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Abstract
By 1916 over 13 million women or 12.7% of the total U.S. population was considered overweight or "stout." In the 1920s, the term "stout" indicated an (often matronly appearance) with generous bust, back and hip curves that did not fit with fashion's demands of the ideal stylish figure. Research related to ready-to-wear fashions for plus sized women in the 20th century is almost non-existent. The purpose of this study was to explore available ready-to-wear fashions for the plus sized woman during the years 1920-1929. To explore this topic, a historical method approach was utilized using primary sources that included The New York Times, Vogue, and Good Housekeeping. The results of this study identified prescriptive and proscriptive advice regarding appropriate clothing styles and merchandising trends marketed to plus sized women.

Keywords
size, historic clothing, apparel industry, women, retail, obesity

Disciplines
American Material Culture | Fashion Business | Fashion Design

Comments
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Thinness has not always been the “ideal” feminine figure type. At various points in American and European history, thinness was discouraged. Excess weight was considered a sign of health and prosperity (Seid, 1989). During the Progressive Era in the United States (1890-1920), negative conceptions of weight gain, obesity, and concern with weight loss began in earnest (Schwartz, 1986). Although women were encouraged to “avoid the sweets” that would contribute to excess weight, the percentage of plus-sized women grew from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century (“Down with avoirdupois!,” 1913). By 1916 over 13 million women, or 12.7% of the total U.S. population, were considered overweight (Segrave, 2008). Today, approximately 34% of the U.S. population is considered overweight, and it is projected that nearly 87% of the population will be in this category by 2030 (Park, 2013). Understanding the historic backdrop of attitudes concerning the full-figured woman may provide insights for today.

By the 1910s, the U.S. ready-to-wear industry was well enough established to offer women nearly all types of apparel (Farrell-Beck & Parsons, 2007). Focusing on the 1920s presents an opportunity to increase understanding of the ways by which early manufacturers and retailers created, marketed, and sold products to an identifiable target market. In this case, the consumer was one who did not necessarily represent a fashionable ideal. In the 21st century, this consumer group becomes even more predominate. Thus, the purpose of this research was to explore the design and merchandising of ready-to-wear clothing for and fashion advice to the plus-sized woman consumer during the 1920s.

Methods

Questions that guided the research included: 1) What ready-to-wear fashions were available to plus-sized women during the 1920s? 2) What advice, both pre- and proscriptive, was available to plus-sized women in the 1920s? 3) How did businesses support or reject the plus-sized female customer? To address these questions, every issue of *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* from 1920 to 1929 was searched. An electronic database search of the *New York Times* from 1910 to 1930 was conducted using terms including, but not limited to, “stout,” “plus-sized,” and “overweight.” *Good Housekeeping* and *Vogue* provided styling advice for both the middle- (*Good Housekeeping*) and upper-class Anglo-Saxon woman (*Vogue*). The *New York Times* provided news of manufacturers and retailers, as well as popular opinions regarding the plus-sized. Additional primary materials from 1900 to 1929 included nutrition books, weight loss pamphlets, and fashion design instructions. A systematic search of Cornell’s Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition, and History database; JSTOR; and America: History and Life database yielded additional sources.

A historical method approach in which themes were extracted from compiled and organized data was utilized (Fitzpatrick, 2007). Common themes that emerged from the study included prescriptive and proscriptive advice regarding what the plus-sized woman should and should not wear; the apparel industry’s attempts to create properly fitting clothing for the larger woman; and merchandising efforts by retailers.

Slenderness as the Ideal

With the rise of mass media in the latter half of the nineteenth century, beauty and fashion standards became more uniform in Europe and America. In the 1880s, a full-figured woman was highly sought after, but by 1890 the Gibson Girl contributed to the voluptuous
woman becoming unfashionable. The new ideal woman’s figure included a full bosom, a nipped-in waist, and slender legs. Roundness was discouraged (Gordon, 1987).

