

Corset Revival and the Feminist Reframing of Restrictive Dress in Vintage Fashion Communities

Amelia Fairchild¹

¹ University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Amelia Fairchild, University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.05.003

Abstract

This paper explores the contemporary revival of the corset within vintage fashion communities and its complex relationship with feminist thought. Once condemned as a symbol of patriarchal oppression and bodily restriction, the corset has been reinterpreted by modern wearers as a tool of aesthetic agency, self-expression, and identity formation. Through a critical examination of historical narratives, digital fashion subcultures, and intersectional feminist discourse, the study analyzes how the corset functions simultaneously as a site of historical memory and contemporary resistance. Drawing on theories of body politics, feminist historiography, and subcultural style, the paper demonstrates that corset-wearing today is deeply contextual and politically plural—shaped by the overlapping forces of gender, race, class, disability, and queerness. It concludes that vintage fashion communities serve as key catalysts for this reclamation, transforming restrictive dress from a symbol of conformity into one of empowerment and feminist reimagination.

Keywords: corset revival, vintage fashion communities, body politics, intersectionality

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the corset has undergone a remarkable transformation in cultural meaning and social perception. Once vilified by feminist scholars as a symbol of patriarchal domination—used to discipline and contain women’s bodies into narrowly defined ideals of beauty and propriety—the corset is now enjoying a nuanced revival. This resurgence is most visible in vintage fashion communities, where enthusiasts and creators engage in historically informed practices of dress while actively reinterpreting the garment’s legacy. What was once synonymous with female restriction is now celebrated for its craftsmanship, aesthetic appeal, and capacity for empowering bodily self-expression.

This shift reflects broader changes in feminist discourse, particularly in the transition from second-wave to third- and fourth-wave feminism. While second-wave feminists of the 1970s saw the corset as an oppressive tool—a manifestation of Simone de Beauvoir’s “second sex” in physical form—contemporary feminists are increasingly drawn to its subversive potential. Informed by postmodernism and intersectionality, many argue that the corset can be reclaimed as an instrument of agency, one that allows women and gender-diverse individuals to play with historical aesthetics, construct curated identities, and assert control over how their bodies are shaped and perceived.

The corset’s revival also signals a tension between embodiment and representation. Within online vintage communities, corset wearers document their practices in visual formats that blend historical fidelity with personal creativity. This not only generates visibility for diverse body types and identities often excluded from mainstream fashion but also positions corsetry as a method of engaging with the past in ways that are both affective and political. For many, the act of wearing a corset is not about conformity to outdated standards, but about accessing a form of sartorial self-determination—where the very medium of restriction becomes a site of

resistance and reinterpretation.

The resurgence intersects with cultural nostalgia, anti-fast fashion sentiment, and maker culture. DIY corset-making and historical costuming reflect a desire for slower, more intentional relationships with dress, grounded in an ethic of care, sustainability, and community education. The corset thus becomes a material conduit for broader critiques of contemporary capitalism and fashion homogeneity, while simultaneously opening space for embodied feminist storytelling. By reframing the corset within this cultural and political landscape, vintage fashion communities offer a powerful counter-narrative to dominant readings of restrictive dress. Their practices illustrate how garments laden with problematic histories can be recontextualized—not to erase those histories, but to complicate them and assert alternative meanings. In doing so, the corset transforms from a symbol of constraint into one of crafted identity, aesthetic agency, and embodied feminist politics.

2. The Corset's Historical Burden

The corset's history is a tapestry of cultural symbolism, bodily regulation, and contested meanings that reflect changing ideas about femininity, discipline, and social order. While precursors to the corset can be traced as far back as Minoan Crete, the garment emerged in its more recognizable form in 16th-century Western Europe, initially as a stiffened bodice known as the "stay." Designed to flatten the bust and emphasize a conical torso, early corsets were associated with aristocratic status and moral decorum. Over time, they evolved into more rigid and highly structured undergarments that molded the torso to increasingly exaggerated silhouettes, reflecting aesthetic ideals that varied by era—be it the Elizabethan columnar body or the Victorian hourglass.



