

10-2013

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“The New Costumes of Odd Sizes” Plus-Sized Women’s Fashions, 1920–1929

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

This is an author's final manuscript of an article from *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 31 (2013): 259–274, doi:[10.1177/0887302X13503184](https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X13503184).

1 **“The New Costumes of Odd Sizes:” Plus-Sized Women’s Fashions, 1920-1929**

2 **Carmen Keist and Sara Marcketti¹**

3 Thinness has not always been the “ideal” feminine figure type. At various points in
4 American and European history, thinness was discouraged. Excess weight was considered a sign
5 of health and prosperity (Seid, 1989). During the Progressive Era in the United States (1890-
6 1920), negative conceptions of weight gain, obesity, and concern with weight loss began in
7 earnest (Schwartz, 1986). Although women were encouraged to “avoid the sweets” that would
8 contribute to excess weight, the percentage of plus-sized women grew from the late nineteenth to
9 early twentieth century (“Down with avoirdupois!,” 1913). By 1916 over 13 million women, or
10 12.7% of the total U.S. population, were considered overweight (Segrave, 2008). Today,
11 approximately 34% of the U.S. population is considered overweight, and it is projected that
12 nearly 87% of the population will be in this category by 2030 (Park, 2013). Understanding the
13 historic backdrop of attitudes concerning the full-figured woman may provide insights for today.

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

¹ 2013Keist, C. N., & Marcketti, S. B. (2013). “The new costumes of odd sizes:” Plus-sized women’s fashions, 1920-1929. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 31(4), 259-274.

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Methods

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Slenderness as the Ideal

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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.

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

45 woman becoming unfashionable. The new ideal woman's figure included a full bosom, a nipped-
46 in waist, and slender legs. Roundness was discouraged (Gordon, 1987).

47 By the early 1900s, a newly emerging modern America focused on control over the body
48 with visible reminders of slenderness seen in photographs and motion pictures (Latham, 2000).
49 Movie stars maintained slim, lean bodies. In the 1920s, illustrations of John Held, Jr. featured
50 flappers with elongated limbs and skimpy dresses, images that both reflected and cemented the
51 ideal body type for women (Fangman, Paff Ogle, Bickle, & Rouner, 2004). Reviewing 1920s
52 fashion periodicals, past researchers have concluded that editors and advertisers constructed
53 thinness as a key component of the coveted or idealized female gender role, making a slender
54 body more desirable than a heavy one (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986; Vertinsky,
55 2008; Vester, 2010).

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

66 During World War I, people made sacrifices for the good of the country and were urged
67 by the U.S. government to conserve food resources. Larger sized Americans were seen as

68 unpatriotic and deviant. The US experienced shortages of molasses, margarine, and skim milk
69 and participated in days without meat, pork, or wheat. Plus-sized women were seen as hoarding
70 food that could otherwise go to the war effort. Dr. Lulu Peters, author of the dieting book, *Diet*
71 *and Health with Key to the Calories* (1918), declared, “tell loudly and frequently to all your
72 friends that you realize that it is unpatriotic to be fat while many thousands are starving, that you
73 are going to reduce to normal, and will be there in the allotted time” (Peters, 1918, p. 78). Peters
74 stated the monetary and energy savings from uneaten food could support the Red Cross and the
75 purchasing of Liberty Bonds for the War effort.

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

84 According to the *New York Times* and *Vogue*, a woman became stout due to lack of
85 exercise, laziness, manner of eating, or the way that she dressed because “any restriction in dress
86 which affects the circulation may produce flesh” (“Women cut weight,” 1915, p. 6). Other
87 possible reasons mentioned for stoutness included the introduction of cars, higher standards of
88 living, less household drudgery, and less worry. At that time, these factors all implied middle- to
89 upper-class women (“Cater by method,” 1918; “Stout women can now be,” 1917).

