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The Evolution of Brassiere in the 20th Century

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Abstract

It is common knowledge that a brassiere, more widely known as a bra, is an important if not a vital part of a modern woman’s wardrobe today. In the 21st century, a brassiere is no more worn for function as it is for fashion. In order to understand the evolution of function to fashion of a brassiere, it is necessary to account for its historical journey from the beginning to where it is today. This thesis paper, titled The Evolution of Brassiere in the 20th Century will explore the history of brassiere in the last 100 years. While the paper will briefly discuss the pre-birth of the brassiere during Minoan times, French Revolution and early feminist movements, it will largely focus on historical accounts after the 1900s. The paper will follow a chronological order, beginning with the pre-birth of the brassiere, followed by a decade-by-decade account of the history of the invention of brassiere, its structural values and the social settings that both influenced and was influenced by the undergarment. My analysis will show that the brassiere is more than a piece of garment – the evolution of the brassiere has and will continue to mirror the evolution of a woman’s status in society. My thesis statement will be explained and captured by my original writing, published text, existing patents as well as pictorial evidence.
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Before the brassiere

Long before women wore brassieres in the 20th century, they have employed many methods to keep their breasts in check. While the main predecessor of the brassiere, the restricting corset was largely worn as women’s undergarment for centuries, ancient civilizations took matters into their own hands before any modern patents were drawn.

Minoan, Roman, Greek and Egyptian women, just to name a few, were practical in their use of undergarments. They tapped into everyday items such as linen clothes, belts and bands to conceal and protect their bodies from activities that may cause their bodies discomfort or harm. An excerpt from an article titled *The History of Corsets* (2011, para. 2) offers a clear illustration to my point:

Around 1700 BC, Minoans used corsets that were fitted and laced or a smaller corselette that left the breasts exposed. In other ancient civilizations, corseted women were painted on pottery in Crete, Egypt, Rome, Greece, and Assyria. Women, in these cultures, commonly took part in strenuous activities such as gymnastics and bullfighting that necessitated the use of constricting bands or garments for support. Grecian women wore bands called zona while Cretan women wore heavy rings around their waists and bolero jackets to give their breasts support.

Also, an article by Walsh of *The Independent*, Breast supporting act: a century of the bra (2007, para. 6) identified that the women in Crete wore material that both supported and revealed their bare breasts, in emulation of the snake goddess.
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*The History of Corsets* (2011, para. 3) reported that undergarments were just as commonly used for practicality as they are worn to illustrate eroticism and even as a method of class distinction. For example, Egyptian women wore a band under their bust as part of their outward costume while Romans used corseted tight lacing as a form of superiority over slaves to show their low status and subjugation to their loosely draped masters and mistresses.

Then, came the infamous corset. A video titled *Secret History of the Bra: History of the Bra* (n.d.) by National Geographic identifies that bras have shifted their curves to match ever-changing standards of beauty throughout their history and this phenomenon includes the bra’s predecessor, the corset. The video explained that “the corset’s job was to cinch the waist and amplify the breast. This look was considered both proper and sexy.”

The common misconception is that women started wearing corsets in the 19th century. The corset was not a new phenomenon then. *The Feminine Ideal* by Marianne Thesander (1997, p. 62) illustrated an iron corset from as early as the early sixteenth century. The Feminine Ideal also illustrated a picture of Queen Elizabeth 1 of England in drum farthingale by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger dated 1592 (Thesander, 1997, p. 63). However, changes regarding women’s corset and general undergarment occurred in the late 1880s. This was brought by the change of attitudes towards the female physique, the awakening of new artistic paragon and a greater differentiation between upper- and middle-class women expressed through various physical ideas (Thesander, 1997, p. 81).

Corsets in the early 1900s placed a lot of importance in the silhouette of a woman’s body. The ideal body type for women was large chest, small waist and accentuated hips, hence
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the reference of a woman’s body to the hourglass was born. In *The History of Underclothes*, authors Willet and Cunnington (1992) stated:

> Fashion decrees that very large hips and great splendor of figure should prevail but also superimposes a distinctly diminutive waist. The stays are of course straight-fronted, giving support but leaving the figure graceful and supple; whilst narrowing the back in the most surprising manner. It keeps English women in the right place, and allows their chest to expand… It is the feature of these stays that while they flatten the figure below they lend fullness to the chest thereby immensely improving the charm of the silhouette (p. 211).