Figure 1. Worchester Corset Co. 1893

<https://clickamericana.com/topics/beauty-fashion/vintage-clothing/victorian-corsets>

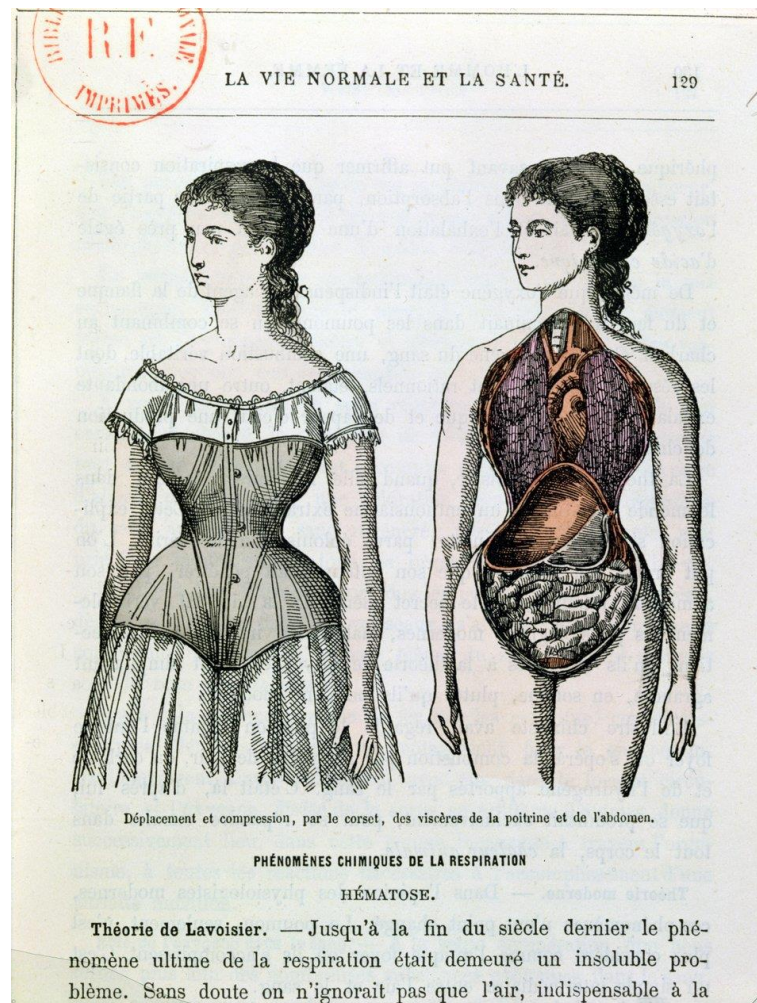


Figure 2. The Harmful Effects of the Corset, illustration from *La Vie Normale et la Santé* by Dr. Jules Rengade (b. 1841), c. 1880. French School. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France. Distributed by Bridgeman Images.

By the 19th century, corsetry reached its most constrictive form during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, when tightlacing became a widespread practice among women, particularly in upper-class and bourgeois contexts. The “wasp waist” silhouette—achieved through the reduction of the natural waist to as little as 18 inches—was seen as a marker of beauty, virtue, and civility. Yet, this fashionable ideal was not without consequence. Medical professionals of the time began raising alarms about the health impacts of corsetry, linking it to respiratory issues, fainting spells, misaligned organs, and even fertility complications. These warnings fueled both popular and professional debates, making the corset a lightning rod for broader anxieties about the female body and its role in society. Feminist critiques of the corset crystallized during the first wave of feminism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the writings of activists such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and members of the Rational Dress Society. Phelps famously exhorted women to “burn the corsets!” as a symbolic rejection of male domination and bodily oppression. These reform movements contended that the corset not only harmed women’s health but also functioned as a tool of patriarchy—imposing an idealized femininity that rendered women fragile, decorative, and physically constrained. The Rational Dress Movement advocated for looser, more practical clothing that allowed greater freedom of movement and expression, aiming to liberate the female body from aesthetic coercion.

