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## **FASHIONABLY VOLUPTUOUS: REPACKAGING THE FULLER SIZED FIGURE**

**KEY WORDS:** Voluptuous, Fuller-Sized, Fashionable, Curvaceous, Body, Repackage

### **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the voluptuous female silhouette in fashion. Is it a super imposed image of a desired female form or simply a way of accentuating the ample assets of a larger sized body? Body image has been identified as crucial to clothing provision and fashion consumption (Sproles and Burns 1994: 42). Research has recognized that fuller-sized and obese people were considered unhappy, unconfident, unattractive and identified a huge level of discrimination and negativity towards the overweight (Blumberg and Mellis 1985; Clayson and Klassen 1989; Miller 1990; Salusso-Dounier 1993). Presenting and describing a body as voluptuous could be a more palatable way to repackage and reconceptualise the larger sized. It is perhaps a more flattering description shrouding prejudices with regards to fashion, style and garment selection. The investigation includes a number of approaches. Object based research investigates the design and manufacture of garments for the fuller sized figure. Action based research in the design studio considers fashion designer's attitudes towards the plus-sized and its effects on production and consumption. Semi structured interviews and case studies support the qualitative approaches taken and identify the fashion choices available for voluptuous bodies and if these clothes involve levels of body modification. They also suggest how the repackaged voluptuous body could continue to be represented in a future global market place.

### **THE VOLUPTUOUS SILHOUETTE**

When the film star Mae West (Leonard 1991; Louvish 2006; Mitchell 2011; Ward 1989) adapted her own portly frame in the 1930's to display an hourglass silhouette she returned to the ideals of the 1890's, binding herself into a "Merry Widow" (La Vigne 2004: 1), corset to give herself a 24-inch waist. She also wore twelve-inch platforms adding to her height, tight fitting gowns and platinum blonde hair. Her manufactured image was adopted as a stereotypical fashion look and inspired couturiers such as Schiaparelli, who created a voluptuous perfume bottle depicting Mae's silhouette, naming it 'Shocking'. "West's unwavering dedication to preserving that image succeeded in creating an illusion that was a reality not only to her, but to an entire public as well" (Eells and Musgrove 1984: 12). Since the beginning of the twentieth century the voluptuous figure has been in and out of vogue. Fashionable celebrities who have been celebrated for their curvaceousness include Mae West as well as: Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Oprah Winfrey, Dawn French, Adele and Beth Ditto. The oversize drag queen, Divine's body, was described as; "That of a 300 pound man not trapped in, but

scandalously and luxuriously, corporeally cohabiting with the voluptuous body of a fantasy Mae West or Jayne Mansfield” (Moon and Sedgwick 2001: 295). Indeed research from Braziel: “Affirms that the fat female, when presented as sexual-at least in the mainstream media-is delineated as participating in sexual masquerade” (2001: 231). The voluptuous figure teeters towards the overweight, therefore at what point does curvaceousness becomes categorized as such? Overweight is defined as “Exceeding the expected normal or proper weight” (Allen 2004: 629). The use of the words ‘normal’ and ‘proper’ is questionable in itself however Braziel and Le Besco described the overweight or corpulent figure as: “Repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene, and above all something to lose” (2001: 2). Voluptuous bodies could be considered by some to be fat but not obese. Braziel and Le Besco described how ‘fat’ in western society has been thought a vilified word since the evolution of diet and fitness industries after World War Two (2001: 2). The website: ‘Galbraith’s Plus Size Clothing’, which promotes the company’s full- figured clothing range, established that ‘Full-Figured’ is generally for UK sizes 12, up to size 20 and ‘Plus-Size’ refers to UK sizes 22 and upwards for women (Galbraith 2010: 1). This would indicate that the voluptuous body (full-figured) could fall into the size 12 to 20 brackets. The endorsement of this figure as voluptuous could be a way to reconfigure prejudices towards the larger-sized, particularly in the commercial fashion industry where recent statistics in the UK alone suggest that 47% of women are a size 16 and above (French 2011: 1).

Voluptuous is a sensuous word that implies a full and gratifying level of indulgence in luxury, sensual pleasure and enjoyment. Described by the Oxford English Dictionary as: “Having a full, sexually attractive body and giving sensual pleasure” (Soanes 2005: 859.), the Penguin English Dictionary elaborates this, attributing it to: “Causing delight or pleasure to the senses. Conducive to, occupied with, or arising from luxury and sensual gratification. Sexually attractive especially owing to shapeliness” (Allen 2004: 1003). The voluptuous female can therefore be considered ripe, curvy, and rotund, possessing an abundance of physical attributes that contribute to sensual enjoyment. The ideal female body size and shape has varied considerably over time and continues to vary among cultures. All societies develop their own perceptions of what the preferred body shape should be. This is generally reflected in the art and literature produced by or for a society as well as in popular media such as films and magazines. Feminine curves have been revered throughout the history of art, literature and fashion. In the court of Louis XIV for instance, or the pictures of Fragonard and Rubens it was celebrated and depicted as beautiful, a place where voluptuous indicated wealth and prosperity. Ruben’s fondness for painting full-figured women gave rise to the terms ‘Rubensian’ or ‘Rubenesque’ (Belkin 1998). Mae West manipulated her own body, becoming one of the most potent advertisements for a fashionably curvaceous figure in the twentieth century. She declared: “A curve is the loveliest distance between two points” (Cherry 2011: 1), yet her figure needed to be encased in uncomfortable corsets that pushed up her breasts and accentuated her hips in order to project an hourglass contour. Historically, great efforts have been made to

alter body shape in the use of boned corsets, practiced for several centuries and reaching a climax during the Victorian era. In the late twentieth century they were mostly replaced with more flexible/comfortable foundation garments.