It would seem that females of that era were comfortable with their sexuality and were openly expressive with their physique. Their undergarments proudly showed off the robust female breasts and curved shape of the waists. However, Thesander describes the woman’s body as “a secret which her clothes did their utmost to keep. We would walk about in the streets in bad weather in order to catch a glimpse of an ankle, a sight of which must be as familiar to you young men of the present day as the stems of these wine-glasses of ours” (Thesander, 1997, p. 82).

Throughout history, the corset has been of great importance as it was regarded as a must for any woman in society who wanted a dress to fit them properly – and for men to take them seriously. During that period of time, the corset had become more tightly laced and decorative, increasing the discomfort felt by the women who wore them. Therefore, it can be concluded that the corset was a social symbol for aristocracy physical control and self-discipline – symbol which will eventually attribute to its death and subsequently the birth of brassiere.
The birth of the brassiere

The 20th century dawned with a new feminine ideal, from strongly accentuated curves to a more toned down silhouette. Corsets became lighter - boneless corsets with elastic panels were created and they loosely fitted women’s body across the hips. The National Dress Reform Association, one of many early feminist organizations warned against the health risks of wearing corsets and called for "emancipation garments". By 1900, several prototype of bra experiments had been conducted (Independent UK, 2007). The first bra prototype was patented by Henry Lesher from Brooklyn, New York in 1889. John Walsh of Independent UK (2007, para. 8) described that Lesher’s designs “offered ladies a rigid metallic structure, like a dustbin, to hold their bits in place.” Bustnlace.com (n.d., para. 1) identified that the undergarment did not provide support for women’s breasts. The prototype was made of shield-like panels to absorb perspiration. Inflatable pads were built in when one breast was larger than another.

Many other inventors contributed to the slow emergence of the brassiere before the modern bra was patented. Walsh (2007, para. 9) wrote that among them was Herminie Cadolle in 1889. She “invented the “soutien-gorge” (the name meant throat support”) as part of a two-piece undergarment” and showed it at the Great Exhibition after she patented her designs. Her designs were considered the first modern brassiere because the invented a two-piece undergarment called le bien-être (the well-being). The upper pieces of separate cups supported the breasts with shoulder straps while the lower piece was a corset for the waist (BustNLace, n.d., para. 8). 100 Most Influential People in Fashion described Cadolle’s revolution to have made her “so popular that she became Paris’s most renowned bra fitter, working with actresses and royals like Mata Hari” (Dennis 2008, para. 2).
Figure 1: Picture of original patented brassiere design by Henry Lesher.
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Figure 2: Picture of original patent obtained by Henry Lesher.

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.
HENRY S. LESHER, OF BROOKLYN, NEW YORK.

BREAST-PAD AND PERSPIRATION-SHIELD.


To all whom it may concern:

Be it known that I, HENRY S. LESHER, of Brooklyn, in the county of Kings and State of New York, have invented a new and useful improvement, being a new article of wearing-apparel for ladies, produced by a combination of breast-pads and arm-pit shields; and I do hereby declare that the following is a full, clear, and exact description of the same, reference being had to the accompanying drawings, making part of this specification.

Figure 1 is a perspective view of the article, applied to the person. Fig. 2 is a front elevation of the same, detached and partially flattened. Fig. 3 is a side view of one of the arm-pit shields, with the shoulder and suspending braces attached.

Similar letters in the figures refer to corresponding parts.

This invention and improvement consists in producing a new article of wearing apparel for ladies, which shall prevent the arm-pits of their dresses from becoming saturated and stained by perspiration, give a symmetrical rotundity to their breasts and a more comfortable and graceful support to the skirts of their dress than heretofore.

The shields A, and pads D, thus connected and combined, are attached to a waist band or belt G, by elastic bands H, two on each of the pads and shields, which bands H extend down the side and front part of the person to the waist, and serve the double purpose of assisting in properly holding the pads D, and shields in their places, and of sustaining the waist band G, to which the skirts are buttoned or otherwise attached, directly below the points where the elastic bands H, of the shields are affixed to the said waist band.

Apart from the advantages derived from the pads D, in giving symmetry and beauty to the person, and the office they perform in assisting to hold the arm pit shields A, in their places, they will be found useful (from their soft and elastic nature and the slight tendency they have to press upward) in giving support to the breasts, no matter what may be their state of development.

