"From promiscuity to homosexuality:" Fears of "Disorder" in Response to Fashion Trends of the 1960s

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As posed in the January 16, 1966 issue of the *New York Times*, a promotional advertisement asked readers, "Are we becoming a nation of sexless neutrals?" To some during the mid-to-late 1960s, in which unisex clothing became widespread, the answer would have been an unequivocal yes. One such individual was psychiatrist Robert P. Odenwald, who, in his book, *The Disappearing Sexes*, stated that the "new morality" seen in the United States was leading to "the rise of many social evils—from promiscuity to homosexuality." With an increase in the popularity of unisex clothing, changing hairstyles for women and men, and shifts in ideals of modesty, Odenwald feared gender distinctions would be diluted. In turn, non-heterosexual relationships would proliferate as "sexual identities" became confused, eventually leading to a failure in reproduction by the human race as a whole.[1] In *The Disappearing Sexes*, as well as the January 16th advertisement for the book, these themes were central. Odenwald, among other critics, deeply feared a continuation in what I call "the shift," a theoretical move away from tradition and toward more open sexuality, changes in gender roles, and eventually a larger, more catastrophic breakdown in society. Due to the fast-paced nature of the shift in fashion trends and the change in ideals, particularly among teenagers and young adults, individuals such as Odenwald advocated for a return to more gendered, traditional fashion out of fear for an increasingly "disordered" American society caused by gender and sexual confusion, as well as what was seen as moral deviancy.[2]

In this paper, I will review the ways in which Americans in the 1960s, especially young adults and teenagers, resisted notions of respectability and order. I will begin by discussing what popular fashions of the 1950s and early 1960s looked like, and how they manifested themselves in media. Afterwards, I will continue providing historical context by introducing the aspects of the mid-1960s, both economically and demographically, that made it possible for unique fashion trends to emerge. Although there were certainly gendered trends, it is important to understand how the 1960s differed from previous decades due to its occasionally unisex identity. Subsequently, I discuss the reasons why clothing of the 1960s changed quickly and significantly, as well as popular styles of the era and how they were received by society. Afterwards, as clothing, androgyny, and hair will have been reviewed, I will speak to how these three factors contributed to greater fears of "disorder."

Prior to the mid 1960s, when fashion shifted away from traditional, gendered clothing, personal style was wholeheartedly influenced by ideals of order. Although there are exceptions to this, as seen in Elvis Presley's highly controversial greased hair, for the most part, Americans prior to the mid-1960s adhered to a definite style determined by white, middle-class definitions of respectability. This style was dictated by what was deemed socially acceptable, and expanded across gender, racial, and class lines. While styles changed over time, particularly with the rise of teenage culture in the 1950s, fashion's status as a force of order did not change until a culture of resistance and creativity arose around late 1963.[3] Prior to this, fashion was identifiable by its couture nature, with long hemlines and basic colors. Clothing was typically sold in sets, as seen in the popular men's gray flannel suit and the women's monochromatic skirt and jacket set, perhaps best epitomized by Audrey Hepburn's appearance in

[1] "Display Ad 1259 -- no Title," *New York Times*, Jan 16, 1966, https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/display-ad-1259-no-title/docview/117475081/se-2.

[2] Robert Odenwald, *The Disappearing Sexes: Sexual Behavior in the United States and the Emergence of Uni-Sex* (Random House, 1965).

[3] Betty Luther Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s And 1970s*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), xiii-xxiv.

Paris When It Sizzles of 1964, where Hepburn is seen wearing a light green Givenchy suit set.[4] Hair followed the same pattern as clothing, with popular styles changing over the decades, but always catering to respectability and order. In the early 1960s, all women were encouraged to keep their hair smooth and styled. Naturally curly hair was frowned upon unless styled to hold the perfect wave, and the hair of Black women had to be straightened and styled regularly to conform to ideas of order. It was in the late 1950s that the first advertisements for wigs were released for Black women, always in adherence with white, middle-class ideals of beauty.[5] Importantly, hair and clothing trends both contributed to the establishment and continuation of traditional gender norms. Fashion was gendered, meaning that women's fashion followed a set of strict, and in many cases, unsaid rules that cemented a woman's role in society. Men's fashion did the same. Across these categories, prior to late 1963, American fashion trends were formed to adhere to social acceptability, and they were turned on their head entirely by the end of the decade.

