Material Culture Analysis of the Post-WWII Women's Corselet

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Dedication

For my mom and Grandma B,

You taught me to sew and ignited a lifelong passion for the ways we dress.

Abstract

Dress through body modification is a primary way we construct our appearance, and convey our identity and gender. Modifying the body occurs through various means of compressing, lifting, combining and separating. Foundation garments are influential in creating one's appearance and have been used by men and women for generations to construct their appearances and convey their identities.

Previous research from various fields has focused heavily on the corset - one of the most controversial aspects of women's dress - but has recently expanded to other periods and other products. Many view foundation garments as literal and symbolic forms of feminine oppression. However, some dress historians argue they can signify various levels of freedom within cultural constraints. In particular, Steele's (2001) and Farrell-Beck and Gau's (2002) research on the corset and brassiere, respectively, offer more diverse perspectives on the use of foundations to construct appearances.

Post-World War II (WWII) foundation garments like the corselet, a descendent of the corset and bra, are generally interpreted as a material means of forcing women back into the domestic sphere after the war and containing them within traditional feminine ideals. This reflects some researchers' second-wave feminist viewpoints and general assumptions that femininity has largely negative connotations. This fails to acknowledge the period's feminine fashions were very quickly adopted and, thus, likely had positive connotations. Previous research often interrogates the same sources and rarely examines extant artifacts.

This study focused on the corselet, a foundation garment popularized during the post-WWII era, and examined the design using material culture methods. Given the basic premise of material culture - objects are shaped by and reflect their culture - this research also considered the culture through these designed-objects. This research built on the exemplary work of the dress historians cited and was influenced by their approaches, which involved carefully examining extant artifacts in relation to other sources of data. A variety of sources were used, including the Minnesota Historical Society's large Munsingwear Archive and collection of Hollywood Vassarette foundation garments.

This research sought to explore and better articulate the functions and meanings of the corselet within the context of the post-World War II era. It provides a "history of [the corselet]" in order to "re-think wider narratives" from the post-WWII era (Riello, 2009, p. 36). Careful observation and analysis of the objects and external sources was used to establish the typical corselet design and its functions in relation to the wearer's body: modifying and supporting the breasts *while* exposing the upper body, molding the torso *while* allowing it to move, creating a

smooth line from breasts to hips, holding up stockings, and sexualizing the wearer's body. Analysis of the objects and external sources also revealed the ways the corselet was intended to be used within postwar culture. I examined *who* wore the corselet, as well as *how* and *why* it was worn. By analyzing the corselet's design, functions and use, I was able to interpret its meanings within the culture.

Some have focused on singular interpretations of foundation garments, arguing the designs reflect literal and abstract instances of either freedom or control. However, I found that both binaries were simultaneously embodied by the corselet. Through my analysis and then interpretation, I identified several dualities: freedom and control, modesty and sexuality, natural and unnatural, seen and unseen. By considering how the corselet reflected each of these seemingly-opposing qualities I was able to position it within its postwar cultural context, as well as within the larger, ongoing practice of body modification.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study sought to challenge existing historical and cultural narratives of the post-World War II period - particularly those that surround women's lives - through a study of one of the era's iconic foundation garments: the corselet. My research was driven by a desire to demonstrate that the materiality and style of designed-objects are not frivolous counterparts opposite function. Rather, these qualities serve very real and important functions within the objects' cultural contexts. Through a material culture study focused on the "history of things" - mainly the corselet - I examined the symbolic functions or signified meanings of the object in order to "rethink wider historical narratives" (Riello, 2009, p. 36). This study was guided by post-structuralist philosophical assumptions and semiotic theory. My research was also driven by a broader goal to challenge assumptions about women's dress and femininity. This study contributes to the professional knowledge and practices of dress history. However, I believe other areas of academia and wider society may also benefit from my findings.

The following chapter discusses my arrival to this subject and why there was a need to further research women's foundation garments, specifically the post-WWII corselet. I then note the purpose of the study and a number of questions that guided my research. I provide a brief overview of the methodology used to accomplish this purpose (discussed at greater length in Chapter 3). Finally, I reflect on the potential benefits of this research. The chapter ends with definitions for key terms used throughout my dissertation.

My Arrival at the Topic

First Hand Introduction

My fascination with the corselet started with an interest in corsets. I was working as a costume technician on my college's production of *On the Verge* (1985) by Eric Overmyer. In the play, three Victorian women travel through different eras up to the mid-20th century - requiring numerous costumes that span a number of periods. The play called for the women to wear corsets: both because they would be seen in one scene and because they would affect the actresses' physicality throughout much of the play. I was chosen to construct a corset for the stage, and also allowed to make one for myself with some of the remaining supplies.

As a theatre major and long-time seamstress, I had previously made several foundation garments but this was different: the use of a historically accurate pattern prompted me to focus much more on the construction process than the resulting final product - as had been the case with earlier projects. I was intrigued by the challenge of creating these corsets. The panels had to exactly align or else the overall form was impacted. I also closely studied the materials, each with their own tiny details - the weave of the coutille or the perfect repeating circles of the spiral steel

stays. A surprising amount of complexity was needed for a garment that would largely be covered.

As the corset took shape, I found the object itself beautiful. It was a beauty through contradiction - the cold, hard steel encased on a light, soft fabric. The resulting aesthetic on the body was also appealing; the resulting curving of the waist into smooth lines was quite pleasing. Its effects on the body surprised me, the ways it changed one's posture and molded the body. After lacing up my own, I noticed how wearing it made me feel - more abstractly - confident and sexy (a sensation my modest-Midwestern upbringing had not taught me to experience). There was almost a sort of power. I cannot help but feel that this initial, materially grounded, experience undoubtedly influenced my desire to study extant foundation garments from another century.

Cultural Artifacts - More Than Just Pretty Things

During my masters work, I came to further appreciate corsets, and other foundation garments, as rich cultural artifacts. Some of the first texts I read that explored corsets at greater depth were Banner's *American Beauty* (2006) and Summer's *Bound to Please* (2003). I was struck by how different their descriptions of the corset were from my own initial experiences. For me, this illustrated firsthand the influence of context. I was well aware my foremothers' and my own experiences were by no means comparable. Wearing a corset for a few hours was very different from wearing one every day. However, I struggled to make sense of the negative experiences of the corset described in these texts with my largely positive impressions. Had I tricked myself into believing I felt confident? Had society tricked me into believing the only way I could feel powerful was by being sexy? I did not think so but these questions truly troubled me.

It was not until I read Steele's *The Corset: A Cultural History* (2001) that I was able to begin to rectify these two seemingly contradictory experiences with the same (or at least fairly similar) objects. Her text highlights the somewhat paradoxical nature of the corset, a material means of restriction and freedom. Steele writes, "By simultaneously constructing an image of irreproachable propriety and one of blatant sexual allure, the corset allowed [Victorian] women to articulate sexual subjectivity in a socially acceptable way" (p. 35). Steele's work also stressed the importance of the objects, which were used to refute myths about women's dress and challenge broader historical narratives. Field's work (2007) highlights how these contradictory meanings are not limited to the corset but apparent in many, if not all, aspects of women's intimate apparel.

