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Visualizing the Decline of the Corset Business

Iris Finkel

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VISUALIZING THE DECLINE OF THE CORSET BUSINESS
ADVERTISING ACTIVITY IN THREE WOMEN’S MAGAZINES (1905-1929)

By

IRIS FINKEL

A master’s capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York

2019
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies
in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Professor Eugenia Paolicelli
Capstone Project Advisor

Date

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Visualizing the Decline of the Corset Business

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Advisor: Professor Eugenia Paulicelli

The corset defined a woman’s silhouette for nearly four hundred years. It continues to fascinate and inspire new ways to study its place in culture. Taking a digital humanities approach, my project encompasses visualizations of metadata from advertisements for foundation garments in Harper’s Bazaar, Ladies’ Home Journal, and Vogue from 1905 through 1929. These visualizations represent the marketing behavior of corset manufacturers, a well-established group of businesses that benefited from the industrial revolution to produce and sell a type of garment that held a constant place in women’s wardrobes.

The marketing savvy of a sophisticated trade association assured that corsets were ubiquitous, as evidenced by the amount of times the term appeared in advertisements in women’s magazines from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Manufacturers were not alone in advertising their wares; they partnered with retailers and others to share advertising costs and boost the visibility of their products. Advertising was paramount to corset manufacturers who gained leverage through the high circulation of popular women’s publications.
Watching the trends in advertising is a data driven strategy to monitor the waning of a staple with a long, storied past. The findings from my study confirmed the expectation of declining corset advertising during the period when a number of forces prompted a revolution in women’s attitude and attire.

The metadata I collected were the results of searches in ProQuest databases, accessed through the New York Public Library. I downloaded the search results and managed the data in Microsoft Excel, which acted as a data source for the visualizations in Tableau Public.
Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to those whose guidance and support helped to shape this project. I am immensely grateful to my advisor, Eugenia Paulicelli, who opened my eyes to the many dimensions of fashion studies and indulged my requests to experiment with new digital tools to fulfill otherwise traditional course requirements. I owe a big thanks to my colleagues in the Libraries at Hunter College who never failed to accommodate my irregular schedule and encourage my interests, and to my colleagues in the Adrian G. Marcuse Library at LIM College for access to valuable resources that facilitated my research. And, last but not least, to my family whose steadfast patience was exactly what I needed, and to Steve, especially, I owe a world of thanks for saving me hours of frustration by contributing immeasurable design expertise.
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List of Charts

Full charts can be found in the appendix. Links to the website with charts are listed below title of chart.

1. Vogue: Histogram of ads with corsets per month (top)  
   Histogram of ads without corsets per month (bottom)  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/vogue.html

2. Vogue: Line chart of ads with corsets per year (left)  
   Line chart of ads without corsets per year (right)  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/vogue.html

3. Harper’s Bazaar: Histogram of ads with corsets per month (top)  
   Histogram of ads without corsets per month (bottom)  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/harpersbazaar.html

4. Harper’s Bazaar: Line chart of ads with corsets per year (left)  
   Line chart of ads without corsets per year (right)  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/harpersbazaar.html

5. Ladies’ Home Journal: Histogram of ads with corsets per month (top)  
   Histogram of ads without corsets per month (bottom)  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/ladieshomejournal.html

6. Ladies’ Home Journal: Line chart of ads with corsets per year (left)  
   Line chart of ads without corsets per year (right)  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/ladieshomejournal.html

7. Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and Ladies’ Home Journal:  
   Histogram of ads with corsets per month in all three publications (top)  
   Line charts of ads with corsets in all three publications (bottom)  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/summary.html

8. Total ads with corsets, per year / composite of three publications  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/summary.html

9. Corset companies advertising in Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar  
   http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/summary.html
Digital Manifest

I. Capstone Whitepaper (PDF)

II. WARC file
   
   a. Digital Edition
      Archived version of http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/index.html

* Metadata downloaded from ProQuest databases do not accompany this project. Search structures used can be found on the following page.
A Note on Technical Specifications

