

# Cultural and Aesthetic Analysis of Some of the Most Daring Celebrity Fashion Trends

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## Abstract

Celebrities play an important role in setting the fashion agenda. Albeit often with some delay or in a watered-down form, celebrity trends are often embraced by either high street stores or more specialist fashion retailers. Designers often seek to push the boundaries of what is deemed possible in women's wear. Celebrity appearances, in particular at red carpet events, have in recent years featured increasingly daring ways of attracting attention to both the wearer's body and the designer's outfit idea. Nipple flashing has been usurped as the limit of daringness by an increasing focus on below the waist. Buttocks and the groin have become important areas for designers to flirt with, and in some cases reveal candidly. Meanwhile, designers offer increasingly extreme versions of that women's staple fashion item, the high-heeled shoe. This article presents an overview of some of the most daring celebrity fashion trends of recent years, provides cultural and aesthetic analysis on these trends, and comments on how these trends either currently do or in future may transfer to a broader clientele.

## Keywords

Celebrities, Fashion, Media, Cleavage, See-Through Dress, Buttocks, Vagina, High-Heeled Shoes

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## 1. Introduction

The fashion industry is worth over a trillion dollars to the global economy every year (Joint Economic Committee of the United States Congress, 2015). Celebrities play a major role in transferring fashion trends from the catwalk to the masses (Church-Gibson, 2012). Often celebrity trends will encounter delay in transferral to the masses or be watered down, however such processes are complex and not entirely predictable. Celebrity trends can be extreme, and it is questionable whether some of them would ever be adopted by mainstream fashion

stores, or indeed whether there would be legal barriers to their adaptation. However, although often not as far advanced as celebrity trends, mass fashion pushes established boundaries and is strongly influenced by at least the broad concepts endorsed by celebrities. Moreover, celebrity fashion influence is not confined to adults and starts in childhood (Boden, 2006). Therefore, it is interesting to analyse from cultural and aesthetic perspectives some of the most iconic and daring trends in recent female celebrity event fashion, for example for wear on the red carpet at film premieres and award shows. Red carpets attract a lot of media coverage, so provide an ideal opportunity for designers to showcase their latest fashions by partnering with a well-known celebrity. Such events also provide an opportunity for female celebrities to get their names into the papers through their outfit choices, helping to build their profiles. Daring outfit choices can also propel lesser known names to stardom. Such choices evidently serve a dual function of self-promotion for both designer and celebrity, and conveyance of a desired ideal about female sexuality.

## 2. Objectives

The aim of this article is to provide cultural and aesthetic analysis of some of the most daring trends in recent female celebrity fashion, drawing on examples well publicized by the media.

## 3. Case Studies, with Cultural and Aesthetic Analysis

### 3.1. The See-Through Dress

Sheer materials exude feminine elegance and have a long history in womens wear dating back several centuries. For example, around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, sheer neoclassical gowns were popular for formalwear (Grigsby, 1988). However, modesty was relatively preserved, since opaque under dresses were worn. Sometimes, a tempting hint of bare skin was revealed through the sheer dress in relatively safe areas such as the shoulders and arms. In the 1960s, a period that saw widespread sexual revolution (Smith, 1990), sheer clothing made a major comeback and became correspondingly far more daring than had gone before. Young women in countries such as the UK and USA were starting to flaunt their sexuality more openly and wearing revealing clothing was one way to do this. The strict etiquette and fashion rules of the preceding decades were being cast away as this new found sexual freedom was embraced. Nevertheless, the wear of sheer materials in the 1960s was relatively modest, and was more flirtatiously feminine than outlandishly provocative. In 1968, the designer Yves Saint-Laurent showed on the runway a dress that featured a fully see-through top without a bra, flaunting the model's bare breasts. However, this look did largely not translate off the runway to celebrity or mass fashion. Sheer and see-through looks then fluctuated in popularity over the following decades.