Many scholars, including Fields and Steele, discuss the apparent return of the "corset" following WWII, as well as the eventual discard of the cinched waist amidst cultural changes and as new under and outer garment fashions emerged. The two eras are often contrasted with one another: the oppression of post-WWII gender ideals and foundation garments positioned opposite

the freedom brought by the cultural movements of the 1960s, like the second-wave feminist movement and the sexual revolution, and new innovations like pantyhose. This somewhat "black and white" depiction of the decades (of cinched waists and subsequent freedom) did not align with the complex discourse surrounding the corset from the century before.

A Search for More Depth

As I studied the foundation garments of the post-WWII era I felt more closely connected to it than the Victorian era. I have living family members who experienced the era firsthand. I had grown up paging through my grandparents' old copies of *LIFE* and watched numerous mid-20th century movies. As a result, I had my own very strong visual memories and perceptions of the era.

I have since sought out more research on foundation garments during this era but found that it lacks the breadth, depth, and complexity seen in scholarship on the Victorian corset. Some excellent work has been done on other undergarments, such as Farrell Beck and Gau's (2002) research the brassiere. However, I've found very little on postwar foundation garments that provided dramatic shaping of the bust, waist and hips together - as was achieved with many 19th century corsets and mid-20th century iterations like the corselet.

In addition to studying foundation garments, I have also begun to collect them. The latter largely springs from a desire to preserve this aspect of dress and women's history, and from a continued appreciation of the objects' construction and aesthetics. This dissertation was certainly driven by a personal desire to further explore foundation garments. However, it also stemmed from a belief that examining the history of the corselet would offer insight into and a deeper understanding of how we all modify our bodies.

Problem Statement

Misconceptions about Body-Modification with Dress

Appearance is a primary way we socially construct and communicate our identities, including gender identities (Goffman, 1959; Kaiser, 1997; Kidwell & Steele, 1989; Tseëlon, 1995). I believe one element of dress that is particularly crucial to explore is the foundation garment. Such garments act as supplements to the body and also physically modify it, albeit temporarily. These garments literally serve as the foundation on which outer garments are worn and, thus, reflect prevailing fashions of both dress and the figure. Additionally, worn directly next to the body, they are central to our literal experiences within our physical bodies and more abstract constructions of our identities.

There are popular and academic perceptions that modifying or containing the body is a feminine practice, often stemming from broader cultural goals to define or control feminine roles

and ideals within a given culture. However, we all modify our bodies in various ways, often based on cultural conventions. It is not a just a female phenomenon. Both men and women have worn corsets, although use and styles have varied over time and between the genders (Kunzle, 2006, p. 72; Steele, 2001, p. 49). In the 1840s men's jackets were "padd[ed] in the shoulders and chest area" to contrast the "sometimes corseted" waist (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 342). Similarly, in the 1930s both men and women manipulated dress to appear "broad shouldered with narrow hips," although the overall appearances had different effects (Kidwell, 1989, p. 129). Yet modifying the body with dress is repeatedly positioned as a feminine practice, with connotations ranging from frivolity and vanity to oppression and objectification.

Unclear Connections between Contexts

The post-WWII era was chosen because foundation garments played a crucial role in the period's dominant fashion - The "New Look." Additionally, post-WWII era has been described as embodying a "Resurgent Victorianism," with parallels between the two eras and their dress drawn by some scholars, despite the fact that the eras and objects differed in many respects. The corsetry or foundation garments used to obtain the New Looks have been equated to the boned, rigid corsets worn as part of the Victorian era's similarly cinched-waist fashions.

The corset is the subject of considerably more research and its interpretations are comparatively more diverse. Much less is known about post-WWII foundation garments, which (unlike the Victorian corset) are largely discussed in terms negative implications and connotations. This fails to acknowledge the period's dominant fashion, Dior's New Look, was not merely adopted, but quickly taken up by women - so much so that it is referred to as a revolution. Previous studies depict women as passive consumers. There is a need to consider this adoption as a conscious choice because the fashion, and the foundations central to it, served various positive functions.

Previous scholarship also often contrasts the dress and cultures of the 1950s and 1960s. The restrictive, ultra-femininity of the New Look is positioned opposite the supposed freedom of the following decade. This reflects a lack of understanding of dress history, and history in general, during the mid-20th century. There was no clear demarcation between the decades. In fact, fashionable silhouettes and foundations changed throughout the period. Women did not abandon their foundation garments immediately as the 1960s began. Even amidst cultural changes of the decade, changes in dress were more complex. Thus, my research builds upon the work of other dress historians (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002; Steele, 2001) to consider foundation garments as complex historical and cultural artifacts, as well as challenge narratives that interpret the objects solely as means of literal and metaphorical feminine oppression.

Lack of Knowledge of the Object

The corselet is technically a combination of a brassiere and girdle (Lynn, 2014, p. 220). However, as its name suggests, the corselet shares a number of similarities with the corset. The former is visually akin to the latter and is also somewhat similar in terms of design and construction. Yet, the corselet is also notably different. It is by no means a replica. While the corset was constructed of tightly woven material, knit or elasticized panels run between some of the stays of the corselet.

The corselet was central to obtaining the silhouette of the New Look; it shapes the whole of the torso - molding the bust, cinching the waist, and rounding hip. Pairing a girdle or waist cincher with a strapless brassiere could modify similar parts of women's bodies. However, these combinations lack the continuous line of the corselet, which results in a very specific appearance and physical experience.

The corselet is also one of the most notable designs within women's foundation garments from the mid-20th century. It is perhaps only second to the "bullet bra" that emerged during the 1940s. The most well-known corselet was the "Merry Widow" by Warner's, released in 1952 (Figures 1). It is so iconic that subsequent iterations from other brands were generically referred to as 'merry widows.' However, despite being a recognizable part of postwar culture, minimal research on the corselet has actually been done.

Purpose of the study

This study had several goals. As a study of dress history, it sought to offer a deeper understanding of women's foundation garments through an in-depth examination of one notable design, the corselet. I examined both the literal and symbolic functions of the corselet, as well as how each was shaped by and reflects the culture.

My research also challenges some existing interpretations of women's experiences during the post-WWII era. Previous research argues that women were oppressed by and contained within the traditional feminine ideals of the period, such as domesticity and maternity. Much of the research also suggests women's dress was complicit in this containment, particularly foundation garments. I believe my findings call into question these interpretations and narrative - which suggest traditionally feminine traits, aspects of dress and roles have solely negative meanings. My interpretation of the corselet also helps to position it and other mid-20th century foundation garments within the ongoing practice of body modification with dress. This indicates the continued relevance of the subject.