In the event of one side of the breast being less developed than the other, as is frequently the case, it is only necessary to inflate the pad on the deficient side more than the other to hide this defect from view. This article may be either applied to a fully or deficiently developed person, as in the former case the pads will not contain any air, and will not, therefore, enlarge the bust so much as to make such enlargement observable.

What I claim as new and desire to secure by Letters Patent is—

The combination of the arm pit shields or protectors A, and breast pads D, substantially as described, so as to produce a new article of female apparel of the character set forth.

H. S. LESHER.

Witnesses:

DAVID STRAUB, JR.,
L. PUTKIN.
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Figure 3: Picture of Herminie Cadolle's two-piece undergarment, le bien-être

Figure 4: Picture of front and back of the upper piece of undergarment by Herminie Cadolle.
Walsh (2007, para. 10) wrote that the word "brassiere" was once a military term. It meant "arm protector" (le bras being French for arm), and by extension, "breastplate". Manufacturers used the term in 1904, but when American Vogue used the word for the first time in 1907, it made a milestone in the fashion history. In 1911, it first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary. While it was Cadolle who invented the modern-day bra, the inventor who patented the term “brassiere” in 1914 was New York City socialite, Mary Phelps Jacob, according to Diaz Dennis (2008, para. 3). Duron (n.d., para. 2) of Women’s Health explained that when Mary Phelps Jacob was 19, she bought a sheer evening gown for a party. The whalebone corset that was supposed to define her figure poked out of the plunging fabric. As a result, she sewed silk handkerchiefs to a length of pink ribbon, added strings and tucked her breasts in place, creating the “Backless Brassiere”. It was then that Jacob made her first dollar from brassieres, from a female friend who requested for her to reproduce a similar device. Disappointed by the sales, she flogged the patent to the Warner Bros Corset Company for $1,500. It would later be valued at $15 million.

Figure 5: Picture of a young Mary Phelps Jacob.
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Figure 6: Picture of Jacob’s patented brassiere design.
Figure 7: Picture of Jacob’s patented brassiere design.
Slow and steady: The evolution of the bra

World War I contributed to the decline of corset-use in America, according to Duron (n.d.) The World Wars changed the roles women played in society. While husbands, brothers and sons were in the army line fighting for their countries, women performed tasks that had been previously reserved for them.

According to The History Channel, although many women contributed and were left unpaid in World War 1, by 1914, millions of women worked in the textile manufacturing industry, mined coal, volunteered for the Red Cross. Duron (n.d., para. 3) described that more and more women abandoned corsets “as they found themselves, for the first time, in uniform and factory garb. American women entered the workforce in great numbers and the corset was deemed an impractical and awkward device that no longer seemed appropriate.” For the first time, women were also in charge of the family. Thesander noted that many women had become self-supporting and financially independent, so even if there was a surplus of women after the wars and not all of them could expect to get married, there were now better opportunities to take care of themselves (1997, p. 116).

The historical milestones of the First World War translated into the boyish appearance and women’s determination to gain suffrage which was finally introduced in 1918, later in several European countries. For the first time, women gained political rights. Because of these victories, women tried to eliminate sex-specific symbols like the corset. (Thesander, 1997, p.116) Fashion also played an important role in this change. The flat-chested flapper look was in trend at the time and it “required breasts to be flattened and bound rather than lifted and defined,” according to Walsh (2007, para. 13). In a newspaper interview in 1958, Andre
Duzaine Hansen said, “Flat-chested, narrow-hipped and no waist, that’s what the ideal woman of the 1920’s looked like – not attractive. Because many women had worked and dressed like men, brassieres were then designed to flatten the bust.” The change was an expression of women’s newly found liberation (Thesander, 1997, p. 116-117).

The passage from *Bra: A Thousand Years of Style, Support and Seduction* sums up the social implications of the decade:

“Flapper girls were a product of the war. Women were allowed to work and have their own disposable income. They realized they no longer needed to stay at home and look pretty. Refusing to retreat back into their kitchen when the men returned from the battlefields, the 1920s new women drove cars, rode bicycles and beat their menfolk at tennis and golf. Corsets wouldn’t do. Their bras had to allow them to work and play with panache” (Pederson, 2004, p. 48).