Second-wave feminists in the 1960s and 70s echoed and expanded upon these earlier condemnations. Within this framework, the corset became emblematic of the male gaze and the disciplining of female desire. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Michel Foucault’s theories of biopower, scholars and activists critiqued the corset as part of a broader regime of bodily surveillance—one that internalized societal control through fashion. In this reading, the corset was less a garment than a manifestation of gendered power, regulating not only how women appeared, but how they moved, breathed, and felt.

The corset’s symbolism extended beyond gender into the domains of class and race. In colonial contexts, corsetry was exported as part of “civilizing” missions, with indigenous women often encouraged or forced to

adopt Western dress standards. Meanwhile, working-class women and women of color were typically excluded from or critiqued for corsetry practices, reinforcing notions of racialized and classed respectability. Thus, the corset operated not just as a personal item of dress but as a technology of normativity and exclusion—marking who was deemed respectable, desirable, and properly feminine. Understanding this burden is essential not only for acknowledging the historical realities of the corset but also for making sense of its contemporary revival. The corset's legacy is undeniably complex: it is at once a site of subjugation and beauty, discipline and creativity, conformity and resistance. Any present-day engagement with corsetry—particularly through feminist or vintage lenses—must reckon with this fraught inheritance.

3. Reclamation and Resistance

The contemporary revival of corsetry within vintage and retro fashion circles reflects a complex cultural negotiation with the past—one that challenges conventional feminist readings of the corset as inherently oppressive. This revival is not a passive adoption of an antiquated aesthetic but a deliberate, often performative act of reclamation that transforms the corset from an emblem of patriarchal control into a medium of feminist self-expression and political resistance. Unlike their historical counterparts who were often compelled by fashion norms and social obligations, today's corset-wearers are choosing the garment freely, frequently in defiance of mainstream beauty standards. This shift from imposition to intention is foundational to the act of reclamation. It aligns with postfeminist frameworks, which emphasize choice, individuality, and empowerment through self-styling. In this context, the corset is not worn to appease societal ideals but to articulate a specific identity—whether that be nostalgic, defiant, glamorous, queer, or historically literate.



Figure 3. “Tartan corset” by dunikowski is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

In vintage fashion communities, the use of corsets often exemplifies what scholars refer to as “aesthetic agency”—a term that captures the power to construct and perform one’s identity through style. Platforms such as

Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as digital stages where wearers perform this agency. Here, corsets are not merely worn; they are styled, narrated, and politicized. Influencers often contextualize their outfits with hashtags like #HistoricalAccuracy, #FeministFashion, or #QueerVintage, signaling that their sartorial choices are also acts of discourse. This aesthetic agency is also embodied. The corset, after all, reshapes the body—visibly and tangibly. For some, this offers gender-affirming value. Nonbinary and trans individuals sometimes use corsets to sculpt silhouettes that align more closely with their gender identity. Others wear them as a reclamation of sensuality, reasserting control over bodies that have been policed or shamed. In each case, the garment becomes a conduit for bodily autonomy—a wearable assertion of the right to choose how one's form appears and feels.

Reclamation is not only about wearing corsets but also making them. The rise of DIY corsetry has reconnected many to the skills and labor historically associated with women's work—sewing, fitting, tailoring. This re-engagement with craft positions the corset not just as a finished product but as the result of a process involving knowledge, time, and embodied expertise. Communities such as Reddit's r/HistoricalCostuming, YouTube creators like Bernadette Banner, and digital pattern collectives facilitate the sharing of techniques and historical research, democratizing access to what was once elite knowledge. This reclamation of sartorial labor parallels feminist calls to value domestic and textile work, which have long been marginalized in both academic and economic discourse. In turning to the corset, vintage fashion practitioners reassert the cultural and intellectual worth of traditionally feminized craft, challenging the binaries between fashion and art, utility and expression.