I. Metadata for advertisements in *Harper’s Bazaar, Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Vogue* for the period 1905-1929 were downloaded from ProQuest databases accessed through the New York Public Library.
   - Publication: *Harper’s Bazaar*
     - Fields used: Publication, Issue Date, Company
   - Publication: *Ladies’ Home Journal*
     - Fields used: Publication, Issue Date
   - Publication: *Vogue*
     - Fields used: Publication, Issue Date, Company

II. Microsoft Excel was used to manage data and serve as a local data source of downloaded data.

III. Tableau Public was the visualization tool used for this study.

IV. Website on Reclaim Hosting developed in CSS and HTML.
   - [http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/index.html](http://fashionindh.org/visualizingcorsetdecline/index.html)

The following search structures can be used to reproduce results.

Each publication was searched independently of the others using Advanced Search.


1. [Publication] AND corset NOT (lingerie OR brassiere OR undergarment OR girdle OR reducer). Select Advertisement for Document Type, and Specific Date Range, January 1, 1905 – December 31, 1929.

2. [Publication] AND corset in Title NOT (lingerie OR brassiere OR undergarment OR girdle OR reducer). Select Advertisement for Document Type, and Specific Date Range, January 1, 1905 – December 31, 1929.
3. [Publication] AND (lingerie OR brassiere OR undergarment OR girdle OR reducer) NOT corset. Select Advertisement for Document Type, and Specific Date Range, January 1, 1905 – December 31, 1929.

Some data cleaning was required to eliminate unused fields, format dates, and parse company names.
Introduction

Inspiration for Visualizing the Decline of the Corset Business came from several places. For a paper I wrote in a Fashion and Law course, I focused on the women who played a part in Prohibition in the United States. The three groups of women who figured large during this period were the Women’s Christian Temperance Union who were instrumental in getting the eighteenth amendment ratified, the Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform who worked tirelessly to appeal Prohibition, and throughout the period were the flappers, a carefree group of apolitical women who wanted freedom from the stifling constraints that inhibited generations of women before them. One way they exhibited their independence was through progressive sartorial choices: they happily adopted the new corsetless silhouette and showed their legs with markedly shorter hemlines. These changes were not just a fad, as we see nearly one hundred years later. There were implications as a result of these changes ripe for further exploration. My pursuit followed the notorious corset.

While researching this era, I read an article by an author who recorded the length of hemlines and location of hiplines in nearly two thousand illustrations that appeared in Good Housekeeping between 1920 and 1929, and measured the data against the accepted notions about styles. Lynne Richards’ analysis, published in 1983, included a literature review of the limited number of investigations that engaged with primary sources to test preconceived ideas about styles. My research did not yield further analysis of this kind since the time Richards’ article was published.
I imagined Richards manually doing her data analysis in the early 1980s and thought about how different a project like this could be managed today. Many publications have been digitized with optical character recognition to enable full text search and we have visualization tools to facilitate multiple types of analysis. This was where the paths of my inspiration crossed. I could use digital humanities tools to interrogate data about the demise of a constant that was part of women’s attire for four centuries.

The change in the silhouette was particularly significant to corset manufacturers whose reliable businesses were threatened. I was curious how this was manifested in women’s publications, not from the outcry by manufacturers or the words of the arbiters, but in data. My goal was to look at the marketing behavior of corset manufacturers through their quantity of advertising in women’s magazines during the period between 1905, around the time when high fashion Parisian designers were expressing dismay with the corseted silhouette and began designing specifically for a corsetless body, and 1929, a year that marked the end of the Roaring Twenties with the stock market crash that resulted in the failure of many businesses. The publications I chose to use in my study were Harper’s Bazaar, Ladies’ Home Journal and Vogue. These represent a range of popular women’s magazines appealing to corset advertisers and their customers, and their archived issues are available digitally.

