

Outsize and Outside: English Women's Plus-Size Clothing 1920s-1960s

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“I am one of those hard-hit people—the outsize woman”

Significant technological changes in nineteenth and twentieth century England made purchasing clothes more convenient and more readily available. The rapid growth of the textile industry, the sizeable development of the ready-made industry, and the power of the department store changed the way that consumers purchased and experienced clothing.¹ No longer did English women have to trek to the local tailor to find custom fit clothing; they could go to the closest Selfridges in London and peruse the racks for their size. But not all women had the same experience shopping for clothing; women whose body type deviated from the ideal thin shape often had a more difficult and frustrating shopping experience, especially considering the limited sizing options in early twentieth century English department stores. “Outsize” clothing, made for women with hips between 42- and 60-inch hips, became available to English women in the early twentieth century, but continued to serve as a site of contention and frustration long after that period. Rhetoric describing outsize clothing in England during the 1920s to the 1960s was critical of the “unfortunate” women who could not fit into the few standardized sizing options available. Advertisements, magazines, and newspaper articles from this time period indicate that while regulating the fat male body was not a concern, controlling the fat female body was. Outsize clothing was almost exclusively advertised to women, with only a few comments on men’s outsize wear in the late 1960s. Moreover, while stores became more inclusive by creating an outsize department or built an entire store dedicated to outsize clothing, advertising images for outsize clothing did not show outsize women. While companies might have been ready to sell to a broader audience, they were not ready to associate their brand with actual images of outsize

¹ Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4.

women. Intertwined throughout a majority of the advertisements was a subtle, and at times overt, anti-fat message to the female consumer. Although store advertisements seemed to broadcast welcoming messages to the outsize woman, they were filled with condescending and offensive language. Advertisements and magazines published between the 1920s and 1960s illustrate that while many English clothing stores expanded their selection to sell outsize clothing, outsizes were still not considered “normal.” They were more expensive and women who wrote into newspapers indicated that they were discontented with the drab styles of larger sizes.

Fat studies as a historical discipline remains centered in the United States. An abundance of secondary literature discusses the transformation of the plus-size fashion industry in the United States, but rarely do scholars apply this framework to the English context. In her chapter in *The Fat Studies Reader*, fat activist and writer Charlotte Cooper laments that “fat has come to be regarded as an issue cited specifically in the United States, and that nontraditional knowledge about fat, embodied in Fat Studies, remains locked inside that country.”² Consequently, fat studies remains dominated by American terminology and is often only applied to the American context. Thus, my research aims to use the framework given by fat studies and apply it to understand the rhetoric surrounding outsize clothing in mid-twentieth-century England. Similarly, Peter Stearns’ *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* provides a compelling history of Western society’s obsession with fads, dieting, and weight consciousness. Stearns analyzes French and American fat consciousness and its evolution with consumer culture but does not extensively comment on other European countries. Likewise, Lauren Downing Peters examines the way that plus-size fashion has marginalized fat consumers in the United States. She draws upon feminist theory, other secondary sources related to the topic, and the

² Charlotte Cooper, “Maybe It Should Be Called Fat American Studies,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 327.

experiences of three New York women to document the frustration toward plus size clothing.³ Likewise, Kathleen LeBesco's book chapter titled, "Revolution on a Rack: Fatness, Fashion, and Commodification," examines the relationship between fat women and consumer culture in the United States. Many fat studies works, because they only focus on the United States, argue that fat women were not targeted as a particular consumer group at least until around the 1990s.⁴ While it is true that fat women were not the dominant target audience for clothing stores, advertisements from England in the mid-twentieth-century demonstrate that they were indeed singled out as consumers; advertisements increasingly attempted to draw outsize women in, recognizing them as women who had purchasing power. Consequently, my work contributes to the growing discipline of fat studies but shifts the focus farther back in history and looks across the pond to England.

Recent scholarship discussing consumerism and plus size clothing examines trends in the twenty first century, but rarely looks back in time to the pivotal moment when ready-made clothing became popularized. In addition, recent research regarding fatness and consumerism takes an ethnographic approach and researchers largely use oral histories and interviews as evidence; the field lacks research that examines historical records like advertisements and newspaper publications, especially in the European context. Rachel Colls' article "Outsize/Outside: Bodily bigness and the emotional experiences of British women shopping for clothes" focuses on the lived experiences of British women shopping for outsize clothing.⁵ Colls

³ Lauren Downing Peters, "You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation," *Fashion Theory* 18, no. 1 (2014) 51.