Through conducting this research I learnt a great deal about the fuller-sized fashion market and was able to draw on my own experience as a fashion designer and lecturer. I focused on action and object based research through developing garments with students and examination of garments in retail outlets and museum collections. Secondary research came from literature that investigated how the body has been distorted, to conform to the demands of fashion and issues relating to the fuller-sized fashion market and obesity. I then formulated specific research questions exploring ways in which the fuller sized figure could be reconceptualized within the fashion industry (Foster and Zaccagnini Flynn 2009; Grey and Malins 2004; Kawamura 2006 and 2011; McRobbie 1998; Taylor 2004; Trumbull 2005). A questionnaire addressing concerns relating to the voluptuous and fuller sized market was sent out to over three hundred fashion students and academics in a large University fashion and costume department. One question asked for thoughts on how the voluptuous figure could evolve in fashion. The majority considered there was a huge difference between voluptuousness and overweight or obese, as well as an acceptance that with improvements in nutrition and exercise the human body was naturally evolving as larger. Many felt there was nothing wrong with curves and being a larger size yet if it was affecting health, fashion designers should not encourage it. In the same way as anorexia, fat was identified as a problem yet it was noted how thinness is endorsed as desirable within the fashion industry. Some considered that in today's culture, more people were dieting to the extreme yet being voluptuous or fuller-sized is often seen as ugly, lazy and disgusting, whereas being too skinny is much more acceptable. The aims of this research were to therefore develop an understanding of the place for a fuller figure in contemporary fashion and if repackaging it as voluptuous would make it appear more commercially palatable. In so doing, it also aimed to investigate its future depiction and perception. The main objectives being to:

- i) Identify the fashion choices available for voluptuous and fuller-sized women.
- ii) Identify how the body can be manipulated through corsetry and underpinnings in garments to project a fashionably voluptuous shape.
- iii) Identify the feasibility for re-conceptualizing negative images of the plus-size in fashion.
- iv) Develop further ideas for fashion research based on body size.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A considerable amount of debate and discussion both in the global fashion and health industries relating to body size has taken place in the preceding twenty years. Much of this has been related to thinness and anorexia. There has been far less discussion about the fuller-sized figure and obesity yet statistically a huge percentage of people globally are overweight.

According to researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Center for Human Nutrition: "The waistlines of Americans will continue to grow and by 2015, 75 percent of adults will be overweight and 41 percent will be obese" (Fiore 2007: 1). The world health organization observed in 2003 that excess weight has reached epidemic proportions globally, with more than 1 billion adults being either overweight or obese. Increases have been observed across all age groups. (World Health Organization, 2003). Heitmeyer and Rutherford-Black (2000), identified existing prejudices in college students towards the overweight with regards to fashion, style and garment selection, "Students perceived moderately and morbidly obese women as less concerned with fashion, less concerned with garment price, less concerned with following fashion trends, and less concerned with obtaining high quality garments" (2000: 138). The students considered that plus size and obese women had limited fashion choices, preferring garments that were comfortable as opposed to having a good overall appearance. They also suggested that obese people had low self-esteem and considered themselves less; attractive, valuable to society and successful.

The large percentage of fuller-sized people (considered in the UK, to be size 16 and over (French 2011: 1) will impact hugely on the fashion industry. Emily Parker, design manager for UK plus-size retailer Evans described it as a "Huge market share that could be potentially tapped into" (personal communication, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011). Literature was examined that related to existing discrimination toward the plus-size or obese with regards to fashion, style and garment selection (Agerup 2011; Alexander; Connell and Presley 2005; Braziel and Le Besco 2001; Kind 2000; Klein 2001; Heitmeyer and Rutherford-Black 2000; Otieno; Harrow and Lea Greenwood 2006; Salusso-Dounier; Markee and Pederson 1993; Waddell-Kral and Thomas 1990). This confirmed that the existing prejudice and self-deprecation of those who consider themselves overweight affect both the design and sales of fashionable clothes to this market. The questionnaire aimed at fashion students and staff confirmed that few fashion design students choose to design for the more voluptuous or fuller-sized market and fashion education fails to incorporate it into their curriculums. When they do design this type of clothing it may be less fashionable, less attractive, of low quality fabrication and not suitable for all occasions. Heitmeyer and Rutherford-Black felt that "Education is needed for students in the apparel field to assist them in altering their preconceived prejudices towards the overweight individual. This could assist students in viewing obese individuals as another viable market segment whose needs must be met in order to increase consumer satisfaction" (2000: 138).

