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Making a Pattern for the American Woman: Clothing Sizing, Beauty Standards, and Constructions of
the Consumer in the United States

In 1939, Ruth O'Brien and William C. Shelton, statisticians for the Textiles and Clothing Division of the Bureau of Home Economics in the United States Department of Agriculture, began a study on women's body measurements in the United States.¹ The study was conducted through the U.S. Department of Agriculture in cooperation with the Works Projects Association (WPA), an agency created under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in 1933.² O'Brien and Shelton took 14,698 American women's weights as well as their specific body measurements in 58 places, and the measurements were compiled and compared to draw conclusions about "typical" body sizes for women in the United States, as well as correlating averages that could be standardized. In 1958, the National Bureau of Standards released Commercial Standard 215-58: "Body Measurements for the Sizing of Women's Patterns and Apparel" based on their research.³ This was the first major study of its kind; prior to O'Brien and Shelton's work, ready-made women's clothing was sized, but sizes were based

¹ Ruth O'Brien and William C. Shelton, United States Department of Agriculture in Cooperation with the Works Projects Administration, *Women's Measurements for Garment and Pattern Construction* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1941).

² "Works Progress Administration (WPA)," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (May 13, 2013), accessed April 15, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Works-Progress-Administration>.

³ "Commercial Standard 215-58: Body Measurements for the Sizing of Women's Patterns and Apparel," National Bureau of Standards, United States Department of Commerce (Washington: 1958).

merely on either age or bust measurements, there were no standard sizes across brands, and it was assumed that the women purchasing the clothing would be able to make alterations to it themselves.⁴

The fact that the WPA commissioned a study on women's clothing sizes is particularly interesting because the study appears slightly different than the normal projects the agency funded.⁵ While thousands of women were used as subjects for the study, only a few people actually worked on the project as a job, so it does not appear to be particularly job-producing at its surface. However, when one takes into account all the results that could come from standardizing sizing, it makes sense that the WPA would want to be involved. Standardized clothing sizes would make shopping easier, leading women to likely buy more clothing, and adding more money to the economy. Further, with the woman in the (presumed heterosexual married) home being societally constructed as the consumer, and with consumerism as a force rising in power, doing anything to even auspiciously assist the female shopper would help prop up consumerism. If standardized clothing sizes are understood as a means of uplifting consumerism, then how the sizes were marketed and constructed and how they changed over time can suggest how the force of consumerism has treated women in the United States over time and how it has worked in tandem with evolving beauty standards to frame the "ideal consumer." Through analyses of four Sears Roebuck Catalog advertisements for women's clothing published in 1940, 1957, 1959, and 1960, the shifting constructions of femininity and of the (related) consumer in the United States between the 1940s and early 1960s emerge.

⁴ Eliana Dockterman, "Inside the Fight to Take Back the Fitting Room: How to Fix Vanity Sizing," *Time Magazine*, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://time.com/how-to-fix-vanity-sizing>; Laura Stampler, "The Bizarre History of Women's Clothing Sizes," *Time Magazine* (October 23, 2014), accessed April 12, 2017, <http://time.com/3532014/women-clothing-sizes-history>.

⁵ "Works Progress Administration (WPA)," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (May 13, 2013), The WPA was developed as a job-creating agency, intended to give work to people affected by the Great Depression and to stimulate the United States economy. However, it was also criticized for being a tool for making people loyal to the Democratic Party and even for the creation of Democratic propaganda.

The first advertisement of note is the 1940 Sears ad “News for Shorter Women: A Wardrobe of *Perfected-Fit* Dresses.”⁶ It is a two page, black and white spread with photos of seven glamorous, thin, white women wearing a variety of patterned versions of the same dress. There is a note on the top right page that reads, “Dresses for parties, sports, travel and everyday wear! Buy to your heart’s content! Whole wardrobes are available on Easy Payments!” There is also a description of the sizes the dresses come in, which range from 16 ½ to 26 ½ in increasing increments of two. The dresses are made for “women 5 feet, 3 inches or shorter,” and the ad claims that they are “styled to make you look [y]ounger and give you flattering [h]eight.” Since this advertisement was published a year before the WPA study was released and 18 years before the National Bureau of Standards implemented standardized sizing, it serves as evidence of the sizing methods used prior to 1958. In particular, the numeric sizes and the marketing of the dresses seem to assume that the customer is youthful-- or at least desires to be youthful, at the note about “mak[ing] you look [y]ounger” suggests. The sizes (16 ½-26 ½) therefore appear to support the idea that sizes were meant to reflect ages, not exact measurements (though size and age were implied to be in some way corresponding). Further, this sizing system reflects the beauty standards of youthfulness and slenderness of the time period, ideas supported by Marianne Thesander’s discussion of the ideal female body between 1930 and 1946 in *The Feminine Ideal*.⁷

Thesander asserts that after the 1929 Wall Street crash, the “1920s emancipated tomboy ideal... was replaced by a more feminine ideal... a slender and ‘natural’ body [because] in periods of crisis there is a greater need to maintain traditional values” and that this ideal lasted until Dior’s 1947 ‘New Look.’⁸ Clothing was designed to drape softly over a woman, giving her a figure that was

⁶ Sears, “News for Shorter Women: A Wardrobe of *Perfected-Fit* Dresses,” advertisement, *Sears Roebuck Catalog* (Spring and Summer 1940), 28-29.