Nonetheless, this act of reclamation is not universally accessible or unproblematic. The corset's revival is entangled in issues of class, race, and body politics. Corset-wearing, particularly when oriented around Eurocentric historical aesthetics, often privileges certain body types and beauty ideals—slim waists, hourglass silhouettes, and pale skin. As such, BIPOC participants, fat activists, and disabled wearers have voiced critiques about exclusion and fetishization within the vintage community. Some seek to decolonize corsetry by incorporating non-Western textile practices or by deliberately modifying Eurocentric silhouettes to fit diverse bodies and narratives. Resistance, then, is not a singular gesture but a spectrum of practices—from reclaiming sensuality to disrupting norms of historiographical whiteness. Many creators use corsets in subversive mashups that blend period fashion with punk, goth, or queer aesthetics, asserting that the garment need not be frozen in time but can be reanimated to serve present-day emancipatory aims.

Through aesthetic experimentation, historical engagement, and bodily performance, the corset's revival illustrates how restrictive dress can be reframed as liberatory. Far from signaling submission, today's corset-wearers assert complex and often contradictory identities—feminist, queer, nostalgic, resistant—demonstrating that the act of dressing is not just personal but political, not just retrospective but revolutionary.

4. Body Politics and Intersectionality

To fully grasp the feminist reclamation of the corset, one must engage with the concept of intersectionality—a framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to articulate how overlapping identities such as race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality shape distinct experiences of oppression and privilege. The act of wearing a corset, and the meanings ascribed to it, differ significantly across these lines. For some, corsetry is a source of empowerment and aesthetic pleasure; for others, it remains a site of exclusion, racialization, or bodily discipline. The corset cannot be reclaimed meaningfully without acknowledging how its histories and revivals are mediated by these intersecting systems of power.

4.1 Corsets and Medicalized Bodies

Contrary to the view that corsets are uniformly restrictive, contemporary wearers often cite physical and psychological benefits. For individuals with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, scoliosis, or chronic back pain, corsets can provide crucial spinal support, acting as adaptive devices that stabilize the body. In such contexts, the corset functions as a therapeutic garment—a technology of care rather than control. Similarly, many trans and nonbinary individuals use corsets as gender-affirming tools to shape or soften body contours in ways that align with their identities. This use is not about adhering to rigid beauty standards, but about navigating dysphoria and asserting bodily coherence in the face of social erasure. Yet these medicalized or therapeutic uses of corsetry remain underrepresented in mainstream fashion discourse, which tends to frame corset-wearing in binary terms—either as fashion fetish or feminist transgression. Recognizing corsetry's role in chronic illness and gender affirmation complicates this binary and challenges assumptions about who wears corsets and why.

4.2 Race, Respectability, and Historical Violence

The corset's historical baggage is not distributed evenly. Within colonial and postcolonial contexts, corsets were used as tools of racial assimilation. European colonizers often imposed corsetry on Indigenous and colonized women as part of so-called "civilizing missions," treating the garment as a marker of European modernity and

moral superiority. As historian Tressie McMillan Cottom and others have noted, beauty standards—and by extension, dress codes—have long been racialized, constructed in ways that devalue and other Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies. In the contemporary vintage fashion scene, these dynamics persist. The aesthetics of historical dress, often centered around Victorian and Edwardian styles, tend to foreground Eurocentric silhouettes and beauty norms that exclude non-white histories and bodies. BIPOC vintage enthusiasts have pointed to both subtle and overt gatekeeping in online communities, where authenticity is policed through racialized lenses. The act of wearing a corset thus takes on different implications for a Black woman navigating histories of hypersexualization and regulation of Black femininity, or for a Latina creator challenging Anglo-European fashion narratives that erase Indigenous textile heritage.