In addition to searching for advertisements with the term corsets, I extended my search to terms representing other foundation garments (girdles, undergarments, brassieres, lingerie, and reducers) while excluding the word corset to see if there was a trend in advertisements for those garments as well.
Context

“The corset is probably the most controversial garment in the entire history of fashion.” (Steele 1)

The corset, despite the controversy, endured as a staple of women’s attire for about four hundred years. Inspiration from the courts led Western European women to adopt the corset as their main foundation undergarment and occasional outer garment sometime in the first half of the sixteenth century. Corsets were constructed using whalebone, or other rigid materials that promoted a new silhouette drawing attention to an unnaturally narrow waist and compressed stomach, flaring out cone-like at the upper torso while flattening women’s breasts. The busk, a stick-like apparatus, was slipped into the front of the corset, forcing a woman into a straight rigid posture. The entire contraption was called stays. Girls of the aristocracy were made to wear these from a young age and pregnant women wore specially designed maternity corsets. Corsets for pregnant women were made into the early twentieth century as seen in advertisements included in this study.

The design of the corset evolved over time, but the boning and the structure remained. The corset went out of fashion for a short period in the early nineteenth century then returned in earnest for fashionable women. By 1830, Victorian fashion prevailed and tight lacing of corsets was so popular that it was thought to be the reason for the common plight of paleness and fainting spells in women during that era (Nystrom 264). Over time, aristocratic and common women alike wore corsets. The narrow corseted waist
remained the defining silhouette of western women’s bodies until the early twentieth century. This constancy guaranteed a stable business for corset manufacturers.

By the mid-nineteenth century, corset manufacturers benefited from the affordances of the industrial revolution. One example was a steam molding process that enabled shaping the corset to an “ideal” torso form created for this purpose (Steele 46). There were a number of large manufacturers who grew their factories and increased production of their corsets, maintaining surplus in warehouses for future sales. Manufacturers were taking advantage of vertical integration to control production of theboning that gave corsets their structure. The raw materials that served this purpose, particularly whalebone and horn, were subject to vagaries in nature, inspiring manufacturers’ investment in research and development to produce alternatives, which several succeeded in doing (Smith 117). Corset manufacturers with more than a thousand workers and one million dollars in sales volume accounted for over one-half of the corset industry employment and sales in 1909 (105). By 1914, there were 167 ready-made corset factories employing about 123 workers per establishment (106, 108).

From the early days of the corset there were detractors who recognized its ill effects on the body. There were also satirists who mocked the caprice of fashion. Neither health nor mockery would prevent women from doing what was necessary to adhere to the shape that defined generations. In the nineteenth century, dress reformers attempted to redirect women’s focus to a freedom from the constraint of the corset to a looser dress that enabled ease of movement. Regardless, designers and dressmakers continued to make clothes that met the ideal that the corset defined. Corset manufacturers, particularly in America, did take note of a greater acceptance of health concerns and logic of dress
reform to design new corset models to accommodate a freer lifestyle. An advertisement for a Foy Harmon corset from the 1880s was captioned, “Breathing while singing” (97).

In the meantime, during the early twentieth century, stirrings of change came from French designers who were beginning to experiment with a different silhouette that moved the focus from the waist to the shoulders from which the dress hung loose and straight. Paul Poiret, one of the prominent early designers of the new silhouette, declared in one of his autobiographies that he waged war on the corset. (Steele 147). *Vogue’s* Paris correspondent reported in 1908, “The fashionable figure is growing straighter and straighter, less bust, less hips, more waist, and a wonderfully long, slender suppleness about the limbs… How slim, how graceful, how elegant women look!” (146). These pronouncements by fashion arbiters did little to affect the corset business, initially.

It was a few years more before corset manufacturers recognized the severity of the threat and fought back. Jill Fields wrote about the vehement efforts of corset manufacturers and others to defend the corset in “Fighting the Corsetless Evil.” In her article she refers to another with the same title written by the treasurer and general manager of Kalamazoo Corset Company and published in the trade magazine, *Corsets and Lingerie* in 1921. In the article, he stated unequivocally,