See-through returned as a major fashion trend in the 1990s (Locke, 2015), but generally the focus was on revealing a bra through a sheer top, which was still considered rather daring at the time. Ironically, baring one whole breast above

the low neckline of a formal dress became established fashion in the French court of the 15<sup>th</sup> century on the instigation of Agnès Sorel (Canellas-Zimmer, 2005). Although fashion has in many ways become more daring over time, modern fashion is less daring than that of Sorel's era in terms of breast exposure. Sometimes, modern celebrities will bear their breasts fully through a see-through dress, but the one breast out look has not returned, except for Lil' Kim's outfit at the 1999 MTV Music Awards, when she did wear a nipple cover. During the 1990s, a few celebrities started to wear see-through dresses in more daring ways that drew the focus of attention downwards. As well as breasts, the buttocks and groin area were now in play. While Kate Moss at the 1993 Elite Look of the Year Party and Rose MacGowan at the 1998 VMA Awards both revealed their nipples in see-through dresses, the true focus of their outfits was below the waist. Moss, who had recently become an adult, showed her black knickers under her totally see-through dress. While the knickers were opaque, they were the most prominent feature on her outfit. The sweet innocent smile and lightly made-up look on her face (Bahn, 2016) only served to intensify the sex appeal of her look. MacGowan's outfit was even more daring. Her dress was slashed at the back to reveal her bare buttocks, the focus on which was heightened by glitter on the strands of thread that hung over her buttocks as well as the wiggle induced by her high heels. Meanwhile, at the front, sparkly highlights also drew attention to her groin area, which was guarded by a pair of decidedly sheer knickers, teasing onlookers as to what may or may not be showing through.

In the last few years, very daring see-through looks have been commonplace at celebrity red carpet and similar events. A lot of celebrities have been wearing dresses that clearly show that they are not wearing standard knickers, while flaunting a lot of skin at the sides of the body and sometimes at the back. Meanwhile, they have increased the sexual tease factor by putting small opaque panels to hide some of the most appealing parts of the body. For example, Maitland Ward wore two different dresses of this nature at the 2014 Adolfo Sanchez Fashion Show. One of her dresses was a leather look net dress that featured alternating opaque and bare squares. Her buttocks, nipples and her upper groin were clearly on show, while a piece of black opaque fabric blocked the view of her vagina, actually drawing attention to it as a tease. Meanwhile, her other dress showed her buttocks through a totally see-through back, while the front was also mainly see-through, but the nipples were hidden by white material that stood out markedly from the black dress, and a triangular sequined opaque piece of materials both hid and drew attention to her vagina. Although this partial see-through look has gained in popularity, the fully see-through look has retained popularity in some circles. Bleona Qereti channelled MacGowan at the 2014 American Music Awards, although her dress was not quite as revealing since she wore nipple covers, her knickers were opaque and the fabric over her buttocks was see-through but not slashed. In 2014, Rihanna wore a beautiful see-through sparkly dress to the CFDA Awards that revealed her nipples and buttocks. However, from an aesthetic perspective, the obvious plain 'nude' coloured thong she wore did not complement her dress well and slightly dampened

the sex appeal. She herself has said she wished she had chosen a sparkly thong (Edwards, 2016), which would have drawn more attention to her groin. Following on from this dress, J-Lo, Beyonce and Kim Kardashian all wore see-through dresses to the 2015 Met Gala.

However, the next, and so far most provocative phase in see-through dress fashion started late in 2016. While previous incarnations of this fashion had blatantly flaunted bare buttocks, they had drawn attention to, but simultaneously teasingly hidden the vagina – this was to change. At the 2016 Angel Ball, Khloe Kardashian wore a very see-through sparkly silver dress that offered an apparently fairly clear view of much of her groin between the sparkly strands of the dress. Not long afterwards, the 2017 UK National Television Awards came around. While some stars chose classical long opaque satin gowns with flamboyantly deep cleavage, such as Kate Wright and Casey Bachelor, the see-through look was again popular among other attendees. Some, such as Myleene Klass, chose a fairly long-standing look of a see-through black lace dress revealing her underwear. However, Marnie Stewart wore one of, if not the most revealing see-through dress in celebrity red carpet history. Her dress has attracted substantial criticism, with even the Daily Star saying it “lowers the tone” (Wetherill, 2017). However, like it or loathe it, Simpson has set a new threshold for how daring celebrity see-through dresses may be by fully baring her vagina. One of the most aesthetically beautiful aspects of Simpson’s dress is how she has fairly muted make-up, has her hair over one breast and has substantial lace patterns over the other breast to draw attention downwards. Meanwhile, the detailed lace patterns over both hips and upper thighs contrast with and draw attention to the plain see-through material that runs down the centre of her outfit, including over her groin. This contrast serves to draw attention to her vagina flash. The criticism of her dress suggests that even UK celebrity culture may not be ready yet for her level of see-through dress adventure.