By the early 1900s, a newly emerging modern America focused on control over the body with visible reminders of slenderness seen in photographs and motion pictures (Latham, 2000). Movie stars maintained slim, lean bodies. In the 1920s, illustrations of John Held, Jr. featured flappers with elongated limbs and skimpy dresses, images that both reflected and cemented the ideal body type for women (Fangman, Paff Ogle, Bickle, & Rouner, 2004). Reviewing 1920s fashion periodicals, past researchers have concluded that editors and advertisers constructed thinness as a key component of the coveted or idealized female gender role, making a slender body more desirable than a heavy one (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986; Vertinsky, 2008; Vester, 2010).

By the twentieth century, women increasingly attended high school and college. An emphasis on physical education influenced the ideal for a more slender aesthetic. Physical education courses became a part of U.S. curriculum in the 1890s. The emphasis on calisthenics promoted a slender and healthful silhouette, and fat bodies were viewed as “somehow disgraceful” (Vertinsky, 2008, p. 454). Colleges and universities initially advocated for these courses to counteract the “damaging side-effects of brain work on women,” but they were later considered important to strengthening women’s physical bodies (Vester, 2010). The craze and acceptance of bicycle riding for women at the turn of the century also promoted a healthful look (Gray & Peteu, 2005). By the 1890s, mental acuity and thinness were related, and the overweight were often considered ignorant and lazy (Cunningham, 1990; Vertinsky, 2008).

During World War I, people made sacrifices for the good of the country and were urged by the U.S. government to conserve food resources. Larger sized Americans were seen as
unpatriotic and deviant. The US experienced shortages of molasses, margarine, and skim milk and participated in days without meat, pork, or wheat. Plus-sized women were seen as hoarding food that could otherwise go to the war effort. Dr. Lulu Peters, author of the dieting book, *Diet and Health with Key to the Calories* (1918), declared, “tell loudly and frequently to all your friends that you realize that it is unpatriotic to be fat while many thousands are starving, that you are going to reduce to normal, and will be there in the allotted time” (Peters, 1918, p. 78). Peters stated the monetary and energy savings from uneaten food could support the Red Cross and the purchasing of Liberty Bonds for the War effort.

By the 1920s, obesity was “not only undesirable from the standpoint of appearance and comfort” but also because of health concerns (Pattee, 1920, p. 432). It was understood that obesity could lead to high blood pressure, a lower resistance to infections, an increased risk of diabetes, and a higher mortality rate than for the slender or average-sized. Individuals’ concerns about weighing themselves to achieve a healthy weight increased the popularity of the bathroom scale (patented in 1916 and advertised in magazines by 1918). The scale “heralded an era in which weight was quantified into pounds of flesh, and a new concern emerged—the fight against fat” (Czerniawski, 2007, p. 273).

According to the *New York Times* and *Vogue*, a woman became stout due to lack of exercise, laziness, manner of eating, or the way that she dressed because “any restriction in dress which affects the circulation may produce flesh” (“Women cut weight,” 1915, p. 6). Other possible reasons mentioned for stoutness included the introduction of cars, higher standards of living, less household drudgery, and less worry. At that time, these factors all implied middle- to upper-class women (“Cater by method,” 1918; “Stout women can now be,” 1917).
Though not the first diet book written, *Diet and Health* (1918) by Peters was the first diet book to appear on the *Publishers Weekly* Best Sellers list, and it stayed there for five years in a row from 1922 to 1926. By 1923, 200,000 copies were sold, and by 1924 it had “outsold every other nonfiction title” (Hackett & Burke, 1977, p. 98). According to Peters (1918), the rule to finding your ideal weight was to “multiply number of inches over 5 feet in height by 5.5; add 110” (p.11). For today’s standards, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention reports healthfulness in terms of the Body Mass Index (BMI) (“Centers for Disease,” 2011). BMI is found using a person’s weight (in pounds) divided by their height (in inches) squared multiplied by 703. People with a BMI below 18.5 are considered underweight; a BMI of 18.5-24.9 is considered normal; 25.0-29.9 is overweight; and 30.0 and higher is obese. Peters’ calculations for appropriate weight in 1918 would be in the normal or healthy range. Equating her recommendations to the CDC’s guidelines, a woman of 5’1” should weigh 116.5 lbs. (22 BMI); 5’2” 121 lbs. (22.1); 5’3” 126.5 lbs. (22.4); 5’4” 132 lbs. (22.7); 5’5” 137.5 lbs. (22.9); 5’6” 143 lbs. (23.1); 5’7” 148.5 lbs. (23.3); 5’8” 154 lbs. (23.4); and 5’9” 159.5 lbs. (23.6).