The next bra revolution was the Maidenform breakthrough in 1922. In a New York shop called Enid Frocks, seamstress Ida Rosenthal, spotted that women with the same chest size didn’t always look right in the same bra. Since breasts are in different shapes, cup size was born. In accentuating and lifting the bosom, rather than trying to flatten it, the 20’s bade farewell to the flapper, and paved the way for the future glamourpuss (Walsh, 2007, para. 15). The National Geographic noted that Rosenthal’s handprint on brassieres is still evident today. The modern invention of sizing was invented in 1928 by Ida and William Rosenthal, Ida’s husband. Their 1926 patent became the prototype of the modern support bra (BustNLace, n.d., para. 18).
Figure 8: Rosenthal’s Maidenform bra design.
Figure 9: Pattern of Rosenthal’s Maidenform brassiere.
In the following two decades, a combination of Hollywood starriness, bolder advertising, and the lure of department stores saw a colossal boom in women's products. In this era, the bra was at the forefront. Maidenform was joined by Gossard, Triumph, Spirella and Teilfit, all manufacturers who fought tooth and nail to invent refinements. Those refinements included but were not limited to better fabrics, patterns, straps, cups, fibers and padded sections. As the technology became more abstruse, the garment's name was simplified, in the 1930s, to "bra" (Walsh, 2007, para. 16).

Thesander (2007, p. 131) noted that “there was an obvious change in the feminine ideal in the course of the winter of 1929-30.” While fashion was dominated by male designers in the 19th century, “fashion in the 1920s was dominated by female designers” (Thesander, 2007, p. 114). Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel was one of the designers who modified women’s dressing by introducing simplicity and practicality into her modern designs, incorporating relaxed clothing to a changing society of new age women. Practicality played a large role in the evolution of women’s undergarments in the 1930s. Perhaps, no other invention in that era drove that point home like the introduction of cup sizes.

According to Valerie Steele (2010, p. 101), letter designation for cup size was first used in 1933 by S. H. Camp and Company. They correlated breast size to letters of the alphabet, A through D. Although it was S.H. Camp and Company brought cup sizing to life, Claudia Glenn Dowling (1989, p. 92) wrote that it was Warner’s that introduced cup fittings to the public in 1935, something manufacturers all over the world caught on. This marks the return of the bosom, after the Depression in the 20’s that was brought on by World War I. Laura Sinderbrand, director of the costume collection at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology said that the 20’s was a decade that eliminated women’s physical characteristics. The 30’s brought them back.
Figure 10: Warner’s cup sizing advertisement
While female characteristics were back in a big way, change was in the air. This time, as women’s hair became shorter; the hem line of their skirts underwent the same construction. The feminine look prevailed with the Lift, a very popular bra. An advertising copy in 1938 reads: The Lift system, with its quilted cups, lifts, supports and points the bosom so that it achieves the modern silhouette. With Lift, the ideal, the beautiful, high, pointed bustline is achieved (Thesander, 1997, p. 139). It was also during this era that the obsession with Hollywood began. It was evident in advertisements for the Hollywood Maxwell Bra: Learn from Hollywood ‘Stars’. Notice all the film stars have that sophisticatedly high bustline. And follow their example: use the famous Hollywood Maxwell Brassiere and have a beautiful, firm, youthful breasts (Thesander, 1997, p. 141).

Figure 11: A Maxwell bra advertisement.
The 40s welcomed a new world war. World War II was making history and there were “more pressing needs for cotton, rubber, silk and steel, so manufacturers turned to synthetic fabrics”. Howard Hughes’ aeronautical firm embodied this phenomenon with a metal bra designed for “sweater girl” Jane Russell, star of the 1943 hit *The Outlaw* (Dowling, 1989, p. 92). The Cantilever bra Hughes designed included rods of curved structural steel that were sewn into the bra below each breasts. The bra which infamously gave Russell a cone-shaped bosom is widely popularized and considered the first push-up bra ever made (BustNLace, n.d., para. 23).

![The Outlaw movie poster.](image-url)

**Figure 12:** The Outlaw movie poster.
Russell’s sexy, gun-toting persona in *The Outlaw* was an exaggeration of the women of her time. However, that exaggeration was not very far off. Pederson (2004, p. 64) wrote that unlike women in World War I who were largely confined to cooking and cleaning, women’s role in World War II consisted of handling anti-aircraft guns, running communications network, mending vehicles and flying airplanes to and from bases. On the other end of the spectrum, the term pin-up girls was coined in 1947 by *Life* magazine, referring to the lingerie-clad, big-busted beautiful women whose endorsements adorned walls across the world during the war era. In their own ways, the pin-up girls who paraded in their underwear contributed in the war efforts.