4.3 Fat Politics and Size Inclusivity

Corsets also intersect with fat politics in complex ways. Historically, corsets were marketed as tools to discipline and minimize the female body, reinforcing thinness as a virtue. Contemporary reclamation, however, has created space for fat and plus-size individuals to assert body autonomy through corsetry. Some wear corsets to challenge the idea that fat bodies should be hidden or minimized; others appreciate the structured support and tailored feel corsets can provide. Nevertheless, many vintage fashion patterns and commercial corset brands remain biased toward smaller body types. Custom corset makers and fat activists have stepped in to address these gaps, emphasizing size inclusivity and body positivity. Makers like Dark Garden and independent sewists on Etsy are expanding the narrative of corsetry to include bodies historically deemed unfit for glamour or period fashion. Through this work, corsetry becomes not only an aesthetic but a political tool—one that asserts the visibility and dignity of marginalized bodies.

4.4 Gender and Queer Fashion Practices

Corsets also play a central role in queer fashion practices. In drag culture, corsets are used to exaggerate curves, perform hyper-femininity, or destabilize binary gender norms. In queer historical reenactment and cosplay, corsets allow wearers to play with time, gender, and identity simultaneously. These practices draw upon what José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentification”—a mode of queer resistance that involves repurposing cultural objects in ways that both acknowledge and subvert their original meanings. For queer wearers, corsetry can be an act of defiance against cisheteronormative expectations of how bodies should appear and behave. In these spaces, the corset becomes not a tool of restriction, but of transformation—of becoming, exaggerating, or queering the body in ways that resist assimilation.

Understanding the corset through the lens of body politics and intersectionality reveals its polyvalent nature: it is at once a historical artifact, a cultural battleground, and a site of personal meaning. Its revival in vintage fashion communities is thus neither uniformly liberatory nor simply regressive. Rather, it is mediated by race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality—factors that shape how the corset is worn, perceived, and politicized. The feminist reframing of restrictive dress must reckon with these layers to move beyond simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation. Only then can corsetry function as a truly inclusive and nuanced medium of self-expression.

5. Community as Catalyst

The contemporary revival and feminist recontextualization of the corset would not be possible without the vital role of community. Both digital and physical vintage fashion communities act as critical incubators of reinterpretation, where wearers, makers, and scholars co-create new meanings around restrictive dress. These spaces—ranging from online forums to TikTok niches, YouTube channels to local historical reenactment circles—enable more than aesthetic appreciation; they serve as participatory pedagogies, political laboratories, and affective networks where histories are challenged, identities are affirmed, and styles are reimagined.

Community engagement transforms the corset from a static object of fashion history into a living, evolving text. Through pattern reconstruction, archival research, and historical costuming, members actively *make* history rather than merely consume it. This shift from passive to active engagement aligns with feminist historiographic interventions that critique male-dominated academic narratives. Communities like Foundations Revealed, Costube (Costume YouTube), and historical sewing Discord servers provide accessible platforms where knowledge circulates horizontally rather than hierarchically. In these communities, historical accuracy is often balanced with personal expression and ethical considerations. Participants regularly debate the implications of re-creating garments associated with colonialism, class oppression, or racialized norms. These conversations reflect a deepened historical consciousness—a recognition that to wear a corset is to engage with the political weight of the past, and to choose how that past is carried forward.

These spaces also exemplify what bell hooks terms “engaged pedagogy”—a mode of learning that emphasizes mutuality, experience, and empowerment. Corset makers often teach others how to draft patterns, adjust fit for non-normative bodies, or interpret Victorian sewing manuals. This knowledge-sharing is not only technical but political: it enables marginalized individuals to reclaim agency over their bodies and historical narratives. Digital

tutorials, livestreams, and blog posts replace the gatekeeping of formal design schools or elite costume archives. A YouTube video on drafting a corset for a plus-size body or a Reddit thread about binding techniques for trans wearers becomes an act of feminist instruction. In this way, community functions as both educator and witness—supporting members in processes of transformation, resistance, and self-recognition.

Vintage fashion communities, particularly those engaged in alternative aesthetics (gothic, steampunk, cottagecore, dark academia), also draw upon subcultural resistance. The corset becomes a symbol of subversion—a means to disrupt the homogeneity of contemporary fast fashion, capitalist consumerism, and patriarchal fashion norms. Inspired by Dick Hebdige's theory of subculture as "style as resistance," corset-wearers often juxtapose historical silhouettes with punk aesthetics or queer styling, creating hybrid forms that reject both mainstream femininity and mainstream feminism. This bricolage signals more than aesthetic defiance; it indexes a refusal to comply with historical amnesia. These stylings are layered with memory, rebellion, and narrative. They turn the corset into a "palimpsest garment"—a material surface inscribed with multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural meanings.

