

The Absence of Plus-Size Models In Lingerie

Research Paper

Xinicol Gonzalez Aguirre

BUF 3100 Trend Forecasting and Social Media

Professor Robert Woods

New York City College Of Technology (CUNY)

Abstract

Throughout this paper lingerie will be discussed and the history of it along with the absence of plus-sizing. We're able to see a glimpse of what was viewed as appropriate throughout the years for women to wear, and the lack of body positivity shown. The evolution of body image and the less material and fabric being used from then to now is pinpointed, as the increase of popularity in the lingerie business. The lack of representation of plus-size through lingerie has caused beauty standards to be misleading. It is time to move away from societal beauty standards and embrace diversity, promoting a healthier relationship with our bodies. Once this is accepted, only then can we create a more inclusive society that is accepting of all and celebrates the beauty of difference.

The Absence of Plus-Size Models In Lingerie

Body image has fluctuated through the years in fashion. What is considered the “standard” body type now is not what was considered before. The standard for women has remained the same always being high, and the fashion world has never made it easier. Fashion industries have never been towards accepting every size in clothing, especially through lingerie. The number for plus-size has ranged throughout the years, along with the models who have represented those numbers. In recent years though, we have seen more of an acceptance of women of all sizes. SavageXFenty by Rhianna could be the brand to thank for this, although other brands have pushed away and even ignored the thought of including plus-size and body positivity. We’re starting to see a much bigger change now than we have years before.

The term lingerie was considered more of undergarments and the many layers of clothing needed for women in the Victorian era. Garments were divided and put individually; chemise, knee-length drawers with an open crotch seam, corset, stockings, camisole (corset cover), short horsehair crinolines, and petticoats. These were all of the basic undergarments for a woman to wear. Most of the garments were used as protection for the women between their skin and dress and were only made in colors such as white or beige (Kristin Holt, 2016). Corsets are the most common lingerie known, it emerged during this era allowing women to have a more structural garment and support the bust area. This structure gave focused on the hourglass figure giving women from the 1800s-1900s an illusion of an unrealistic body standard. Where the waist is smaller and the body should form an “S” figure (F., & Fyeah History, 2019). Plus size would never be mentioned during the Victorian era, but the words “Gipson Girl” is brought up forming the ideal figure shown during that time, it's clear that the plus-size figure we consider now is what was ideal. With a little more structure and emphasis on the form of the shape.

The concept of lingerie being made to appeal more to women visually isn't mentioned till the early 1900s the beginning of the Edwardian Era. We see a shift towards comfortability for women and two new sets of dresses, Lingerie dresses, and Teacup dresses. Teacup dresses were designed to look like robes over the dress making it more of an evening gown, this gown could be worn outside with close friends or family or inside at home. The fabrics were heavy and came in different colors and the tea gown was considered a luxury item for its ruffled fabrics and long trailing sleeves (The Dreamstress, 2018). Chemise garments were never shown or modeled on the body during the Victorian era but in the Edwardian era, they were viewed as more practical and are redesigned to be lingerie dresses. Lingerie dresses were more lightweight and designed as daytime dresses, and were used during the hot weather. The fabrics used were cotton, linen, and lace, and only made in off-white, eggshell colors. Even with this loose-fitting, teacup and lingerie dresses were still shown to have the “S” figure, having the waistline support the bust and focused in. Lady Duff Gordon, who is famously known as a British designer who survived the Titanic in 1912, was very popular during the Edwardian era for creating lingerie, teacup, and evening dresses. Lady Duff Gordon, also known by her professional name Lucile, is one of the first designers to “dismiss the classic-boned corsets and wired underskirts, and she replaced them with the crafted sheer, provocative lingerie, designed to heighten sensuality in women’s dress and free them from restrictive underwear.” (Kalyani Kala, 2018). Lucile allowed women to feel more modern and free with the new split skirts and risky low necklines. This new look was known for being more romantic and feminine giving the luxury design a new name with its embroidered flowers and sheer drape fabric. Lucile could also be known for creating the first “Fashion Show” with her “Mannequin Parade” show, helping and training the first professional

models. These models, although thin, were able to show off their curvy silhouette by emphasizing it.

We slowly saw the drop of the word “Gipson Girl” in the 1900s, and the standard it held along with the “S” curve-like figure because of the less use in corsets. In 1914 World War I had begun and this left many with less use of fabrics, materials, and work. Men went off to war and women filled up their roles while gone. Once the war ended in 1917 this new look on life and postwar materialism came back and lingerie and body image made revolutionary changes. In the 1920s the Flapper era began and we see a big shift in the body image where women are viewed to be slender, thin, have short cut hair, and a boy-like body. Betraying the classic “hourglass” figure. With this new freedom women have gained more confidence in ditching the restricted corset and layered garment for more loose, short, and feminine lingerie (LaPorte Karen, 2018). Bandeau brassieres were also created to give a more “flat-chested” look, rayon fabric started becoming popular allowing a cheap affordable version of silk. Step-in chisme were also created and became popular. There was more movement and expression when modeling lingerie but the body stays petite and slender.

From this shift, there are barely any traces of plus-size models in lingerie in the 1920s, except for the term “Plus-size” appearing when designer Lane Bryant discovered the lack of clothing for curvier women. Lane Bryant’s customized work allowed many females out of the normal size range to be able to wear what they’d like. This did not last forever though, by the 1940s women were back to focusing on and advertising the standard body figure. Advertising that slout women should consider slenderizing fashion (Business Insider Nederland, 2017).