“…When it was announced that no corset shall now be the rule, it was expected that the American corset manufacturer and the merchant would gasp, then bow their heads in gentle and piteous submission to the commands of the Parisian boulevardier. But did they? They did not… The publicity campaign that sprang into life immediately could not have been more ably managed if it had been under one directing general… The corset manufacturers have flooded the trade with literature and advice on how to spread the true story of the corset less [sic] fad. The newspapers have helped considerably.” (Fields 363)
Census statistics for the corset industry showed little change in the value of products manufactured between 1919 and 1921, a period of a declining economy post war, and a 3.2% increase between 1921 and 1923. Pro-corset ideology served to further malign the corsetless evil, pointing to the influences of social transition and economic upheaval (364). Manufacturers responded by education in terms of sales training and corset fitting, often through their own proprietary schools for corsetry, as well as by offering more varieties of corsets to accommodate the changing silhouette. There was even talk in trade journals of renaming corsets as girdles to modernize its image (364).

The story of the demise of the corset did not officially end in the late 1920s. A return to the womanly figure in the 1930s meant the market for foundation garments that enhanced a woman’s shape prevailed, while changes in design and nomenclature of these garments had already been established. In July 1930 the Corset and Brassiere Manufacturers Association laid plans for the first National Junior Corset Week to take place the following September (Fields 376). The purpose of this was to generate and retain interest among young women. However, the corset had already lost its ground as a mainstay of a woman’s figure. Its replacement with other undergarments that served the common purpose of containing and shaping parts of a woman’s body evolved over time with new technologies, but that concern veers away from the focus of this study.

The proliferation of advertising in magazines was a boon for both publisher and advertiser by the late nineteenth century. In 1892 the advertising revenue of the Ladies’ Home Journal was approximately $250,000. Five years later the revenue from about the same number of lines was $500,000 (Presbrey 481). In the “woman field” four
publications in 1928 each had a circulation of approximately 2,500,000 and women’s publications had revenue from advertising of about $75,000,000 a year (481).

Warner’s Corset was the first article of clothing to be nationally advertised in a businesslike way. Between 1881 and 1912 Warner Brothers built the industry’s most extensive marketing and distribution organization (403). Their advertising expenditures grew from $47,00 in 1880 to $300,000 in 1912, reaching retailers and customers directly with advertisements in *Ladies’ Home Journal, Harper’s Bazar, and a host of other publications* (Smith 125). R. & G. Corset, another early advertiser, graduated to a full back cover in 1899 at a cost of $4,000 per insertion. In 1910, as reported in the trade publication *Women’s Wear*, Royal Worcester Corset Company was said to spend nearly two million dollars in advertising resulting in making their brands world famous.

With advertising so instrumental to corset manufacturers and their partners, the fight to remain relevant could be measured by looking at the amount of advertisements they continued to place in magazines through the 1920s. Visualizing the Decline of the Corset Business presents an analysis of this activity.
Analysis

Multiple searches were conducted in ProQuest; each publication was searched independently.

Results used in visualizations from the following searches:

1. Search for corset anywhere in advertisement, NOT undergarment or lingerie or brassiere or girdle or reducer. This search yielded any advertisement that included the term corset, excluding terms for other foundation garments.
   
   *Vogue*=3,432; *Harper’s Bazaar*=644; *Ladies’ Home Journal*=1,344

2. Search for corset in title of advertisement, NOT undergarment or lingerie or brassiere or girdle or reducer. The intent of this search was to chart and compare corset manufacturers across three publications since it was most likely that manufacturer or brand names would be in the title. However, company names were not available in metadata for *Ladies’ Home Journal* therefore this deeper analysis was limited to *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*.
   
   *Vogue*=1,137; *Harper’s Bazaar*=310; *Ladies’ Home Journal*=172

3. Search for undergarment or lingerie or brassiere or girdle or reducer NOT corset. This search yielded advertisements that included any of the above terms, excluding corset.
   
   *Vogue*=3,684; *Harper’s Bazaar*=926; *Ladies’ Home Journal*=964

The visualizations show that corset advertisements declined significantly by the end of the 1920s while advertisements for other foundation garments increased. There were a larger number of advertisements in *Vogue* than in *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* due to its publication frequency relative to the others.
In the chart with company names (chart 9.), the frequency of the advertiser can be seen along with the publication(s) in which the ad was placed. As noted earlier, company metadata were not available from *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

Examples of corset manufacturers with large advertising expenditures:
- Royal Worcester Corset Co. was in 96 advertisements over the period 1905-1929 with most appearing before 1911.
- Modart Corset Co. was in 71 advertisements continuing through 1929.

