerment themes from the women's liberation movement changed the language used to market beauty products to women, moving from describing how a woman should look for other people to how she should look for herself. By using themes of self-empowerment and body acceptance to describe products like bras, fashion marketing in the late 1970s arguably intensified the connection between body image and a woman's worth to a new intimate, ethical and emotional level.

⁴⁹ Susan Davis, "United States," *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, July 23, 1972. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/170367396/abstract/A74D94B655F04A88PQ/128>

⁵⁰ "70's Planning Guide," 4.

The popular and commercial reaction to women's liberation, from the bra industry to newspaper articles, certainly shifted women's representation in the media. As industry leaders analyzed what women wanted, a wider array of product options were made available to women, as in the varying types of bras Maidenform offered. Advertisements were increasingly directed at women for women, when they had otherwise appealed to male approval or societal status.⁵¹ Still, the ways in which businesses broke down women's liberation imagery and ideology into marketable themes both silenced and shortchanged their message. The complaints many women's liberation groups originally had against aspects of consumerism were absorbed into new marketing schemes. In some cases, women's liberation members' attempts to draw attention to objectification and sexualization only resulted in further objectification and sexualization by ads that co-opted their imagery and ideology into product titles.

Bras had been used to talk about and blame many different causes for women's oppression, some of which inherently conflicted. When these mixed messages met the popular press they lost their impact amidst the confusion. Everyday women wondered how their appearance tied into their politics, while many felt the need to be in bra-less in solidarity with the movement due to its strong association with the image of a women's liberation movement member. These choices certainly made an impact on the bra industry, if not day-to-day gender identity. But with many mixed meanings and constant media mockery, going bra-less diluted into another 70's trend, turning "natural-ness" into a marketed look and a form of pseudo-political action, letting industries and the popular press help shape the collective organizing of feminists.

⁵¹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 67.

Conclusion

In 2014, MTV launched *Braless*, a YouTube Series hosted by Sex Educator Laci Green.¹ In the trailer, Green explains the show is about “feminism, politics, paparazzi, pop stars, sex toys, sexting, getting pissed ... and bras — lots of bras.” In her own popular YouTube Series Sex+, Green expresses support for individuals whether they choose to wear bras or not, contextualizing it as a personal preference. She often uses pop culture to talk about issues of sex and gender, rather than primarily focusing on everyday individuals or politics like members of women’s liberation. Though the focus of feminism has shifted, Green and MTV turned to the term “braless” for a show about feminism, gender, and sexuality issues—the tie between bras and feminism remains strong in the public memory.

Bras regained their popularity moving into the more conservative 80’s, and intimate apparel styles have fluctuated ever since. Un-lined bras and “bralettes” have gained popularity again in the past two years, correlating with a resurgence in the popularity of feminism as an identity and a movement. Popular lifestyle websites like *Buzzfeed* and *The Huffington Post* have countless articles about whether one needs to wear a bra, what it’s like to go without a bra, and tips for everything bra-related in between.² On the whole, bras have not maintained their political symbolic efficacy, but

¹ Todd Spangler and Todd Spangler, “MTV Launches First Original YouTube Channel, ‘Braless’ Hosted by Laci Green (Exclusive),” *Variety*, October 30, 2014. <http://variety.com/2014/digital/news/mtv-launches-first-original-youtube-channel-braless-hosted-by-laci-green-exclusive-1201343485/>.

² BuzzFeedYellow, *Women Go Braless For A Week*, accessed March 13, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJfqGt5Xsjc>; PureWow, “17 Of Your Most Common Bra

remain in the public memory as a touchstone for discussing feminist issues. Half a century after the women's liberation movement, the bra debate and what it means about gender and sexuality rages on.

The legacy of this cultural moment is not limited to bras, however. In the past year, discussions about how clothing genders and sexualizes women have become a point of outrage on both sides of the argument, as students ask to wear shorter and more comfortable clothing and tight workout gear becomes everyday wear. *Fox News* brought on a panel of commentators this past October to determine if women should be allowed to wear leggings in public; around the same time, a high school student body president in South Carolina was suspended for violating a dress code she called sexist.³ Both through media sources and in everyday discussion, we continue to weigh in publically on how women should dress.

There is no clear consensus on the meaning of specific clothing items in socio-political culture, and there likely never will be. As I have shown, bras were an important political symbol in the late 1960's into the first few years of the 1970's, before becoming passé for protest purposes. This was largely due to the interactions between protest, industry, and the press, which changed the effective language feminists at the time could use. Symbols remain historically fascinating as they change so rapidly over time, in and alongside other shifting cultural norms. A productive clothing symbol inside one

Problems, Solved," *The Huffington Post*, accessed March 13, 2016.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/purewow/17-of-your-most-common-br_b_7793762.html.

