FYP: Critical Essay

Rebellious Self-Expression during the Anti-War Movement: The Politicisation of Fashion Through Counterculture

The rising conflict between the US and Vietnam during late 1960s and 1970s inspired a desire for social change among American youths. Peace-protesting was steadily introduced by college students across the US in the mid-sixties in opposition to the state’s involvement in the war. These smaller protests led to the establishment of the greater Anti-War movement which has since gained recognition as a modern counterculture movement.[[1]](#footnote-1) The desire for social and political liberation among young people manifested across a variety of cultural formats, particularly in fashion. Protesters used clothing to visually symbolise their rebellion against the conservative, war-driven society of that time. This essay investigates the politicisation of fashion through the counterculture movement, examining fashion as a direct response to the conflict in Vietnam and its contribution to the transformation of individual expression.

The counterculture generation of the late sixties and seventies sought change across youth culture. The movement reflected decades of cultural rebellion within Europe and North America and responded to the Vietnam War through liberated forms of experimentation.[[2]](#footnote-2) The fashions of this era moved away from the conformist nature of previous decades and inspired fresh, free-flowing, and inclusive trends. This rejection of traditional systematic society manifested across a variation of art-forms including fashion, music, and film. Hippies believed that fashion, prior to counterculture, was a ‘system that society impose(d)’[[3]](#footnote-3) on them and contributed to the ‘restriction of freedom’ that was felt by youths at this time. To achieve this new concept of self-expression, hippies abandoned “received fashion, in order to invent (their) own personal fashions”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The term counterculture can be confused with ‘subculture’[[5]](#footnote-5) as they have similar tropes, the difference according to Roberts’ article ‘Toward a Generic Concept of Counterculture’ is that counterculture ‘rejects the norms and values which unite the dominant culture’[[6]](#footnote-6). A subculture affirms ‘the national culture and the fundamental value orientation of the dominant society’. Roberts argues that the similarities between a counterculture and the dominant culture in which it rejects often ‘out-weigh’[[7]](#footnote-7) the differences. This is because a counterculture is ultimately still a *culture* and, in many respects, resembles its “opposite”.[[8]](#footnote-8) It can therefore be understood that a counterculture emerges as a direct response to an event or crisis, and often reflects the culture in which it is rejecting.

To understand how fashion was politicised through counterculture, one must first consider the extensive conflicts that were active at this time. It is argued that the Anti-War movement relates back to other periods of crisis including WWII, the Great Depression, and the Cold War.[[9]](#footnote-9) The space race and the increased possibility of nuclear war between the US and Soviet Union was becoming a major source of anxiety for Americans, and so led to a collective belief that the US social “system”[[10]](#footnote-10) was flawed. The Anti-War movement is argued to have been an ‘outgrowth of the two world wars taken as a collective experience’ and was not entirely exclusive to the conflict in Vietnam.[[11]](#footnote-11) In an article published in ‘Peace Research: The Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies’, Benjamin T. Harrison argues that the “baby boomers”[[12]](#footnote-12) from this post-war period became the first ‘generation with idealised aspirations.’ The events leading up to this period convinced this generation of youths that their seniors had made a mess of the world, and that they were the only ones who could redeem it.[[13]](#footnote-13) Youths began to question society’s insistence on ‘conformity, environmental destruction, de-spiritualisation from nature and an impersonal ethos’[[14]](#footnote-14). Many youths thought the ‘flaw’[[15]](#footnote-15) in the system was due to excessive wealth, consumerism, and materialism.[[16]](#footnote-16) The answer to this, according to the hippies, was to adapt a simpler and more playful style of living.[[17]](#footnote-17) This new attitude to life then manifested in innovative methods of self-expression through fashion which has since become a defining aspect of this counterculture.