One major condition that allowed fashion to change so quickly was the establishment of a teenage cohort, which was just beginning to emerge in the late 1950s. As written by Victor Brooks in *The Last Season of Innocence*, "In 1959, the first cohort of sixty-seven million Baby Boomers were turning thirteen," and consumer culture was reaching a new height, with more families utilizing the first credit cards and buying more cars, which could be driven by teenagers, providing freedom.[6] Additionally, more families owned televisions than ever, bringing the influence of media into private homes. As age group identities grew, so too did the prevalence of small subcultures in which young adults could create their own community. These subcultures, including the Hippies, grew in popularity throughout the 1960s. By the end of the decade, the characteristics that constituted the shared identities of the members of these groups spread to the general public. Additionally, the consumer society based on need that existed prior to the mid-1960s no longer existed, rather shifting to a society based on desirability. This shift allowed for trends within subcultures to spread to a wider audience, with Alice Morin noting in *The Fashion of the 1960s: A New Power Shaping the American Image* that "creative propositions no longer threatened mass consumerism… they gave capitalism the look of a varied, diverse… and resourceful system," thus meaning that the conditions which facilitated order prior to "the shift" began to break down.[7] In tandem, the emergence of teenagers as a distinct group and the newfound independence allowed by the economic advances of the 1950s allowed for young adults to express themselves through a wider array of clothing and fashion styles. Though changes in fashion trends spread to groups other than teenagers and young adults, the younger population was more inclined to push previously established boundaries of what was acceptable for their gender identities, whether they were conscious of it or not.[8] At its core, the rate at which young people participated in new, bold fashion trends did not comply with definitions of order, and greatly contributed to a fear of disorder.

Used as a gendering tool prior to the shift, hair significantly influenced fashion and style in the 1960s. Largely inspired by The Beatles, who appeared in the United States for the first time in February of 1964 on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, men and boys began to grow their hair longer than was deemed socially acceptable in an attempt to emulate the band's style. This hair growth, however, easily upset multiple journalists and social commentators. As written in the *Chicago Tribune* in response to The Beatles' performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, "Their bowl haircuts flop over their eyes in sheepdog fashion… Their hair is long, but their pants are tight."[9] This

[4] Bob Willoughby, 5734-34 '*Paris When it Sizzles*, 1963, Photograph, https://www.imdb.com/media/rm3852310528/tt0058453

[5] Alice Morin, "The Fashion of the 1960s. A New Power Shaping the American Image," *USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics* 1 (2018): 2-3, https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-2752/7162.

[6] Victor Brooks, *Last Season of Innocence: The Teen Experience in the 1960s* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 9-14.

[7] Morin, "The Fashion of the 1960s," 3-5.

[8] Alice Morin, "The Fashion of the 1960s. A New Power Shaping the American Image," *USAbroad - Journal of American History and Politics* 1 (2018), https://usabroad.unibo.it/article/view/7162/7525

[9] Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 5.

commentary was critical of The Beatles, as well as critical of those who chose to imitate their style. In 1968, as the expansion of what Odenwald would deem "disordered" style became more widespread, 53 boys were suspended from Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, Connecticut, for sporting the very hairstyles that the *Chicago Tribune* commented on four years earlier. Their long hair, as well as that of boys and men across the country, was criticized for its "dirty" appearance, as it was considered inappropriate for looking unwashed and unkempt.[10] This description is vastly different from popular men's hairstyles of the previous decade, which were typically cut in a "crew cut" or "ivy league" style, which were short on top, buzzed on the sides, and always styled neatly. With the shift, as men began to grow out their hair, fears of disorder arose. Under the same conditions that allowed men to grow their hair longer, women were able to cut their hair shorter. In fact, popular actress Mia Farrow cut her hair to a longer crew cut in the mid 1960s, inciting a reaction from many. Journalist Gloria Emerson commented four times on Farrow's short hair in a short article featured in the February 18, 1967 issue of the *New York Times*.[11] Due to the popularity of what appeared to be a reversal in traditional hairstyles, some claimed that the distinctions between boys and girls were being blurred, leading to a higher chance of homosexuality and sexual activity, both of which were indications of disorder.