Statement of Purpose, Relationships, and Research Questions

This research sought to explore and better articulate the functions and meanings of the corselet during the post-World War II era. To do so, I compared the corselet and other foundation garments from the same period to determine the varying functions (both literal and abstract) unique to the corselet. I also examined various cultural media depicting the corselet to interrogate and support my observations of the objects. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How did the corselet physically change during this period? Which aspects of the design, if any, remained the same?
2. How was the corselet (intended to be) specifically or uniquely used? How was this different from other foundation garments?
3. What insights does the corselet offer into post-WWII culture? What were the corselet's symbolic functions or meanings within that culture, particularly beyond those ascribed to foundation garments by previous research?

Overview of Methodology

These questions were explored through a material culture study based on the process outlined by Prown (1982), also taking into consideration Zimmerman's (1981) suggestions on comparing groups of objects. This study was also shaped by Riello's (2009) examination of the relationship between material culture and historical narratives, particularly his discussion of using objects to study the "history of things." This interdisciplinary approach involved "discussions and confrontations" of established narratives through examination of multiple material objects and additional sources (p. 33).

A range of objects from a number of sources were examined and analyzed. However, I relied heavily on resources at the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS), namely their large Hollywood Vassarette collection. I also utilized the large archive of supporting documentations in MNHS's library. Through the research process other written and visual sources were also identified and analyzed as external evidence - such as advertisements or dress advice - in order to explore the findings from the objects and to position them within their cultural and historical contexts.

Benefits of This Study

Dress History

This study benefits dress historians. It continues the current shift within the field away from solely researching couture and elite dress by researching mass-produced foundation garments worn by a variety of women. I conducted my research in a rigorous way: justifying, carefully documenting, and critically examining the whole of my research process. It is my hope

that the resulting work highlights the value of dress as a primary historical source and encourages its continued use.

Given the intimate connections between inner and outer garments, my findings add to the field's understanding of dress from this era, more generally. The insights gained about foundation garments from this period could be utilized in studies on other eras, considering the overall trajectory of this class of objects. The findings could also inform studies of foundation garments during the decades that followed, just as an understanding of 19th and early-20th century designs influenced this study.

Other Fields

Researchers in other fields also benefit from this research. My findings could be used in fields like history, cultural studies, and women's and gender studies. I built upon the work of other material culture scholars. My work further reiterates the value of object-based research. I hope it highlights the importance of studying mundane things rather than merely focusing on "good design" (Attfield, 2000). By examining everyday objects, like dress, we are able to study aspects of a culture so ingrained they are not overtly expressed. These often-overlooked *things* are frequently better indicators of the true nature of the culture than other written and visual sources (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 67; Prown, 1980, pp. 199–200, 1982, p. 2).

Beyond Academia: Raising Questions and Encouraging Dialogue

In addition to challenging the narratives surrounding women's dress and lives during the postwar era, I hope I have challenged the notion of history in general. That is to say, I hope readers begin to question what we privilege as a worthy subject of historical inquiry. History has focused traditionally on the accomplishments of men, the experiences of the vast majority of women deemed as less important. The choice of this subject for a doctoral dissertation suggests that what some might deem trivial aspects of women's lives are, in fact, not only worthy of study but have the potential to make incredibly valuable contributions to our broader understanding of history and culture.

It is my sincere hope that this research encourages dialogue about the material means through which *we all* construct and convey our gender identities. Examining the complexities and dualities within the corselet paves the way for other research within academia and discussions within society that begin to question views of gender as a dichotomy - challenging the fundamental premise of gender difference and inequality.

Definitions

Dress: “An assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 15).

Corset: “A waist- and torso-shaping garment stiffened with boning and tightened with laces, typically encasing the bust and the hips for an hourglass figure” (Lynn, 2014, p. 220). Additionally, the body of the foundation garment is generally made of tightly woven, unyielding material.

Corselet: “A one-piece [foundation] garment incorporating brassiere and girdle, with shoulder straps and integral suspenders” (Lynn, 2014, p. 220). See definition of girdle. In this study, a “corselet” must have boning (also referred to as stays) but may not have shoulder straps.

Foundation garments: “Any undergarment that provides breast support and [/or] shaping of the waist and hips” (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 187). The term will be used to refer to groups of body-modifying undergarments, more generally.

Girdle: “A [foundation] garment extending from the waist, down over the hips to the upper thighs, usually with integral suspenders. Made with reinforced elasticized panels and sometimes reinforced with boning” (Lynn, 2014, p. 221).

Feminine: “characteristic of or appropriate or unique to women” (“Feminine,” 2016). *Feminine dress* refers to dress deemed appropriate or unique (traditionally worn only by) women. *Femininity* is a noun that refers to the larger, culturally constructed group of these characteristics. The adjective and the noun are contrasted by *masculine* and *masculinity*, respectively.

Sex vs. Gender: There is a complex debate regarding the differences between the two terms. For the sake of this proposal, sex will be used to refer to the biological difference between *females* and *male*. *Gender* will be used to refer to “behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex” (“Gender,” 2016). This association is viewed as culturally constructed. The terms *women* and *men* will be used when speaking of *gender*.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This research sought to *explore and better articulate the functions and meanings of the corselet during the post-World War II era*. The following chapter reviews existing literature on women's foundation garments from dress history, as well as other fields like history, women's history, cultural studies, and film studies. I begin with a general review of sources discussed to highlight tensions and the persisting second-wave feminist viewpoint that shapes much of the research on foundation garments - particularly the corset.

I review the information and insights gained from previous research on women's foundation garments from the mid-19th century into mid-20th century, focusing more heavily on the Victorian and post-WWII eras. I have structured this literature to suggest a shift from concrete materiality to abstract meaning, hoping to highlight the dynamic relationship between the two and mirror the material culture process. Initially, I focus on findings related to the design, style, and material qualities of the objects. I also consider how the design was central to women's use of foundation garments. Then, I examine the foundation garments' more abstract or symbolic functions within the culture.

I review scholars' interpretations of the meaning of foundation garments at two points, after the section on 19th century (Victorian) corsets and following discussions of subsequent 20th century foundations. The latter considers all periods reviewed but focuses on overarching themes relevant to my study of the post-WWII corselet: freedom and restriction, public and private, and modesty and sexuality. I also note connections between interpretations of 19th and 20th century foundations, when relevant.

In addition to discussions of women's foundation garments during different periods, I also review previous research on cultural depictions of the corset and other foundations, such as advertisements and films. Such media appears to have both reflected and shaped the meanings of the objects they portrayed. This section is structured in a similar concrete to abstract fashion in order to consider topics from advertising techniques to the cultural implications of advertisements and films.

I identify several insights gained from the previous research, which guided my own study. I then review additional scholarly work that also shaped my research on the corselet. I discuss the material culture methodology, providing a general overview and information about its specific use in dress history. Similarly, I consider both the semiotic approach and post-structuralist assumptions that guided this material culture study. I conclude with a summary of the chapter.