90 Though not the first diet book written, *Diet and Health* (1918) by Peters was the first diet
91 book to appear on the *Publishers Weekly* Best Sellers list, and it stayed there for five years in a
92 row from 1922 to 1926. By 1923, 200,000 copies were sold, and by 1924 it had “outsold every
93 other nonfiction title” (Hackett & Burke, 1977, p. 98). According to Peters (1918), the rule to
94 finding your ideal weight was to “multiply number of inches over 5 feet in height by 5.5; add
95 110” (p.11). For today’s standards, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention
96 reports healthfulness in terms of the Body Mass Index (BMI) (“Centers for Disease,” 2011). BMI
97 is found using a person’s weight (in pounds) divided by their height (in inches) squared
98 multiplied by 703. People with a BMI below 18.5 are considered underweight; a BMI of 18.5-
99 24.9 is considered normal; 25.0-29.9 is overweight; and 30.0 and higher is obese. Peters’
100 calculations for appropriate weight in 1918 would be in the normal or healthy range. Equating
101 her recommendations to the CDC’s guidelines, a woman of 5’1” should weigh 116.5 lbs. (22
102 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);
103 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).

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

113 **Providing Ready-to-Wear for Plus-Sized Women**

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

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

130 **Product Development**

131 Specialization and choice were limited in the 1910s; the growing number of plus-sized
132 clothing manufacturers in the early 1920s showed recognition of the plus-sized women’s
133 demographic (Gould, 1911, p. 126; “Increase,” 1923; “Specialized blouses,” 1920). *Vogue*
134 acknowledged that stout women could and should be as stylish and fashionable as more slender
135 women, stating: “Yet surely the makers of the mode do not expect all women whose waist-lines

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

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

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

179 In the 1920s, plus-sized women could purchase ready-to-wear clothing from a variety of
180 specialty retailers. Numerous shops advertised in *Good Housekeeping*, *Vogue*, and *Harper’s*

181 *Bazaar* including Lane Bryant, R and Z Stout Waists, Graceline Dresses, F.F. Models, Super
182 Customade, La Mere Frocks, Blackshire, Queen Make Everyday Dresses, and Charles E. May
183 Company, Inc. Many of these retailers stressed that their garments were scientifically designed to
184 improve the look of the plus-sized woman and to make her appear more slender, yet still in the
185 vein of popular styles and silhouettes (Figure 2).

186 “Insert Figure 2 About Here”

187 Lane Bryant sold a wide variety of women’s products from undergarments to outerwear
188 for plus-sized women. Women with a 39.5 in. to 56 in. bust could purchase coats, suits, skirts,
189 dresses, waists, corsets, negligees, and underwear in styles that were specially proportioned and
190 designed for larger women (“Advance fall fashions,” 1920). Lane Bryant stressed through
191 advertisements that their specialty clothing would make the plus-sized women appear slender,
192 smaller (“Lane Bryant specially designed clothes,” 1920), “express individuality,” (“New
193 autumn apparel,” 1920, p. 123) and “make stoutness becoming” (“Make stoutness becoming,”
194 1920, p. 148).

195 Other retailers modified popular lines to the stout physique. These modifications included
196 the use of “slenderizing effects” (“Blouses specially designed,” 1920, p. 133), “correct lines to
197 solve the problem of the plus-sized woman’s bodies” (“The stout styles,” 1920, p. 126), and
198 elastic waistbands to fit a fuller figure’s proportions (“Distinct types,” 1920, p. 33). Retailers
199 such as Dolly Gray advertised dresses for the “perfect figure,” and semi-made dresses “for the
200 stout, the short, and the hard-to-fit” (“Dolly Gray,” 1927, p. 233). The semi-made dresses came
201 complete with all of the “difficult sewing done” including box pleats, collars, and trimming. All
202 that the purchaser of the semi-made dress needed to do was complete the seams to assure a
203 perfect fit.

204 Within the fashion press, businesses and plus-sized women gradually acknowledged that
205 there should be different departments for plus-sized women's clothing in department stores.
206 Department stores that advertised plus-sized women's fashions included Gimbel Brothers, The
207 Rosenbaum Co., Mandel Brothers, R. H. Macy & Co., Barmon Brothers Company, Inc., and
208 Platt Bros. To satisfy the needs of the plus-sized woman, manufacturers and retailers needed to
209 sell appealing garments that were specially designed and properly proportioned by people who
210 studied the stout woman's "clothing problems" ("Increase," 1923). Special departments also
211 could provide salespeople trained to meet the plus-sized woman's needs. According to Benson
212 (1981), a plus-sized salesperson would be more empathetic towards plus-sized customers.