⁴ Kathleen LeBesco, "Revolution on a Rack: Fatness, Fashion, and Commodification," in *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 66.

⁵ While it is not within the scope of this research, Colls' article provides a useful framework for thinking about the contemporary emotional experience of shopping for plus-size clothing. She explains that "clothing and the spaces of clothing consumption act as the creative and materialism medium through which big bodies have the potential to be emotionally experiences in a number of ways." Spaces of consumption, like the department stores mentioned in this research, are sites of contestation and frustration for women searching for plus-size clothing.

conducted 25 interviews with British women and detailed their relationship with clothing, spaces of consumption, and “bodily bigness.” This approach sheds light on the personal testimonies of women experiencing outsize clothing but focuses on the present day. Therefore, my research utilizes the framework established by the American fat studies discipline and applies this terminology to understanding mid-twentieth-century outsize fashion in England.

Understandings of gender and women’s role in society shifted from the 1920s to the 1960s alongside the development of outsize clothing. Following the Great War, British society saw a reemergence of traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity characterized by the creation of separate sphere ideology and an order based on biological sexual differences. The 1920s flapper girl with her short hair, boyish look, and sexual confidence was juxtaposed with an effeminate and impotent young man. The new boyish young woman wore simple clothing that showed off her slim, athletic figure, small breasts, and narrow hips. This “reversal” or blurring of gender roles produced deep anxiety in a society coping with the loss of so many men in the first World War. During the interwar years in England, women were quickly pushed out of the jobs they had held during the war to make room for the returning men. This dismissal from traditionally masculine jobs pushed women back into the home and reinforced the post war ideal of the male breadwinner and the stay-at-home wife. Nevertheless, the 1920s and 1930s were years of economic decline and the depression made it difficult for many families to satisfy this ideal; in many cases, women had to work to support the family.⁶

The 1940s mark a shift in perceptions regarding women’s role in English society. The advent of the second World War signaled a severe need for women’s labor. After being relegated to the home during the interwar years, women were needed in the war effort and, like during the

⁶ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1990* (London: Routledge, 2002), 287-310.

Great War, they took on traditionally male jobs. Unlike after the First World War, however, women did not rapidly leave their jobs and carried the double burden of caring for the home and holding onto their war-time job. The postwar boom of consumer goods in the 1950s propelled women into work so that they might earn money to purchase new products for themselves and for the home. A decade later, in the face of a sexual revolution, feminism, a push for gay rights, and rising unemployment in the 1960s, society began to feel a sense of moral panic. The emergence of “Thatcherism” spurred a return to prewar traditional moral, social, and gender norms.⁷ These changing views of women, gender roles, and women’s participation in consumer culture throughout the middle of the twentieth century form the backdrop for the advent of outsize clothing in England.

In order to understand the significance of the language surrounding outsize clothing in newspaper and magazine advertisements, it is important to outline the changing views of women’s bodies in the West within the context of fat history.⁸ Perceptions of women’s bodies in the West have changed over time, as thinness and plumpness have alternated as the ideal body type. Historian Joyce L. Huff’s analysis of William Banting’s 1863 *Letter on Corpulence* provides a useful frame of reference for understanding the diet craze just prior to the advent of outsize clothing sections in English stores. Banting’s writings serve as an archetype of how fat bodies were perceived leading up to the twentieth century. Banting published his pamphlet in 1863 in England and set off a dieting craze that lasted until around 1900 and contributed to the

⁷ Kingsley, *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1990*, 311-335.

⁸ In this essay, the term “fat” is not used as a pejorative term. Lauren Downing Peters in, “You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation,” claims that because of the medicalization of the terms “obesity” and “overweight,” members of the fat acceptance movement have made an effort to make “fat” an empowering term.

