Why are women’s shoes so pointy? A fashion expert on impractical but stylish footwear

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One thing uniting humans across history is their willingness to suffer for fashion.
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“Why are ladies’ shoes so pointy? Feet and toes aren’t pointy, most of men’s shoes aren’t pointy, and they hurt my feet.” – Bunny, age 13, Mizpah, New Jersey

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While people’s actual feet are rounded on the end, women’s dress shoes often come to a sharp point at the toe. Many people also feel these pointy shoes are uncomfortable to wear. So why do shoe designers keep making them this way?

With over two decades in the fashion industry, I've researched and taught on the influences behind fashion design and how it's used, even when certain traditions and styles seem impractical.

Revisiting the interesting history behind women's pointy shoes can help us understand the various reasons why they're still popular.

Pointy poulaines for men

Several current fashion trends for women, including pointy shoes, were in fact initially adopted by men.

In medieval Europe, around the 14th and 15th centuries, pointy leather shoes were popular among wealthy men. Called poulaines – or cracows, after the Polish city Kraków, where historians think they originated – these shoes could run as long as 12 inches in length. To keep the stiff, pointy shape, the wearer would stuff the ends of the shoes with moss or wool.

The pointy tip is the point for poulaines.

Deutsches Schuhmuseum Hauenstein, CC BY-SA

Like most items of fashion, shoes signal the wearer's status to their peers. Poulaines were heavily decorated and expensive to make, and their elongated design made it difficult to move around. Thus, wearing poulaines communicated to others that the wearer was wealthy, having no need to perform physical work that required mobility.

Pointy shoes as status symbol

These shoes became so popular that in 1463 King Edward IV of England passed laws limiting toe length to 2 inches for anyone below a lord in social ranking. This decree had social, political and religious effects.

Socially, restricting the longest-toed shoes to the nobility ensured the shoe would be a visual status marker associated with the upper classes. This obvious sign helped maintain social order and prevented lower-class people from trying to pass themselves off as higher in standing than they were.

Politically, the king used this same legislation to control the textile trade and protect English industries. By regulating the fabrics and accessories necessary to make excessively ornate shoes, Edward IV could limit foreign competition with English textile manufacturers and at the same time manage fashion trends.

Only nobility got to enjoy the longest pointy shoes England could offer.
Loyset Liédet (circa 1470)/Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal

From a religious perspective, King Edward IV passed these laws on the grounds that God was displeased by anything other than modest clothing – for the lower classes, anyway. Additionally, religious leaders believed that the long toes prevented people from kneeling in a respectful, submissive manner and so restricted the ability to properly pray.

The pressure to literally “fit in” to these pointy shoes also came with a physical cost. Poulaines hurt the wearer’s feet and could make their toe bones crooked. Bunions – a bony bump that develops on the inside of the foot at the big toe – became more common with the popularity of these shoes.

Pain with a purpose

Various cultures have adopted pointy shoes throughout history, often to signify status, wealth or a connection to a specific subculture. A few examples include the juttis or khussas of Northern India and Pakistan, respectively; the lotus shoes once popular in China; and the pointed flat slippers worn during the Etruscan civilization.

From a practical standpoint, however, pointy-toed shoes can lead to foot deformities and health problems. Why do people still wear pointy shoes if they’re so painful?

Fitting into lotus shoes required intentionally breaking one’s feet.

Daniel Schwen/The Children's Museum of Indianapolis via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

One reason is a desire to belong. Your brain is programmed to seek out and find people who think and believe like you. Like how early humans needed to stay with their tribe to survive, your brain thinks that being part of a group can help keep you safe.

Because high-heeled, pointed shoes are commonly worn by women, wearing them gives the wearer feelings of acceptance from other women. While there is nothing inherent about pointy shoes that make them feminine or attractive – considering that they were often originally designed for men – fashion often relies on trends that people unconsciously agree on. What is stylish is often influenced by accepted social norms.

Your brain also has clever shortcuts to help you make decisions quickly. One shortcut is to look at what other people are doing. If you see lots of people wearing a certain style or playing a particular game, your brain thinks, well, if everyone is doing this, it must be a good choice. This process helps you make decisions without having to think too hard about every little detail.

Scientists call the powerful, mental influence fashion has on both the person wearing it and the people seeing their outfit enclothed cognition. The shoes you wear may alter how you perceive yourself and others, as well as carry symbolic meaning. So designers might use elongated shoes to create the illusion of a long, slender silhouette to create a look that is not only seen but also personally felt as elegant and powerful.

With new technology and an increased consumer desire for comfort, the good news is that next time you get dressed and want to wear pointy, fashionable shoes, they may be at least a little less painful than they were in the past.

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And since curiosity has no age limit – adults, let us know what you're wondering, too. We won't be able to answer every question, but we will do our best.

Michael Watson does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.