One potential issue with such beautiful, but daring, celebrity fashion is that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it may not be legal in some jurisdictions for members of the public to emulate certain celebrity fashions, potentially reflecting the continued male dominance in positions of power globally. While we cannot wear such an outfit in public with confidence in our jurisdiction currently, several friends and I consider Simpson’s look to be one of the beautiful party dresses ever. We often wear see-through dresses to private house parties and the bare nipple has been a fairly staple fashion look in our circle for years. Following on from Simpson’s look, we have just started to leave off our knickers to emulate her. However aesthetically beautiful, and sexually stunning, this look is, there are still many cultural and legal barriers that would have to be broke down before all celebrity see-through dress looks can be worn by members of the public who want to wear them without any concerns about acceptability or legality. In entertainment venues near where we live, it is often acceptable for attractive young women to wear see-through dresses that show their nipples and buttocks, but except in certain x-rated venues, the groin must be fairly well covered, at least by underwear.

The see-through dress is one of the most iconic outfits in celebrity red carpet and event wear history. It has evolved from the innocently slightly sheer looks of several centuries ago, through a phase of merely revealing a bra through a see-through top, to include a substantial focus on the area around the buttocks and vagina. Most current looks focus either on revealing the underwear through a see-through dress or revealing a lot of skin and the fact that no standard underwear is being worn, while teasingly concealing some of the most appealing areas. However, the threshold of showing bare vagina has now been breached, even if it hasn't become a mainstream look even among celebrities. One theory behind the attractiveness of breasts and cleavage to men, the "genital echo theory" (Wilson & Nias, 1976), says that breasts remind men of the bare buttocks of their evolutionary ancestors. However, many see-through dresses in recent years have had buttocks as a prominent feature. This increases the sexuality from the indirect allusion to bare buttocks as seen in breast cleavage to a direct, albeit see-through display, of the buttocks. Most see-through dresses, while revealing a lot, have kept something hidden, retaining a tease of what might be underneath. This tease is particularly intense when the layer beneath is itself sheer, but not sufficiently so to show everything. Some recent see-through looks, most notably Simpson's, have moved to the idea of showing everything. Although in some ways the tease is reduced by not keeping something hidden, in other ways it is further intensified in that strong sexual feelings are likely to be aroused in heterosexual male onlookers but cannot be acted upon, echoing the metaphor of the forbidden fruit that dates back to Adam and Eve. While see-through dresses on the red carpet may be in part a way of attracting media attention and fame, they also offer an important insight into assertive modern female sexuality and how it can capture the male mind and influence men's behaviour.

### 3.2. Buttock Cleavage

As discussed above, the traditionally shown breast cleavage may be seen as a sexual symbol echoing the bare buttocks of our unclad evolutionary forebears. However, buttock cleavage is not a particularly longstanding fashion trend and retains a shock value that is no longer attached to even deep breast cleavage, provided that the nipples are covered. In recent years, however, celebrity fashion has explored ways to turn back the clock and put bare buttocks, as shown by our evolutionary forebears, back on the fashion agenda after centuries upon centuries during which this was seen as an exposure too far. Backless dresses have a longer history than buttock cleavage dresses, but are still a relatively recent addition to the fashion scene compared to for example sheer fabrics or breast cleavage, dating from the 1920s with the rise of "flapper fashion" (Glamourdaze, 2009). Although seen as outrageous when they first hit the fashion scene, culture has changed a lot over the past nearly a century, and backless dresses are now commonly worn for cocktail wear and eveningwear, and are seen as a sexy look but not outrageous.