This generation of baby boomers had greater opportunities than the previous generation. Their college education inspired greater engagement with and expectation of the world around them, leading to a desire for socio-political change and cultural rebellion.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to Harrison, as well as producing more college students, the post-war period ‘could also afford the leisure of protests.’[[19]](#footnote-19) He explains this generational difference as “what the generation of the fifties saw as leisure *in* work, the generation of the sixties saw as liberation *from* work.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The conflict in Vietnam inspired a mentality among young people that their generation’s work was to carry out these protests in the hope that they would achieve socio-political change and peace from the war. Through the many rebellions of this prosperous generation came a ‘counterculture in value-conflict’ with the dominant society of that time.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Through a shared opposition to the conflict in Vietnam and participation in peace protests, an Anti-War movement formed in the late sixties. Those who followed this movement were known as hippies, and slowly populated communities across the US.[[22]](#footnote-22) Bearing witness to the consequences of their elder’s past, youths began to express their desired liberation from conflict in their appearance. Suri argues that many of the strategies employed by followers of the Anti-War movement such as ‘community organising’[[23]](#footnote-23) and ‘non-violent demonstrations’ had strong antecedents. He recognises that the aims and techniques of counterculture were ‘radical, but also traditional’ and argues that they ‘deployed a very usable political past’[[24]](#footnote-24). A collective opinion that the US was unstable as a political state combined with its contribution to war inspired new ways of self-expression for members of hippiedom[[25]](#footnote-25). Trending pieces such as bell-bottoms, short skirts and clothing with abstract patterns defined counterculture aestheticism. Lytle remarks in his article ‘Making Sense of The Sixties’ that the iconic fashions of the Sixties were not ‘simply fads like the hula-hoops, poodle skirts and bikinis of the conformist Fifties’[[26]](#footnote-26), he argues that these fashions ‘struck many in authority as symbols of defiance so disturbing that they justified official repression’[[27]](#footnote-27)

An article published in *The New York Times* in 1967 recognised protesting as a ‘demonstration (that) is both a moral gesture and a political act.’[[28]](#footnote-28) Youths chose to express this intersection between morality and political justice through their clothing. The wearing of such modern and alternative pieces by members of these protests lead to the politicisation of trending fashion items. These pieces represented a rebellion against several social issues, and against conformist living in its totality.[[29]](#footnote-29) Primarily, youths sought peace from the war in Vietnam and protested for the US’s withdrawal from conflict. Young males from the ages of eighteen to twenty-five were drafted through the Selective Service System across the US to fight in Vietnam[[30]](#footnote-30). This was something that college students were also passionately against. Peace protests began in the early sixties on a small scale on college campuses across the US.[[31]](#footnote-31) Students understood the power of symbolism and incorporated this into their dress, wearing free-flowing garments with colourful patterns. This fashion style was an entirely new concept to their senior Silent Generation[[32]](#footnote-32) who had not experienced such emphasis on self-expression for political gain.

College students, as recognised by Jeremi Suri in his article ‘The Rise and Fall of an International Counterculture’, were political constituencies who ‘questioned basic social assumptions’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Suri explains that these children of a ‘generally affluent generation’ were “deeply engrossed in the search for some newer means of arriving at moral values’.[[34]](#footnote-34) A 1966 article in *The New York Times* reads: ‘the Vietnam conflict has nevertheless generated an intellectual, moral and ideological upheaval passionately centred among American young people’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Despite the original purpose of these peace protests being a demonstrative opposition to the war in Vietnam, the effect these protests had culturally is arguably their most primitive aspect.

Fashion discourse, as noted by Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark in their article: ‘Conceptualising Fashion in Everyday Lives’ can be explored through three key themes: the routine element of fashion, historiographies of fashion, and the research methods that allow an investigation of fashion as an aspect of everyday life.[[36]](#footnote-36) Buckley and Clark emphasise the presence of fashion in everyday life, and the power ‘simple fashions’[[37]](#footnote-37) can hold within a society when worn by the majority. This approach suggests that despite its conceptual nature, fashion is also significantly reflective of reality. The word ‘fashion’ is indicative of modernity and is a concept recognised as something that “increasingly sharpens our sense of the present”.[[38]](#footnote-38) Considering this framework, one might question what must occur for a fashion trend to emerge. As previously mentioned, a period of fear or crisis such as the conflict in Vietnam can inspire rebellious fashion trends. Separate to the political significance of their clothing, hippies believed the act of self-expression to be personally liberating.[[39]](#footnote-39) It can therefore be understood that the wearing of counterculture fashions during the peace protests had both political and cultural implications, some of which were intentional and some not.

