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### *The Flapper Style*

Historically, there have been multiple styles of dressing that were created and they played a vital role in modern fashion. Each individual has a varying and unique dressing style and some may be inclined to the fresh element while others are influenced in vintage styles that are attributed to old vogue. In the 1920, there were new styles that provided more convenience to the modern female wardrobe and this was obtained via a progressive simplification of dresses. The style is the flapper where formality and multiple layers were rejected in favor of lighter, comfortable and more natural dresses. The look dominated a significant part of the decade and was characterized by dresses with creeping hemlines and a dropped waist that could be created in economical fabric (Kass 3). The photograph of a sample of the dress shows how flapper style was applied by Coco Chanel, a prominent designer, who assisted in popularizing it. In the design, both the hemlines and waistlines followed the same but inverse projections in the entire decade as the latter dropped until 1923 before they began rising again (Kass 3). On the other hand, the hemlines rose till 1926 when they started dropping again. The aim of this paper is to discuss the historical, social and cultural context of the flapper style as fashionable clothing.



Diagram of Flapper Style by Gabrielle Chanel. Retrieved from:

<https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1920-1929/>

### **Cultural and Social Factors in the Creation of the Garment**

A consumer society was rapidly adopted in the 1920s as a result of an economic boom and the rise of a young, enthusiastic postwar generation. “The affluence then stimulated significant change across diverse aspects of culture and the society thus ushering in the explosion of materialism and individualism” (Park 9). This is an indication that the rise of a new generation boosted the adoption of new trends. “Additionally, the rise of the young generation and women including the development of mass media played a critical role in revealing the conflict that

existed between thriftiness and morality by modernity and the Victorian Age as a traditional value system” (Lee 20). This quote reiterates the tension that lies between different factions regarding culture and art. The period was also characterized by cultural norms of desirable behavior and the appropriate status of women and these expectations led to a different concept of the representative of femininity.

The flappers emerged in the early 1920s as the image of the young women representing the time (Kass 5). However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were required to adhere to the Victorian ideal of femininity since the colonial era, where moral, submissiveness and reverence were held with high regard (Park 11). “The cultural standards of this era entailed the emphasis on the ideal community, thrift and saving and a clear separation of the public and private domains for women and men. The leading elites of this society were the upper and middle-class people in specialized professions and devoted to commerce” (Reddy). The quote indicates the class differences that were associated with a variety of garments at the time. Men and women were required to play varying roles based on their areas of responsibility. The ultimate goal of that time was to build an industrious and virtuous nation.

“During the modernization movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they started changing and expressing themselves in terms of their appearance and dresses and their behavior” (Kass 6). This indicates a change in attitude with the changing times. Moreover, at this time, women began pursuing an independent personality freed from social and economic bounds (Al-Halah et al. 389). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a rise in the popularity of flappers and Jazz. “Furthermore, Gibson Girl, an image that appeared in 1890 where the paintings of Charles Dana Gibson were published in *Life* magazine, became a representation of femininity” (Reddy). “Gibson captured the shifting image of women by showcasing them wearing mannish jackets

instead of corsets and tight dresses making Gibson Girl emerge as the most desirable model of a woman who was portrayed as being ambitious, attractive, independent and with an active lifestyle” (Reddy). These show the close relationship between art and fashion. Further, the number of female university students has risen to approximately 283,000 by 1920s and women took pleasure in participating in varying activities, learning and enhancing their ability to think (Park 16). Their social activities also gradually expanded through different means including provision of learning, legal rights and expansion of employment opportunities (Park 17). The Victorian standards weakened and with industrial advancements, a series of home appliances were developed and liberated women from domestic chores (Kim and Geum 4). Another notable change was the attitude of women towards sex as they became more open about it particularly the young urban women in the middle-income group. Such trends created a platform for a more open social discussion concerning sex.