The next frontier for backless dresses was evidently to drop the cut further

from the waistline to flaunt buttock cleavage. It remains a bit of an extreme look that is not worn particularly frequently, although at entertainment venues near us, there will often be a few young women wearing backless dresses low enough to show some buttock. Part of the appeal of this look may be the shock factor in extending the backless trend beyond the culturally accepted norms of the waistline. Another factor may be that shapely buttocks are a very beautiful and feminine part of the body. Yet another may be the sex appeal generated by showing the buttocks that guard the entry to the rear passage, alluding to anal sex. Showing areas of the body that arouse men and take control of their minds and actions may be empowering for women. While deep breast cleavage is often showed, to date most buttock cleavage looks in celebrity event fashion have showed only a relatively small amount of the butt crack, usually an inch at most, while breast cleavage frequently shows over four inches. Two of the most iconic appearances of this buttock cleavage trend were Heidi Klum back in 2007 at the Victoria's Secret fashion party and Rihanna when hosting an afterparty for the 2014 Met Gala (London, 2014). It was considered possibly the "most unwelcome fashion comeback" in 2014s by the Daily Mail.

While buttock cleavage seems an aesthetically beautiful injection of sexuality into women's eventwear, the relatively small amount of buttock exposed may reduce the appeal of this look as commonly conceptualised. One designer in particular, Lina Petrauskiene, offered a number of dresses that sought to show a lot of buttock cleavage (Wellman, 2012), at least 3-4 inches as is often shown with breast cleavage. However, although they were beautiful, they sold relatively poorly and to our knowledge have not been worn by celebrities, meaning that the vanguard of backlessness in celebrity eventswear remains at a hint of buttock. The more extreme buttock cleavage look is in my view very beautiful and time will tell whether mainstream culture develops soon to accept this highly glamorous showcasing of a woman's femininity and sex appeal. I certainly have a couple of dresses of this design for nights out. Criticism in the media, for example by Wellman (2012), will not help however with such cultural factors. Of course, backless dresses are not the only way in which fashion reveals buttock cleavage, although they are the way most associated with glamorous celebrity eventswear. Showing some buttock up a very short skirt has been a nightclub favourite for years, while some celebrities such as Kendall Jenner have started a trend of wearing jeans with rips over the buttocks, and it will be interesting to see if this sensuous take on everyday casualwear takes off.

### **3.3. The High-Split Dress**

Daring celebrity fashion trends have also focused on other ways, besides see-through dresses, to draw attention to that most intimate and provocative area of a woman's body, the vagina-the point of entry to the primary sexual tract. One of the most popular ways to do this in recent celebrity womenswear has been to take the previous trend for thigh-split dresses to an extreme. The first phase in this new injection of glamorous sexuality was to extend the split right up to the

hipbone on one leg. This pushes the cultural norm of dresses being just split to show some thigh. It also shows the aesthetic beauty of one whole bare leg as well as injecting sexuality through the baring of the hip area, making it possible that the dress might fly open revealing more. One especially beautiful example of this trend was Anja Rubik's white dress at the 2012 Met Gala. The second phase was to have splits up to both hips rather than just one, leaving a panel of material hanging loosely down over the groin. A classical example of this look, featuring two fully bare legs, was Kendall Jenner at the 2014 MuchMuch Video Awards. The third phase of this trend was introduced at the 2016 Venice Film Festival by Giulia Salemi and Dayane Mello. According to Metro, "Fashion has given up skirting around the issue and has seemingly declared the vagina its erogenous zone of 2016" (Lynch, 2016).

In what has been dubbed a Visible Vagina Dress (VVD), Salemi's look was especially beautiful. Her bold orange dress featured a deep breast cleavage and was split up from the floor to her lower stomach. Hers were among the highest splits that have ever featured on a dress. A very narrow orange strip of material hung sensuously down between her two fully bared legs. This dress truly heralds the progression of daring red carpet celebrity fashion from the baring of nipples, through some, if limited, experimentation with buttock cleavage to a focus on the vagina. The Daily Star remarks "First we freed the nipple as stars took to the red carpets in sheer slip dresses, but now A-listers have decided to liberate their downstairs region with a shocking new trend. More and more celebs are flashing vagina cleavage in skin-exposing dresses with soaringly high splits. Seams are inching higher and higher so women can reveal a glimpse of the area surrounding their most intimate body part" (Buchanan, 2016). I would love to wear a dress like hers, but have not yet been able to find one. VVD may not be an accurate term for her dress, since her vagina was not fully visible. However, she showed beautiful and very deep cleavage of her vagina, meaning that we have a new form of cleavage to consider—the vagina cleavage. Although she did not wear conventional knickers, as made clear by some pictures, she did wear a Shibu. Maybe the fourth phase of this daring trend could be to experiment with wearing a dress like this with truly nothing underneath, offering occasional full flashes of the vagina, which would be a less daring look than Marnie Simpson's stunning see-through knickerless dress.