Literature was analyzed that considered how the body has been altered through diet or body modifying clothes (Almond 2009; Arnold 1999; Entwistle, 2000 and 2000; Glover 2008; Ince 1998; Ribeiro 2003; Stewart and Janovicek 2001; Van Der Does 1980; Vincent 2009; Wallerstein 1998; Warwick and Cavallaro 1998). This was crucial to understanding how the corpulent body can be manipulated through corsetry and padding in order to be considered voluptuous. It also identified many fuller-sized followers of body modifying clothing, for instance the revival of 'Burlesque' (Von Teese 2006), has inspired many large people to look

spectacularly voluptuous with well chosen corsetry. Whereas some people love the modifying effects of these garments, many dislike the constricting sensation and discomfort imposed this however is to do with the individual preference of the person and not their actual size. An historical and theoretical perspective on aspects of the overweight was also considered (Braziel and Le Besco 2001; Arnold 1999; Entwistle 2000; Koda 2001; Lurie 1981; Mitchell 2011; Ribeiro 2003; Taylor 2004; Vincent 2009). It included the appropriation of object-based research considered to “Play an important role in the creation of knowledge” (Steele 1998: 327). Although this type of research has been criticized for its ‘descriptive concentration on the minutiae of clothing’ (Taylor 2004: 348), it can determine the relationship of the artifact to its description, analysis, culture and semiotics, making it a valuable form of primary data. The researcher can touch, feel, try on and discuss the garment. In relation to this research it initiates a physical and sensory connection with clothes that manipulate fuller-sized body shapes.

## **INTERPRETING VOLUPTUOUS**

Through investigating how the voluptuous body is perceived, I decided to give in depth consideration as to how it relates to the way clothes are made, worn, sold and represented by the media. It inspired an investigation into a much wider meaning of the term ‘voluptuous’ within fashion analyzing the historical, the high street, fashion magazines and the work of fashion students. This assisted in substantiating its evolution in future debates relating to body size and fashionable clothing. The questionnaire about the voluptuous and fuller-sized figure, aimed at fashion students and academics, identified that the majority seemed more comfortable with the description of the figure as voluptuous as opposed to large or even obese. For example one answered: “It is down to a choice of words, a thin person can be described as skinny or slender, a larger person can be described as overweight or voluptuous, it is common sense as to which word is more flattering” (questionnaire response, 2011). One question specifically considered the future for the voluptuous shape. Some believed a healthy, curvy figure would become more desirable, others predicted that natural curves and cleavage would become celebrated and revered, while others considered that people would always try to be thinner when often a voluptuous figure is more attractive and fits into clothes better. Most were adamant that voluptuous silhouettes were recurrent trends in fashion and would never go away.

### *Historical overview*

Historically, to carry weight has served to advertise material wealth and prosperity, with fashion seeking to enhance the curves of the wealthy, for instance, the bustles of the 1880’s accentuated shapeliness and served the leisured classes, yet were impractical for the labour

induced work of the working class (Black and Garland 1975). Feminine curves have often been desirable, Rubenesque nudes and Marilyn Monroe being prime examples of more voluptuous ideals of this desirability. I decided to consider historical fashionable garments for the fuller-sized figure through object-based research, which gives the researcher: "Unique insights into its historic and aesthetic development" (Steele 1998: 327). According to Fleming it can classify the characteristics of the object: "The history, material, construction, design, and function of the artifact" (Fleming 1973: 154.). I analyzed several costume collections (Leeds Museums and Galleries, Gallery of English Costume, Victoria and Albert Museum, Bath Museum of Fashion and Bowes Museum) and discussed with the various curators whether fuller-sized clothes were stored in costume collections. All agreed there were very few. Miles Lambert (personnel communication, August 19<sup>th</sup> 2011), costume curator of the Gallery of English Costume attributed this to the fact that fuller-sized clothes were difficult to exhibit in a way that made them appear aesthetically pleasing. He also felt that unless fashion dictated a voluptuous silhouette the prevailing modes were better represented by the acquisition of garments that reflected the fashionable look on standard figures such as a UK size 12. The costume collection at Leeds houses a small number of fashion garments that appear to have been designed for a plus-sized figure. These include the oversize size 16, Ossie Clarke dress (fig 1) in viscose crepe from the 1970's and the 1980's Laura Ashley dress (fig 2). Whilst both dresses could be easily worn by the plus-sized due to their high-waisted smock-type design, it should be noted that this style was a contemporary fashion trend appropriated by consumers with smaller figures and Natalie Raw confirmed this was the reason for their inclusion in the collections. As the body is swathed in volumes of fabric it also disguises a "Sexually attractive body" (Soames 2005: 859), that hints at "Shapeliness" (Allen 2004: 1003). This implies that the re-christening of fuller-size fashion as voluptuous would need to incorporate much curvaceousness of line in garment design.