With the growth of this counterculture, came a sense of excitement for the hippie generation.[[40]](#footnote-40) A combination of their shared ‘coming of age’[[41]](#footnote-41) and the influence of the conflict in Vietnam came a ‘mood of tremendous angst’[[42]](#footnote-42) among the baby boomers. Questions like “Who am I?” and “What does it all mean?”[[43]](#footnote-43) filled their minds as they voyaged through their primitive years of adulthood. It was through this questioning that inspired a transformation of individual expression, a lot of which was achieved through fashion. It is argued that clothing is a “universal language of signs” and can be both symbolic of and rebel against the society in which it is fashionable.[[44]](#footnote-44) A lack of power and control of the conflict in Vietnam arguably inspired hippies to use self-expression as a method of communication.[[45]](#footnote-45) The hope was that like-minded individuals would recognise trending styles like long hair, bell bottoms and patterned clothing to be representative of the hippiedom way of living. The aim was that the clear breakaway from classic, more traditional clothing styles worn in previous decades would suggest that the hippiedom lifestyle was the future, their clothing embodied a message for change.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The rise of baby-boom youth culture in the sixties provided a ‘large and profitable market’[[47]](#footnote-47) for new trends. The growth of counterculture fashions can be measured by the development of television in America during this time. The accessibility of television in the homes of the middle class during the late fifties and sixties was transformative for American culture in many respects. For the first time, families could sit around a television set in the evening and engage with news programmes. High engagement with televised entertainment presented an opportunity for companies to promote their products on an entirely new scale. Advertisements could now reach the 90% of American households who owned a television set.[[48]](#footnote-48) A combination of fashion advertisements and footage from peace-protests arguably aided the spread of counterculture across the US. Advertising during this period, according to author Betty Luther Hillman in her book ‘Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation’ helped to ‘increase the emphasis on personal appearance as part of one’s politicisation’[[49]](#footnote-49). Hillman notes that a chant used by protesters during the Chicago Democratic National Convention in 1968 “the whole world is watching” demonstrated their awareness that television and the media were ‘instrumental in visually broadcasting their message to the outside world’. The author suggests that hippies, knowing their audience, explains why activists used ‘dress and hair styles as visual cues to signify their political goals’[[50]](#footnote-50).

Bell-bottom trousers were a popular style worn by youths during the anti-war protests and were available in both male and female fittings. These trousers were tight fitting around the upper half of the leg with a flared cut after the knee. This cut of pant was originally worn by US Navy sailors as functional workwear in the 19th and early 20th century and resurfaced in the sixties during the Anti-War movement.[[51]](#footnote-51) Bell-bottoms were seen to be worn repeatedly throughout protests and became a fashion associated with this time. It is argued by Ronald Barthes in *System de la Mode* that fashion can “know only a very long history or no history”.[[52]](#footnote-52) This theory suggests that perhaps without their military background, these pants would not have resurfaced again during a time of conflict. It is argued that protesters returned to this cut of pant and tailored them to be associated with their own policies spiteful of the US military’s involvement in Vietnam.[[53]](#footnote-53) Hippies purchased bell-bottoms, a style previously associated with the military, and repurposed their function. The trousers were now worn as uniform during peace protests that condemned the military activity from which the style rooted from.

In conclusion, self-expression allowed youths who followed the Anti-War movement in the US during the late sixties and early seventies to feel a sense of control in a war-driven society where they otherwise felt powerless. Self-presentation techniques ‘provided a rich tool’ for activists to visually express their opposition to and alienation from American culture. The conflict in Vietnam sparked youths to question the American socio-political system, resulting in the establishment of an Anti-War movement. Peace protesting, despite its denotative opposition to war, had larger cultural connotations through the way in which people presented themselves. The fashions of this time were part of a greater counterculture that formed in response to hippies shared rejection of traditional American society. The politicisation of clothing during the peace protests can be measured by its television coverage through protest footage and advertising. Self-expression through clothing and hairstyles was therefore both a political and cultural tool used by activists to communicate their ideas to the world.[[54]](#footnote-54) The counterculture of the late sixties and seventies has since been recognised as one of the most defining of the century and is argued to be the most transformative period of individual expression in the 20th century.[[55]](#footnote-55)

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