Scientific and Social Research, 2025, Volume 7, Issue 11
https://ojs.bbwpublisher.com/index.php/SSR
Online ISSN: 2981-9946
Print ISSN: 2661-4332

Little Black Dress as A Sign of Female Consciousness

Ruyi Fu*

Design Department, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou 510640, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Abstract: The little black dress (LBD) has evolved from a minimalist garment introduced by Chanel into a powerful cultural symbol that reflects the transformation of female consciousness throughout modern history. This paper investigates the semantic, cultural, and ideological meanings embedded in the LBD across different periods, focusing on how its changing design aesthetics mirror shifting perceptions of femininity, empowerment, and social identity. By analyzing visual materials, fashion designs, artworks, and advertisements from the Victorian era to contemporary popular culture, the study demonstrates that the LBD has been repeatedly reinterpreted as a site where gender norms are challenged, reconstructed, or reclaimed. The evolution of the LBD—from mourning attire to modernist neutrality, to a signifier of elegance, and finally to a medium of personal agency—reveals broader societal transformations regarding women's autonomy and self-expression. Ultimately, the LBD functions not only as a fashion item but also as a semiotic vehicle documenting the progress of women's roles and rights in society.

Keywords: Feminism; Culture; Semiotics; Fashion; Female consciousness

Online publication: November 14, 2025

1. Introduction

Since its introduction in the early twentieth century, the little black dress (LBD) has become one of the most enduring symbols in fashion history. Its simplicity, versatility, and cultural adaptability have allowed it to transcend trends and function as a marker of social, aesthetic, and ideological change. Yet, beyond its status as a wardrobe classic, the LBD also embodies shifting narratives of femininity and female identity. Throughout different historical stages, the LBD has signified modesty, modernity, elegance, rebellion, and empowerment—often simultaneously.

The origins of the LBD trace back to Coco Chanel's reinterpretation of black, a colour previously associated with mourning and restriction. Chanel's design democratized fashion by making a simple black garment accessible and practical, reflecting the emerging independence of modern women. Later reinterpretations—such as Hubert de Givenchy's iconic dress for Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*—further shaped the public perception of the LBD, associating it with confidence, sophistication, and self-possession.

In contemporary culture, the LBD continues to evolve, becoming a tool through which women express autonomy, challenge gender stereotypes, or reclaim bodily agency. Through case studies ranging from Victorian mourning attire to Bauhaus modernism, to androgynous design, this paper explores how the LBD operates as a semiotic system. By tracing its cultural evolution, the study reveals how this seemingly simple garment encapsulates broader transformations in women's roles, rights, and representations.

2. Research

2.1. Little black dress liberated women

This little black dress (LBD) in the movie, Breakfast at Tiffany's, was designed by Hubert de Givenchy. The dress shows his appreciation to female women's charm. Chanel was the pioneer of the little black dress, and her dress hid most female characteristics. However, Givenchy brought some female features back. He adjusted the loose silhouette into a slinky silhouette as shown in **Figure 1** [1]. The dress was lengthened to let the soft fabric drape on the slim figure. The long sleeves were transformed into long gloves that have the same type of fabric as the dress, which is a formal suit. At the front side of the dress, it has a simple bateau neckline, but at the dress's back in **Figure 2**, the curved line of the armhole and big collar exposes the shoulder, which makes her sexy but not erotic [2]. Also, the feminine accessories of Chanel's black dress were kept by Givenchy. Although the dress was slightly sexy, Givenchy got rid of the submissive image of women. Further, Audrey Hepburn made this dress well-known in the film. Her glamorous and confident image in the movie was associated with the little black dress.