Varying Views in the Literature Reviewed

The corset has been a component of women's (and at time men's) dress since the late Renaissance. It is also "probably [one of] the most controversial garments in the history of fashion," subject of a multitude of - often conflicting - interpretations (Steele, 2001, p. 1). Several scholars have noted feminists', both first- and second-wave, longstanding views of the Victorian corset as a means of oppression (e.g. Fields, 2007, p. 48). Many of the texts that will be discussed fall quite decidedly within that category (Banner, 2006; Roberts, 1977; Summers, 2003). Given my noted experiences with and view of the corset, I felt it was particularly important to consider research that reflected this point of view. Other scholars, some of whom draw from feminist theories in varying degrees, acknowledge the complexities and contradictions within the Victorian corset. This is clearly reflected in the sources examined that focus heavily on the corset.

Roberts considers the role of the corset in defining gender. She suggests Victorian women's clothing, especially the corset, "projected the message of a willingness to conform to the submissive-masochistic pattern [and] helped mold female behavior" (p. 557). While her research is approximately four decades old it is still valuable to consider, given that it has influenced subsequent research (often cited in more recent sources) and reflects the "traditional hostile view" of the corset held by many second-wave feminist scholars (Kunzle, 2006, p. xi).

Summers shares several Roberts' assertions about the corset. She examines the role of the corset in constructing and maintaining middle-class Victorian femininity. She seeks to "identify and tease out ways that the corset oppressed women, physically and emotionally" (p. 5). While she holds what might be considered second-wave feminist views, she does at least somewhat acknowledge this bias in stating her goal.

Much of Steele's cultural history of the corset centers on the Victorian period. However, unlike Roberts and Summers, she posits women's experiences with the corset were far more complex. She argues, "Corsetry was not one monolithic, unchanging experience that all unfortunate women experienced before being liberated by feminism. It was a situated practice that meant different things to different people at different times" (p. 1). Steele seeks to dispel many myths about the corset through her examination of a wide variety of sources. Her work and some of the other research examined (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002) are excellent examples of using objects as primary sources - providing not only crucial knowledge but also guiding the methods used in my own research.

The Victorian corset is also examined within a broader examination of women's dress and feminine ideals (Banner, 2006; Lynn, 2014; Thesander, 1997). The corset is also discussed in relation to fetishism (Kunzle, 2006; Steele, 1997). The corset has played a longstanding role in

fetish fashion and does to this day. While I focused on widespread or fashionable foundation garment use, I briefly touch on corsetry as a fetish in relation to other research that, these scholars suggest, misrepresent most Victorian women's use of the corset. These sources also reveal valuable information about the specifics of general corset use, which is contrasted with that of the more extreme fetishists.

Of these texts, Banner's work reflects some of the strongest second-wave feminist views of foundation garments like the corset and other aspects of women's dress. This is not surprising, given that she earned her doctorate and began teaching women's history during the 1960s - alongside that feminist movement. This is by no means a criticism; it is a reality of researching culture. Like Banner, my work is also undoubtedly influenced by the context surrounding me and my own third- and fourth-wave feminist views.

As noted in the quote from Kunzle above, this view is apparent in much of the previous research on the subject. Scholarship on the Victorian corset and other foundation garments worn by women frequently reflect "hostile" interpretations in line with a second-wave femininst viewpoint (p. xi). Interestingly, Kunzle and others like Thesander, who also tends to view women's dress through a more positive lens, offer harsh interpretations of foundation garments from certain eras. This is equally (if not even more) notable, indicating the persisting negative narrative surrounding this aspect of women's dress.

Other scholars focus more heavily on foundation garments during various parts of the 20th century. The research comes out of a variety of fields, including dress history (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002), history (Fields, 2007; Nelson, 2007), cultural studies (Burns-Ardolino, 2007), and film studies (Dione, 2009). In addition to the scholars already discussed, their work was also valuable to and informed my study.

Farrell-Beck and Gau provide an in-depth study of the history of one foundation garment: the brassiere. In addition to being rigorously conducted - examining objects and archives, as well as using other qualitative methods like interviews - their work is incredibly valuable because it offers a differing perspective than most discourse on the brassiere. In the introduction, they write:

> Some previous writers have presented fashion as a burden from which women ought to be 'set free.' We perceive fashion and the businesses that provide fashion goods in a different way. Women used fashion as entertainment, self-creation, and everyday art. As consumers, women were free to reject unacceptable styles, including the long skirts of 1922 and the sack dresses of 1957 (p. xiv).

They acknowledge their own biases in how they view dress and fashion. The dress historians also suggest women's active roles during periods that have been traditionally discussed in terms

of both emancipation (1920s) or restriction (1950s). The above passage reflects their deep understanding and knowledge of the subject, which affords them the ability to consider the complexities of dress. Their work reflects a more nuanced understanding of the subject.

Fields examines 20th century intimate apparel as a means of studying women's history. She considers garments, including drawers, corsets, girdles, and bras, as well as less object-specific topics like the significance of the color black and advertisements. The historian's work highlights the complexities of foundation garments and intimate apparel, more generally. At times, the text reflects a second-wave feminist viewpoint or bias - focusing more heavily on how these objects functioned as a negative force within women's lives. This is not necessarily surprising, as Fields was a student of Banner and the acknowledgements section in the book indicates that the historian played an influential role throughout the research process (p. xiii).

Other scholars (Burns-Ardolino, 2007; Dione, 2009; Nelson, 2007) are largely focused on foundation garments as a means of feminine oppression. Burns-Ardolino acknowledges how her own experiences shaped her approach to foundation garments from the 20th into the 21st century. However, Dione and Nelson also very clearly have strong biases that influence their research on the mid-20th century. Unlike Burns-Ardolino, they do not acknowledge their motives and biases.

These sources, when examined together, indicate a number of both changing and persisting qualities within the Victorian corset and 20th century foundation garments. Previous research offers valuable information about the objects and insights into their uses or functions within women's lives. Scholarship also highlights several notable (often contradictory) meanings associated with the corset and other foundation garments. These areas of previous research are discussed below, following a justification of the period of dress history I chose to focus on and a brief discussion of what was known about the corselet based on previous research.

Foundation Garments from the Victorian Era into the 1960s

While one could argue that any research on women's foundation garments is valuable to this study, I limited my discussion to the Victorian Era (mid- to late-19th century) into the 1960s. Given noted associations of the Victorian Era with the Post-WWII era, it is crucial to consider previous research on the former. This area of women's foundation garments has been more heavily investigated by researchers, offering comparatively more findings to consider than other periods. Research on the Post-WWII era is also crucial to consider, as this is immediate context surrounding the objects I studied.

I also review research on the decades between the two periods in order to position the corselet within the larger historical and material trajectories of foundation garments. I have

divided this research into two groups. I will also briefly touch on the 1960s to show how this decade is often positioned opposite the 1950s, as well as highlight research that challenges these assumptions.

