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### Final Paper: Diving Into the Evolution of Swimwear

1988- The year Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston were at the height of their careers, topping the Billboard Hot 100.<sup>1</sup> George Bush was elected as president in the United States, and the Washington Redskins won the Super Bowl.<sup>2</sup> The swimsuits worn at the Miss USA pageant by all of the contestants were royal blue, high cut one-pieces. High-rise and thong cut bottoms were in style with bikini swimwear, but one peices dominated the swimwear industry. Swimwear had gone through a long process to become so tight and revealing, originally introduced in the 1800s were ‘swimming dresses’ and did not expose any skin. Swim apparel had become a fashion category on it’s own with the first Miami Swim Fashion Week being held in 1982. “As a brief form of clothing, any study of swimwear is closely aligned to beauty, thinness and the fashion body—its changing shape and bodily ideals” (Schmidt). Women’s swimwear became a platform for ‘sexy’- and the ideal body to fit into that swimsuit was desired by many.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hot 100-1988 Archive,” Billboard Charts Archive, Billboard.com, accessed November 11 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/archive/charts/1988/hot-100>.

<sup>2</sup> “XXII Super Bowl” nfl.com, published Febuary 1, 1988, accessed November 11 2017, <http://www.nfl.com/superbowl/history/boxscore/sbxxii>

Although the first swimming club was established in 1742, it wasn't until the 1920s (the age of 'flappers' and the disregard of modesty) that the swimwear silhouette moved away from a dress with bloomers, and towards what we recognize as a bathing suit today. This was the first decade where swimwear had no sleeves and became significantly shorter. The 1930s followed a similar hemline, with a short bottoms being preferred. In the 1940s, swim fashion went almost static. With World War II going on, there was not a high demand for new swimwear styles. The well known spaghetti strap did come into play, which projected towards the triangle bikini top trend and the introduction of the bikini by Louis Reard in 1946. It was also in the 40s that mother and daughter beach styles were in fashion. Only high-waisted bottoms were appropriate in the 1950s, as anything lower than your belly button was unheard of. It was the 1960s feminist movements that brought credit to the tiny bikinis known to us today. The monokini of 1964, designed by Rudi Gernreich, was a perfect example of the motto: "the less fabric, the better."<sup>3</sup> Being the first topless bikini, it broke away form of modesty that was a very important part of women's fashion just a short 40 years ago. The 1980s & 90s had similar silhouettes, with women becoming more empowered by their sexuality. Being in shape and showing more skin was more 'in' than ever before. There was a sense of freedom in the cut of the suits- no restrictions can be recognized by this time.

Karen Brits, a fashion enthusiast in 1988, was the ideal example to look at for the inspiration image for this paper. Being 19 at the time, she was well aware of the trends in

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<sup>3</sup> "Bathing Suit", Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, metmuseum.org, accessed November 11 2017, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1986.517.13/>

the industry and often made her own clothing in the latest Vogue patterns. Pictured below, she is wearing a Calvin Klein look-alike, made by Pick n Pay Clothing (the second largest supermarket in South Africa.)<sup>4</sup> Calvin Klein was a big influence on



fashion at the time (in both men's and women's fashion). The suit is made from a wool-like material, which was first seen to be used in the mid-1930s. It additionally has a separate white elastic belt, accentuating the body's middle.

The suit also has the high-cut, cheeky bottom famed in the 1980s, that directed attention to the elongated leg. An example of a similar style that was advertised in the May 1988 Harper's Bazaar by Calvin Klein featured German model Tatjana Patitz.<sup>5</sup>

I thought looking at the Sports Illustrated swimwear edition magazine of 1988 in comparison to the 2017 calendar was a great example of how swimwear has changed to suit the model/consumers tastes, as well as body type, rather than to follow the current trends. In the 2017 edition of Sports Illustrated Calendar, there is body diversity, with athletic

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<sup>4</sup> "History", Pick n Pay History, [picknpay.co.za](http://www.picknpay.co.za/history), accessed November 11 2017, <http://www.picknpay.co.za/history>

<sup>5</sup> "Advertisement: Calvin Klein Swimwear (Calvin Klein Co.)." *Harper's Bazaar* 121, no. 3317 (05, 1988): 98.

icons (such as Aly Raisman and Serena Williams), plus-sized models (Ashley Graham) and supermodels (Gigi and Bella Hadid).<sup>6</sup> The 1988 catalog in contrast, had petite women with minimally-toned muscles, wearing teeny bikinis or high-cut one piece swimsuits.<sup>7</sup>



The swimwear in 1988 and in 2017 were and are parallels to their perspective era's social trends, just like any other fashion. In the eighties, women were obsessed with diets, exercise and having a slim, 'sexy' figure. The first legal, nude beaches were also started in the 80s. In 2017, we see the body positivity movements and models of every shape, size and race coming into the fashion modeling world. This has made a huge impact on how and what kind of swimwear is made.

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<sup>6</sup> Tsai, Yu. *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit 2017*. Image, 2017.  
<https://www.si.com/swimsuit/model/ashley-graham/2017/photos#24>

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, Julie. *Sugar and Spice and, Oh, So Nice*. Image, 1987.  
<https://www.si.com/vault/issue/702375/119/2>

Textile exploration and development has redefined swimwear from what it used to be in the 1890's (development being the use of flannel instead of serge). With synthetics like polyester being mass-produced in the United States by 1953, swimwear started to move away from natural fibers for obvious reasons. Speedo, being a leader in swimwear for sport use, was one of the first to experiment with different fabrics for optimal swim performance and minimal drag in the water. They were then, and still are today, a leading brand in olympic sport swimming apparel. Speedo was also the industry leader in 'leisure' swimwear up until 1969, with the establishments of Rip Curl and Billabong. Other competitors, such as Seafolly and Quicksilver, were established in the mid-70s and are still popular today.

In conclusion, the body in itself has been seen in a new way since the introduction of swimwear. Clothed, the body conceals flaws and creates silhouettes with fabric, but in a bathing suit, the body itself becomes the silhouette. How this silhouette is embraced today is very different than what it used to be (toned and skinny) in the 1980s. Looking forward, I think swimwear will only progress in the promotion of individuality of body forms, and might be the first fashion form to move into being determined completely by body type, rather than style, trend or pattern experimentation. Maybe one day, 'everyday clothing' and swimwear will merge with advanced fabric technologies, and the bikini will only be read about in the history books.

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