Fig1



Fig 2

The Leeds Costume Collection does have a Worth gown (c1880) (fig 3 and fig 4) for a fuller, voluptuous figure that belonged to a wealthy customer who rapidly put on weight. This type of garment, however, has an interesting social and cultural history attached to it. It belonged to Yorkshire woman: Mary Holden Illingworth (1838 - 1908) whose father owned textile mills in both Bradford and Paris. As the family was extremely prosperous Mary developed a love of fashion and shopping and became a regular client of the Paris couturiere Charles Frederick Worth, where she purchased the gown. In later life she gained a lot of weight, after having children and it is also said she suffered from diabetes. The dress has been let out several times to accommodate this. Curator Natalie Raw however, acquired the dress at auction as an excellent example of the house of Worth's craftsmanship, not as a plus-size garment.





Fig 3



Fig 4

Societies and cultures have focused attention on perceptions of what a female body should look like. There have been wide differences about what is considered an ideal or preferred body shape but these are usually reflected by the popular culture, art and media of the time. Artificial devices have been used or operations employed to alter body shape however this research is not concerned with surgical intervention. The fuller-sized figure can be transformed into a voluptuous shape by means of a variety of technical tricks applied to or worn beneath clothes. Historically, great efforts have been made to reduce a women's waistline. The use of boned corsets as previously discussed, has been practiced for several centuries, these are tightly laced to push out organs and emphasize the waist. By the twentieth century corsets were mostly replaced with more flexible/comfortable foundation garments. Similarly padded bras have been used to increase the size of women's breasts, whilst minimizer bras have been used to reduce size. Some corsets or girdles have also been designed to reduce hips. Many fashionable clothes also have underwear foundations built into their construction. Leeds Museums and Galleries hold a considerable collection of twentieth century corsets and bras that have pleated flesh into fashionably desired silhouettes and scrutiny of much fashionable clothing reveals many of the technical principles of the underwear that have been sewn into clothes in order to achieve similar effects. Fig 5 shows a 1920's girdle that was used to reduce the size of hips. This was achieved through tight lacing and the straight boned panels. It created the flat boyish silhouette of the 1920's and was worn under dresses such as the pink flapper dress from the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig 6). The strapless 1950's hand fitted corset in (fig 7) was worn under clothes such as the plus-sized Frank Usher dress (fig 8). The corset pleated flesh into shape and the heavily constructed bra with under wiring and combination of stretch and non stretch fabrics help to produce a silhouette resembling an hourglass shape: wide bottom, narrow waist and wide top.



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8

The 1890's corset in black cotton with lace (fig 9) would have been similar to the 'Merry widow' corsets appropriated by Mae West as she bound her flesh together in order to project her voluptuous ideal. The 1898 dress in (fig 10) from Bath Fashion Museum epitomizes those worn by West's shapely 1890's 'Diamond Lil' character (Tuska 1992: 40). It is heavily boned and does not rely on the stretch of its 1950's counterpart. The circular stitched bra shape in (fig 11) has been appropriated by designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier. It has been worn outside clothes to create shape as in his stage costumes for Madonna or built into garments such as corsets or dresses similar to those designed by Dolce and Gabbana which in turn have been inspired by pulchritudinous 1950's Italian movie stars such as Gina Lollobrigida. A chronological analysis of fashion for the fuller-sized figure would have been inappropriate within the scope of this research, the examples discussed emphasize a historical perspective in order to give depth to the investigation and describe how the body has been manipulated through corsetry and underpinnings in garments to project a fashionably voluptuous shape.



Fig 9



Fig 10



Fig 11

### *Analysis of the UK high street*

Beyond the confines of fashion collections in museums, an analysis of contemporary fashion reveals many designers who have been inspired by the voluptuous body including: Leigh Bowery, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Pam Hogg, Gareth Pugh, Antony Price and Dolce and Gabbana. Designer clothes inspire high street interpretations of the looks, yet an analysis of retailers in the UK high street identified limited stores supplying stylish clothes for the voluptuous or fuller-sized market. This led the British comedienne Dawn French to found 'Sixteen 47' an independent boutique for large women in 1991 with her business partner Helen Teague. Dawn's main objective for the shop was to provide not just clothes for big girls, but beautiful clothes. As a plus sized female she lamented a huge lack of choice in clothing for the fuller figured woman. The name 'Sixteen 47' derived from a statistic, she discovered that claimed that 47% of women in the UK are size 16 and over. She reflected on the kind of problems she faced as a large woman trying to find quality, stylish clothes that fit and said; "In my teens, I was wearing clothes that were for women in their fifties" (French 2011: 1). The two business partners also set up their designer label 'French and Teague' which became available in up-market designer stores such as Selfridges and Liberty.

Otieno, Narrow and Lea Greenwood (2005) worked on a survey of 250 women in the UK, which analyzed plus-size groups shopping experiences. According to the findings of their survey, 80 per cent of the samples were aged 18-40, of which about 37 per cent wore size 16 clothing. 56 per cent of them tend to shop in department stores and 73 per cent shopped at high street stores. Women have felt increasingly self conscious about sizing labels in their clothing (Le Pechoux and Ghosh 2002) and its been suggested that many women determined their self worth, attractiveness, career and social life in terms of clothing size. In other words, the smaller the dress size that a woman can fit into, the more confident they feel. A questionnaire about the availability of plus-size clothing was issued to 117 female shoppers randomly selected by Chan (2006) from shopping malls and supermarkets in Manchester, UK aged 20 – 50. One question asked: "What does the term plus-size mean to you in terms of

clothing?” Only 14.5% felt that it meant curvaceous or in other words voluptuous. The others identified the term with less palatable descriptions like: extra-large, obese or overweight.