Beginning at the End: The Corselet

Prior to discussing approximately a century of foundation garment history, it is beneficial to provide a background to the main design researched. The corselet emerged amidst the shift away from the corset towards the brassiere and girdle. Brassiere saleswomen observed that women resisted the combination of foundations because the separate garments segmented women's bodies. This was interpreted as a desire for "physiological and subjective oneness" (Fields, 2007, p. 91). One of the manufacturers' responses seems to have been the early corselet, released around 1919.

Beyond psychological reasons, the corselet was also effective in creating a smooth line from bust to hips (Fields, 2007, p. 91; Thesander, 1997, p. 112). Fields argues that while the garment was less rigid, promoted as "a solution to the corset problem," it still bound the torso and countered the freedom offered by new, looser-fitting outer garments (p. 91). This interplay between freedom and control is apparent in wider discussions foundation garments from all the eras reviewed shortly.

Based on existing research and surveys of museums' collections, corselets were produced in the decades that followed. For example, The Museum at FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) has a Cadolle corselet from approximately 1933 ("Cadolle corselet, c.1933," 2014).

The corselet continued to be used into the 1950s, when it became increasingly popular. The most well-known and influential example is the "Merry Widow" by Warner's, released in 1952. This corselet is discussed by several scholars as being central to constructing the quintessential 1950s silhouette (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 126; Fields, 2007, pp. 267–271; Kunzle, 2006, p. 225; Lynn, 2014, p. 108). Like the earlier corselets, this version shaped the bust, waist, and hips without the bulge created by separate foundation garments.

Corselets during the post-WWII era were visually similar to the Victorian corset. Fields describes them as a "reimagining of the Victorian corset… [both a] throwback and an up-to-date means of eroticizing the female body via restriction" (p. 267). These 19th and 20th century foundations differed materially in several other ways. However, this does not appear to have been examined.

Previous scholarship indicates misconceptions about the corselet. For example, Banner's (2006) assertion that for special occasions women wore "boned corsets, called 'merry widows,' which they tight laced" is wrong and misleading (p. 420). While the initial patented design did lace

up (US Patent 166,760), most “Merry Widows” and other corselets closed via hooks-n-eyes or zippers. Furthermore, while the original design did have a woven ribbon around the waist, the elasticized panels make it impossible to “tight-lace” a “Merry Widow.” Banner is striving hard to make connections between the 19th corset and 20th century corselet. That is not to say that association with the corset did not impact the corselet (Kunzle, 2006, p. 225). However, the two differed materially and were worn in very different contexts.

The Victorian Corset

The corset is intricately intertwined with broader discussions of dress and gender within a culture. Thus, existing research on the corset is valuable to consider when studying many aspects of women’s dress and, arguably, crucial when examining the various 20th century foundation garments that are descendants of the corset. Extant literature on the boned foundation is especially important when examining the corselet - whose very name suggests the relationship between the two objects.

Despite the corset’s noted long history (Steele, 2001, p. 1), I focus primarily on the corsets worn during the Victorian era - which ranged from the mid- to late-19th century. There is a strong visual connection between the designs of the Victorian corset and the mid-20th century corselet. Furthermore, post-WWII culture has been paralleled with the previous era and characterized as reflecting “resurgent Victorianism” (Banner, 2006, p. 417). With this in mind, previous research on the Victorian corset was incredibly valuable to this study.

The Victorian Era lasted until Queen Victoria's death in 1901, at which point she was succeeded by her son Edward - hence the “Edwardian Era” at the beginning of the 20th century. This section considers the hourglass Victorian corset into the 1890s, just prior to the shift to the straight-front corset and cultural changes that shaped women’s lives. Both are discussed in the next section.

Designs and Styles of Victorian Corsets

While the corset was widely used during the Victorian era it was by no means a static object. They extended to various points above and below the waist throughout the 19th century (Figure 2). The design of the corset was influenced by the designs of women’s fashionable dress. For example, “from the late 1840s to the 1860s skirts were full and bell-shaped, at which point corsets were relatively short and not particularly tightly laced, since the massive skirts made all waists look proportionally small” (Lynn, 2014, p. 86). The corset was not only impacted by women’s use (lacing) of the object but also by the outer garments. The design of the corset changed as hips became more visible during the various bustle periods (1970-1890) and silhouettes narrowed, especially with the fitted cuirass bodices (1878-1883) (Tortora & Eubank,

2010, p. 390). In the 1880s, corsets became notably longer, molding the hips and lower abdomen (Lynn, 2014, p. 90).

Corsets for specific activities. Changes in women's lives also influenced the designs of the corsets. Women's participation in physical activities increased throughout the latter half of the 19th century. In many instances, the corsets women generally wore did not meet their physical needs for these activities. Manufacturers responded with new designs, arguably to ensure that the practice of corsetry continued (Summers, 2003, pp. 152–154).

Lynn (2014) discusses a surviving ready-to-wear corset from 1883. It was intended to be worn for a variety of "healthful and exhilarating exercises as Rowing, Riding, Driving, [and] Lawn Tennis," citing the advertisement. The corset's bones are sewn to the exterior of the corset (a common practice starting in the 1880s) and encased in leather to protect outer garments, in case the bones snap "under the pressure of physical exertion" (p. 88). Summers explores the impact of women's participation in gymnastics, also noting designs created for this activity (p. 155).

Shorter, underbust corsets were popular during the 1890s and into the 1900s. They generally come to points beneath the bust and over the abdomen. Lynn notes, during the 1890s this style was worn for activities like riding horses or bicycles (p. 128). This cut offered greater "ease of movement." One style of underbust corset was the ribbon corset. Interestingly, dress reformists favored this design. It was made of strips of satin ribbon and only had boning on the front, sides, and back. Granted, this style, like other underbust corsets, still impacted women's posture and could be tightly cinched (p. 92).

Other notable details. In addition to changes in the overall design, colored and more decorative corsets became increasingly popular in the 1880s and 1890s (Lynn, 2014, p. 126; Thesander, 1997, p. 90). The "slot-and-stud busk" (patented in 1848) made the corset easier to put on and take off, no longer needing to be unlaced (Lynn, 2014, p. 126; Steele, 2001, p. 43). In addition to providing more functionality, innovations also addressed fashionable needs. The "spoon busk" used from the mid-1870s to late-1880s, "curve[d] fashionable over the mid-sections without - it was thought - pressing on the internal organs" (Lynn, 2014, p. 88). Such changes better accommodated women's bodies and lives.

On the other hand, innovations like steel eyelets meant that corsets could be laced tighter as the 19th century progressed (Lynn, 2014, p. 128; Steele, 2001, p. 44; Thesander, 1997, p. 90). Features like coutille and other woven materials around the waist, or "a cinching 'belt'," also allowed the corset to be tightly cinched. Yet, this also had practical benefits, helping to reduce "breakage at stress points" like the narrowest part of the concave waist (Lynn, 2014, p. 90). The Industrial Revolution also greatly impacted the production of the corset, resulting in a greater

number of styles at different price ranges during the latter half of the century (Steele, 2001, p. 44; Thesander, 1997, p. 88).