“demonization of the fat body in Western culture.”⁹ Banting’s regiment outlined methods to reduce corpulence, assuming that all corpulent people needed to reduce their fat. Banting was not alone in his fear of corpulence during mid-nineteenth-century England; this period saw an overall increase in interest in bodily shape. During the Victorian Era, the fat body was “singled out and stigmatized in an environment tailor-made for a hypothetically average body.”¹⁰

Banting’s pamphlet gained immense popularity in the years following its publication, with around 63,000 copies sold across England, Europe, and overseas in the United States.¹¹ Banting contributed to the social climate that, by around 1900, had transformed the “normal” body type from plump to thin and lean.¹² This new curiosity in dieting and interest in weight consciousness set the stage for women’s experiences while shopping for outside clothing in the 1920s through the 1960s. Moreover, standardized sizes and ready-to-wear clothing drastically changed the availability of clothing for the larger woman. Ill-fitting ready-to-wear clothing brought attention to larger body shapes and plus sizes in the early 1900s were hard to come by.¹³

Advertisements from clothing stores like Evans Outsize Shop, Selfridges, and Harrods and magazine publications from *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Country Life* illustrate that outside clothing was specifically made for and almost exclusively targeted women. The term “outside” refers to larger clothing sizes in general, but in reality, outsizes were only associated with women’s garments. A *Women’s Wear* newspaper publication, “Keen Interest in Size Range Grows in London Stores” from September 1924 points to the rise of outside clothing as a female

⁹ Joyce L Huff, “A ‘Horror of Corpulence’ Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth Century Fat-Phobia,” in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (University of California Press, 2001), 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹² Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8-13.

phenomenon. The author, from the London Bureau of Women's Wear, proclaims that "the London stores are taking up the size question in women's apparel with enthusiasm" and that "a comparatively short time ago it was practically impossible for a woman to buy a coat...unless she was stock size, or willing to wear a thing which did not fit her."¹⁴ In the vast majority of advertisements, magazines, and newspaper articles published in early- to- mid-twentieth-century England that reference outsize clothing, women are the sole focus. The expansion of outsize clothing and the fact that outsize clothing was specifically advertised to women seems to have been motivated primarily by two factors.

Firstly, newspaper publications expressed that women were unsatisfied by the stock sizing's limited size ranges and called for stores to offer more inclusive clothing sizes. Women's frustration with the outsize industry stems from the unstylish clothing and higher prices for outsizes. A female writer from a British periodical published in 1928 states that upon entering a store, outsize women are told "just a little alteration, Madam, and anyone would think that it was made for you" and all of a sudden "on goes half a guinea—at the very least—to your bill!"¹⁵ English stores during this time period increased the price as the size increased; a Harrod's ad from 1915 divides women's chemise sizing into slender, women's, outsize, and extra outsize, and the prices increases correspondingly.¹⁶ Outsize clothing ads specifically refer only to women's clothing because women were the ones pressuring stores to continually improve their limited selection. This is further exemplified by a publication in the *Western Daily Press* that speaks to women's dissatisfaction with outsize clothing options. The author of the article claims that outsize women "expressed their disgust with the design of their clothes" and cited the

¹⁴ London Bureau Women's Wear, "Keen Interest in Size Range Grows in London Stores," *Women's Wear*, September 22, 1924, issue 70. ProQuest.

¹⁵ "No More 'Outsize'," *Answers*, March 17, 1928, 10, ProQuest British Periodicals.

¹⁶ "Harrods," *The Times*, June 14, 1915, 4, The Times Digital Archive.

Federation of Women's Institutes suggestion for "improvement in design and choice of clothes for outsize women at a reasonable cost."¹⁷ Similarly, the *Daily Telegraph* published an article entitled "That Outsize Problem" which further demonstrates that outsize clothing was gendered and that women were unhappy with what outsize clothing had to offer. The author, Ann Steele, reports that "if you are (whisper the word) 'outsize' you probably have a difficult time" finding fashionable and reasonably priced clothing.¹⁸ Furthermore, she writes that large women have an extremely tough time in the fashion world, especially considering that many outsize garments "had hideous floral designs."¹⁹ Clearly, design of outsize clothing and the high cost associated with larger clothes proved to be a source of frustration for women whose body type deviated from the ideal thin shape.

Why else did clothing stores advertise outsize clothing exclusively to women?

Newspapers, advertisements, and magazines published in this time period suggest that it was important to regulate and properly fit (and hide) the fat female body. English women couldn't simply wear "normal" clothing in a larger size, outsize women were told specifically how to dress in order to make themselves appear thinner. After all, Ruth Jordan in her advice column claims that women everywhere should want to dress to look slimmer because "to look slim is to look young."²⁰ According to Kathleen Barrow in her 1932 article in *Country Life*, "Fashion and the Figure," all women "whether she is tall, short, stout, or thin, should study the lines of her figure and adapt her toilette to these."²¹ Barrow points out, however, that only the stout woman must be prepared to make compromises regarding her dress. Proper attire for an outsize woman

¹⁷ "Outsize Women in Revolt," *The Western Daily Press*, October 13, 1949, British Library Newspapers.