UK high street stores that specifically supply fuller-size clothing include; Evans, Long Tall Sally, Elvi and Ann Harvey. A close analysis of other well established high street retailers offering fuller-size womenswear included: BHS, Bonmarche, Debenhams, Dorothy Perkins, Evans, George at Asda, H&M, Marks & Spencer, Monsoon, New Look, Next, Primark, River Island, Top shop, Wallis, Warehouse and Zara. Chan (2006) identified that the top five fashion retailers rated by fuller-size shoppers were: Marks and Spencer who received the highest response (66.7%), followed by Next (52.8%). Debenhams and Primark both received the same percentage in response, which is 33.3% and BHS gained 22.2%. Interestingly Evans only got 11.1% response and no mention was made of other fuller-size only retailers. Evans has 330 stores around the UK and Ireland and has been pro-active in recognising the varying shapes of female bodies (personal communication. 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011). They sell fashionable clothing for the UK size 14 to 32 figure and from September 2011 garments have been labelled according to descriptions of body shape such as: pear, hourglass, apple or busty as well as size. Evans marketing declares “That every woman should feel confident and beautiful in her curves, and we believe that we provide her with the clothing to really celebrate her shape” (Evans 2011: 1). They promote their sales advisors as having an in-depth understanding and passion for fuller-sized fashion and a specialist expertise in designing, fitting and styling the latest fashions to flatter curvy women. This is achieved through holding ‘Fit to Flatter’ training sessions for each sales person. The design duo Clements Ribeiro began collaborating with Evans in 2011 to develop a premium range of clothes for sizes 14-32. Initiatives such as this may give greater design credibility to high street retailers who focus solely on the fuller-sized market and be a more palatable way to repackage the larger sized body through emphasis on design.

### *Analysis of fashion magazines*

Projections from UK government statistics suggest that by 2050, 60% of men and 50% of women will be obese (Chan, 2006). Similar statistics are recorded throughout the western world, for instance in Fiore’s (2007) estimate that: “By 2015, 75 percent of adults will be overweight and 41 percent will be obese” (Fiore 2007: 1). Despite this predicted crisis in the future health of the average global consumer and the simultaneous historic changes in their body shapes and sizes, they continue to be subject to improbable, often artificially improved and potentially dangerous images of what is fashionable. These images are vigorously projected in the promotional activities of fashion designers and brands, predominantly disseminated through fashion magazines. Therefore a situation emerges where idealized images of body shape and size are increasingly different from the reality of most consumers. In order to gain a realistic understanding of how the contemporary fashionable figure is represented I undertook an analysis of fashion and lifestyle magazines generally available in

many UK newsagents from July and August 2011. I specifically wanted to identify how and if the voluptuous and fuller-sized figure was represented. Fashion magazines and their online counterparts are important because they send out highly potent images of fashion to the worldwide consumer (Tilberis 2007). I selected at random magazines from a well known UK retailer, that were easily accessible to the general consumer, these included: Vogue, (UK, USA, French, Italian), Elle (UK and French), Glamour and Tatler as well as female orientated magazines such as: Good Housekeeping, Women's Weekly and The Lady. The July and August editions of the UK magazines were intended as representative samples.

Vogue is probably the most established promulgator of high fashion worldwide. Known as the "Grand Dame of fashion publications" (Fortini 2005: 1), it is published in separate, international versions (USA, France, Italy, China, etc). I focused on British Vogue due to its accessibility within the UK. The August (2011) issue began with a series of advertisements for high profile luxury fashion brands (Gucci, Prada, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Armani, Dior, Burberry, Bottega Veneta, Saint Laurent, DKNY). The majority of the models appeared to be extremely young and skinny, between the ages of 15 to 20. All were styled in costly, luxurious designer garments that could be bought by customers with large disposable incomes (generally people over the age of 35) and those with an intellectual appreciation for the nuances of fashion. The models were extremely thin and only one advert hinted at a level of voluptuousness. This was for Dior jewelry, featuring a well-nourished naked, teenage girl with a 1940's inspired hairstyle, clasping a large pink rose to her well-developed breasts. The 'Midi Town' feature (Almond: 161-171) celebrated the charms of the mid-calf skirt, as worn by curvaceous 1940's models. Designer Jonathon Saunders declared: "There seems to be a move towards an elegant sophistication, a forties inspired fluid midi length that doesn't feel heavy or frumpy" (D'Souza, p.171). Presented on the Vogue 2011 models, the clothes appeared too large and desperate to slide off the slim, boyish carapaces wearing them. A careful scrutiny of other features including: the diary pages, the 'Miss V' gossip column and the life style features revealed perpetual photographs of skinny celebrities, models and designers. There were only two images of more voluptuous figures in the whole magazine: (i) in the more matronly shapes of Queen Elizabeth 11 and Princess Margaret from 1977 (176) and (ii) in the feature on actress Gemma Arterton. This celebrates her curvaceous body, as she declares: "My shape means I can't throw on an outfit. Gucci tends to design best for my hourglass figure" (Schulman; p.216). In conclusion English Vogue, August 2011 almost predominantly features a plethora of female models and celebrities who project an emaciated, very youthful look, wearing sophisticated products that are intended for an older, wealthier and larger customer.