“The changes that were witnessed by Americans resulted in the flapper’s culture since it was considered a deviation from the acceptable behavior in the contemporary cultural scene” (Park 16). “Flappers initially appeared in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it became popularly used in America in the 1920s” (Park 17). “The perception of this style was not clearly defined but later, it was considered as vivid patterns of the young contemporary generation and developed a brand-new vanity fair” (Park 17). “The period was also regarded as the Jazz Age and the American fashion industry was following the European haute couture” (Kass 8). These quotes reiterate the fact that a change in culture and trends led to the birth of the flappers. Flappers were closely linked to Jazz music which promoted individual freedom with improvising (Goodrum 51). Most individuals were seeking practical and convenient attire and the trend was a fashion style that was natural, simpler and easy to copy. The Coco Chanel design became a great

template for mass producing the clothes in the U.S and demonstrated that consumers were seeking for modern off-the-rack clothing (Lee 21). The style de-emphasized the mature female form through flattening the chest, shortening the hems and dropping waistlines to hips for dresses and skirts. Flappers were accessible to women of all social classes and the dresses were popular due to their versatility and affordability. The style was regularly covered in magazines like *Life* and *Vanity Fair* (Reddy). On the other hand, in the wake of the economic depression which was accompanied by the crash of the stock market led to the decline of the flappers as women were forced to scale back their social and leisure activities (Al-Halah et al. 392). Therefore, the flapper style was significantly influenced by the reigning cultural and social trends of the 1920s which dictated the needs and preferences of customers.

### **Materials used to make the Clothing**

The clothing of women in the 1920s fashion was characterized by fine and high-quality fabrics that were light and soft to touch. Since people in that era lacked a gentle cycle in their washing machines, clothes were notoriously hard to clean. “Moreover, fashion during this period emphasized on the entire look and androgynous shapes and simple lines looked better on bodies free from curves” (Kass 22). This indicates an innovative introduction in the creation of garments. The materials that were used to make flappers include jersey and artificial silk, lightweight cotton and linen. During the 1920a, there was a growing industry of cotton mills making it easier to use cotton as fabric. Clothing made from this was breathable and durable was also used to make voile which offers excellent fabric for summer tea dresses. Wool could also be used either as textured or twill type for outerwear (Goodrum 52). While silk was labor intensive to make and costly to buy, it offered unique quality for the dresses. Women that wore flappers neglected their corsets in favor of lingerie and bras. An authentic flapper costume could also be

made from chiffon, satin or crepe (Kim and Geum 11). “On the other hand, most people preferred solid colors over prints since they showed off ribbon decorations, beads and embroidery better than patterns” (Kim and Geum 12). “The early colors were mainly deep pink, tan, dark blue, violet, emerald green and burgundy. Some of the common prints were polka dots, repeating geometrics, stripes, large plaid and simple floral” (Park 31). These quotes provide evidence that the flappers fully satisfied diverse tastes and preferences. Black was also considered as a fashionable color. Therefore, the fabric used focused on lightness and simplicity and they were printed with simple and neat casual styles.

### **Indicators of when the Clothing was Made**

The key indicators of the flapper style are the hemlines of the dresses which rise dramatically to the knee. Additionally, most of them have shorter, calf-revealing lengths and lower necklines that are not necessarily form fitting. The dresses and skirts are also made to swing and there is scarcity of fabric around the arms, legs and neck (Kass 27). The other specific elements include pleated panels, seam decoration, uneven split hems and asymmetric trimmed necklines (Kass 29). Thus, flappers were generally sleeveless, straight and loose offering a revitalized body confidence for women. The light fabrics provide an aspect of glamour and the trend showcased the beauty of its intricate creation with sequins and embellishment for an added touch of elegance (Park 33). The outfits are a symbol of glamour and minimalism. Flappers are boxy and hung straight from the shoulder to the knee, and have no waistline which eases movement, a major feature of the garments. Despite the outfits not showing hips or breasts, the show legs. The designer, Gabrielle Chanel made an effort to popularize the freedom of the flapper look. Additionally, women that wore this outfit cut their hair and curled it in several tiny

curls and wore makeup (Lee 24). Consequently, each of these features is a vital indicator of the flapper style.

The flapper style marked the beginning of the modern American society, at a time when traditional beliefs were being challenged by contemporary values. The society was shifting from the Victorian establishment where women were required to uphold family values to the Jazz Age and modernity which was characterized by freedom, individualization and self-expression. The flapper dresses and skirts could be identified by the hemlines and waistlines and the main fabrics used include silk, chiffon, linen and lightweight cotton. The trend of this outfit aligned with the predominant beliefs and changing cultural and social attitudes surrounding women and fashion.

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