Peters (1918) advocated several strategies to monitor weight. These included fasting by eating a diet comprised solely of baked potatoes and skim milk once a week, counting calories, and weighing weekly. Peters also advised women to form their own overweight groups, suggesting the name, “Watch Your Weight—Anti-Kaiser Class.” Other publications of the period with weight control guidance included *Food and Life: Eat Right and Be Normal* (1917), *The Science of Eating* (1919), *How Phyllis Grew Thin* (ca. 1920s), and a series of weight loss booklets published by the Corrective Eating Society in 1919. *Practical Dietetics* (1927) advised individuals not to starve but to decrease the amount of food ingested and increase activity for “producing results” (Pattee, 1920, p. 433).
Providing Ready-to-Wear for Plus-Sized Women

In the 1920s, the term “stout” frequently indicated a matronly appearance with generous bust, back, and hip curves that did not fit with the fashionable figure. Albert Malsin, husband of Lane Bryant’s founder Lena Bryant, characterized a woman as stout if her body was proportioned with larger hips, waist, or bust (Mahoney, 1950). Generally, women 10-15% above the “average” weight were considered overweight (Czerniawski, 2007; Segrave, 2008; “Stout women can now be,” 1917). In 1924, the New York Times stated that stout sizes included those with a 38.5” to 52.5” bust (“Providing dresses,” 1924).

Some designers, manufacturers, and businesses thought the plus-sized woman was more trouble than she was worth. She was referred to as the afflicted, a problem, and the cause of “manufacturing difficulties” (“A chance,” 1922, p. 27). Plus-sized women in the 1920s were called a variety of names by the popular and fashion press, including large figured, full figured, well-developed, the Juno figure, fleshy woman, inclined to rounding curves, stately figure, mature/matronly figure, heavy, extra size, generous proportions, unfortunate proportions, portly person, not-so-slender, big woman, chubby figure, woman of dignity, and stout. Ready-to-wear garments for plus-sized women were often considered an afterthought and were presented after the start of the season following the presentation of the “regular” size garments (“Attire,” 1926).

Product Development

Specialization and choice were limited in the 1910s; the growing number of plus-sized clothing manufacturers in the early 1920s showed recognition of the plus-sized women’s demographic (Gould, 1911, p. 126; “Increase,” 1923; “Specialized blouses,” 1920). Vogue acknowledged that stout women could and should be as stylish and fashionable as more slender women, stating: “Yet surely the makers of the mode do not expect all women whose waist-lines
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measure more than 34 inches to retire to one of those communities where the genial garment
known as the Mother Hubbard is the last word in dress” (“Smart aids,” 1921, p. 115). Despite
this encouragement, there remained antagonism against the “too-fat” women who were “sadly

Some American manufacturers hired specialty designers to study the plus-sized woman’s
form. These designers found that creating clothing for plus-sized women was no different than
designing for average-sized women in that the overweight wanted stylish garments that fit their
figure and personality. They wanted garments that were designed for their body type in youthful
lines that promoted slenderness (Figure 1). They did not want to purchase garments designed for
the average woman in larger sizes (“Increase,” 1923; “Youthful fashions adapted,” 1921). These
afterthought garments would neither fit properly nor flatter the figure. Further, plus-sized women
expected the styles to be in the fashionable mode and available in department stores at the same
time as the small- and average-sized garments (“Attire for stout women,” 1926; “The new
costumes,” 1929).