213 Department stores regularly advertised goods made for the slender woman alongside
214 offerings for the plus-sized woman. R. H. Macy & Co. advertised a slender silhouette "tuxedo"
215 sweater in green, grey, blue, buff, white, and black for average-sized women (sizes 36 to 46). A
216 similarly designed sweater for the plus-sized woman (sizes 48 to 52) was offered only in black,
217 navy, and buff, and for \$1 more ("Sweaters diverse," 1923). Companies frequently advertised
218 that the plus-sized could "share the fit, form and fashion of slender women," ("The larger
219 woman's problem," 1926, p. 210) yet this would cost additional money for the extra fabric and
220 design ingenuity ("A style secret," 1926). It is not clear if the extra charge was created by the
221 manufacturer or the retailer. In one *New York Times* article, an unnamed manufacturer of plus-
222 sized garments advised retailers to reasonably price plus-sized women's garments for "too often
223 the case has been that the stout woman has been penalized in price for her size" and is "entitled
224 to see a variety of garments at a range well within her pocketbook" ("Catering trade," 1922, p.
225 28).

226 In the mid-1920s, it was reported in the *New York Times* that department stores sold a
227 better selection of plus-sized clothing than earlier in the decade and that buyers spent more time
228 considering this target market. Department store buyers noticed the popularity and success of
229 specialty shops like Lane Bryant and may have observed that plus-sized women were not a
230 novelty (“Increase,” 1923). The *New York Times* (1924) stated that the “trade developed an
231 appreciation of how much attention must be paid to the needs of the stout woman, who is still
232 very much in evidence despite the general tendency toward slimness of figure which is the desire
233 of femininity in general at the present time” (“Providing Dresses,” p. 42).

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

235 **Garment Styling**

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

244 Within the pages of *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*, women were urged to fit the mold of
245 fashion even when their bodies did not oblige (Bakst, 1923; Latham, 2000). Editorials and
246 advertisements proclaimed that excess flesh destroyed the slender silhouette (“Simplicity,” 1923;
247 “The waistline,” 1925). Design manipulation camouflaged and minimized the plus-sized
248 woman’s body, which was seen as a “weak point.” (“A guide to chic,” 1924).

249 *Vogue* stated that plus-sized women “cannot gown themselves in the same styles as their
250 exceptionally slender friends” (“The importance of the line,” 1920). Appropriate styles were
251 modified from styles worn by the average-sized woman and adapted with concealing and
252 flattering lines. It was important that plus-sized women purchase gowns specially designed for
253 them and not purchase “regular” gowns in larger sizes. The “regular” sized garments in larger
254 sizes did not have the “stylish stout effects” because they were not properly cut and proportioned
255 for the plus-sized woman’s body type (“Providing dresses,” 1924, p.42).

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

265 Plus-sized women were urged to dress for their figure in styles that were age- and figure-
266 appropriate. Tight, long skirts were to be avoided because these would give a “sausage-like
267 effect” (“A guide to chic,” 1924, p. 102). Incorrect waistlines and skirt lengths were said to
268 shorten and widen the already-stout figure. The plus-sized woman was told to avoid the higher
269 hemlines that were decidedly in fashion. A *Good Housekeeping* author warned, “Do not think of
270 putting your skirts fourteen inches off the floor” (Koues, 1926, p. 102).

271 Much of the advice provided to women in *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* stressed hiding
272 the figure through fabric additions and optical illusions. Extra fabric included pleats, flares,
273 draperies, “floating” panels, sashes, apron backs with bows, and the use of jabots. Even the
274 House of Worth added long, floating panels with bias edges designed for larger-sized women.
275 Although extra fabric additions were recommended, embroidery and other embellishments were
276 to be avoided, as this would give an overdressed appearance and contradict the term “stylish
277 stout” (“Fitting the flat back,” 1923, p. 128).