Figure 1. Marianna Cerini, British Actress Audrey Hepburn on the Set of Breakfast at Tiffany's Based on the Novel by Truman Capote and Directed by Blake Edwards, March 31, 2020, Photograph. Source: CNN

Figure 2. Cerini, Marianna. Audrey Hepburn's Dress Was Designed by None Other than Hubert de Givenchy, Who Worked on Hepburn's Entire Wardrobe for the Movie "Breakfast at Tiffany's." March 31, 2020. Photograph. Source: CNN

In contemporary times, women wearing a sexy black dress is mostly self-appreciation. In 2016, Taylor Swift wore an LBD at the Vanity Fair Oscars After-Party in **Figure 3** [3]. The style of this dress is different from Chanel's and Givenchy's. The knee length of Chanel's dress was for movability, but this dress has floor length that is for a ceremony. Compared to the dresses of Chanel and Givenchy, this dress is tight and emphasizes the curved shape of the body. The collar of this dress is lowered to her waist and shows her collarbone and breast, which makes

her sexy and attractive. The armhole is much bigger. It shows her long and slender arm. The side of the dress is open to the thigh and shows her long and thin leg. The style of this dress is sexy and exposed that retrospect of the time when feminine ascetics dominated society. Besides, the pearl necklace becomes metal in a simple form. As metals are often used in industrial production of the modern era, they signify modernity. Instead of being appraised by men, they regard their features as attractive. Taylor dresses up for herself to manifest her independence as she is a successful woman.

Figure 3. Alicia Brunker and Charlotte Chilton, The Evolution of the Little Black Dress, February 12, 2020, Photograph Source: ELLE

2.2. Little black dress empowered women

Regarding the meaning of black, it was a mourning colour in the Victoria era. In these pages from fashion magazines in **Figure 4**, the details, accessories of the mourning dress are various, even though they were the same colour and structure [4]. Manufacturers added details to appeal to customers but did not change the colour, so wearing the black dress was a convention. Referring to the history, Queen Victoria wore black clothing after the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861 until her own death in 1901. Wearing the black mourning dress showed her strong commitment and honour to her husband, so it signified her respect. Also, this colour was connected to sorrow as she wore it to express her lament. Soon, the queen led the trend. Rather than a forceful law, women could still choose the garment, but they did not, because they would be seen as peculiar for not following the social norm. Although black mourning dresses were popular in the Victoria era, women chose to wear them due to the fear of social norms. Thus, the mourning black was restrictive.

Figure 4. Meghan MacRae, Dull Black Everything… Victorian Mourning Dress, July 30, 2014, Magazine. Source: Cvltnation

Black became indifferent in modern times. As Bauhaus started in 1919, when industrialization flourished, its product design had the features of industrialization. Colours used in Bauhaus are mostly neutral, such as black and white, and grey. The Classic Bauhaus Chair, which can be seen in **Figure 5**, has lots of imitations in many places, like the office, the classroom, and so on [5]. **Figure 6** shows that it is only constituted of pure black fabric and metal [6]. The black fabric is not easy to get dirty and is durable. The simple form of this chair makes it easy to manufacture and reproduce. As Bauhaus protests that function is more important than form, they refuse any decoration, but decoration can satisfy people's psychological needs. The product ignored the mental desire of people, so it consequently associated with efficiency and the indifference of the industrial age, as well as the neutral black used in the product design. The principle of Bauhaus affected the design of the world, and the LBD was at the time that Bauhaus was developing. Hence, the influence of Bauhaus and Chanel's LBD is relevant due to the use of black in the dress.

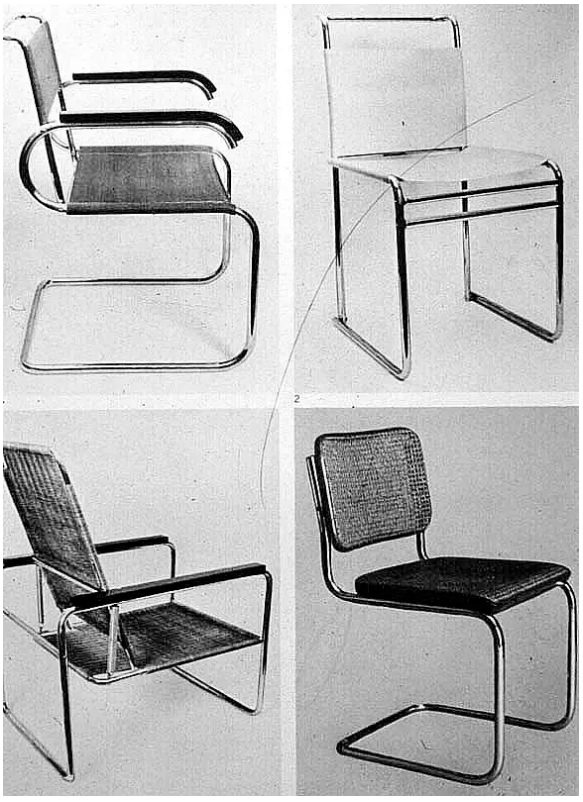

Figure 5. Jane Bovary, *Bauhaus Furniture History and Characteristics*, March 17, 2024, Photograph. Source: *Dengarden*