By 1929, manufacturers introduced plus-sized clothing in half-sizes to address women
with uncommon proportions (“The new costumes,” 1929). Half-sizes, similar to petite-sizing
today, reduced the need for excessive alterations and fit plus-sized women 5 ft 5 in. and shorter.
Half-sized garments typically included shorter waistlines, narrower shoulders, shorter skirts,
fuller hips, and fuller sleeves through the upper arm. Half-sized garments were “generally young
styles and close in fashion and styling to regular misses size dresses” (Mahoney, 1950, p.22).

Retail Merchandising
The *New York Times* predicted in 1917 that “in a very short time all of the larger department stores will have departments designed solely for catering to the needs of the stout woman” (“Stout women can now be stylish,” 1917, p. 72). The need for separate departments and unique boutiques sprung from the discouragement that many plus-sized women encountered when shopping in stores for average-sized women. Some plus-sized women felt humiliated that stores did not carry clothing in their size and that they detected an “air of superiority” from slim salesgirls who stated, “We haven’t your size” (“Cater by method,” 1918, p. 28). Plus-sized women often relied on tailors, dressmakers, or their own skills for clothing creation. While garments custom-made by tailors and dressmakers were still considered superior, homemade clothing was often difficult to construct (Cranor, 1920; Parsons, 2002).

Plus-sized women’s clothing retailers seemed to hold conflicting views about their customers. Some retailers viewed the plus-sized customer as difficult due to sensitivity about their size, whereas others found them to be easily pleased and appreciative of the efforts to fulfill their needs. The *New York Times* urged retailers to acknowledge plus-sized women as important, paying customers (“Catering trade,” 1922; “Increase,” 1923). By making the plus-sized woman feel significant, retailers would generate more revenue, customer loyalty, and word-of-mouth promotion. One retailer stated that if a plus-sized woman could not solve her “particular problem” in one store, she would remain faithful to stores that were able to fulfill her needs. Retailers tried to increase sales of plus-sized women’s clothing by training sales people to be courteous and sensitive to the plus-sized woman’s needs (“Providing dresses,” 1924).

**Specialty Stores and Specialized Departments for Plus-Sized Women**

In the 1920s, plus-sized women could purchase ready-to-wear clothing from a variety of specialty retailers. Numerous shops advertised in *Good Housekeeping*, *Vogue*, and *Harper’s*...
Bazaar including Lane Bryant, R and Z Stout Waists, Graceline Dresses, F.F. Models, Super Customade, La Mere Frocks, Blackshire, Queen Make Everyday Dresses, and Charles E. May Company, Inc. Many of these retailers stressed that their garments were scientifically designed to improve the look of the plus-sized woman and to make her appear more slender, yet still in the vein of popular styles and silhouettes (Figure 2).

“Insert Figure 2 About Here”

Lane Bryant sold a wide variety of women’s products from undergarments to outerwear for plus-sized women. Women with a 39.5 in. to 56 in. bust could purchase coats, suits, skirts, dresses, waists, corsets, negligees, and underwear in styles that were specially proportioned and designed for larger women (“Advance fall fashions,” 1920). Lane Bryant stressed through advertisements that their specialty clothing would make the plus-sized women appear slender, smaller (“Lane Bryant specially designed clothes,” 1920), “express individuality,” (“New autumn apparel,” 1920, p. 123) and “make stoutness becoming” (“Make stoutness becoming,” 1920, p. 148).