³ "Fox News Turns To A Panel Of Men To Debate Whether Women Should Be Allowed To Wear Leggings," *Media Matters for America*, October 27, 2015.

<http://mediamatters.org/video/2015/10/27/fox-news-turns-to-a-panel-of-men-to-debate-whet/206439>; Stephanie McNeal BuzzFeed News Reporter, "A Student Body President Was Sent Home From School For Wearing This Outfit," *BuzzFeed*, accessed March 15, 2016.

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/stephaniemcneal/a-student-body-president-was-threatened-with-suspension-for>.

culture might mean something entirely different in another time and place. This shifting and sometimes cyclical ways clothing conveys meaning denies a progressive or universal reading of history, and insists on the particulars. Bras did not remain a productive symbol in the women's liberation movement, but they have resurged again in contemporary discussions of gender norms. This symbol was everywhere, creating meaning and losing it contemporaneously in different settings. As a history, meaning was made both in the sum total of concurrent moments during a period and in individual exchanges.

The other legacy of this period is the continual commercialization of feminism, as analyzed by many prominent scholars and everyday critics.⁴ In *Disco Divas*, author Sherrie Inness tracks 1970's marketing trends to the present day, writing "today, advertisements still define women in terms of buying things, offering consumption of goods as a substitute for the fulfillment many women are yet to find."⁵ Importantly, advertisements moved away from consumer items as outside accessories for an objectified woman and instead described products like clothing as intimately associated with a women's emotional and professional worth. As Naomi Wolf explains in *The Beauty Myth*, into the late 1970's *Vogue* "began to focus on bodies as much as clothes."⁶ As the body beneath the beauty products gained more attention, the number of dieting articles in women's magazines rose 70% from 1968 to 1972, and eating disorders skyrocketed.⁷ Debora Spar writes in *Wonder Women* that,

⁴ See: "How Feminism Became a Great Way to Sell Stuff," *The Guardian*, April 23, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/23/feminism-adverts-great-way-sell-stuff>.

⁵ Inness, *Disco Divas*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The irony here is that the all-pervasive search for bodily perfection may come, in part, from the feminist movement. Because insofar as feminism liberated women to enjoy their sexuality, it also and simultaneously highlighted the importance of women's physical and sexual attraction.⁸

This paradigm shift in advertising culture is the most damning evidence that women's liberation did not change consumer culture for the better, and might have worsened the effects of beauty products on women's, and even young girls' self-image. Instead of worrying over how their image pleased men, women were taught that their image was integral to pleasing themselves.

Just as bra industry officials appropriated imagery and language straight from the women's liberation movement, so to do many contemporary companies and celebrities, from Dove to Beyoncé.⁹ Over the course of writing this thesis, my Facebook account got an ad for a T-shirt that had the words "Angry Liberal Feminist" on it, since Google tracks the language on my linked Gmail account. It is increasingly easy to commodify every aspect of an individual's identity, whether an interest or a deeply held political belief. Getting women to feel good about buying more is economically advantageous—clothing has become a trillion dollar industry, the most labor intensive and second-most polluting in the world.¹⁰ In her exposé book on the clothing industry, *Overdressed*, Morgan Andrew writes about how the fast fashion industry excites our interest and defines our identity while behaving "with embarrassingly little regard for the environment or human

⁸ Spar, *Wonder Women*, 99.

⁹ Jessica Bennett, "How to Reclaim the F-Word? Just Call Beyoncé," *Time*, August 26, 2014. <http://time.com/3181644/beyonce-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/>; "How Feminism Became a Great Way to Sell Stuff."

¹⁰ Elizabeth L. Cline, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012); Andrew Morgan, *The True Cost*, (2015), Documentary.

rights;” we opt for sentiment without substance.¹¹ Feminism has become a popular term again, but its commercialization has only expanded since the women’s liberation movement era. As Nancy Fraser writes, many feminists have come to fully endorse marketization, to the detriment of those who seek to organize outside the market.¹² When companies seek to embody the morals of socio-political movements thematically, they colonize ethical discussions for the sake of profit gain, coming to represent personal value systems. As I have shown, clothing can generate meaning, and social movements can change industries. But a dissonance occurs when those industries come to define politics, identity, and what it means to be natural—when it takes a bra to “coax the body into a natural look.”¹³

¹¹ Cline, *Overdressed*, 5.

¹² Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013), 211.

¹³ “Bra Manufacturers Claim the ‘Nude Look’ Actually Will Boost Sales.”

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