Analysis of the other selected high fashion magazines from July and August 2011 (Vogue, (USA, French, Italian), Elle (UK and French), Glamour and Tatler) revealed they were populated by identical adverts for luxury designer companies and fashion and lifestyle features featuring skinny models and celebrities. In contrast Italian Vogue (July) included a small, recently launched section called "Vogue Curvy" (Sozzani; 100-105), celebrated by the slogan

“Beauty Comes in all Shapes and Sizes”. This featured a photo shoot with a voluptuous size 16 model. The styling however had a marked lack of flair and imagination resembling a slightly down market shoot for a mail order catalogue. This was in marked contrast to the flair deployed in Italian Vogue’s other fashion stories. Designer catwalk shots of clothes to suit the fuller figure and an interview with the plus-sized singer Adele also featured. A blog about ‘Vogue Curvy’ ([www.skinnyversuscurvy.com](http://www.skinnyversuscurvy.com)) included comments such as: “Why do you need another, different magazine for the “curvy” women – why mixing the “curvy” girls (read average, non-skinny, plus-size and all the other types, sizes and shapes) with the skinny girls in the same magazine is simply NOT possible” (1). The fashion website WGSN highlighted a curvy womenswear trend analysis (Cherry 2011: 1) which examined how the editor of Italian Vogue, Franca Sozzani is “Championing healthier body image through an online petition against pro-anorexia websites and blogs” (1). It also discussed evidence of a huge interest in the curvier shape from both designers and fashion editors. In contrast, a survey of other women’s magazines in the UK from July 2011 (Good Housekeeping, Women’s Weekly, and The Lady) revealed a far more diverse approach in its fashion storylines. These journals however, are not high fashion outputs aimed at the fashionable consumer and the fashion industry. ‘Good Housekeeping’ for instance starred the full figured comedienne Dawn French on its cover and included articles that featured curvaceous women such as: ‘We took a risk and it paid off’ (Nicholson; 28-31).

#### *Analysis of fashion student’s work*

The questionnaire aimed at fashion students and academics focused on a particular group of people who are specialist articulators in the presentation of fashionable selves. The media powerfully manipulates the public to consider only certain shapes and sizes to be attractive or fashionable and fashion professionals buy into this concept. It is therefore arguable that students become interested in fashion and see themselves as involved in the fashion world partly because their shape and size make it possible for them to be so. The questionnaire asked why fashion designers predominantly choose not to design for the voluptuous and plus-size market. The answers swung between two points, (i) being that it would limit their career options as it was not considered a financially viable market to design for: “I honestly think when it comes to fashion designers, they have a certain client, a certain target market and when imagining their ideal, it is a slim, confident woman, who will make the clothes look exceptional. In today’s media, thin is in” (questionnaire response, 2011). The second, (ii) being that it would limit creativity and the development of design ideas: “I suppose it limits your design ideas. Slim people can wear pretty much anything. The larger-sized have to wear things that suit their shape” (questionnaire response, 2011). There was also a view that “Being oversize is considered undesirable therefore there may be a perception that ‘oversize fashion’ is also undesirable” (questionnaire response, 2011). Most answers demonstrated very negative attitudes toward the fuller-sized and obese.

Some fashion student respondents considered their tutors actively encouraged them to design only for “thin or underweight” (2011) people yet it was felt they should be taught to make and design for any size. Teaching block making and alteration skills alongside grading was perceived to be a good start: “I think there should be a variety of sizes of dress stands and blocks available for students to use or at least the option to learn how to make their own blocks for different figure shapes. Also being able to use curvaceous images in fashion drawing would no doubt encourage people to draw figures with breasts and hips and explore design possibilities that they previously thought weren't available to them” (questionnaire response, 2011). The images below were selected from a group of 70 final year student’s graduate collections from 2011. Interestingly no students had selected to design for the fuller-sized market however some had selected to design for a curvaceous figure. The styles emphasize shapeliness through manipulating the body with corsetry and underpinnings to project fashionably voluptuous silhouettes, this included: hip and shoulder padding, stitched bra cups, emphasis on the cleavage, corsetry and through the cut of the garments. It could be concluded that there is a prevalent bias for fashion students to design fashionable clothes for slimmer customers and that this bias remains when they enter industry. It indicates that further research on the impact of designing for the voluptuous and fuller-sized customer within the fashion industry is needed and also implies it is ripe for repackaging in a more enticing way so the ability to be fashionable can become more connected to larger body shapes and sizes.