⁷ Marianna Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 131-153.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 131; According to Thesander, “[Dior’s] New Look creations had longer, fuller skirts, the waist was small and the shape of the bust was lifted and accentuate, giving the modern hourglass figure,” *Ibid.*, 155.

markedly feminine, but youthfully thin.⁹ The dresses in “New for Shorter Women” are a perfect example of this: they are wrapped and generally loose, but they cinch in around the waist with a belt to highlight the shape of the woman wearing them in a manner similar to corsetry but more “natural.”¹⁰ The young, mainstream beauty was uplifted in society and being advertised to, and even the numbers used to sell clothing provide evidence of this. Thus one of the main requirements for the ideal female consumer in the 1930s through early 1940s was youth. The older woman (meaning 30s or above) was not framed as a consumer, unless she was attempting to look younger.

The 1957 Spring and Summer Sears Catalog contains another two page advertisement, entitled “Gingham-look Sea Stars.”¹¹ The left page is in black and white, and the right is in full color. The two pages are almost mirror images of each other, with both featuring three women wearing one piece, strapless bathing suits that go down to mid thigh on the heavily made-up, white women pictured. The women on the outside edges of the pages are kneeling, wearing sunglasses, and looking toward the center of the spread; the women in the middle have shawls wrapped around their heads and are also looking toward the ad’s middle; and the women closest to the center of the two page advertisement are both in sunglasses with one leg stretched forward with a pointed toe. All of the women have accentuated waists and busts, and all of the swimsuits being sold have descriptions and selling features listed, and these include “shorts make hips and thighs look slim” and “control your figure.” The suits come in sizes 32, 34, 36, and 38, and there is also a small note near the bottom left side of the right page that explains that sizes are based on bust measurements. Once again, this ad was published before

⁹ Ibid., 136.

¹⁰ Thesander pays particular attention to the history of corsets in her novel, and she notes that corsets of the 1930s and early 1940s were significantly lighter than their predecessors (though heavy corsetry came back into vogue shortly after), Ibid., 138-139.

¹¹ Sears, “Gingham-look Sea Stars,” advertisement, *Sears Roebuck Catalog* (Spring and Summer 1940), 78-79.

the standardization of clothing sizes, so its method of sizing is significantly different than that for the dresses.

“The Blouse Beautiful Makes the Costume” is an advertisement published in the 1959 Spring and Summer Edition of the Sears Roebuck Catalog.¹² The ad is a two page spread, with the left page featuring eight color photographs of slim, white women sporting huge smiles and the women’s blouses that are being advertised. The right page of the spread lists all the styles of blouses available, information about them, their prices, and the sizes they are available in. The right side also contains black and white images of five women (also white, slim, and smiling) who are wearing products for sale. As with the swimsuits in “Gingham-look Sea Stars,” the sizes available for all the blouses are 32, 34, 36, and 38, and there is a note on the bottom of the right page that informs customers that sizing is based on bust measurement. Notably, this advertisement was published the year after the 1958 sizing standards went into effect, but it still uses an antiquated method of sizing, suggesting that the move toward standardizing sizing was a process, likely due to simple constraints such as products already made in factories and catalogs already printed that needed to be phased out.

The fact that the sizing used in these two late 1950s ads uses the bust as a frame of reference and assumes “hourglass-like” figures with small waists and more pronounced hips and breasts, as evidenced by the figures of the models, suggests the importance of female size and shape in constructing the consumer in the 1950s. Thesander explains that “the very curvaceous feminine ideal of the 1950s” was, in part, a response to the “rather masculine image of [World War II],” as many women had taken on “men’s work” in both the First and Second World Wars while the men were in the military, and when the men began returning to the workforce, women were being pushed back into the home to make

¹² Sears, “The Blouse Beautiful Makes the Costume,” advertisement, *Sears Roebuck Catalog* (Spring and Summer 1959), 110-111.

room for them.¹³ However, she asserts that the hyper-feminine beauty standard also “fitted in very well with the post-war consolidation of middle-class family ideology, which positioned women as the central figure of the nuclear family.”¹⁴ The 1950s marked the end of World War II, but they also marked the beginning of the Cold War. As Elaine Tyler May discusses in *Homeward Bound*, the “domestic ideology” of “containment” was a response to fear of the impending Cold War.¹⁵ As fear of an unknown nuclear world grew, so did the need to create an ideal, safe, domestic, and anti-communist home in response. At the center of this home was the woman: the mother, the housewife, the homemaker, and most importantly, the shopper.¹⁶ The wife and mother of the nuclear family was the person who did the shopping in the home, buying products and buying into capitalism as an antidote to communism. Thus, the sizing system focusing on a woman’s bust and specific shape emphasized the importance of the feminine, homely woman and not only functioned to sell products, but also helped propel capitalism and frame it as anti-communism.