¹⁸ Ann Steele, "That Outsize Problem," *Daily Telegraph*, May 9 1966, 15, The Telegraph Historical Archive.

¹⁹ Steele, "That Outsize Problem," 15.

²⁰ Ruth Jordan, "Dressing to Look Slim," *Jordan Ruth Answers*, February 6, 1932, British Periodicals.

²¹ Kathleen Barrow, "Fashion and the Figure," *Country Life*, September 1, 1928, 1, ProQuest.

includes a suit with neutral colors and “made of dull surfaced material.”²² This lackluster description of what stout women must wear is juxtaposed with the opinion that small, slim figures should wear a “charming robe” or a “well knit” suit.²³ In a similar manner, L.M.M. published “Dignified Dresses” in *Country Life* and provided full and outsize readers with instructions on how to dress elegantly and with dignity. The author claims that “the aim of all women is to be slim and flat” and the stout woman represents instances in which “Nature refuses to obey.”²⁴ For these “unnatural” women, the author recommends that they must carefully choose their garments to avoid showing too much flesh or displaying their curves. For example, L.M.M. asserts that outsize girls should wear a “simple house frock” made of a “dull material which does not accentuate the figure.”²⁵ Ultimately, supercilious instructions advised outsize women to wear drab colors that hide their body and make them appear thinner. These publications reinforce the idea that being outsize was outside of the norm and that women who could not fit into the stock sizes should aspire to do so. The *Evening Telegraph*’s title “From ‘Outsize’ to Normal Figure” exemplifies the popular assumption that having a waist between 42 and 60 inches placed women outside of normality.²⁶ The author of this article recommended taking Kruschen salts to rid oneself of excess corpulence.

Another important feature of outsizes during this time period was that outsizes were often associated with a matronly or old figure. Kathleen Barrow’s 1931 publication, “The ‘Out-size Figure: How to Make a Success of the Modern Toilette,” exemplifies typical advice on how an

²² Barrow, “Fashion and the Figure,” 1.

²³ Barrow, “Fashion and the Figure,” 1.

²⁴ L.M.M., “Dignified Dresses,” *Country Life*, February 27, 1926, 1vi., ProQuest.

²⁵ L.M.M., “Dignified Dresses,” 1.

²⁶ “From Outsize to Normal Figure,” *The Evening Telegraph*, October 12, 1937, British Library Newspapers.

outsized woman should dress differently according to her age. Barrow condescendingly remarks that:

The first thing to realise is that what suits a professional mannequin to perfection is certainly not likely to suit the woman who has lost the contour of youth, and the second point to remember is that one must face one's bad points boldly and set to work to overcome them and to find in every case a proper alternative.²⁷

Here, Barrow assumes that being oversized is related to having lost a youthful figure. Like other authors from the same magazine, *Country Life*, she argues that if a woman is so unlucky to be an older oversized woman, she surely should do everything in her power to change that. On a similar note, Barrow claims that once a woman "has lost the girlish grace of her figure she should aim at appearance of dignity and poise."²⁸ An oversized woman should no longer attempt to be beautiful and feminine; instead she should aim to dress in a reserved and austere manner. Barrow's association of oversized women with an old and matronly appearance mirrors L.M.M.'s assessment in the 1926 article "Dignified Dresses" that oversized matronly figures are more difficult to style. The author declares that because matronly oversized women's bodies differ so drastically from each other, "it lies in the skill and art of the dress designer to get all these defects into comparative proportion and poise."²⁹ Again, the columnists recommend that motherly oversized women emphasize poise when dressing themselves; apparently oversized women must preserve what dignity they have left. By the late 1960s, the connection between being an oversized woman and a matronly figure is still contested. On one hand, Caroline Combs in her 1966 *The Sunday Times* article writes that finally manufacturers are aware that oversized women do not "want to

²⁷ Kathleen Barrow, "The Oversized Figure: How to Make a Success of the Modern Toilette," *Country Life*, April 25, 1931, 1xxii, ProQuest.

²⁸ Barrow, "The Oversized Figure," 1xxii.