Other retailers modified popular lines to the stout physique. These modifications included the use of “slenderizing effects” (“Blouses specially designed,” 1920, p. 133), “correct lines to solve the problem of the plus-sized woman’s bodies” (“The stout styles,” 1920, p. 126), and elastic waistbands to fit a fuller figure’s proportions (“Distinct types,” 1920, p. 33). Retailers such as Dolly Gray advertised dresses for the “perfect figure,” and semi-made dresses “for the stout, the short, and the hard-to-fit” (“Dolly Gray,” 1927, p. 233). The semi-made dresses came complete with all of the “difficult sewing done” including box pleats, collars, and trimming. All that the purchaser of the semi-made dress needed to do was complete the seams to assure a perfect fit.
Within the fashion press, businesses and plus-sized women gradually acknowledged that there should be different departments for plus-sized women’s clothing in department stores. Department stores that advertised plus-sized women’s fashions included Gimbel Brothers, The Rosenbaum Co., Mandel Brothers, R. H. Macy & Co., Barmon Brothers Company, Inc., and Platt Bros. To satisfy the needs of the plus-sized woman, manufacturers and retailers needed to sell appealing garments that were specially designed and properly proportioned by people who studied the stout woman’s “clothing problems” (“Increase,” 1923). Special departments also could provide salespeople trained to meet the plus-sized woman’s needs. According to Benson (1981), a plus-sized salesperson would be more empathetic towards plus-sized customers. Department stores regularly advertised goods made for the slender woman alongside offerings for the plus-sized woman. R. H. Macy & Co. advertised a slender silhouette “tuxedo” sweater in green, grey, blue, buff, white, and black for average-sized women (sizes 36 to 46). A similarly designed sweater for the plus-sized woman (sizes 48 to 52) was offered only in black, navy, and buff, and for $1 more (“Sweaters diverse,” 1923). Companies frequently advertised that the plus-sized could “share the fit, form and fashion of slender women,” (“The larger woman’s problem,” 1926, p. 210) yet this would cost additional money for the extra fabric and design ingenuity (“A style secret,” 1926). It is not clear if the extra charge was created by the manufacturer or the retailer. In one New York Times article, an unnamed manufacturer of plus-sized garments advised retailers to reasonably price plus-sized women’s garments for “too often the case has been that the stout woman has been penalized in price for her size” and is “entitled to see a variety of garments at a range well within her pocketbook” (“Catering trade,” 1922, p. 28).
In the mid-1920s, it was reported in the *New York Times* that department stores sold a better selection of plus-sized clothing than earlier in the decade and that buyers spent more time considering this target market. Department store buyers noticed the popularity and success of specialty shops like Lane Bryant and may have observed that plus-sized women were not a novelty (“Increase,” 1923). The *New York Times* (1924) stated that the “trade developed an appreciation of how much attention must be paid to the needs of the stout woman, who is still very much in evidence despite the general tendency toward slimness of figure which is the desire of femininity in general at the present time” (“Providing Dresses,” p. 42).

**Prescriptive and Proscriptive Dress Advice for Plus-sized Women**

**Garment Styling**

The ideal silhouette of the 1920s was tubular, flat, and “boyish” as opposed to the womanly silhouette of the 1910s. Skirts remained ankle-length at first, but by 1927, they were at their highest for the decade and showing the knee (Richards, 1983). Women usually wore one-piece, looser-fitting, sleeveless, or long-sleeved dresses. Silhouettes changed from a barrel shape in 1919 to an oblong shape in the early 1920s; in the late 1920s, silhouettes were wedge-shaped with narrow hemlines (Tortora & Eubank, 2010). Throughout the 1920s, dress silhouettes included a lower, horizontal waist-hip line created through manipulation of fabric in pleats, tucks, smocking, and belts or sashes (Richards, 1983).

Within the pages of *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*, women were urged to fit the mold of fashion even when their bodies did not oblige (Bakst, 1923; Latham, 2000). Editorials and advertisements proclaimed that excess flesh destroyed the slender silhouette (“Simplicity,” 1923; “The waistline,” 1925). Design manipulation camouflaged and minimized the plus-sized woman’s body, which was seen as a “weak point.” (“A guide to chic,” 1924).
Vogue stated that plus-sized women “cannot gown themselves in the same styles as their exceptionally slender friends” (“The importance of the line,” 1920). Appropriate styles were modified from styles worn by the average-sized woman and adapted with concealing and flattering lines. It was important that plus-sized women purchase gowns specially designed for them and not purchase “regular” gowns in larger sizes. The “regular” sized garments in larger sizes did not have the “stylish stout effects” because they were not properly cut and proportioned for the plus-sized woman’s body type (“Providing dresses,” 1924, p.42).