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

287 “Insert Figure 3 About Here”

288 If extra fabric panels and design details did not do enough to “hide” figure defects, *Good*
289 *Housekeeping* advised women to literally veil the portion of the silhouette that appeared too
290 curvy (“Brimms are uneven,” 1928; “The deceptively simple,” 1928; “Large women’s dresses,”
291 1925). *Vogue* advised women with large hips to hide this “flaw” with long side panels of fabric;
292 these panels would “[break] the circumference line” (“Smart modes for older women,” 1922).
293 Wraps, deep cape collars, and three-quarter coats were also considered flattering to a “somewhat

294 heavy figure” (J. R. K., 1922, p. 86). Capes came with caveats, however. If a plus-sized woman
295 was also tall, she was advised to wear garments with a cape effect that started beneath the
296 shoulder blades rather than at the top of the shoulders. This decorative treatment visually broke
297 the “bulging” effects of the hips (M. H., 1923, p. 43).

298 Advice was offered for all kinds of attire, including sportswear (“More sports apparel,”
299 1927). Women with “massive chests, thick haunches, and stout legs or those with bottle-necks,
300 hunched shoulders, and spindle shanks” did not want to dress for “hiking” in untidy half-open
301 blouses, too-tight short breeches, and ungainly sweaters tied around their waists for this would be
302 “considered evidence of madness” (“Figures that do,” 1923, p. 63). *Vogue* informed plus-sized
303 women to wear pullover sweaters and unbuttoned cardigans worn loose.

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

312 According to the *New York Times*, plus-sized women’s clothing was designed and made
313 in “sure and safe way[s] to be smart” in dark and concealing colors such as black, browns, and
314 dark blues (“Dark colors,” 1922, p. 20). Navy blue and purple were noted as popular colors for
315 plus-sized women as they were “especially suited to garments for them” (“Large women’s
316 dresses,” 1925, p. 34). Black concealed undesirable features and monochromatic black

317 ensembles provided inconspicuous outfits that blended waistlines and silhouettes (“All black, all
318 navy,” 1922). Plus-sized women occasionally used lighter shades of gray and blue with touches
319 of reds, purples, greens, and beiges. Bright colors such as orange that would draw attention to the
320 plus-sized figure were to be avoided (“The correct use of line,” 1920; “Dark colors,” 1922;
321 “Dress fashionably,” 1923; “Smart frocks,” 1923; “These new fall clothes,” 1926).

322 **Accessories and Hair Styling**

323 Besides garment styling, plus-sized women were given advice on accessories and
324 hairstyles. The *New York Times* urged hats for plus-sized women with correct lines and proper
325 colors (“Stylish stout hats now,” 1920). It was deemed “ridiculous” for a plus-sized woman to
326 wear tiny hats incongruous with the size of her body. Flattering hat styles were said to be those
327 with moderate-sized brims, those with slightly drooping brims, and those with large, soft crowns
328 (“Bright colors”, 1927; “For the woman with grown daughters,” 1923; “Stylish stout hats now,”
329 1920). *Vogue* advised plus-sized women to avoid the popular “bob” hairstyle because long hair
330 concealed thick necks. If all else failed, scarves were “kind” for hiding unsightly double chins
331 (“Odds against chic,” 1924, p. 73). Shoes for the plus-sized were to be plain with buckles and
332 without the fashionable straps recommended for the slim. Monochromatic stockings and shoes
333 would help make the ankles and feet appear thinner.

334 **Undergarments**

335 To achieve the smooth look of the 1920s, corsets were routinely recommended by
336 companies and fashion editorials for the plus-sized (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002). Styles were
337 largely influenced by the demands dictated by the silhouette popular at the time. Although
338 slender women largely stopped wearing the corset in the 1920s, plus-sized women were advised
339 to never abandon the corset. *Vogue* stated, “Only the perfect skeleton can permit itself entire

340 freedom from the ghost of the corset” (“Figures that do,” 1923, p.63). Corsets were designed to
341 meet the requirements of the simple, straight, fashionable silhouettes by providing a smooth,
342 unbroken line in the front and back of the garment. Back-laced corsets worn with silk-covered
343 elastic brassieres were thought to best reduce and mold the full figure without sacrificing youth
344 or comfort (Gardner, 1924; “Mainstays,” 1924; “Odds against chic,” 1924; “Simplicity of line,”
345 1924; “Youthful fashions,” 1921).