²⁹ L.M.M., "Dignified Dresses," 1vi.

look like matronly hippopotami, with cross-over bodices and fussy drapes.”³⁰ While some manufacturers changed outsize styles to make them more modern and fashionable, the idea that an outsize woman had matronly features remained embedded in the way stores discussed large sizes. In 1968, *The Daily Telegraph* reported on Evans the outsize shop, a prominent and successful outsize clothing store. The author of the article noted that in the eyes of Evans, “the word fat doesn’t exist, stout is out, outsize is not exactly overstressed: rather the choice would be “motherly.”³¹ Cyril Spencer, the head of Evans, defended this word choice and argued that “mothers want to be attractive but don’t have too much spare money to throw around.”³² In other words, outsize women are relegated to the status of overweight mothers. The characterization of outsize women as motherly during this decade forms a part of the return to traditional gender norms in the face of rising unemployment and anxiety about blurred gender lines in 1960s Britain.

In the vast majority of the advertisements that depict drawings of outsize and non-outsize models, there is no noticeable difference between the two women. A 1944 *Harper’s Bazaar* advertisement for Marjorie Chapman, Ltd. depicts an outsize model wearing a utility dress. Curiously enough, the print shows a slender looking woman, with a belt tied around a cinched waistline.³³ Likewise, *Country Life* magazine’s “Dignified Dresses” article contains images of how outsize women should dress. The images of tall, slender women contrast with a description of the outsize body as either having narrow shoulders and large hips, a full bust and narrow hips, or rounded shoulders “due to age or too much flesh.”³⁴ The inconsistency between image and

³⁰ Caroline Comb, “Sizing up the Situation,” *The Sunday Times*, October 30, 1966, 53, The Sunday Times Digital Archive.

³¹ “He Has No Time for Twiggy Types,” *The Daily Telegraph*, November 30, 1968, 6, The Telegraph Historical Archive.

³² “He has no Time for Twiggy Types,” 6.

³³ “Hanovian Utility Outsize Model,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, June 1944, 3, The Harper’s Bazaar Archive.

³⁴ L.M.M, “Dignified Dresses,” 1viii.

word reflects brands' reluctance to actually being visually associated with selling outside clothing. This parallels historian Kathleen LeBesco's finding that traditionally, advertisers may want to avoid associating their brand with fatness because of its negative connotations.³⁵ The dissonance could also be due to outside advertising being relatively new during the early part of the twentieth century; perhaps advertisers did not exactly know how to draw an outside body wearing their clothes.

Underlying these advertisements, newspaper articles, and magazines are notable societal assumptions about outside women. Stores purposefully targeted fat women as consumers and consequently recognized them as active participants in the consumer economy. Magazines like *Country Life* and *Harpers Bazaar* published articles specifically addressing the fashion needs of outside women, recognizing them as a prominent group in the shopping world. While periodicals sometimes relegated new stories regarding outsides to the bottom sections of the page, spreads in magazines about outside women usually took up a relatively large amount of space. In a 1949 publication of the *Western Daily Press*, a short section about the increased demand for women's outsides seems out of place among a flurry of articles about Chinese communism, the Sultan of the Indonesian Republic, and other post World War II topics. Apparently, outsides were a popular enough topic to include. Moreover, most writers assume that being outside was a transitory state; no woman would want to stay in the outside category. Instead, articles discussing how outside women should dress indicate that thinness is the goal and patronizingly encourage women to do all in her power to remove or hide the excess body fat. Thus, being outside deviated from the normal body type and was viewed as a stepping stone on the way back to a slender figure. As a result, women were frustrated with the outside fashion industry. They wrote into

³⁵ LeBesco, "Revolution on a Rack," 66.

newspapers unsatisfied by the dull styles and annoyed by the few guineas tacked onto their bill. In addition, outsize female bodies were directed on everything from what colors to wear, the appropriate fabric to hide their fat, and even how to carefully arrange their scarf to imitate the appearance of an elongated figure. Embedded among these other assumptions was the idea that the outsize body was a matronly body. In other words, the explanation for a fat body must be that a woman was a mother and had simply not yet lost the weight. Thus, matronly outsize women were instructed to dress with pose, elegance, and dignity—not beautifully, sexily, or confidently. The term outsize itself suggests that outsize women were “outside” of normal standard sizes. Creating a whole separate category of “outsize” influenced women’s shopping experiences and placed them into a space of marginality. Exclusive terminology that put women into separate categories made it easier for manufacturers to regulate fat female bodies by charging more for larger garments and subsequently created a stereotyped image of what an outsize body looks like.

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