Pederson (2004, p. 64) wrote about returning war soldiers, “returning troops wanted a pin-up girl to come home to.” Women who were tired of utility clothing they wore during the war also craved a life of glamor. An exaggerated image of femininity was born. The paradoxical image aimed to sexualize women’s hourglass figure and at the same time promote female innocence.

This new breath of life spawned Christian Dior’s ‘New Look’ from 1947 – 1957. Dressed had wide padded shoulders and skirts were shortened to just below the knee. Clothes had a stiffer, more masculine cut and no longer hugged the body explicitly. At the same time, they incorporated the small waist, big hips hourglass form. Dior was up front and center in that movement during and after World War II. He created the look to map elegant femininity, a welcome trend after clothes rationing, poverty and masculine lifestyle and image to which women had been subjected during war (Thesander, 1997, p. 155).
Figure 13: A model wearing Christian Dior’s New Look.
Figure 14: Christian Dior in his workshop. The year was 1947.
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Figure 15: Christian Dior with his models rehearsing for his 1957 collection.
The birth of Barbie in 1959 went hand in hand with the cult of extreme youth in the 60s. Beauty was unofficially redefined by the doll, as though Marilyn Monroe’s death in 1962 marked the end of the embrace of voluptuousness of female figures. Even mannequins were a little taller than the average woman, legs were exaggeratedly elongated, waist smaller, hips narrower and bust higher (Thesander, 1997, p. 156). The body image of the period reflected a view of women as sex objects. Although the drastic changes in women’s undergarment from tight stringy corsets to convenient bras with hooks were over, it should be noted that women were wearing less garments than ever before. The first Barbie that was created wore black and white bathing suit which showed off her breasts and legs (Lord, 2009, p. 64). This sexual image was to be recreated and reemphasized from then on.

Figure 16: The first Barbie dolls released by Mattel.
While bras in the 1950s reflected the day and age of the baby boomers who claimed a more maternal look after the war, the 1960s saw “the biggest upset in the history of the garment” (Walsh, 2007, para. 19). The following is Walsh’s account of the largest demonstration in the history of brassiere:

The key moment was the 1968 demonstration by 400 women against the Miss America beauty show at Atlantic City Convention Hall. Somebody put a "Freedom Trash Can" on the ground and encouraged protesters to throw into it girdles, nylons, bras, curlers, high-heeled shoes and other emblems of enslavement. When the can was full, someone suggested setting fire to it, but no one could obtain a permit, and the plan was, rather weedily, dropped. But the idea of "bra-burning feminists" remained a potent image in the public mind – on a level with students burning their draft cards in protest against the Vietnam War.

Bras were not the only thing women threw away that day. Bras, mops, girdles, pots and pans, and Playboy magazines, all symbolic items that unilaterally represented women in the previous decade were tossed in a big garbage can. Women called them “instruments of female torture”. Carol Hanish, a member of a small feminist group which was one of the protest organizers, New York Radical Women, said the idea of the protest was sparked by a movie discussion during a group meeting about how beauty standards oppressed women. Hanish thought that “protesting the pageant might be a good way to launch the movement into the public consciousness” (Greenfieldboyce, 2008, para. 8).
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Figure 16: Women participating in the "bra burning" event.
Figure 17: A young woman with a bra which was known as an “instrument of torture”.

Amidst the era of demonstration, son of the head of Canadian Lady Corset company, Larry Nadler conducted a study which led to the discovery that in reality, many women didn't hate their bras as symbols of oppression. Rather, they considered them a means to looking beautiful. Nadler targeted the bra market with something new - it would be seamless, sexy and flattering, and would appeal to teenagers. His invention, the Wonderbra went on to change the world. With Wonderbra, bras would no longer be hidden behind a lady's blouse, a taboo to be discussed in private, nor a defense against prying male eyes. On the contrary, breasts were now the main focus of a woman’s figure. Rather than lifting and separating which was Playtex’s tag line for the lingerie, the Wonderbra pulled the breasts together, flaunting them for the world. Rather than a purely functional garment, they were now seen as a means of attraction and marketed as a luxury item (Walsh, 2007, para. 21). He mentioned that “in 1974, Wonderbra TV commercials took the unprecedented step of showing a woman's torso wearing only a Wonderbra, with the tag line, "We care about the shape you're in".”
The sexualization of women in lingerie may have started with Wonderbra but it was the dawn of Victoria’s Secret that put lingerie, fashion and sex in the same sentence. According to Duron (n.d., para. 8), Victoria's Secret was founded by Roy Raymond in San Francisco, CA. Raymond made his own undergarments-only store in 1977 after he felt the discomfort of shopping for lingerie for his wife in a department store. His shopping trip dedicated to his wife quickly followed with the opening of the lingerie store in malls and a mail order catalog. However, Raymond was no businessman. Before Leslie Wexner, the founder of The Limited purchased the label, it was headed into bankruptcy. Under Wexner’s direction, Victoria’s Secret “lifted lingerie out of the red-light district, launched it onto the runway, and landed it right into the underwear drawers of mainstream America” (Adler, 2010, para. 2).