In order to dress correctly, plus-sized women were often encouraged to ignore highly fashionable clothing and to dress plainly and inconspicuously. Vogue stated, “Often the apparent plumpness of a woman is, in reality, the result of unwise selection of frocks” (“The importance of the line,” 1920, p. 48). Plus-sized women were advised not to call attention to themselves by overdressing, trying too hard to follow popular fashions (unless properly modified), or wearing the fads of the season and other “wild frocks” (“The no-longer-slim bride,” 1922, p. 60). Vogue instructed them to “shun all wayward, trampish, boyish outfits as souls shun the devil” and they were told that “only by extreme repression can they fit themselves decently into modern garments” (“Figures that do,” 1923, p. 63).

Plus-sized women were urged to dress for their figure in styles that were age- and figure-appropriate. Tight, long skirts were to be avoided because these would give a “sausage-like effect” (“A guide to chic,” 1924, p. 102). Incorrect waistlines and skirt lengths were said to shorten and widen the already-stout figure. The plus-sized woman was told to avoid the higher hemlines that were decidedly in fashion. A Good Housekeeping author warned, “Do not think of putting your skirts fourteen inches off the floor” (Koues, 1926, p. 102).
Much of the advice provided to women in *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* stressed hiding the figure through fabric additions and optical illusions. Extra fabric included pleats, flares, draperies, “floating” panels, sashes, apron backs with bows, and the use of jabots. Even the House of Worth added long, floating panels with bias edges designed for larger-sized women. Although extra fabric additions were recommended, embroidery and other embellishments were to be avoided, as this would give an overdressed appearance and contradict the term “stylish stout” (“Fitting the flat back,” 1923, p. 128).

Design details such as diagonal lines and diagonal trimmings provided visual illusions to slenderize the stout form. Flared skirts were often worn in longer lengths as they would provide height and supposed slenderness to the wearer. Sleeves were finished with extra fabric and decorations such as fluting, rows of buttons, and wide and unusually shaped cuffs. These treatments added attractiveness to the wrist and directed attention away from other areas of the body (Figure 3). To facilitate easier movement, sleeves were to be joined discreetly at the shoulder with a yoke treatment rather than set-in. During the second half of the 1920s, popular silhouettes were more fitted, but plus-sized women’s apparel continued to feature exaggerated or swathed hips and fullness placed low on the garments (Koues, 1926).

If extra fabric panels and design details did not do enough to “hide” figure defects, *Good Housekeeping* advised women to literally veil the portion of the silhouette that appeared too curvy (“Brims are uneven,” 1928; “The deceptively simple,” 1928; “Large women’s dresses,” 1925). *Vogue* advised women with large hips to hide this “flaw” with long side panels of fabric; these panels would “[break] the circumference line” (“Smart modes for older women,” 1922). Wraps, deep cape collars, and three-quarter coats were also considered flattering to a “somewhat
heavy figure” (J. R. K., 1922, p. 86). Capes came with caveats, however. If a plus-sized woman was also tall, she was advised to wear garments with a cape effect that started beneath the shoulder blades rather than at the top of the shoulders. This decorative treatment visually broke the “bulging” effects of the hips (M. H., 1923, p. 43).

Advice was offered for all kinds of attire, including sportswear (“More sports apparel,” 1927). Women with “massive chests, thick haunches, and stout legs or those with bottle-necks, hunched shoulders, and spindle shanks” did not want to dress for “hiking” in untidy half-open blouses, too-tight short breeches, and ungainly sweaters tied around their waists for this would be “considered evidence of madness” (“Figures that do,” 1923, p. 63). *Vogue* informed plus-sized women to wear pullover sweaters and unbuttoned cardigans worn loose.

Articles recommended colors and fabrics that would accentuate a plus-sized woman’s best features and hide her defects. Dull sheen fabrics such as crepe roman, crepe de chine, serge, twills, and voile were favored fabrics. Other popular fabrics included georgette, tricotine or tricolette, and jerseys; these easily draped along the curves of the plus-sized woman without clinging and were said to be forgiving. Larger women were advised to avoid large patterned prints such as plaid, bold and bright colors, and “noisy” fabrics such as satin and taffeta that would draw attention to unsightly curves (“The afternoon town frock,” 1928; “Fitting the flat back,” 1923; “For the stouter woman,” 1920; “Printed silks,” 1925).