Finally, “Proportioned Pants” is featured in the 1960 Spring and Summer Edition of the Sears Catalog.¹⁷ There is a note under the headline “Proportioned Pants” that states, “Graduated in pattern through the seat and crotch for fine fit...scaled to your height from waist to hip, from hip down.” The ad is a two page black and white spread, and both pages contain images of slim, presumably white women wearing the pants that are being sold. Only one of the nine models’ entire body is shown; the rest are only photographed from the waist down to showcase the pants. Most of the pants are sold in either “Misses” sizes 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20, or “Women’s” sizes 38, 40, 42, and 44, and the bottom of the right page contains a “measurement chart” that lists numeric sizes with the corresponding hip and

¹³ Marianna Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 173.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

¹⁶ Breen Greer, Lecture (March 7, 2017).

¹⁷ Sears, “Proportioned Pants” advertisement, *Sears Roebuck Catalog* (Spring and Summer 1960), 102-103.

waist measurements that go with them. The “Women’s” sizes are measured in the exact same way as the “Misses,” but they are larger, and they assume a different hip to waist ratio. The pants also are all available in “short,” “regular,” or “tall,” and there is a small image of three women of different heights with an explanation that “short” pants are intended for women under 5’2,” “regular” for women between 5’3” and 5’6,” and “long” for women 5’7” or taller. The sizes listed in the “Proportioned Pants” ad are the same sizes instituted by the 1958 Commercial Standard, showing that, though the standards were not yet used by Sears in 1959 (as in “The Blouse...”), they were implemented by 1960.

In this advertisement, all of the women featured (though most of them are only shown from the waist down) are wearing traditionally masculine clothing.¹⁸ Most obviously, they are wearing pants, but they also have shoes that look similar to men’s dress shoes, including, for example, Oxfords. However, the models are still depicted as fitting an extreme ideal for the female body, with slim legs and tiny, cinched in waists that the high-waisted pants highlight. The size of these women seems to only represent the “Misses” pants, as the “Women’s” pants start at higher sizes. The lack of visibility of women over a particular size suggests the accepted notions of feminine physique of the time. As in the 1930s and 40s, women were expected to look slim and youthful, but as in the 1950s, they were also expected to have visible curves and specific proportions, as the very name of the advertisement suggests.¹⁹ By 1960, “beauty” required a combination of the standards that had preceded it, and the exact measurements of what certain sizes could mean and what could be construed as “normal” or desirable were finally implemented in a standardized way.

¹⁸ Though not necessarily related to this particular advertisement, it is interesting to note that the models are literally topless, meaning without the top halves of their bodies, because 1960s American fashion featured a movement that continued into the 1970s with women wearing topless, meaning breast-baring, clothing. Marianna Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 188.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

One final thread that runs through all the above advertisements that has yet to be discussed, but is of extreme importance to the construction of the consumer, is the fact that all the women who are modeling the clothing are white. In fact, all of the women studied for O'Brien and Shelton's 1941 paper were white, and thus, all of the clothing size standards released in 1958 were intended for white women.²⁰ All of the advertisements therefore assume the consumer to be white. Assuming white as both the consumer and the ideal form of beauty has been a trend in the history of the United States and, unlike many of the other kinds of beauty standards that can be observed in the ads, whiteness is an unchanging constant in all of them.

Though much of her work is beyond the scope of this essay in terms of time, Lola Young traces the history of what she calls "racialized femininity" in Western countries from the eighteenth century onward.²¹ She asserts that female beauty standards have consistently had a racial aspect throughout history, whether they were explicitly recognized or not. There are obvious racially charged beauty standards, like straight hair, light skin, and specific European facial features, but there are also more subtle, yet equally pervasive ways in which "racialized femininity" can be seen. For example, Young discusses an excerpt from a 1933 beauty book that warns readers to remember that the color black is "arresting" and requires someone wearing it to be "prepared to feel... faultlessly groomed, unworried, and glowing in a clean fresh sort of way."²² As Young points out, though this warning is not explicitly about race, it assumes that the reader is white in order for the color black to have an

²⁰ Ruth O'Brien and William C. Shelton, United States Department of Agriculture in Cooperation with the Works Projects Administration, *Women's Measurements for Garment and Pattern Construction* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), p. 2.