General Use of the Corset

A primary function of the corset has been to visually differentiate between men and women, as well as to construct gender difference. Some see the corset as "enormously exaggerating" only "minimal differences" between the sexes (Roberts, 1977, p. 555). Others position this practice within the longer history of differentiation with dress - often through different means at different times (Kidwell, 1989; Steele, 2001). Men had worn corsets or corset-like garments and continued to wear them during the 19th century for certain more strenuous occasions (Steele, 2001, p. 49). However, the less frequent, more practical use should not be confused with women's adoption of corsets during the Victorian era.

Women's use of the corset will be discussed in the following sections - discussing the foundation garments role in body modification, in differentiating between classes, and in feminine rites of passage. I then touch on opposition to the corset during the Victorian era. I also note several areas of disagreements within previous research on how Victorian women used the corset - policing (or forced use) of the corset and tight-lacing practices. These disagreements begin to touch on interpretations of the corset and illustrate the blurred boundary between the literal uses of the object and its signified meanings.

Body modification and beauty ideals. Another primary, if not *the* primary, use of the corset was to shape the body - generally into the established beauty ideal of the culture. While the preferred figure of the Victorian era did change - shifting from a "fragile and submissive" to more "voluptuous" ideal - the hourglass silhouette persisted (Banner, 2006, pp. 69, 186). However, the narrow waist is not specific to the Victorian Era. Rather, it relates to a longstanding hip-to waist ratio (.7) that is reflected in many feminine body ideals (Etcoff, 1999, p. 193; Steele, 2001, p. 165). The rigid boned Victorian corset redistributed flesh to make the waist narrower, while enlarging the busts and hips; this silhouette, with its slim waist and firm torso also had particularly strong connotations of youth (Kunzle, 2006, p. 15). The corset was also used to correct and conceal physical flaws (Steele, 2001, p. 54). However, it should be noted Victorians preferred the "naturally small" woman to the corseted woman (Steele, 1997, pp. 64–65).

The ability to modify the body into the current ideal undoubtedly motivated women's adoption of the foundation garment. This was so much so that "virtually all free women in the United States wore corsets" (Fields, 2007, p. 47). However, use was by no means uniform from woman to woman and even changed for individuals based on their immediate context. For some women, most likely those of means, the type of corset varied throughout the day, from soft to rigid

(Kunzle, 2006, p. 23). The extent to which the foundation garment was laced also varied and depended on context, cinched tightest during formal, public occasions (Roberts, 1977, p. 558; Steele, 2001, p. 108).

Attracting a husband. Many scholars agree women modified their bodies to fit prevailing physical ideals in order to attract potential suitors (Banner, 2006, p. 151; Roberts, 1977, p. 564; Steele, 2001, p. 51; Summers, 2003, p. 22; Thesander, 1997, pp. 94–96). In addition to appearing attractive, body modification with the Victorian corset also signified desirable abstract qualities like respectability. These functions will be discussed shortly in terms of the corsets conveyed meanings. However, a particularly notable use of the corset was to emulate physical or beauty ideals that suggested illness and even death.

Affecting illness and death. Banner (2006) and Summers (2003) argue the corset was central in constructing the morbidity idealized in Victorian Culture. They cite a variety of cultural depictions in the visual arts and literature to illustrate the ideal. The ideal centered on the visual effects of illnesses - particularly Tuberculosis - as well as death (Banner, 2006, pp. 78–79; Summers, 2003, pp. 125–139). Summers suggests healthy middle-class women used the corset to affect “physical vulnerability or debilitation” (p. 125).

Both discuss fainting at great length, particularly during formal occasions like balls - when corsets were laced tighter and warmer settings exacerbated the corset’s effects on the body. They also relate the unconsciousness of fainting with death. The use of the corset in this manner within these public settings, where men and women interacted, suggests women used it to appear attractive by adhering to the cultural ideal. Both argue this practice was, as Summers writes, “[the] physical manifestation of cultural imperative and values that determined passivity - to the point of unconsciousness - as the epitome of an ideal” (p. 137).

Both Banner and Summers offer very negative interpretations of the Victorian corset - viewing it as an oppressive means of enforcing passivity. However, their observations should not be dismissed. Other scholars have discussed Victorian culture's observable preoccupation with death, seen in cultural artifacts like mourning clothes and gothic literature (Fields, 2007, pp. 134, 142). Similarly, the popularity of fainting couches during this era also provides evidence of fainting or feigning ill in public. However, other scholars have challenged several claims made by Banner and Summers about the physical effects of the corset.

Physical effects of corset use. Some scholars suggest the corset lead not only to minor, temporary ills like fainting but to many very serious ailments (Banner, 2006; Roberts, 1977; Summers, 1999, 2003). Roberts suggests the suffering caused by the corset was central to Victorian feminine ideals (pp. 556). She cites an 1870 source that suggests, “100 illnesses [were]

caused by tight-lacing," going on to discuss various criticisms from the medical profession (p. 561-562). Similarly, Summers (2003) cites numerous medical, feminist, and popular writing to argue that women's use of the corset, especially when tight-laced, caused numerous "female complaints" or health issues (p. 89). However, both researchers seem to take the written accounts at face value.

Steele (2001) challenges Summers' (1999) analyses of the medical texts (p. 68). She acknowledges some of the illnesses discussed by Summers did occur, such as reduced lung capacity, fainting, and (in extreme cases) cracked ribs. Steele also points out that the corset did not cause scoliosis and the support of boned garments helped to treat the illness. On the other hand, because the corset physically supported the upper body, prolonged use could cause muscle atrophy and increased reliance on wearing the corset (pp. 69-71). However, the adoption of fashionable dress despite its negative physical effect is by no means specific to the Victorian era or to women. Langan and Watkins (1987) examined the physiological effects men's neckwear: neckties and shirt collars. "67% were found to be wearing neckwear that was tighter than their neck circumference" and this restriction of the neck impacted their "visual performance" (p. 67). It is misleading to position Victorian women's use of the corset and the physical effects on the garment as unique instances within wider dressing practices.

The corset was often "blamed" for many other illnesses (pp. 68-72). Steele also argues the corset was never a cause of death. Rather, doctors may have attributed cause of death to it for lack of other explanation (p. 79). Overall, Steele's research suggests corset use did not result in most of the illnesses attributed to the garment. This stresses the need to critically analyze primary data within its historical and cultural context, taking into account the biases and motives of the original writer. That being said, the corset's association with illness and death undoubtedly contributed to its meanings and may have encouraged its wider use, given the ideals of the period.

Varied Use by Groups of Women

Class differentiation. The functions and types of corsets also varied within different groups of women. This is apparent in discussions of the corset and status. The use of corsets to differentiate between classes dates back to sixteenth century stays (Steele, 2001, p. 13; Thesander, 1997, p. 85). After 1850, working- and middle-class women wore corsets - in part to due to the increased access to corsets that resulted from the Industrial Revolution (Steele, 2001, p. 45; Summers, 2003, p. 11; Thesander, 1997, p. 88). Thesander points out that, unlike other fashion, the corset was not abandoned once it was adopted by the lower class. One could argue that this illustrates the importance of the corset in women's lives.

