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## Introduction

Heeled shoes have ranged from masculine riding boots to contemporary footwear associated with female power and sexuality. Gender representations across various forms of visual culture can illustrate how the modern perception of the high heel has emerged as a result of our social discourses and cultural practises.

While ideal body shapes for men and women have invariably changed with time, one constant is that the ideal body, regardless of specifics, has never represented the bodies of most women (Garner et al, 1980; Rodin et al, 1984). The form of the female foot is no different. From foot binding and the consequentially petite foot as a symbol of beauty in China, to the ubiquitous allusions to large feet and their pairing with spinsterhood as early as 18th century cartoons (Gill, 2008), women have endured pain and disability to meet the requirements of podiatric beauty standards. In modern culture, operations to deaden nerves or to add botox cushioning to the soles of women's feet to alleviate the pain of wearing high heels are on the rise (Sanghani 2014). Beauty standards from this perspective have been described as "vehicles for the oppression of women" (Freedman, 1994), and yet high heels are self-imposed. This will be discussed by an exploration of the associations of heeled shoes throughout their history.

## A Brief History of the Heel

Heeled footwear can be traced to as far back as the 9th century (Semmelhack, 2014), where Persian men would wear them for the practical means of securing the foot in the stirrup. This style of shoe, essential to Persian fighting styles, was soon mimicked by cavalry across Asia and Europe, but it was only in the early 16th century, after the first diplomatic mission to Europe (Kremer, 2013), that Persian shoe fashions were enthusiastically adopted by the European aristocrats. These heeled shoes were thought to give their appearance a virile, masculine edge (Shawcross, 2014).

Venetian chopines, often as high as 18 inches, were also starting to infiltrate into the aristocracy (Semmelhack, 2014). Designed as ornate and heavy block platforms, these shoes were ostentatiously impractical in the muddy, rutted streets of 16th century Europe, but therein lay their appeal; used to elevate oneself above the mud and squalor, they were a way of being physically and socially elevated above others. Heeled shoes' impracticality was soon synonymous with wealth and status, worn by the few who could afford not to walk or move. As the wearing of heels filtered into the lower ranks of society, the bourgeoisie responded by dramatically increasing the height of their platforms to new realms of impracticality.

In 1595, Queen Elizabeth was famously painted wearing a pair of latchets, this being the first visual documentation of heels in Europe (Post Staff Report, 2015). Elizabeth Semmelhack, author of "Heights of Fashion: The History of the Elevated Shoe" and curator at the New York Beta shoe museum, has argued that women of this time saw heels as a hegemonic accessory of masculinity (2008). Women were cutting their hair, adding epaulettes to their outfits and wearing heels to masculinise their appearance (Shawcross 2014). By the late 16th century, heels were unisex, fashionable accessories of the upper class, resulting in the term to refer to an authoritative or wealthy individual as "well heeled" (Merriam Webster, 2015).

A more notable shoe aficionado was King Louis XIV of France (1638-1715). From his early twenties, Louis XIV had his heels covered in red Moroccan leather- this dye being particularly expensive- again reinforcing the association of heels with privilege and power. An even greater prejudice was installed when Louis issued an edict that only members in his court were allowed to wear red heels (Kremer, 2013). Helen Persson of the Victoria and Albert museum has linked this trademark of an elitist shoe to the modern red soles Christian Louboutin's (Post Staff, 2015).

The 17th century's conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, and the birth of

enlightened thinking was the beginning of what is now called the Great Male Renunciation. This paradigm shift prioritised education rather than privilege. However, it is important to note that women were not privy to such an education and the opportunities that were presented with it; this revolution was exclusively for men. Up until this point it was fashionable for middle-upper class men to also wear makeup, jewellery, ostentatious fabrics, heels and accessories (Post Staff, 2015). Male fashions were now replaced by homogenous, practical clothing (Kremer, 2013). Heels became a primary example of irrational and impractical dress, and by 1740 men had stopped wearing them altogether (Post Staff 2015). These accoutrements became symbolic of femininity (Shawcross, 2014), for if men were deemed educable and practical, women were stereotyped as irrational, sentimental and uneducable (Kremer, 2013). Lavish fashions were now exclusively the trappings of upper class females, and in time became associated with feminine desirability. High heels became more tailored for their female users, with opulent designs and fabrics. Like the corset, heels began to be designed to sculpt the body and make it appear more pure, refined and desirable (Semmelhack, 2008). Women taped their feet to reduce apparent size and to fit into the tapered ends of heels that would be glimpsed under swathes of skirts and petticoats. These delicately pointed toes were the epitome of alluring femininity.