The "shift" seen in popular hairstyles and clothing of the 1960s consistently challenged traditional gender ideals, with critics arguing that it would lead to a breakdown of society as it was previously known. As argued by Betty Hillman in *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s*, "As men adopted bell-bottom pants, colorful clothing, and longer hairstyles and women donned pants and short hairstyles, many journalists pronounced that a new era of 'unisex' fashion had arrived."[12] For some, this new unisex dress was a harbinger of equality. With gendered clothing being eliminated, some reasoned that feelings of togetherness and gender equality must be on the rise. However, not all people felt that unisex clothing was an essentially positive force. As written by Robert P. Odenwald in his 1965 book *The Disappearing Sexes*, "we are a race of less masculine men and less feminine women, and we are in danger, if this trend continues, of developing a population of neutrals with virtually nothing to distinguish them" reflecting the fear of many that the unisex nature of some fashion trends would reverse gender roles as they were known. Odenwald, in particular, blamed women's growing roles outside of the home for the erasure in gender distinctions, with many women going to work during World War II and continuing their professional aspirations, rather than returning to the home for traditionally feminine duties. Odenwald, among others, argued that these fashion and cultural changes would undoubtedly cause homosexuality, because "unisex dress and hairstyle trends would lead to such confusion in sexual identities that the human race would fail to sexually reproduce."[13] The hints of androgyny in fashion were therefore a direct danger to American society, indisputably bound to lead to the unraveling of 'normalcy,' allowing America's direct descent into complete and total anarchy.

The notion of disappearing gender divisions not only applied to hair, but also expanded into clothing. Shifting away from the traditional, modest, and couture clothing of the early 1960s, clothing became mass-produced and diverse by the middle of the decade. As the United States established itself as a world power at the end of World War II, the economy boomed. Generation gaps became more pronounced, creating an individual, teenage identity. By the mid-1960s, this teenage identity was particularly influenced by popular culture, an aspect of American society that became heavily prominent around the same time that teenagers established themselves as a subgroup. By 1960, ninety percent of American households owned at least one television set, and families were more likely to subscribe to magazine or newspaper providers with their newfound postwar economic comfortability.[14] Naturally, media greatly influenced clothing trends. Over time, the clothing

[10] Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 1.

[11] Gloria Emerson, "Mia in Paris: 'I'm Kind of 20-20-20,'" *New York Times*, February 18, 1967, https://www.nytimes.com/1967/02/18/archives/mia-in-paris-im-kind-of-202020.html

[12] Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 24.

[13] Odenwald, *The Disappearing Sexes*.

[14] Morin, "The Fashion of the 1960s," 4.

that characterized subcultures spread to the general public and became widely available in stores across the country. According to Morin in *The Fashion of the 1960s*, for women, the miniskirt and trousers were popularized for the first time in the mid-1960s. In a break from tradition, "normal" citizens could emulate the style icons they looked up to in large numbers. Additionally, "psychedelic prints, jeans, peace-and-love logos, [and] flowers" were brought into mainstream fashion, allowing Americans to participate in a consumerist culture that gave them the option to "break the mold" of order.[15] For both women and men, this betrayal of tradition was criticized for its disregard for gender roles and indicated to critics that society was becoming permissive of "deviant" behavior, such as heightened sexual activity. In particular, men's fashion experienced a significant shift in the 1960s. Originating in Britain, the so-called "peacock revolution" made an analogy to male peacocks who use their colorful feathers to attract a mate. Somewhat suddenly, in men's fashion, brightly colored clothing, ruffles, jewelry, handbags, creams, and perfumes were marketed towards men. Men were also able to let go of some past staples of traditional clothing, with the nehru jacket allowing men to forgo collared shirts and ties in formalwear. Some argued that this "peacock revolution" signified true masculinity, because male animals use bright colors to attract female attention, while allowing men to purchase the clothing without feeling that they were feminizing themselves.[16] Still, others took issue with the new trends in men's fashion, with *Newsweek* suggesting that it may be a "homosexual conspiracy."[17]

