



From Stout to Plus: Identifying the Evolution of Apparel Sizing for Larger Consumers from 1913 to 1993

Mary Katherine Daniels & Dr. Pamela Ulrich, Auburn University; USA

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Ongoing discourse regarding women's apparel sizing standards, or lack thereof, reflects a collective sense of confusion both within industry and amongst consumers (DesMarteau, 2000; Kennedy, 2009; Schofield & LaBat, 2005). This confusion over sizing has been shown to lead to consumer frustrations with the fit of clothing, with plus size consumers experiencing a great amount of difficulty (Petrov & Ashdown, 2012). Issues of apparel sizing and fit and a plus size market are not a recent phenomenon. However, discourse regarding demographic trends that contribute to this growing segment has become increasingly pertinent in recent years. A better understanding of the history of apparel sizing, particularly for those larger consumers could help to diagnose the present situation. The purpose of this research is to identify when this segment of plus size consumers gained recognition in terms of sizing and representation through visuals and verbiage.

This work is exploratory in nature, with the objectives of identifying (a) categories of adult women's apparel sizing; (b) individual size specifications for customers; and (c) terminology used to discuss sizing and fit. Sears and Roebuck is an appropriate business to study because it had a significant presence in the mass market, and its catalog was published consistently for most of the company's history. Because it was a large company that offered affordable products for all female consumers, Sears and Roebuck should also be a good source for investigating sizing or fit descriptions for what companies today call the growing sector of "plus size" women.

Content analysis was applied to the examination of Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter catalogs from the third year of each decade between 1913 and 1993. Size charts were studied; size categories were identified; along with the sizing or fit verbiage and visuals associated with describing apparel for relatively larger women. Overall, results showed changes in the number of and measurements associated with sizes that were available for order; the terminology associated of sizing; and the number of size categories;

An overarching theme that was identified as a result was that Sears & Roebucks sizing methods followed closely with the history of sizing recommendations that were published in 1941 and 1958. From 1913 to 1933, size designations were not used; rather, exact measurements were required to order garments, and sizing divisions were based on predetermined measurements and age. By 1943, the order sizes were designated, with three size divisions, and these were delineated according to bust, waist and hip measurements.

Words used to refer to consumers of larger sizes changed over time. From 1913 until 1963, terms such as stout, extra stout and full figure were used to describe the body type of consumers purchasing what were perceived to be large sizes, and to name the size category. The term, stout, was not observed after the 1973 catalog. After that, the term women's was used in its

place until the final catalog was published in 1993. The numbers used to identify sizes for Sears and Roebuck's largest consumers showed a downward trend. In 1943, 1953, and 1963, a 53 was the largest size offered; from 1973 to 1993, a 30W or 4X size designation was the largest. By 1983, "X" was being used to designate sizes other than maternity wear. By 1993, Sears had adopted a new vanity sizing strategy for both its misses and women's categories, which added smaller sizes while increasing associated measurements.

Prior to 1943, illustrations of proportionally shaped, larger females were used to showcase apparel. From 1943 until 1983, photos of clothing designed for larger size consumers were featured on proportionately shaped models who did not exhibit the body type of the target market. The category that featured the most realistic representations of larger models who exhibited a non-proportional distribution of weight was undergarments, specifically girdles.

Based on the findings, it can be established that Sears closely followed sizing recommendations made in 1941 and 1958. Additionally, it can be seen that Sears employed the use of vanity sizing, an increasingly popular practice, for both misses and women's sizes, as first seen in the 1993 catalog. The use of vanity sizing represents the company's recognition of a growing consumer segment, and provides an approximate point of reference for a time when women went from being stout to plus size.

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