Adler’s article in The Daily Beast (2010, para. 2) quoted Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst at the NPD Group, a market-research company. Cohen said that the company “made intimate apparel front and center” by taking “the secret out of Victoria’s Secret”. With prime-time fashion shows since 1995, sexy TV ads, steamy catalogs, and a presence in nearly every shopping mall in America, Wexner made lingerie trendy. Cohen explained, “All of a sudden women wanted people to see what they were wearing [underneath], and innerwear became outerwear.” Women began treating bras as they have been treating clothes – as fashion items. Like the women in the 60s, 10 years later, women were still taking their sexuality into their own hands and in turn made news. But this time, the headlines were different. At that point in time, bras were not viewed as anatomically or even physiologically necessary to support the breasts. They were also not viewed as a symbol of oppression. If anything, they were a symbol of sexual liberation, or as Steele (2010, p. 100) identified, the bra was viewed as a “fashionable or socially demanded item”.

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Figure 18: First Victoria’s Secret catalogue, released in 1977.
In the same year Victoria's Secret was founded, Lisa Lindahl and Polly Smith dreamed up the first sports bra out of two jock straps. Teamed up with Hinda Miller, a costume designer and a fitness enthusiast, they created the Jogbra (Duron, n.d., para. 7). The Jogbra was made for exercising women. It came alive in the light of the fitness craze in the 1970s and took center stage in the 1980s. The Jogbra scaled down the voluptuousness bras attempted to achieve previously. Early jogging bras compressed breasts against the chest, making exercise more comfortable.

Soon after, the fashion world witnessed another major turn in the form of a manmade fabric, Lycra. The stretchy material revolutionized sports bras and workout gear (Perderson, 2004, p. 99). Encyclopedia.com entry The Fitness Craze (2011, para. 1) best describes the relationship of fashion, function and fitness:

Americans in the 1970s would do anything to improve their health, cure a bad back, flatten a stomach, or handle their anxieties. Aerobics, dancing, isometrics, stretching, jogging, walking, bicycling, swimming, yoga – Americans increasingly worked out. By 1977 a record 87.5 million U.S. adults over the age of eighteen claimed to participate in athletic activities. The most visible sign of the fitness boom were some eight million joggers who trotted along big-city park paths and suburban byways. Popular marathons attracted thousands of participants; and Sen. William Proxmire, a five-mile-a-day runner, claimed, "It's a super feeling, like being immortal." "A good run," said a woman jogger in New York City, "makes you feel sort of holy."
Figure 19: Celebrity Jane Fonda endorsed fitness in her 1981 book.
The 1990s highlighted the progress women were making politically and socially. Diane (2011, para. 1) reported that once again, feminism continued to grow. Article Women of the Century: 100 Years of American heroes on *Discovery* marked that in 1991, the Glass Ceiling Commission was established to eliminate the barriers that block qualified women from advancements in the workplace and in the 1992 election, the percentage women in Congress doubled, thus dubbing 1992 as the Year of the Woman. Everyday women also took a step forward. Diane (2011, para. 7) wrote that with computers and internet, more people, notably women were able to work from home. “This opened doors for many stay-at-home moms who could now be accessible to their children, while earning extra income from their home offices.”

While women injected themselves into the professional lives previously heavily dominated by men, Aston (2003, p. 3) wrote, “America in the 1990s was a scene of ‘men behaving badly’, from celebrity boxers (Mike Tyson, convicted for the rape of Desiree Washington) to American presidents (Bill Clinton, impeached for his alleged affair with Monica Lewinsky).” In 1998, just months after President Clinton’s impeachment fashion magazine *Vogue* contrasted the “badly behaving men” to successful powerful women by putting First Lady Hillary Clinton on the cover of the December issue and called her “extraordinary”.