Fig 12

Fig 13

Fig 14

Fig 15

Fig 16

### *Fashion industry initiatives*

There are other initiatives within the fashion industry that seek to promote the fuller figure and influence the marketing initiatives of trend-led apparel retailers catering for customers who are

larger-sized. The initiatives fuse relationships between female fashion consumers' concepts of body image and fashion. By celebrating voluptuousness it influences consumer behavior and the marketing responses of fashion retailers. 'Full Figured Fashion Week in New York' is devoted entirely to the curvy world. It declares itself: "An international showcase for all the most important players in the curvy universe – from the best and brightest plus-size clothing brands to bloggers and independent designers, from internet sites to the most important testimonials in the field" (fffweek.com). An initiative in the UK called: 'All walks beyond the catwalk', is the brainchild of fashion journalist Karyn Franklyn (Bourne, Franklyn, O'Connor, Ringwood 2011). This project aims to celebrate diversity in the fashion industry with a focus on the more curvaceous customer. It attempts to broaden the messages the industry sends out to the rest of the world, recognizing that it is a powerful communicator of ideas about beauty and body image, facilitating thought and discussion about fashion design with few restrictions or boundaries. It celebrates and promotes a point where fashion meets diversity, helping to initiate a more tolerant environment in which people are 'real'. It also aims to publicize a different language in design education in which student's work can represent a variety of different body sizes. The initiative also promotes model agencies that cater for the fuller figure. Sarah Watkinson founder and director of 12 plus UK Model Management said: "It is a rarity for my models to be involved in London Fashion Week or a cutting edge editorial for a magazine such as ID. The simple reason is that designers don't design for curvy models, so the samples don't exist. 'All walks Beyond the Catwalk' has teamed my models with talented designers and an award-winning photographer. The results speak for themselves" (2011: 6).

Examining how the voluptuous figure has been perceived historically, through the high street, fashion magazines and the work of fashion students, paves the way for further fashion industry initiatives to design and promote it. The analysis could have been extended to include pattern cutting and skills based garment technology however this has been addressed within each aspect, particularly when considering how the body can be modified through clothing. Key points have established a very limited representation of the voluptuous figure in many areas of fashion as adorning the more voluptuous can inhibit the rendering of contemporary modes. There are also limited shops within the high street (UK) that cater for a fuller figure, reflected by very few positive representations within the fashion media. The fashion education system reflects this negativity as curriculums present few opportunities for students to explore the creation of clothes for fuller figures. Commercially the majority of consumers are UK size 16 and above and the conclusions indicate that repackaging fashion for the fuller-sized in a positive, enticing way would make economic sense to the future of the fashion industry.

### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:**

Fashionable body shapes have fluctuated in size throughout history and are reflected in the fashion of the times. Today people have far greater access to affordable food and labour



saving devices, unemployment and sedentary lifestyles are more common and weight gain therefore is more prevalent. Alternately, there is a huge media focus on ideal body weight and weight loss trends, therefore under eating and anorexia is also highly prominent. The first aim of this research was to identify the fashion choices for voluptuous and fuller-sized women. I focused predominantly on the UK high street to due to its accessibility and as a representation of western fashion yet this exposes limitations due to geographical boundaries. Further research could consider a global investigation or focus on non-western countries however as fashion is a globally accessible commodity, I would suggest that my findings are considered as a small reflection of this global context. The findings do emphasize limited dedicated stores within the high street supplying stylish clothes for a fuller figure, reflected by very few positive representations within the fashion media. A close analysis of the plus-size store 'Evans' reveals a concerted effort to market the larger figure in a flattering way emphasizing voluptuous descriptions such as 'curvy' and 'hourglass' in their promotional material. Many larger people do follow fashion and desire to dress well, a fact that is reflected in the increased UK outlets stocking large sized ranges as an addition to their mainline offerings however, choice is still limited due to a generalized assumption that the fuller-sized are not interested in fashionable clothing (Heitmeyer and Rutherford-Black 2000: 138). This can lead people to feel excluded by the fashion world, either choosing to follow alternative fashion or to feel that they cannot look good in an accepted sense and to lose interest in clothing as a consequence. Further analysis of historical and media representations of larger figures and the work of fashion students reveals more prejudice.

Fashionable clothes designed for standard model sizes (UK size 12) are predominantly shown on underweight models as detailed in the analysis of fashion magazines, alternately plus-sized clothes are generally not collected by museums as it is felt they do not successfully reflect contemporary modes. It can be argued that thin bodies showcase garments most effectively as they provide a much more neutral vehicle, the clothes not having to vie with more striking body shapes. In historical and contemporary fashion great efforts have been made to alter body shape particularly in the use of boned corsets, practiced for several centuries and reaching a climax during the Victorian era. In the late twentieth century corsets were mostly replaced with more flexible/comfortable foundation garments such as control pants yet fashionable garments continue to utilize corsetry inspired underpinnings and paddings in order to create desired shapes. Cosmetic surgery can alter body shape, which is an area for further research, for instance there has been much use of liposuction to remove the "Cancerous growth" (Klein 2001: 27) of body fat in recent years. Until the twentieth century the larger sized female body was deemed a representation of wealth and prosperity, it was often unwarranted flesh, encased by corsetry. Should the pendulum of fashion swerve towards the corpulent body where all followers of fashion seek to be voluptuous, liposuction could be reversed and fat restored to bodies. The carapace could then be manipulated by clothes, which are designed to contain and reveal voluptuous portions of breasts, bottoms and thighs.