According to the *New York Times*, plus-sized women’s clothing was designed and made in “sure and safe way[s] to be smart” in dark and concealing colors such as black, browns, and dark blues (“Dark colors,” 1922, p. 20). Navy blue and purple were noted as popular colors for plus-sized women as they were “especially suited to garments for them” (“Large women’s dresses,” 1925, p. 34). Black concealed undesirable features and monochromatic black
ensembles provided inconspicuous outfits that blended waistlines and silhouettes (“All black, all navy,” 1922). Plus-sized women occasionally used lighter shades of gray and blue with touches of reds, purples, greens, and beiges. Bright colors such as orange that would draw attention to the plus-sized figure were to be avoided (“The correct use of line,” 1920; “Dark colors,” 1922; “Dress fashionably,” 1923; “Smart frocks,” 1923; “These new fall clothes,” 1926).

Accessories and Hair Styling

Besides garment styling, plus-sized women were given advice on accessories and hairstyles. The *New York Times* urged hats for plus-sized women with correct lines and proper colors (“Stylish stout hats now,” 1920). It was deemed “ridiculous” for a plus-sized woman to wear tiny hats incongruous with the size of her body. Flattering hat styles were said to be those with moderate-sized brims, those with slightly drooping brims, and those with large, soft crowns (“Bright colors”, 1927; “For the woman with grown daughters,” 1923; “Stylish stout hats now,” 1920). *Vogue* advised plus-sized women to avoid the popular “bob” hairstyle because long hair concealed thick necks. If all else failed, scarves were “kind” for hiding unsightly double chins (“Odds against chic,” 1924, p. 73). Shoes for the plus-sized were to be plain with buckles and without the fashionable straps recommended for the slim. Monochromatic stockings and shoes would help make the ankles and feet appear thinner.

Undergarments

To achieve the smooth look of the 1920s, corsets were routinely recommended by companies and fashion editorials for the plus-sized (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002). Styles were largely influenced by the demands dictated by the silhouette popular at the time. Although slender women largely stopped wearing the corset in the 1920s, plus-sized women were advised to never abandon the corset. *Vogue* stated, “Only the perfect skeleton can permit itself entire
freedom from the ghost of the corset” (“Figures that do,” 1923, p.63). Corsets were designed to meet the requirements of the simple, straight, fashionable silhouettes by providing a smooth, unbroken line in the front and back of the garment. Back-laced corsets worn with silk-covered elastic brassieres were thought to best reduce and mold the full figure without sacrificing youth or comfort (Gardner, 1924; “Mainstays,” 1924; “Odds against chic,” 1924; “Simplicity of line,” 1924; “Youthful fashions,” 1921).

Corseting the plus-sized body was viewed as difficult around the hips, bust, and diaphragm. In order to account for these problems, cross-boning cinched in the “over-developed diaphragm while a confining brassiere was made for an ample bust” (Gardner, 1924, p. 61). Vogue stated that “flesh is plastic and can be moulded to look its best with very little guidance” (“A guide to chic,” 1924, p. 86). Plus-sized women were advised to wear their corsets at all times for “training one’s figure is much like training children’s manners—it cannot be done for guest days only, but it must become a habit” (Gardner, 1924, p. 60). Women appeared smaller and more slender when wearing a properly fitting corset. In 1927, plus-sized women comprised the majority of the demand for corsets (“Changed ways,” 1927). At this time, corset-makers, or corsetieres, tried to make supportive corsets without added bulkiness. The purpose was to achieve the straight silhouette in fashion (“The corset makes the figure,” 1927).