While connotations of class and respectability persisted, the corset's functions differed for lower- and middle-class women. Some scholars, drawing from Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), suggest the corseted woman was intended to communicate her husband's or father's wealth because they were literally unable to do manual labor (Roberts, 1977, p. 566; Thesander, 1997, p. 85). Steele (2001) points out this was not true, given that many women worked while wearing corsets. However, the corset did signify leisure and gentility. Lower class women appropriated such meanings (p. 49).

Summers (2003) explores class differences at length and suggests the corset was used by middle-class women to "strengthen and protect their class hegemony'. Working-class women adopted the corset to "obfuscate or escape their working-class origins" (pp. 10, 15). She notes the corsets worn differed in terms of cost and the quality of the materials, although not in design (p. 20). Middle-class women also tended to tighten their corsets more than working women; however, they had to be careful to also differentiate themselves from fashionable *demi-mondaines* or courtesans (Summers, 2003, p. 22; Thesander, 1997, p. 87). This highlights the corset's ability to convey both class and morality, but such communication was precarious.

Rites of passage. Use of the corset also varied based on women's ages. It played a particularly important role in the lives of young women, functioning as a rite of passage (Banner, 2006, p. 150; Kunzle, 2006, p. 22; Roberts, 1977, pp. 559–561; Steele, 2001, p. 49; Summers, 2003, pp. 64–67). Corsetry for young girls was established between 1860 and 1880, seen in advertisements that promote versions for girls as young as a year or two. The trend is also discussed in a number of contemporary women's magazines and newspapers, as well as first-wave feminist discourse (Summers, 2003, p. 64). This practice differed from the 18th century, when children wore miniature versions of adult clothes. Instead, young girls donned "healthy" corsets that were not "physically restrictive" (Steele, 2001, p. 49).

Summers notes this practice emerged as breeching (a sartorial transition from boyhood to manhood) declined. She argues the shift indicates the female gender had become more "fluid" and needed to be "confine[d] and control[ed]" - citing the first-wave feminist movement and the resulting anxieties about gender roles as the cause (p. 67). While other cultural factors most likely came into play, there is agreement amongst scholars that wearing a corset was intended to prepare girls for their expected social roles as women (Banner, 2006, p. 150; Steele, 2001, p. 49; Summers, 2003, p. 64). This went beyond initial adoption, extending into young adulthood as girls in their mid- to late-teens transitioned to women's boned corsets as they became "introduce[ed] into adult society" at functions like balls (Banner, 2006, p. 150). In addition to aging and rites of

passage, the corset also served specific functions for women during another life experience: pregnancy.

Pregnancy. Several sources examined discuss the unique functions of the Victorian corset during pregnancy (Kunzle, 2006, p. 123; Lynn, 2014, p. 132; Steele, 2001, p. 76; Summers, 2003, p. 60). While motherhood was idealized during this era, pregnancy was viewed as "somewhat repugnant and best kept out of view" (Summers, 2003, p. 22). Many women used the laced, rigid foundation garment to hide their pregnancy, allowing them to continue working or remain within society - depending on their class (Kunzle, 2006, p. 123; Summers, 2003, p. 60). The corseted pregnant body was a concern for both doctors and dress reformers, potentially harming the mother's reproductive system or the baby (Lynn, 2014, p. 132; Steele, 2001, p. 76; Summers, 2003, p. 60). Miscarriages did occur. However, it has been suggested some women deliberately laced their corsets tight in order to abort the child - lacking other means to prevent or end pregnancies (Kunzle, 2006, p. 123; Steele, 2001, p. 76; Summers, 2003, p. 60).

There were also arguments for corset use during pregnancy. Summers cites contemporary discourse that suggests women's bodies were viewed as inherently weak and pregnancy further weakened it. Thus, support - in the form of a corset - was needed (p. 60). Lynn notes the emergence of a "safe" pregnancy corset, discussing a surviving example in the collection at the V&A (p. 132). While these corsets were still boned, they had added laces up the sides and some had openings over the breasts for nursing. Women also wore corsets in hope of returning to their prenatal bodies, a practice that continues to reemerge and be discussed during the 21st century (Flam, 2013; Nathman, 2016). The pregnant and postpartum bodies, with their full waists, were "the antithesis of femininity"; corseting of the body was intended to bring back the narrow waist and the body's "seemingly virginal state" (Summers, 2003, p. 60).

19th century opposition. Despite this widespread use, it is important to note some women opposed the corset, including dress reformers and those involved in the Aesthetic Movement (Fields, 2007, p. 50; Lynn, 2014, p. 130; Steele, 2001, p. 61; Thesander, 1997, pp. 98–100). Some objections center on "perceived dangers" of wearing the corset, like a rib puncturing an organ (Lynn, 2014, p. 130). Dress reformers believed clothing should be utilitarian and not decorative, viewing men's clothing as "intrinsically superior" and more rational (Steele, 2001, p. 61). They felt fashion was frivolous; however, Steele points out this overlooks the fact many women may have experienced pleasure from fashion and dress. There were softer, less restrictive alternatives to the corset available during the 19th century (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 9–10; Lynn, 2014, p. 130; Summers, 2003, pp. 152–155). However, these foundation

garments were never widely accepted, as they did not fit within established fashions (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 9–10; Thesander, 1997, pp. 98–100).

Disagreement in Regarding Use

Policing. Several scholars move beyond considering *how* the corset was used to examining *why* it was used in these ways. With regards to the question of adoption, there is a clear division between feminist scholars and those with a deeper knowledge of dress history. Feminists' criticisms tend to view the corset as a means of maintaining "hetero-patriarchal dominance" (Summers, 2003, p. 8). Banner (2006) suggests the corset served as a means of constructing and reinforcing "restrictive, middle-class Victorian views of women" and its adoption was a means of embodying the "purity, piety, domesticity and submission" idealized during the era (p. 80). Summers echoes Banner's largely negative perspective, noting the corset served as a "coercive device" (p. 8). Their and others' (e.g. Roberts, 1977) interpretations cast Victorian women as passive victims.

However, Steele (2001) strongly opposes the interpretation of the Victorian corset as a means of "policing" women and enforcing gender difference. The dress historian calls out both Banner and Summers work, suggesting their view "is ultimately unconvincing" (p. 35). She goes on to argue women were not forced by men to wear corsets. In fact, much of the contemporary opposition to the corset came from men in places of power (e.g. doctors). Rather, women were "kept" (in the more immediate sense) in corsets by other women, mainly their mothers. These older women "enforced sartorial norms" to "maximize beauty and a sense of propriety" - both essential in attracting a husband and securing young women's economic futures. (p. 51). There is disagreement regarding how this was done - more specifically, how tightly the corset was laced to appear attractive to a potential suitor.