The appeal of the VVD, at least as red carpet wear, is multifaceted. Firstly, at least while it is a relative newcomer to the fashion scene, it brings real shock factor that in term brings added fame and paparazzi attention to the celebrity in question. Secondly, from an aesthetic point of view, it showcases bare legs, which are among the most elegant and beautiful parts of a woman's body, which offering varying degrees of exposure of the area around the most beautiful area of all. Thirdly, from a cultural perspective, it is a very sexually provocative look that in some cases offers a very heavy tease of the vagina, the entry to the primary sexual tract. This look, along with the knickerless see-through dress, is the most sexually provocative of the latest celebrity fashion trends. Women may, if they

choose, at least in certain situations, use sexual provocation to influence the thought patterns of men and distract them from their tasks. For example, [Van den Berg and Dewitte \(2006\)](#) found that pictures of sexy women, even without extremely provocative outfits, can influence men's decision-making behaviour and make them more likely to accept an unfair offer. Therefore, even more so, could very provocative dresses be used to influence a man, whether that is to attract his sexual attention for the first time or to influence his thought processes to the benefit of a woman with whom he is already in a relationship.

### **3.4. Extreme High-Heeled Shoes**

High-heeled shoes (high heels) are an essential part of many women's gender identity ([Dilley, Hockey, Robinson, & Sherlock, 2015](#)) and have a long history in this role ([Stewart, 1972](#)). There have been debates about issues of social pressure and compulsion to wear high heels, which is not the focus of this article. I do consider it important that women can choose whether or not to wear high heels, and believe that usually this choice is currently respected. However, also most women will want to wear high heels at work, at least if they work in the corporate sector, and definitely for smart social occasions. They transform a woman's appearance and are truly "sex on legs" ([Foreman, 2014](#)). This sex appeal is supported by scientific evidence ([Barnish, Morgan, & Barnish, 2017](#); [Guéguen, 2015](#)). Of course, high heels are bad for our health ([Barnish et al., 2017](#); [Barnish & Barnish, 2016](#); [Cronin, 2014](#)), but surely that is a choice we can make as adults. Certainly, I disagree with the way many of my friends who work in health are accused of hypocrisy if they wear high heels even to smart occasions such as conferences or on nights out. My preference is for very casual events or daytime when off work to wear either pretty flats or 2-3 inch wide-heeled boots. This helps save my feet for when I feel really high heels are what I need. I would feel underdone personally attending work or a smart social event without a 5-6 inch heel.

Most female celebrities wear high heels for every, or almost every, red carpet appearance or similar. They really help to increase the aesthetic appeal of some of the other fashion trends we have discussed above, particularly those that include drawing attention to the legs, since high heels give the legs an illusion of extra length. In this section, what I would like to note is not that celebrities are often wearing high heels, but some of the more extreme forms of high heels that have been showcased by celebrities. At least in the celebrity world, the focus seems to have moved away from the 3 - 4 inch range towards the 5 - 6 inch range. Designers that had until recently rarely produced 6 inch stilettos now report them as representing in some cases up to a third of their high heel sales ([Bourne, 2009](#)). The 5 - 6 inch heel, without a platform, once seen as a near impossible feat, has now become a highly sought after and dramatically iconic symbol of female sexuality, to such an extent that 4 inch heels now seem "a little granny heel" for glamorous social occasions ([Bourne, 2009](#)). While some consider high heels are demeaning, many women actually find them empowering

through bringing them closer to eye-to-eye to most men and through the sexual effect they have on men. 5 - 6 inch heels, often stilettos with no or a minimal platform, have become a major go-to look at celebrity events. Moreover, some celebrities have embraced very high heels while performing daily tasks around town (Daily Mail, 2011; Smith, 2012).

