

## Twiggy: The Monetization of a Movement

Swinging London in the sixties was the breeding ground of a significant youth-driven cultural revolution fueled by rebellion and creative expression. Determined to operate independently from their parents' standards, the city's youth created a collective identity of their own through fashion, art and music. The face of this movement was none other than the doe-eyed slender teenager from the suburbs, Twiggy. With her signature dramatic eyelashes and gamine frame, she existed both as a work of art and a rejection of standardized beauty. Twiggy embodied the burgeoning expressive style that London's rebellious youth prided themselves on. As mod culture chipped away at the class system, Twiggy was able to ride the coattails of the social movement to superstardom and global recognition.

Twiggy would quickly become one of the most recognizable faces in the world as a fashion icon, but without swinging London she would not have signified anything other than a young girl in fashion. The sixties were a time when youth culture broke down social structure and rebelled against the "hegemonic straight jacket" set in place by the previous generation's politics and ideologies.<sup>1</sup> The demographic expressed themselves through the consumption of music and clothes, thus crating a very specific image and generating a new breed of consumerism. Prior to the sixties, children viewed shopping as a chore to be done with their parents, but this new mod culture was founded on "dandyism and preening and taking advantage of the system to look sharp."<sup>2</sup> Dance halls, music shops and coffee bars

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1. *Twiggy: The Face of the 60s*. Directed by Philip Priestly. Performed by Alex Taylor and Lesley Lawson. Made to Measure. Accessed November 11, 2016.

<https://m2m.tv/watch/twiggy-the-face-of-the-60s/films>.

2. Levy, Shawn. *Ready, Steady, Go!: The Smashing Rise and Giddy Fall of Swinging London*. New York: Doubleday, 2002, 27.

flourished with a fashion-forward hip culture that demanded creative style and unique clothing. The typical mod, “didn’t have the money to get smart suits cut to fit, but he was clever enough to turn his minimal finances into the maximal wardrobe.”<sup>3</sup> The mods rejected fancy department stores and opened the door for a new type of store to emerge that would transform shopping into a fun experience, a creative outlet and a lifestyle. New stores like Biba cropped up around Abingdon Road and Carnaby Street in London and brought to market clothes for young women designed by young women. The shops of the sixties were accessible, open and inclusive. Suddenly, access to culture was no longer reserved for the elite. This new visual-centric culture was the perfect atmosphere for the breeding of an icon.

Fashion magazines, album covers and advertisement campaigns could be marketed to a youth consumer demographic for the first time, but traditional aristocratic high fashion models had no place in mod culture. The movement needed Twiggy. By conventional standards, she was too short, too skinny, too young and too sexless to be a fashion model, so when she emerged as the fresh face of swinging sixties London, she encapsulated a change in society. Fashion editor Deirdrie McSharry called her, “the first truly classless top model.”<sup>4</sup> She was able to rise to iconic status in part because she created her own breed of existence as the first international supermodel, but also because she transformed the abstract social movement of her time into a consumable image. In fact, Twiggy’s existence as the face of her generation predated her introduction to the fashion world. Her rise to

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3. Levy, *Ready, Steady, Go!*, 17.

4. Priestly, *Twiggy: The Face of the 60s*.

fame came after McSharry published an article in *The Daily Express* that named Twiggy The Face of 1966. The counterculture movement responded immediately to the gangly teenager as “the anti-Hendrix: childlike, sexless, domestic, familiar, painfully ordinary and very, very white” because she provided a relatable and tangible commercial presence without signifying high society.<sup>5</sup> Twiggy had a look that was unique precisely because she was far more ordinary than existing fashion models. Her boyish figure came to represent a rejection of the classic standards of womanhood and the dramatic bottom eyelashes she painted on her face gave her a dynamic recognizable quality that lent itself perfectly to advertisement. Before long, she was appearing regularly on the cover of every major magazine and publication. By 1970, she was the world’s most photographed fashion model, presumably because she provided a channel for commercial giants to reach the most influential social demographic in the world. Her image “not only mirrored the creative effervescence of 1960s London but also sold vast quantities of clothes and makeup to a burgeoning consumer society.”<sup>6</sup> She did not appear manufactured and yet at the same time was highly commercial.

Even after Twiggy’s initial media explosion, when top fashion houses approached her with their latest trends, she rejected high fashion, saying that the designs were okay for middle-aged women but too old-fashioned for her, and proceeded to get herself banned from the couture shows in Paris.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, she officially opened the door for a type of

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5. Levy, *Ready, Steady, Go!*, 29.

6. Priestly, *Twiggy: The Face of the 60s*.

7. Armstrong, Mark. *Swinging Britain: Fashion in the 1960s*. Oxford: Shire Publications, 2014, 128.

monetization and commercialization that had never existed in the fashion world before. Twiggy was everything that was glamorous about being normal. In addition to bridging the gap between commercial companies and the youth demographic, she also created a famously recognizable look that allowed her to reap the benefits of her global commercial status. She translated her public identity into a successful clothing line and licensed merchandise that included wigs, makeup, T-shirts, lunch boxes, dress-up kits and the Twiggy doll. In Twiggy's case, "desire [was] alienable, transferable, since wants must be perpetually switched in response to market developments. The market inevitably turned the public face of the celebrity into a commodity."<sup>8</sup>

With tangibility came reproducibility. Girls everywhere were painting their eyes like Twiggy, furthering the supermodel's global propagation. When Twiggy first came to America, the youth culture was much more conservative, but still admired Twiggy as a progressive, hip fashion icon. People from other countries who were obsessed with swinging London became obsessed with Twiggy and vice versa. She was a physical way to tap into momentum, passion and creativity.<sup>9</sup> With each major feature, Twiggy became more and more sought-after as she became a powerful vehicle for photographers and publications to harness the momentum of the swinging sixties. Her face was so distinct in its connotation of posh swagger and individuality that photographer Melvin Sokolsky conceptualized a shoot that featured Twiggy surrounded by enlarged cutouts of her own face. By the end of the sixties, swinging London had been turned into a commercial concept, a far cry from its previous reputation. Twiggy now existed as a paradox of what

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<sup>8</sup> Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Armstrong, *Swinging Britain*, 81.

she represented opposed to the reality of the situation. Accordingly, at the turn of the decade, she turned away from fashion and broke into film. While she went on to lead a successful career in acting, winning two golden globes for her first film before making her Broadway debut, the image of Twiggy as the full-lashed fresh face of the sixties would not be forgotten. In turning away from fashion all together, she immortalized her iconic youthful look characterized by androgyny, long lashes and short hair.<sup>10</sup> Her film success “can never overshadow her iconic status as the incarnation of a period of optimism and grace that still springs to mind whenever and wherever her name is mentioned.”<sup>11</sup>

Twiggy pioneered the concept of the supermodel as an icon and not as a visual element promoting a specific brand or campaign. Her image came to symbolize the supermodel, the rebellious swinging sixties, individualism and a new commercial culture. Whichever ideal or movement an individual elected to assign to Twiggy, she became “an idealized form of generalized traits or aspirations of embodiment and character” because she was so widely recognized.<sup>12</sup> The function of a human as a vehicle of association is a major contributing factor to celebrity and eventually iconic status. In her autobiography, Twiggy recalls, “I used to be a thing, I’m a person now.”<sup>13</sup>

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10. Marwick, Arthur. *A History of Human Beauty*. London: Continuum, 2007, 9.

11. Priestly, *Twiggy: The Face of the 60s*.

12. Rojeck, *Celebrity*, 35.

13. Twiggy. *Twiggy: An Autobiography*. London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1975, 40.

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