Fast forward to the 1950s, World War II had just ended in 1945 and unlike the Roaring 20s, many women were not rushing to party and be in long loose clothing. Women were wanting to dress more modern and classically, and this caused lingerie to change completely and created different pieces that could come together. During the war and after, many men had portraits or posters hung up of “Pin-up Girls” who were models that were popularized for their attractiveness (F., & Fyeah History, 2019). Many of these models could be seen in some sort of lingerie but with the focus on the bust being a little bigger than the bottom. Bullet-like bras were the main focus in the 50s and the bigger the better for the women of that time. High-waisted underwear along with corselettes made an appearance as well, this was viewed as the “new” corset not tight and easily wearable. Nightgowns and slips were also created but with more sheer and flowy material (LaPorte Karen, 2018). You’re able to see the image from the 1920s of having a “boy-like” figure disappear, and women wanting to embrace their covers once more by accentuating the bust area. Being fit and thin has always been the standard in the 1900s, this pattern has stayed consistent through the year, and even with Marilyn Monroe being the iconic sex symbol of the 1950s, her body positivity was not enough for women to turn to extend plus-size lingerie or even clothing as a whole. The 1960s were seen to stay consistent with lingerie designs such as the bullet-like bra, high-waisted panties, and nightgowns, and the material being used to make it is the same, but the models remain thin. This body image could be seen in the 1920s where being slender, thin, and small was the ideal size for a woman. Lesley Lawson, also known as Twiggy Lawson, is famous for being the image of the 1960s. Her thin small figure became wanted by magazines and other designers (Marlen Komar, 2019). This easily became the wanted body image for many models and through the 1960s-2000s plus-size models or clients were never viewed or mentioned.

The 1970s was a different era, it was a time for protests and revolutionary moments for women, bras were seen as restrictions, and feminism grew and had many women protesting. This

“free the nipple” slogan became a huge hit during the 1970s allowing women to feel liberated by wearing non-padded dresses, shirts with no bra, and lingerie slips outside in public (Summer Lin, 2021). Nightgowns/slips were made more seamless and matched with your skin tone, one piece was popular when wearing a jersey dress (LaPorte Karen, 2018). Still, with all of these protests from women wanting to feel free, and lingerie being more sheer and liberating, there was still no public image of plus-size being represented in lingerie. The 1980s is when lingerie became more popular and came in sets to match garments and different bright-colored options. The material used for the garments and set were lace, silk, and soft ruffles. Lingerie was focused on men in being able to work their way up and for women to still feel feminine and desirable (LaPorte Karen, 2018). Fitness and health was huge in the 80s and models like Cindy Crawford and actress/fitness model Jane Fonda were known for their toned slim figure. Curves were still not viewed or seen.

The 1990s and early 2000s were infamously known for not accepting or showing plus-size through lingerie, Victoria's Secret was popularised in the 1970s and became a huge lingerie company in the early 1990s having its first fashion show in 1995 (Willett-Wei, 2021) During the 1970s to 1999, Victoria secrets would focus on lingerie and made most of the sets out of silk, and lace the colors and themes would stay feminine. By the early 2000s though lingerie was seen more as a costume and props such as wings and different materials were added on. (Willett-Wei, 2021). Models such as Kate Moss, Naomi Cambell, and Cindy Crawford were the it girls of the 90s and early 2000s, their image and body are what were seen as average and the expectation for women everywhere when flipping through magazines. During these times in the 1990s and early 2000s, plus-size lingerie was never shown on fashion shows, magazines, or catalogs. This lack of body positivity and high standard for women wasn't touched until the late 2010s when famous upcoming plus-size model Ashley Graham famously called out Victoria's Secret and every lingerie company through Instagram for not including plus-size women. (Ella Alex, 2018). When Ed Razek, the chief marketing officer of Victoria's Secret is asked about this he states, “We attempted to do a television special for plus-sizes [in 2000]. No one had any interest in it, and still don't.”—“Everybody keeps talking about Rihanna’s show,”—“If we had done Rihanna’s show, we would be accused of pandering without question. Because [Victoria's Secret] has a specific image, has a point of view. It has a history. [...] "It's like, why doesn't your show do this? Shouldn't you have transsexuals in the show? No. No, I don't think we should." Victoria's Secret since this interview has tried to reinvent itself as a brand and includes plus-size women and more plus-size options (Maheshwari, S, 2021).

With this in mind, it has taken almost 50 decades for plus-size lingerie to be shown. Now, when searching for imagines of plus-size lingerie through the years, you're shown no representation. This lack of recognition in the fashion world, specifically in lingerie, touches a different meaning of the Absence of beauty. From this absence though, comes new recognition, and for this, we need to thank the SavageXFenty collection. Rhianna, who is a well-known artist, singer, and songwriter, has been able to allow plus-size women to enjoy and buy lingerie to their size and liking. Her fashion shows as well have changed the game since The Victoria's Secrets Show. Rhianna has been able to redefine Lingerie through her fashion show by allowing all sizes to be included on the Runway (Hale, K. 2021). Looking through history, we're now starting to see a much bigger than we have years before. This portrayal of plus-size will be seen more not only through lingerie but in fashion all around. The absence was clear in the past, but the future of fashion will change this perspective of plus-size and break the uncomfortable boundaries many have of it.

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