Community is also an emotional architecture. For many participants, especially those excluded from dominant fashion spaces due to body size, gender identity, disability, or race, these communities offer a rare sense of belonging. Comment sections on corset tutorials often feature gratitude, vulnerability, and support: people thanking creators for helping them feel beautiful, valid, or strong. This emotional labor—performed through encouragement, mentorship, and visibility—compensates for the alienation felt in mainstream fashion discourse, which continues to marginalize non-conforming bodies. Importantly, these interactions generate what Lauren Berlant might call "affective publics"—emotional collectives formed through shared desires, frustrations, and aesthetic experiences. The corset, in this context, becomes a nexus around which these affective economies gather, transform, and endure.

The communities that surround corsetry are not simply fan spaces or hobbyist groups; they are dynamic zones of cultural production, feminist reimagination, and intersectional resistance. They foster not only aesthetic experimentation but also ethical reflection, political critique, and collective healing. As catalysts for reclamation, these communities ensure that the corset is not a relic of oppression but a conversation in motion—continuously rewritten by those who dare to wear the past differently.

6. Conclusion

The revival of the corset in vintage fashion communities is emblematic of a broader cultural and feminist shift: a refusal to accept inherited binaries of oppression and liberation, modesty and sexuality, history and progress. Instead, it reflects a contemporary moment in which restrictive dress is not merely worn but *reinterpreted*, not merely inherited but *remade*. The corset—long seen as the ultimate emblem of patriarchal control—has been re-sutured with new meanings, emerging as a site of resistance, reclamation, and reinvention.

This transformation is not superficial; it is political and epistemological. It calls into question linear feminist narratives that cast certain garments, aesthetics, or eras as either regressive or liberatory. As third- and fourth-wave feminists have argued, empowerment is not universal but contextual—it is shaped by who wears the garment, why, how, and under what conditions. A corset laced voluntarily by a queer creator affirming their identity holds radically different meaning than one imposed through colonial or patriarchal mandates. This contextual nuance is essential if feminism is to remain relevant in a pluralistic, global, and digitally interconnected world.

The corset revival compels us to reconsider how historical memory operates through fashion. Rather than dismiss the corset as an outdated symbol of bodily constraint, vintage fashion communities treat it as an archive of embodied knowledge—a relic that can be excavated, studied, and transformed. This process reclaims history not as a fixed narrative but as a material and wearable text open to reinterpretation. Wearing a corset becomes an act of archival engagement: it honors labor, invokes lineage, and foregrounds the agency of those who have been historically silenced in both fashion and feminist canons.

The feminist reframing of the corset is also inextricable from the spaces in which it unfolds. Digital communities have democratized historical fashion, allowing wearers to form affective and pedagogical networks that are grounded in shared aesthetics but energized by difference. These communities are not utopian—they reproduce exclusions and hierarchies—but they also foster alternative models of fashion discourse, ones that value slow craft over fast fashion, embodiment over abstraction, and multiplicity over monolith. They remind us that style can be both playful and political, rooted in pleasure and criticality alike.

The corset's reemergence in feminist fashion dialogues underscores a critical truth: that restriction and empowerment are not always opposites. In some cases, the act of embracing a historically restrictive garment becomes a paradoxical form of liberation—a way to confront the past on one's own terms, to reclaim control over one's body and narrative. Through this act, the corset sheds its singular symbolic weight and becomes a

polyvalent artifact—one capable of carrying the contradictions, desires, and resistances of those who wear it today. To study the corset's revival is to study how fashion can serve as both memory and method, archive and aspiration. It is a reminder that feminist politics live not only in protests or polemics but also in stitches, silhouettes, and communities that dare to dream otherwise.

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