Media personalities such as the UK comedienne Dawn French have used their position of high public profile to redress the fashion balance in favor of larger sized people. Rather than making a virtue of unhealthy weight gain, the emphasis is on embracing people as they are and empowering them to make positive choices about what they can wear and how they are perceived. This in itself is far more likely to promote a holistic sense of self and personal health. People who feel good about themselves treat themselves better across the board. Using words with negative associations such as fat, obese and oversize are immediately unpalatable. There also needs to be a considerable amount of sensitivity when interviewing people and collecting data. I carefully considered the wording of the questions I asked the fashion students and academics however a small proportion were offended by the tone of the enquiry: "I think these questions are rather offensive. Using the phrases 'overweight' and 'thin' is incredibly insensitive. I thought it could have been handled in a far more sympathetic way as the way the questions are worded almost insinuates that anyone larger than a sample size is overweight" (questionnaire response, 2011). This answer indicates a need to tread carefully when assessing the feasibility for re-conceptualizing negative images of the fuller-sized in fashion. Alternately this level of sensitivity is also crucial when researching the underweight and anorexia. This proves how some people can be offended by reference to individual body shape and what this can imply as the same respondent said: "Not every small size has an eating disorder, just as not every larger size suffers from an eating disorder" (questionnaire response, 2011).

Klein argued that "Fashion is not a natural thing, but it obeys its own inherent logic" (2001: 21). In a similar way to skirt lengths shifting from mini to midi or hair from long to short, the fashion for a thin body could swing to the voluptuous for no reason other than a reaction to the status quo. There are numerous debates and theories about the reasons for fashion change related to economics, changes in society, taste and morals etc; however an overview of fashion history confirms its ability to continuously contradict preceding modes. If the fuller-sized body were to suddenly be in vogue, it could negate the suggestion that it needs to be re-conceptualized as the more palatably voluptuous. The shift from thin to fat could inspire further research into the ways the fashion industry could redress this balance to make money from people's anxieties about being thin. It could also balance positive and negative words used to describe thin from skinny to the more elegantly sounding slender. Derogative concepts about the underweight could also, therefore be reconceptualized. This research has only considered the female body. Voluptuous words such as ripe, curvy, and rotund do not transfer particularly well when describing a fuller-sized male body however those who oppose traditional descriptions of differences between genders would disagree. Further research could consider how to repackage the male body redressing a gender balance with words such as muscular or stocky to describe the fuller figure. The research could also emphasize the analogical comparison of the voluptuously female Mae West, who surrounded herself with meaty body

builders and beefy winners of the 'Mr. Universe' contest both on stage and in her private life, in order to compliment her own 'Merry Widow' curves. The cultural production of fashion successfully generates new visual languages that can destroy barriers. Human beings have used the way they decorate their bodies through a 'Presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959), as an authoritative means of making a statement about themselves. Exhibiting both the fuller-figured female and male body through a celebration of its voluptuousness (or in the male muscular) could therefore help to break down the prejudices traditionally associated with being a larger size.

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## **MAGAZINES AND PERIODICALS**

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## **ILLUSTRATIONS:**

- Fig 1 Ossie Clarke dress, 1970's – LEEAG.1982.8.1, Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 2 Laura Ashley dress, 1980's – LEEDM.E.1990.13, Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 3 Worth gown owned by Mary Holden Illingworth, c. 1880, LEEAG.2011.207.1 Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 4 Worth gown owned by Mary Holden Illingworth, c. 1880, LEEAG.2011.207.1 Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 5 Girdle to reduce hips, 1920's – LEEAG.2011.629, Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 6 Pink Jean Patou flapper dress, 1920's – T.1981970, Victoria and Albert Museum  
Fig 7 Strapless hand fitted corset with flower print, 1950's – LEEDM.E.1975.157, Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 8 Purple Frank Usher dress, 1950's – LEEDM.E.1977.45.1, Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 9 'Merry Widow' corset 1890 - LEEAG.2008.3, Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 10 Court dress (bodice, skirt and train) of white silk satin with central panel embroidered in a bow/knot motif in diamante and pearls. BATMC 2005.56 to B  
Illustrated in: Langley Moore, L. 1994. *The Woman in Fashion* London, Batsford. page 145.  
Fashion Museum, Bath and North East Somerset Council.  
Fig 11 Conical bra, 1950's – LEEDM.E.1976.62.13, Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Fig 12 Rebecca Massey, undergraduate final collection outfit, 2011  
Fig 13 Ethan Mitchell, undergraduate final collection outfit, 2011  
Fig 14 Susanna Greening, undergraduate final collection outfit, 2011  
Fig 15 Ethan Mitchell, undergraduate final collection outfit, 2011  
Fig 16 Amy Connor, undergraduate final collection outfit, 2011