Herein lay the beginning of the high heel's association with female sexuality. By the late 18th century, the Massachusetts Puritan Colony in the New World passed a law "banning women wearing high heels to ensnare a man", by penalty of being tried as a witch (Muritein, 1974). The mincing, swaying walk of one teetering on heeled shoes "feminised" women's graceful gaits (Furnham 2013). A woman's role in the 18th century patriarchal society was one of subservience; arranged marriages allowed a woman to "progress from her father's daughter to her husband's wife, never surpassing their place in society as a beautiful accessory for the "keeping of men" (Howells, 2003, Forbes et al, 2007).

When the French monarchy fell in 1791, so too did the height of women's heels. Spurred by the rejection of the bourgeoisie, women also started to challenge the traditional feminine role. Napoleon banished the heel from French society as a symbol of oppression and an attempt to show equality (Piboolnuruk and Nutchant, 2012). The winds of fashions began to favour spring shoes, with smaller and more practical wedges.

However, only fifty years later, by the mid-19th century, two coinciding products revolutionised visual culture and heels were in favour once more. Firstly, the camera was invented and photography was born. For art, this was a revelation; realistic paintings could now be replaced by instantaneous pictures. While art responded with impressionism, the visual depiction of women through photography blossomed (Howells, 2003). The second invention was the sewing machine which had started to be more widely accessible. Up until this point, clothing and shoes were necessary but expensive commodities. Sewing machines made a range of clothing items more accessible to lower classes, and in so doing, broke the associations between certain fashions, such as heels, and privilege (Forbes et al, 2007).

With the invention of the photograph and "the pin-up", heels rose to dominance once more. Scholars have tried to reason why, and many have concluded that for the instantaneous moment of taking a picture, women appeared more attractive when wearing heels (Furnham, 2013). There is a plethora of academic research to prove that theory. Dr Ed Morrison of Plymouth University conducted a study that found that wearing heels makes a woman appear more attractive to both genders (Forbes et al, 2007). Heels also physically change the way a woman holds herself and moves. Legs are elongated and shoulders are pushed back. In "The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe", William Rossi describes the pleasure of a man watching the sashaying buttocks and undulating hips of a woman walking in heels (1993).

There are however, physical implications of wearing such an unnaturally structured shoe. Wearing heels regularly can result in back problems, bunions, blisters, disfigured toes and permanent deformations (Feldman 2008). They have been described as painful, inhibiting and oppressive in nature (Freedman 1994). While slowing a woman's walk, they also inhibit her from running away from an attack, making her defenceless. The mere physical effect of having to look down while walking in such shoes has been described as a visual cue of vulnerability to others (Schorn, 2009). They demean, constrain, deform and inhibit, and yet their self-imposed popularity saw them through to the 20th century.

## 20th Century and Feminism

This was a time of social reformation and empowerment for females, and yet through women's suffrage, wars and multiple waves of feminism, high heels have always incongruously seeped back into female fashions after phases of unpopularity due to their impractical nature.

In the Preface to Hugh Hefner's "Playmate Book: 50 Years" (Edgren and Hefner, 2005) he

described a young man's necessities during Army service as a uniform, a helmet and a pin-up. He described these photographs as morale boosters during the war, reminders to the boys away from home of what- and whom- [they] were fighting for.

After the Second World War, women who had been active were now encouraged to return home and return to their traditional roles (Feldman, 2008). Fashions became more demure and ladylike again as a result. With material advancements during the war, Dior was able to invent the stiletto heel, using plastic innovations to create a slender heel of incredible strength. According to Rebecca Shawcross in her book *Shoes: an Illustrated History* (2014), stilettos helped create the modern sex symbol as we know today. Semmelhack (2014) wrote that Vogue models, television housewives and Hollywood bombshells were all typically represented in stilettos.