Corset companies in the 1920s created figure type classifications for corsets that “bolstered their claims to scientific validation of their products, and to the need for professional fitters” (Fields, 1999, p. 372). Corsetieres realized that plus-sized women’s body proportions were more varied than average-sized women and that the stout needed support in different ways. Even if a woman was of the same size as a friend, her proportions could still be very different. Many corset companies offered corsets tailored to specific figure types and “problems” including
tall heavy, short heavy, large above waist, and large below waist (Figure 4). If the hips (or other
body parts) were “too large” for the figure, which was seen as an “obvious defect,” there were
special girdles that counteracted the problem (“A guide to chic,” 1924, p. 86). Saleswomen
commonly attended company-based corset schools to learn the methods and characteristics of the
corsets they would be selling. Plus-sized women often stated feeling at ease when the corset fitter
themselves was larger (Fields, 1999; “A guide to chic,” 1924; “Simplicity of line,” 1924). This
concept was on par with sentiments expressed towards plus-sized women clothing saleswomen.

“The New York Times described specific adaptations of undergarments for the plus-sized
or “chubby figure” to give extra strength to the garment and smooth the figure. Modifications
included the following: (a) elastic shoulder straps to add resiliency, (b) extra bands of knit fabric
in the girdle to hold the diaphragm in place and to confine the hips, (c) step-ins (or combination
camisole with panty) with fan-shaped reinforcements made of boning and (d) knitted elastic
inserts to give durability and “complete its confining qualities” (“Corset designs,” 1926, p. 139).

Conclusions

By the 1920s, plus-sized women were able to purchase ready-to-wear clothing in both
department and specialty stores. While still viewed as problematic customers by some
manufacturers, designers, and retailers, businesses slowly realized the potential purchasing
power of the plus-sized woman. Many businesses created garments especially designed for her
by introducing plus-sizes and half-sizes. The success of specialty stores, particularly Lane
Bryant, confirmed the profit potential of the plus-sized target market.

Styling advice for the plus-sized woman was included in nearly every issue of Vogue and
Good Housekeeping in the 1920s. While some of the advice emphasized the ways in which the
plus-sized woman could accentuate her best features, most of the advice focused on hiding and
camouflaging perceived “defects” related to size. Some advice was even contradictory, such as
the use of decoration to hide the figure but avoidance of trims that brought too much attention.
Conflicting suggestions on appropriate styles could have reflected the ambiguity of the industry.

In 2012, the plus-sized apparel industry was valued at $7.5 billion (Binns, 2013).

Evidence of 1920s manufacturing, designing, and selling strategies can be found today in
marketing references to slenderizing the female form, separate departments and stores for the
plus-sized, and training for sales staff (Lane Bryant, 2013). Unfortunately, some of the problems
experienced by the plus-sized remain as well. Women during the 1920s complained of designs
simply “sized up” rather than carefully designed to the larger female form. According to the
NDP, a market research company, in 2012, 62% of plus-sized women reported a difficult time
finding styles that they wanted (Binns, 2013).

By the 1920s, the slender body as the ideal body was fully realized and that trend endures
today. Fashion periodicals and retail offerings continue to promote slenderness, although the
average woman today is a size 14 (Gruys, 2012). Although there were 6,019 plus-sized apparel
stores operating in the United States in 2012, it seems ambivalence remains toward the plus-sized
woman as some designers and manufacturers do not manufacture clothing above a size 12

The results of this study demonstrate the conflict between the cultural ideal of thinness
and businesses’ need to develop and sell products to the plus-sized customer. While some
businesses have been and are today empathetic to the plus-sized customer’s needs, designers and
merchandisers must continue to listen to this important target market. We explored plus-sized
women’s fashions presented by ready-to-wear manufacturers and retailers through
advertisements and advice published in *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, and the *New York Times*; future researchers could investigate advice offered to plus-sized home sewers to explore similarities and possible differences in perceptions of target consumers. We did not research plus-sized merchandise that might have been offered through the widely distributed catalogs of Sears and Roebuck, as well as Montgomery Ward, which would have provided a more rural and lower economic class perspective to this topic. Additionally, patent records could reveal attempts to invent solutions for the perceived problems of developing clothing for plus-sized women. These additional sources would provide a deeper and broader understanding of this target market.
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