Figure 6. Marcel Breuer, Chair (Model B33), 1927, chrome-plated Tubular Steel with steel-thread Seat and Back. Source: Smarthistory

2.3. Little black dress signified female elegance

Pearl was a girlish accessory. In Vermeer's famous painting, Girl with a Pearl Earring in **Figure 7**, the white pearl was associated with innocence [7]. The girl's clothes are exotic compared to Dutch native garments. She turns her head, and her eyes are toward the viewer. She is looking at the viewer, and her mouth is open as if she has something to tell. The light is on her face. Through the light, the big and white pearl is pure and shining. As Jonathan Janson says, "But with Vermeer these large, drop-shaped, gleaming pearls become the points of convergence of light, symbols of the beauty of the worlds" [8]. The pearl is associated with the innocent image of the girl.

Pearl is a feminine jewellery. In this poster in **Figure 8**, a woman wears a black dress with a V-neckline that lowered to her chest, a pair of violet velvet gloves, and a set of pearls [9]. Her toilette is quite formal and elegant. The makeup on her face and tidily tied up hair tell that she is going to attend an important occasion. She stares at somewhere, and the corner of her mouth rises, which shows that she is delighted. In her hand, there is a red invitation, and in the left corner, a man holding a smoke stands at a distant place. Also, the gentleman dresses up formally and puts a napkin on the pocket at his chest. These clues indicate that the woman has a date with the man. At the lower part of the poster, it says, "for that priceless look", and at the lower right side, it is the brand's name. This is a jewellery advertisement. The brand associates the elegance of this woman with the jewellery. The man is waiting for this woman, so the poster says wearing these jewelleries will make you an ideal woman for the one you like. The woman's appearance is attractive and feminine. Further, the pearl jewellery signified femininity.

Figure 7. Johannes Vermeer, Girl with a Pearl Earring, 1665, Oil Painting on Canvas. Source: Essentialvermeer

Figure 8. VintageDancer, Rhinestone and Pearl Choker Necklace and Large Bracelet, 1946, Poster. Source: Vintagedancer

2.4. Androgynous design denies gender

The androgynous design was considered an offence to gender as it challenged the gender norm. In Frida Kahlo's self-portrait, there is a lot of hair on the floor, and she holds a pair of scissors and a braid while her hair is short. It means she just cuts her hair. She wears big earrings and high-heeled shoes that are usually women's accessories, but the suit she wears is oversized in contrast to her small figure. The size of this suit does not match her body and has a dark colour, so this might be a man's suit. She presents a masculine image of a woman. There are some musical notes above the painting, which are "in English, 'Look, if I loved you, it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore'" which can be seen in **Figure 9** [10]. Although she and her

husband were just divorced in 1939, this painting is more than a complaint. In both the portrait and the notes, the long hair symbolizes femininity. Her husband's love for her is at a biological level, which makes her heartbroken. That she presents the androgynous image is a way to deny her gender.

Instead of being against gender, androgynous design fights against the stereotype of gender. "Rei Kawakubo is one of the pioneers of fashion androgyny: when she started Comme des Garcons in the 70s, it was a womenswear range literally telling people to dress like a boy. The dress in **Figure 10** has lots of distorted bumps on the slender waist of the mannequin, and the crotch is raised [11]. This dress is for a lady and shows the curved body, but it is not the ideal image of a woman. Instead, it mocks the perfect body of women and the feminine stereotype. It presents what women can be. Rei questions the conventional requirement for a female image that only women with an elegant and perfect figure are beautiful. In a patriarchal society, women are obsessed with their appearance morbidly. That Kawakubo opposes the feminine image is against the male gaze that "plays out most obviously … [by] gazing at women's body parts, making sexual comments and exposure to visual media that spotlights women's bodies and body parts, depicting them as the target of a non-reciprocated male gaze" [12]. Androgynous design denies the stereotype of gender.