In response to a fear of disorder initiated by changes in fashion, adults in positions of power exerted their influence over young adults at an extremely high rate, whether in school or by attempting to control industry. At Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx, New York, in September of 1965, two boys who arrived for a preopening event had their long hair cut with scissors by the dean of discipline upon arrival. In the Collegiate School of New York City, New York, a male student was told that "A sloppy head is indicative of a sloppy mind." At other schools, the true fashion problem was "strangle britches," or extremely tight pants for boys.[18] For girls, miniskirts were an item of regular criticism, with Executive Vice President of Crazy Horse Fashions Larry Robbins stating that miniskirts are "impractical… and [tend] to make the wearer look promiscuous."[19] Additionally, great controversy surrounded unisex fashion, which was described by some retailers as "distasteful," with a great deal of pressure put on "not [encouraging] a crossover of the sexes."[20] While popular among youth, boys' long hair, tight pants, unisex clothing, and miniskirts each contributed to feelings of discomfort and apprehension, even among stakeholders in the fashion industry who would benefit from selling more of these trendy items. When broken down to its most basic foundation, the apprehension that many felt about new fashion connects to the exact reasoning given by Odenwald to resist the latest trends. For many detractors, the primary reason for attempting to control the way that youth expressed themselves through fashion was due to this fear. With men wearing ruffled shirts, and women cutting their hair short, critics cringed at the possibility of a 'neutral' population, whose morality may not align with their own ideals.

As men and boys began to grow their hair longer more frequently, some women cut their hair shorter, and unisex and androgynous fashions

[15] Morin, "The Fashion of the 1960s," 1-10.

[16] Angela Taylor, "Men's Fashions in the 1960's: the Peacock's Glory Was Regained," *New York Times,* December 15, 1969, https://www.nytimes.com/1969/12/15/archives/mens-fashions-in-the-1960s-the-peacocks-glory-was-regained.html

[17] Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 24.

[18] Philip Dougherty, "Schools in the Area Give Notice That Long Hair Is for Girls Only: Beatle-Topped Boys Facing Planned Resistance Today, With Barbers the Winners," *New York Times*, September 13, 1965, https://www.nytimes.com/1965/09/13/archives/schools-in-the-area-give-notice-that-long-hair-is-for-girls-only.html

[19] Isadore Barmash, "Miniskirts Are Raising Some Retailing Eyebrows," *New York Times*, December 4, 1966, https://www.nytimes.com/1966/12/04/archives/miniskirts-are-raising-some-retailing-eyebrows-a-source-of-debate.html

[20] Isadore Barmash, "Retailers of 'Unisex' Apparel Wear Uncertain," *New York Times*, March 2, 1969, https://www.nytimes.com/1969/03/02/archives/retailers-of-unisex-apparel-wear-uncertain-retailers-ambivalent.html

became increasingly popular, previously prominent ideals of respectability were slowly overturned. Fears of promiscuity and homosexuality, in particular, consistently propelled individuals like Robert Odenwald to encourage a return to the typically white, middle-class values of the 1950s. Regardless of the efficacy of the actions of its proponents, fears of disorder prominent in American society in the mid-1960s directly challenged the freedom enjoyed by youth, further dividing the population on the basis of morality and expression. In essence, the barriers that were pushed by fashion in the 1960s allowed Americans to resist traditional morals of a previous era.

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