Adding a platform is a way of making high heels even higher. However, the sexually enticing changes in a woman's gait primarily come from the heel-to-toe elevation, which is not increased by a platform. Also, platform heels can lack elegance, depending on how they are designed. A small platform can help increase the apparent height of a stiletto heel for extra perceived drama and glamour. For example, even back in 2011, Heidi Klum and Zoe Saldana used small platforms to increase the height of their Oscars stilettos to 7 inches (Goldwert, 2011). Depending on the dress style, and in particular whether it is sheer or has splits, the wearer's shoes may not be seen. However, high heels can have a dramatic effect on women's posture and perceived attractiveness even if they are invisible (Barnish et al., 2017). If the shoes cannot be seen, this can favour the decision towards achieving a dramatic 6 inch height increase through a more moderate heel-to-toe drop of around 4 inches plus a platform. This was the look embraced for example by Emily Ratajkowski, Joanne Froggatt and Sofia Vergara at the 2016 Emmy Awards (Sutherlin, 2016).

Moreover, some celebrities have taken the opportunity to showcase extremely high platform heels. This is a different look that does not merely try to make a stiletto look a bit higher without increasing the foot drop, but rather the platform is an integral feature of the look, alluding to the style of platform heels worn by strippers. Indeed, the difference in aesthetics and sexual-cultural factors relates more to the style difference than any difference in overall platform height. Stars such as Helen Mirren and Courtney Stodden have both been photographed wearing the ultra-high clear platform look (Sampson, 2013), Stodden wearing platforms in public of up to 10 inches. Meanwhile, no discussion of platform heels would be complete without a mention of Lady Gaga, who has frequently worn platform heels at celebrity events, often around 10 inches, but once wore 24 inch platform heels at the CFDA Awards. Although it was aesthetically very beautiful and sexually very empowering to see her elevated to such heights, the actual design of the 24 inch heels was not particularly elegant and was rather boxy. The highest commercially available platform heels according to the Guinness Book of Records are 20 inches by the designer James Syiemong. They feature dramatic narrow stiletto heels, but a heel-to-toe drop of only 3 inches reduces the appeal. These days it is not difficult, inspired by this celebrity trend, to buy 8 - 12 inch platform heels with a foot drop of at least 4 inches. The two most iconic looks appear the 6 inch stiletto without platform and the 10 - 12 inch platform stiletto, although the latter could be made more attractive by more frequently using a 6 inch stiletto as the basis rather than a 4 inch one.

High heels may be restrictive, some consider them demeaning, many women

consider them empowering and they certainly exert sexual power over men. According to one Misterpoll survey (Allegria\_vagina, 2016), 46% of respondent women often and 24% sometimes wear very high heels on a date so that can feel protected as their male partner helps them balance. Meanwhile, in another Misterpoll survey (Guy999, 2016), 70% of respondent women usually wear high heels on a date and 52% show a lot of cleavage. Interestingly, use of different strategies to exert sexual control over the male partner, including high heel wear, were associated with each other. Most respondent women (73%) were usually late for dates, 58% being deliberately late. Of those who were deliberately late, more (51%) were usually very late (more than 20 minutes) than those who were accidentally late (17%). Of those who were deliberately late, 87% usually wore high heels and 78% show a lot of cleavage. Considering only those who were deliberately very late, 94% usually wore high heels and 82% show a lot of cleavage. Of those (24%) who thought the man should always pay, 88% would usually wear high heels, 69% show a lot of cleavage, 78% are usually late, 92% are usually deliberately late and 64% are usually very late. Of those who thought the man should always pay and were usually deliberately late, 92% would usually wear high heels and 88% show a lot of cleavage. Therefore, high heels appear one part of a complex strategy women may use to feel good about themselves and also attract and influence men.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has shown ways in which celebrities help lead fashion trends and how these may or may not always be translated to the masses. We have seen how see-through dresses can be used to enhance a woman's aesthetic appeal and draw sexual attention to her most beautiful parts, and also how what is revealed through see-through dresses has become more daring, almost to the point where they maybe nowhere to go next. We have seen how buttock cleavage can be shown to offer a more direct sexual signal than breast cleavage, but also that any move towards deep buttock cleavage has so far been resisted. We have seen how splits in dresses have become higher and more daring to offer a stronger tease of the area around the most intimate part of a woman's body, leading to the new concept of the "vagina cleavage". We have also seen trends in high heel fashion that feature increased heel height of stilettos and ultra-high platform heels to enhance sex appeal and seek empowerment, including through exerting a sexually distracting effect on men.

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