Figure 9. Frida Kahlo, *I Painted My Own Reality*, 1940, Oil Painting on Canvas. Source: *MOMA*

Figure 10. Rei Kawakubo, Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Ensemble (Bodice and Skirt), 1997, Garment. Source: MOMA

2.5. Little black dress presents the progress of society

Every woman could own an LBD as everyone could own a Ford T. The democratic value of the car was associated

with the little black dress because of their low and affordable price, and they were in the same era. In the background of this poster in **Figure 11**, there is a lot of smoke and fire. This is an industrial area, and workers are going back [13]. In the foreground, a driver is driving the Ford T car. Inside the car, a worker sits near the driver. On the right side of the poster, a worker is looking at the car, which shows his admiration. The title "within the means of millions" means millions of people. At the lower right side of this poster, there is a list of prices for several types of cars, and the lowest one is only $260. It shows that it will concern the benefits of low-income working-class people in society. Even these workers can afford to buy a car. The democratic value is embedded in that everyone owns the same thing equally.

The democratic value spread to women. Millions of people in society not only indicate classes, but also gender. As cars were usually for men at that time, women were mostly in the home, but the Henry Ford company considered women's rights. The woman on the left side shown in **Figure 12** is holding a bunch of branches and wears a white shirt, brown trousers, and a pair of long boots. She looks at her left side and smiles [14]. On the right side, another woman is in a black Ford T car, and her hands are on the steering wheel. They travel somewhere. The woman on the left side is going to fire these branches. They stay here to go camping. As the title of this poster suggests that women can go many places with a Ford car. Women should leave the domestic place and have an adventure. It encourages women to pursue freedom.

Figure 11. The Henry Ford, Advertisement for the 1925 Ford Model T, "within the Means of Millions", 1925, Poster. Source: Thehenryford

Figure 12. The Henry Ford, Advertisement for the 1924 Ford Model T, "Freedom for the Woman Who Owns a Ford", October 1924, Poster. Source: Thehenryford

3. Discussion

The evolution of the little black dress (LBD) reveals how fashion objects operate not merely as aesthetic products but as cultural texts embedded within complex ideological structures. The LBD's shifting meanings—from mourning symbol to signifier of elegance, modernity, autonomy, and gender resistance—illustrate how garments actively participate in the construction of social identity rather than passively reflecting it. Through a semiotic lens, the LBD becomes a site where the signifier (the dress itself) and the signified (its cultural associations) continuously change in response to historical conditions.

Firstly, the semiotic transformation of black from sorrow to neutrality and later to elegance underscores how cultural meanings are neither fixed nor inherent. Chanel's appropriation of black disrupted Victorian connotations of grief and social constraint, embedding modernist values of simplicity, functionality, and independence into the garment. Later designers further expanded this meaning by reintroducing feminine elements or by using the LBD as a canvas to critique societal expectations of women's bodies. These shifts demonstrate the fluid and negotiated nature of meaning-making in fashion.

Secondly, the LBD provides a lens through which gender politics can be examined. Its trajectory reflects the broader social evolution from patriarchal expectations—where women's appearance was bound to morality, modesty, or domesticity—to contemporary ideals that prioritize autonomy and self-expression. The emergence of androgynous interpretations, as seen in Kawakubo's design or Kahlo's self-representation, challenges the assumption that femininity must conform to male-defined standards of beauty. Instead, these reinterpretations destabilize gender binaries and open possibilities for women to reclaim control over their image. Thus, the LBD not only symbolizes femininity but also becomes a tool for negotiating power dynamics.

Thirdly, the LBD's democratization parallels the rise of mass production and consumer culture. Like the Ford Model T, the affordability and accessibility of the LBD positioned it as a product of modern industrial society. This democratization implies that fashion can function as a social equalizer, allowing women across class backgrounds to participate in modern cultural expression. At the same time, it raises critical questions about how mass production shapes aesthetic norms and whether democratized fashion truly liberates women or reinforces new forms of conformity.

Finally, the LBD's endurance across eras suggests that its power lies in its adaptability. Its simplicity invites reinterpretation, allowing each generation to project new values onto the garment. Whether the LBD is used to express elegance, rebellion, sensuality, or neutrality, its cultural significance is always tied to the shifting collective consciousness of women in society. This continuous negotiation highlights fashion's capacity to document social change and demonstrate how personal dress choices intertwine with broader cultural narratives.