The decline in corset advertising is most notable in the chart that combines the data from all three publications from a high of 370 ads in 1906 to a low of 53 in 1929 (chart 8). Corset manufacturers were heavily promoting their products and pushing their pro-corset ideology in the early 1920s but by the mid 1920s, young women everywhere were flaunting their corsetless attire and it seems that corset manufacturers may have been retreating to redefine themselves and their products. At the same time, they continued their campaign to educate retailers and sales people. The corset trade did not die, but it appears that advertising may have been less effective for the trade than it once was and manufacturers were investing less in this marketing effort.
Appendix

Charts

1. [Bar chart showing ads with corsets per month from 1905 to 1929 with notes: While the use of corset in advertisement declined at the end of the decade, advertisements with terms for other foundation garments increased.]

   [Pop-up noting: Ads with corsets: 16
   May
   1
   1912
   Vogue]

   [Bar chart showing ads without corsets per year from 1905 to 1929 with note: * with other foundation garments]
These two charts show the trends in the number of advertisements containing the word corset (left) versus advertisements containing words for other foundation garments, excluding corset. (right).

45 ads with corsets in 1922

Vogue
Harper's Bazaar - Ads with corsets per month 1905-1929
Hover over the lines in the chart to amount of ads per month.

Harper's Bazaar - Ads without corsets per month 1905-1929
* with other foundation garments
Foundation garments included in search are listed in tooltip box on hover.

*Ads without corsets: 4
January 1914
*includes search for undergarments or lingerie or brassiere or girdle or reducer

Harper’s Bazaar
These two charts show the trends in the number of advertisements containing the word corset (left) versus advertisements containing words for other foundation garments, excluding corset. (right).
Ladies' Home Journal - Vogue - Ads with corsets per month 1905-1929

Hover over the charts for details on ads per month.

Note the decline in advertisements with the term corsets after 1925.

Ladies' Home Journal - Ads without corsets per month 1905-1929
* with other foundation garments

Issue Date

These two charts show the trends in the number of advertisements containing the word corset (left) versus advertisements containing words for other foundation garments, excluding corset. (right).
Ads with corsets in Harper's Bazaar, Ladies' Home Journal, and Vogue per month 1905-1929

These charts show the total number of ads that had the term corsets across all three publications. The decline in the use of the term is evident by the end of the decade.

Total ads with corsets per year

- Vogue
- Ladies' Home Journal
- Harper's Bazaar
The chart below is a composite of companies that advertised in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* during the years 1905-1929.

> Hover over a bar for information
> Click on the bar to select it, then click on the link for the company in the information box to see all other times that company advertised through the entire period in either publication, or in both.

*Company name metadata not available for *Ladies' Home Journal*, the third publication used for this project.*

Corset Companies advertising in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, 1905-1929

![Bar chart showing advertisement dates for different companies from 1905 to 1929. Each bar is color-coded and labeled with company names and publication years.]
**Publications:**
Publication frequency and newsstand prices between the years 1905 and 1929.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Prices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Harper’s Bazar</em> until November 1929 when it became <em>Harper’s Bazaar</em></td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>15 cents - 12/1915 - 7/1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35 cents - 8/1918 - 2/1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50 cents - 3/1920-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bi-monthly -</td>
<td>10 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9/1910 - 5/15/1911</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monthly - 6/1911-</td>
<td>15 cents - 6/1911 – 10/1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 cents 11/1923-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vogue</em></td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>10 cents – 2/15/1910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biweekly/fortnightly</td>
<td>15 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2/15/1910 -</td>
<td>25 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10/15/1910- 8/1/1918)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35 cents - 8/15/1918 -</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography

Fields, Jill. “‘Fighting the Corsetless Evil’: Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930.”


Richards, Lynne. “The Rise and Fall of It All: The Hemlines and Hiplines of the 1920s.”