Carlyn (2003, para. 1) suggested that “the 1990s might well be remembered as the decade of Girl Culture and Girl Power.” This third-wave feminism promoted “feminine glamour through a creed of selfish individualism” bled from politics to fashion to music (Aston, 2003, p. 6). Strong-willed women took over the decade and their historical journey was mapped through their public expressions using art, music and a new wave of corsetry.
Figure 20: Hillary Clinton on the cover of Vogue, issued in December of 1998.
Parallel to the third wave feminism during this decade was the return of the sexualization of women’s bodies, predominantly breasts. According to Walsh (2007, para. 23), Gossard, a lingerie brand took Wonderbra under license in 1990 and hit a wave of popular uplift. British women in the early 1990s became fixated by plunging lines and spilling cleavages. Vogue published articles on the return of the padded bra, marking the return of the breasts which took a backseat and stepped out of the spotlight in the decade prior.

Designers like Vivienne Westwood and Thierry Mugler brought out a range of outrageous corsetry. However, it was Jean Paul Gaultier who garnered headlines. He began his cheeky experiments with lingerie worn as outerwear -- a trend that reached its apogee with the conical breastplate worn by Madonna on her Blond Ambition tour (Walsh, 2007, para. 25). Wearing underwear as outerwear, Madonna wore two corsets by Gaultier. The couturier took the 1950s ‘bullet bra’ as inspiration and dressed the singer in “dangerous conical cups combined with a faintly grandmotherly feel.” The huge media frenzy brought the corset back to the forefront of fashion (Pederson, 2004, p. 101).

Dowling (1989, p. 98) wrote that Madonna’s video décolletage boosted sales of the bustier. Popular Hollywood movies such as Dangerous Liaisons, a 1988 period piece set in Rococo France also helped this along. According to the late Frederick Mellinger, owner and founder of lingerie retailer Frederick’s of Hollywood, Madonna was good for business. He estimated that her Blonde Ambition helped boost fashion bra and corset sales by 40 percent at the lingerie giant (Pederson, 2004, p. 101, 102).
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Figure 21: Madonna wearing her infamous Gaultier gold conical bra during her 1990 tour.
Figure 22: The designer and his muse. Gaultier posed with Madonna who was wearing his creation.
In the new millennia, “the bra goes red hot”. Although first crafted for the 1996 Victoria Secret catalog, the fantasy bra has been worn by Heidi Klum and Tyra Banks at the Victoria Secret fashion shows. But it was Gisele Bundchen who modeled the most expensive version in 2000. The Red Hot Fantasy Bra was reported valued at $15 million. Made from red satin and hand-cut Thai rubies and diamonds, it's listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most extravagant and expensive items of underwear ever created (Duron, n.d., para. 10).

Figure 23: Gisele Bunchen in a Victoria Secret catalog modeling the $15 million bra.
Walsh (2007, para. 25) observed that by the 2000s, the bra market has expanded to bursting point. Over time, bras have established themselves as a self-indulgently luxury purchase and have become part of a “lucrative market in sexy products for women who like to remind themselves of the wanton seductress that lurks beneath their sensible business suits.” The writer also noted that the top-of-the-range modern bra is a semi-visible item that hints but not boasts the sensual personality of its wearer. Bras have come a long way from the days when they were about concealment, flattening and the furtive structuring of female breasts (Walsh, 2007, para. 26). A bra is said to “lift, support and enhance your life” like nothing else had before” (Pederson, 2004, p. 115).

Bras today no longer just represent form and function – they are most of all fun. Bras come in confections in all manners of fabrics, colors and cuts with no purpose but sheer delight. Mirroring the myriad of women in society today, there are shape-shifting minimizing bras for the abundant, padded push-ups for petites, tough athletic bras for support, and cleavage-enhancing bras for seduction (Pederson, 2004, p. 115). Women in the 21st century are considerably less confined by opinions, standards and expectations upheld by society and the lingerie they wear underneath their everyday costume reflect that progress.

Female lingerie has represented womanhood and the power of sexuality of women from the 19th century to modern times. The undergarment has undergone numerous alterations in both design and purpose over the course of a little over 100 years based on the cultural, sociological, economical, historical and political changes brought about by society. As the history of the world shaped itself and modified its face time after time, so did the evolution of the intimate clothing women donned under their dresses.
References