In sum, the LBD serves as more than a timeless fashion staple; it is a dynamic cultural symbol through which issues of gender, identity, class, and modernity are debated and reimagined. Its evolution underscores the role of fashion as both a reflection of societal transformation and an active participant in shaping the discourse of female consciousness.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of the little black dress (LBD) reflects more than changes in style; it mirrors the transformation of female consciousness and the shifting dynamics of social values. From its origins in mourning attire, black gradually moved through modernist neutrality and into the realm of timeless elegance, ultimately becoming a site

of empowerment and self-expression for women. Each reinterpretation of the LBD—whether through Chanel's minimalist liberation, Givenchy's feminine refinement, or contemporary designers' challenge to gender norms—demonstrates how fashion operates as both a cultural mirror and a social agent.

The LBD has consistently absorbed and responded to societal expectations regarding femininity, class, independence, and gender performance. Its democratization parallels the expansion of women's rights, while its stylistic variations reflect diverse feminine identities rather than a singular ideal. The dress serves as a semiotic archive, documenting how women negotiate visibility, autonomy, and agency within changing cultural landscapes.

Ultimately, the little black dress stands as a powerful symbol of women's progress. Its continued relevance underscores the importance of fashion as a site where social meanings are constructed, contested, and reimagined. As society continues to evolve, the LBD will undoubtedly persist as an emblem of both individual expression and collective female empowerment.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Reference

[1] Cerini M, 2020, British Actress Audrey Hepburn on the Set of Breakfast at Tiffany's Based on the Novel by Truman Capote and Directed by Blake Edwards. CNN, March 31, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/audrey-hepburn-little-black-dress-remember-when/index.html

[2] Cerini M, 2020, Audrey Hepburn's Dress Was Designed by None Other than Hubert de Givenchy, Who Worked on Hepburn's Entire Wardrobe for the Movie "Breakfast at Tiffany's". CNN, March 31, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/audrey-hepburn-little-black-dress-remember-when/index.html

[3] Brunker A, Chilton C, 2020, The Evolution of the Little Black Dress. ELLE, February 12, 2020, https://www.elle.com/fashion/g8192/evolution-of-the-little-black-dress/

[4] MacRae M, 2014, Dull Black Everything… Victorian Mourning Dress. Cvltnatio, July 30, 2014, https://cvltnation.com/dull-black-everything-victorian-mourning-dress/

[5] Bovary J, 2024, Bauhaus Furniture History and Characteristics. Dengarden, March 17, 2024, https://dengarden.com/interior-design/bauhaus-furniture

[6] Breuer M, 1927, Chair (Model B33), 1927, Chrome-plated Tubular Steel with Steel-thread Seat and Back. Smarthistory, https://smarthistory.org/the-bauhaus-marcel-breuer/?msclkid=d20b6031c39a11ecae6cabac9e2adb0f

[7] Vermeer J, 1665, Girl with a Pearl Earring. Essential Vermeer, https://www.essentialvermeer.com/cat_about/earring.html

[8] Jonathan J, 2024, Understanding Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring. Essentialvermeer.com, https://www.essentialvermeer.com/cat_about/earring.html

[9] Vintage Dancer, 1946, Rhinestone and Pearl Choker Necklace and Large Bracelet. Vintage Dancer, https://vintagedancer.com/1940s/1940s-formal-dresses-history/

[10] Kahlo F, 1940, I Painted My Own Reality. MOMA, https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/685

[11] Kawakubo R, 1997, Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Ensemble (Bodice and Skirt). MOMA, https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/43/702

[12] Tara W, 2017, Taking Back the Male Gaze. Psychology Today, November 6, 2017, https://www.psychologytoday.

com/us/blog/the-clarity/201711/taking-back-the-male-gaze

[13] The Henry Ford, 1925, Advertisement for the 1925 Ford Model T, “within the Means of Millions”. Thehenryford, https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/355535/#slide=gs-192345

[14] The Henry Ford, 1924, Advertisement for the 1924 Ford Model T, “Freedom for the Woman Who Owns a Ford”. Thehenryford, https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/32320/#slide=gs-187729