Here lies the beginning of the modern association and confusion of what heels represent. Women burned their bras in fits of feminism, and yet many did so while wearing heels (Sands, 2008); this created an evocative dichotomy between females. For many feminists, high heels indicated subservience and sexual stereotyping by men (Raven, 2013). For others, it was a symbol of self-expression. One person's patriarchal oppression was another's embrace of their own sexuality. The individualism and freedom of expression that stemmed from feminism has created central battleground of sexual politics that is ongoing today.

### Heels in Today's Society

Today, the footwear industry is worth over £6 billion in the UK alone (Sanghani, 2014), with the New York Times describing high heels as "a woman's power tools" (2000). Popular TV shows such as *Sex and the City* depict successful women wearing heels of dangerous heights daily. This overrepresentation in visual media has arguably linked social awareness of women's competencies to superficial aspects of their appearance (Gueguen, 2014). High-heeled shoes communicate a sense of elegance and aesthetic taste, which is directly influenced by contemporary advertising that conjures images of elegance, sex appeal, and luxury (Stermitz, 2012).

Similar to men wearing ties, there is the societal expectation that one must look professional in a work environment. A modern law firm has recently gone as far and publicising their dress code for women as "stilettos with skirts rather than trousers to embrace their femininity" (Steiner and Mcdermott, 2008). In many ways, heels have also empowered women in the working environment. Their added height traverses the difference between genders and bestows a shoulder-to-shoulder equality (Feldman, 2008). "Power dressing" has associated the clicking of stilettos on hard surfaces to mean the approaching boss rather than secretary (Fulton, 2011), and women have reported that stilettos give a sense of grace, elegance, and luxury "a sense of self-esteem" (Gill, 2008). However, heels have been associated female sexuality far longer than they have been of female authoritative power, and herein lies the concern of the heel's modern cultural associations.

### Conclusion

In an article for the Independent, Sarah Sands described women wearing high heels as a "heroic vanity" (2008). Modern associations of heels are symbols of authoritative power and of female sexuality (Mitchell, 2002). This dual association is of concern, as it could lead to downgrading women's power to that of a sexual nature. If this is the case, it gives women's power a very limited shelf-life that is dependent on superficial aspects of appearance related to age, beauty and feminine expectations.

While women are constrained by such inherent stigmas of femininity, so too are men by hegemonic expectations of male masculinity. While ripe with varying cultural associations, the heel has been emblematic of virile masculinity in the past, and can occasionally be seen in males in the entertainment industry in today's culture (Semmelhack, 2014). If heels were truly emblematic of power, men would be wearing them too. Perhaps in time, as the dichotomy of gender-based expectations are broken, they will again.

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High heels also have a serious physiological impact on the way someone walks, stands, and moves. As the actor and drag queen RuPaul once put it, “High heels do not represent femininity, they just make your butt look really good” your posture completely changes for a superior, affected stance and the butt becomes a work of art. Kiva Reardon, editor of Cleo, a magazine on feminism and film, and programming associate at the Toronto Film Festival, concurs. “Height has always been equated with power,” Reardon says. “As a taller woman, I nearly always opt to wear heels in hopes of being one of the The idea of a high heel or platform shoe is actually a seriously ancient one. One of the first traced high-level pieces of footwear in history belonged to actors in ancient Greece, and were known as kothorni. They were flat shoes with wooden or cork bases up to four inches thick. However, these weren't necessarily worn offstage; they were actually meant as a kind of shorthand about the social class of various characters in Greek drama and comedy. The higher the heel, the more “elevated” the character. The focus was on the instep; a curved instep was supposed to show a woman's femininity and refinement, and tiny heeled feet were the height of sophistication. It was the beginning of erotic photography, too, and heels played a strong role in its first years. “High heels are to us what corsets were to late Victorian women. They are inhumanly uncomfortable” and yet self-imposed,” observed Sarah Sands recently in the Independent on Sunday, before confessing that she is saving up for “some perilously high purple suede shoes by Christian Louboutin.” And she won't be alone. Because this is the season of statement footwear: extravagant, fantastical, eccentric and, above all, high, high, high. Balenciaga's most coveted summer accessory is a pair of multi-stranded gladiator boots, leather-laced up to the knee and balanced on unfeasibly steep wedges. Prad