²¹ Lola Young, "Racializing Femininity," *Women's Bodies*, edited by Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw, (New York: Cassell, 1999).

²² Marian Verri, *Modern Beauty Culture: A Complete Guide to Beauty* (London: New Era, 1933), qtd. in Lola Young, "Racializing Femininity," *Women's Bodies*, edited by Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw, (New York: Cassell, 1999).

“arresting” contrast when placed against white skin. The assumption is that a woman reading a beauty book in 1933, and thus a woman desiring or even capable of beauty, must be a white woman.

However, it is important to recognize that though much of mainstream consumer culture worked to push blackness out of beauty, black women were not merely powerless victims of their circumstances. Rather, there is significant evidence that they pushed back, redefining social constructs of beauty for themselves, especially within their own communities. Academic Elizabeth Matelski argues in her essay “(Big and) Black is Beautiful” that this self-affirmation did not only take place in the vacuum of the activist 1960s:

... The African American community did not passively accept white America’s standards of beauty... Black women did not universally conform and desire lightened skin, relaxed hair, and the body of Marilyn Monroe. Rather than yielding to narrow ideals of fashion, body, and cosmetic culture, African American women and men broadened the definition of female beauty. The rejection of white beauty standards demonstrated that the black middle class sought to create a unique identity even prior to “Black Power” in the mid- 1960s...²³

Matelski points to black women celebrities of the 1950s, particularly musicians, who defied dominant requirements of light skin, slimness (an ideal which was societally conflated with whiteness as well, according to Matelski). She also recalls a story of a 1947 beauty pageant for women of color, “Miss Fine Brown Frame,” in which the judges initially tried to crown a light-skinned contestant, but had to change the titleholder to Evelyn Sanders, the darkest-skinned contestant, after the audience protested.²⁴

The audience themselves was making the statement that, in the words of an article on the event from

²³ Elizabeth Matelski, “(Big and) Black is Beautiful: Body Image and Expanded Beauty Standards in the African American Community, 1945-1968,” *Essays in History* (Chicago, 2012), p. 163, accessed April 15, 2017.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 168.

Ebony, “for once, white standards of beauty would not be forced upon them.”²⁵ Though whiteness was an assumed aspect of beauty in all of the advertisements discussed, the reaction of the black community to the “whiteness as beauty” construct is important to note.

In 1983, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (the former National Bureau of Standards) withdrew the clothing size standards, which had updated in 1970.²⁶ Size standards had become almost meaningless as the modern practice of “vanity sizing” arose to make sizes numerically smaller and smaller to account for *Time*’s Laura Stampler refers to as the concurrent growth of “American girth... egos.”²⁷ United States Obesity began a sharp trend upward after the 1960s, as a National Center for Health Statistics study shows.²⁸ Moreover, as Susan Bordo asserts in *Unbearable Weight*, increasing expectations of slimness (and, by extension, of particular clothing sizes) led to a high prevalence of eating disorders that escalated dramatically between the 1960s and 1980s.²⁹ The changes in United States women’s clothing sizes were many, and they were dramatic from the 1960s onward. However, examining the more slow-moving changes prior to widespread obesity, eating disorders, and vanity sizing offers a much more nuanced understanding of the role of clothing and of sizing in American consumerism. The history of U.S. women’s clothing sizes between the late 1930s and early 1960s parallels the historical constructions of both the ideal female shopper and the ideal American version of

²⁵ *Ebony*, “Miss Fine Brown Frame: Darkest Girl in Contest Wins First Prize,” May 1947, p. 47. qtd in. Elizabeth Matelski, “(Big and) Black is Beautiful” *Essays in History* (Chicago, 2012), 168.

²⁶ National Bureau of Standards, “Status Report on Voluntary Product Standards,” *Federal Register* 48, no. 14 (January 20, 1983), p. 2581, http://gsi.nist.gov/global/docs/vps/psfiles/PS_42-70.pdf; “Voluntary Product Standard 42-70: Body Measurements for the Sizing of Women’s Patterns and Apparel,” National Bureau of Standards, United States Department of Commerce (Washington: 1970).

²⁷ Laura Stampler, “The Bizarre History of Women’s Clothing Sizes,” *Time Magazine* (October 23, 2014), accessed April 12, 2017, <http://time.com/3532014/women-clothing-sizes-history>.

²⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1993).

²⁹ Cheryl D. Fryar, Margaret D. Carroll, and Cynthia L. Ogden, “Prevalence of Overweight, Obesity, and Extreme Obesity Among Adults: United States, 1960-1962 Through 2011-2012,” National Center for Health Statistics (September 2015), accessed April 12, 2017.

female beauty, suggesting that who is perceived as a consumer and who is perceived as beautiful have been increasingly inseparable categories in the United States.

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