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

357 Corset companies in the 1920s created figure type classifications for corsets that
358 “bolstered their claims to scientific validation of their products, and to the need for professional
359 fitters” (Fields, 1999, p. 372). Corsetieres realized that plus-sized women’s body proportions
360 were more varied than average-sized women and that the stout needed support in different ways.
361 Even if a woman was of the same size as a friend, her proportions could still be very different.
362 Many corset companies offered corsets tailored to specific figure types and “problems” including

363 tall heavy, short heavy, large above waist, and large below waist (Figure 4). If the hips (or other
364 body parts) were “too large” for the figure, which was seen as an “obvious defect,” there were
365 special girdles that counteracted the problem (“A guide to chic,” 1924, p. 86). Saleswomen
366 commonly attended company-based corset schools to learn the methods and characteristics of the
367 corsets they would be selling. Plus-sized women often stated feeling at ease when the corset fitter
368 themselves was larger (Fields, 1999; “A guide to chic,” 1924; “Simplicity of line,” 1924). This
369 concept was on par with sentiments expressed towards plus-sized women clothing saleswomen.

370 “Insert Figure 4 About Here”

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

377 **Conclusions**

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

384 Styling advice for the plus-sized woman was included in nearly every issue of *Vogue* and
385 *Good Housekeeping* in the 1920s. While some of the advice emphasized the ways in which the

386 plus-sized woman could accentuate her best features, most of the advice focused on hiding and
387 camouflaging perceived “defects” related to size. Some advice was even contradictory, such as
388 the use of decoration to hide the figure but avoidance of trims that brought too much attention.
389 Conflicting suggestions on appropriate styles could have reflected the ambiguity of the industry.

390 In 2012, the plus-sized apparel industry was valued at \$7.5 billion (Binns, 2013).
391 Evidence of 1920s manufacturing, designing, and selling strategies can be found today in
392 marketing references to slenderizing the female form, separate departments and stores for the
393 plus-sized, and training for sales staff (Lane Bryant, 2013). Unfortunately, some of the problems
394 experienced by the plus-sized remain as well. Women during the 1920s complained of designs
395 simply “sized up” rather than carefully designed to the larger female form. According to the
396 NDP, a market research company, in 2012, 62% of plus-sized women reported a difficult time
397 finding styles that they wanted (Binns, 2013).

398 By the 1920s, the slender body as the ideal body was fully realized and that trend endures
399 today. Fashion periodicals and retail offerings continue to promote slenderness, although the
400 average woman today is a size 14 (Gruys, 2012). Although there were 6,019 plus-sized apparel
401 stores operating in the United States in 2012, it seems ambivalence remains toward the plus-
402 sized woman, as some designers and manufacturers do not manufacture clothing above a size 12
403 (Binkley, 2013; Binns, 2013; “Variety,” 1926, p. 39).

404 The results of this study demonstrate the conflict between the cultural ideal of thinness
405 and businesses’ need to develop and sell products to the plus-sized customer. While some
406 businesses have been and are today empathetic to the plus-sized customer’s needs, designers and
407 merchandisers must continue to listen to this important target market. We explored plus-sized
408 women’s fashions presented by ready-to-wear manufacturers and retailers through

409 advertisements and advice published in *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, and the *New York Times*;
410 future researchers could investigate advice offered to plus-sized home sewers to explore
411 similarities and possible differences in perceptions of target consumers. We did not research
412 plus-sized merchandise that might have been offered through the widely distributed catalogs of
413 Sears and Roebuck, as well as Montgomery Ward, which would have provided a more rural and
414 lower economic class perspective to this topic. Additionally, patent records could reveal attempts
415 to invent solutions for the perceived problems of developing clothing for plus-sized women.
416 These additional sources would provide a deeper and broader understanding of this target
417 market.

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