Tightlacing. Some sources suggest Victorian women went to extreme lengths to reduce their waists using corsets. Banner (2006), in particular, spends a considerable amount of time discussing the exact dimensions 19th century women sought to obtain. She comments, "Fashion decreed much more than simply wearing a corset. The imperative to thinness included exact dimensions that were only achieved by tight lacing" (p. 73). Banner and others (Roberts, 1977; Summers, 2003) argue the extremely constricted waist was central to not only physical beauty ideals, but also abstract notions of feminine attractiveness.

16-inch waist. Steele (2001) goes at great lengths to dispel the "myth" of the 16-inch waist - somewhat referring more generally to tightlacing. After examining and measuring numerous surviving 19th century corsets, she makes many valuable observations. For example, the size of the corset does not indicate how tightly it was laced and the size of the uncorseted

waist is also a factor (p. 102-104). She concludes that a sixteen-inch waist was not common. In her discussion of corsets within fetishism, she similarly observes that waists this small "can and do exist" but are "rare" (Steele, 1997, p. 61).

That being said, Banner's comments about "dimensions" should not be dismissed - even though the actual dimensions the historian names may be inaccurate. She also discusses the "competitive circumstances" surrounding women's corset use - noting that waist size was often compared to other women's (p. 24). The notion of competition helps to not only further explain corset use but also explain why some written sources are misleading. Steele (2001) suggests when women speak or write about the size of their waist, they may be referring to the size of their corset, not their actual waist (p. 102). This too suggests a sort of competition, a selective revealing of information.

Fetishistic use. It is crucial to separate fashionable corsetry from fetishistic corsetry during the Victorian era (Kunzle, 2006, p. 3; Steele, 1997, p. 58). As Steele astutely puts it, "although most Victorian women wore corsets, they were not usually tight-lacers with 16-inch waists any more than most women today wear fetish shoes with 7-inch heels" (p. 58). She goes on to further differentiate between the vastly different uses of the corset, focusing largely on the significance of it within the very specific fetish context. For example, she discusses the garments within Sadomasochism (S&M), functioning as "punishment" on the slave and "armor" for the dominant (p. 63). While the corset was most likely not used by women this way, Steele analysis reiterated the contextual and constructed meanings of the corset, which could be expanded to all corset use.

Questionable sources on corset use. Both Steele (1997, 2001) and Kunzle (2006) criticize written sources other scholars use to argue for the widespread practice of tightlacing, especially *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (*EDM*). Steele (1997) calls the journal "most suspect sources imaginable" and notes its "correspondents had very different priorities than those of the average Victorian woman" (p. 59). In her latter work, Steele (2001) examined over 150 letters from *EDM*. She questions whether they reflected most women's experiences or were even authentic (pp. 88-90). Yet other scholars, particularly those seeking to interpret the corset as a means of oppression (Banner, 2006; Roberts, 1977; Summers, 2003), use these letters as sources on general corsetry.

Interestingly, Roberts acknowledges the accounts in *EDM* may be "exaggerated" but then goes on to use them to support her discussion of children, education, and corsetry (p. 559). Tight-lacing boarding schools are a myth that has been perpetuated by scholarly literature (e.g. Banner, 2006; Roberts, 1977). Kunzle (2006) stresses that such accounts are "in the realm of fantasy" (p.

184). Steele (1997) also notes, "there is no reliable *external evidence*" of these practices and that "*internal evidence*" within the letters is often contradictory (p. 69) Previous use of *EDM*, like the medical sources discussed, suggest it is imperative that researchers critically examine the source of the information. It is also crucial to consider their own personal and cultural biases as they analyze sources from a different time than their own and try interpret or attribute them with meaning – either within the researchers' own immediate contexts or in the source's contemporary context (as my study primarily seeks to do).

Meanings of the Victorian Corset

Feminine respectability and eroticism. As touched on, the corset was used to convey idealized abstract qualities, such as morality and respectability. The foundation garment was central to a "respectable" appearance (Summers, 2003, p. 19; Thesander, 1997, p. 87). Furthermore, the uncorseted body was viewed as immodest, a sign of lacking or having "loose" morals (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 9; Roberts, 1977, p. 565). However, it was not simply wearing a corset but the way it was worn. As noted, middle-class women had to not only differentiate themselves from the lower class, but also from courtesans (Summers, 2003, p. 22). Some (e.g. Summers, 2003) view these requirements as negative, forcing women to adhere to precarious standards. On the other hand, Steele (2001) argues the respectability signified by the corset could have positive connotations for some women (p. 1).

All the sources examined note the corset also has erotic connotations. In addition to modifying the waist into a physically attractive shape, the corset also impacts the breast. It not only has the ability to make them more visually apparent but can also cause a "heaving bosom." This not only alludes to sexual arousal but also results in a physical sensation of breathlessness, which can actually heighten physical pleasure (Kunzle, 2006, p. 18). Because of the corset's presence next to and interaction with the female body, the foundation also becomes sexualized (Kunzle, 2006, p. 22; Steele, 2001, p. 114).

Interestingly, while their interpretations tend to align, Banner (2006, pp. 94, 97) suggests there is an "underlying" or "incipient" sexuality to the period's ideal but Summers' (2003, p. 122) views it as "overt". Both, however, view sexualization of the female body via the corset as objectifying women and as a means of forcing them into submissive roles. Steele suggests the corsets could have positive, empowering connotations for women. She discusses its "ambivalent role," stating:

> In order to be 'decently dressed' women had to wear corsets…Yet Victorian women…were well aware that the corset also functioned as an adjunct to sexual beauty. By simultaneously constructing an image of irreproachable propriety and one of blatant

> sexual allure, the corset allowed women to articulate sexual subjectivity in a socially acceptable way (p. 35).

Summers somewhat alludes to this function, acknowledging the corset as a signifier of both "transgressive and normative femininity" (p. 7). However, she seems hesitant to view the use of the garment in terms of women's conscious expression of their sexuality, preferring to see it as an instrument of feminine objectification.

Kunzle also explores seemingly contradictory meanings within the corseted female body, noting the foundation garment functioned as a form of protection - both literally for the body and abstractly in terms of the noted respectable appearance. Yet, the majority of corset designs leaves the "sexual nodes" exposed and their encapsulation of the body is sometimes equated to a "lover's embrace" (pp. 22-23).

Public and private. Discourse on the corset suggests interplay between public and private spheres, as well as seen and unseen bodies. Steele (2001) suggests the corsets dual functions, and seemingly contradictory meanings, arise from its "status as underwear" (p. 114). Fields (2007) makes similar observations while discussing intimate apparel more generally (p. 3). The body is clothed but is also in a state of undress. Worn directly next to the body, undergarments allude to its nakedness and hiding the body in this manner heightens arousal.

Freedom and control. The noted tension between feminine respectability and sexuality could be discussed in terms of freedom and control. Most Victorian corsets were very rigid foundation garments. The boned garment literally controlled the shape and movements of the body. Yet, this sartorial constriction allowed women the freedom to express and experience their sexuality *within* the restrictions of Victorian society.

In addition to containing the body within a feminine shape, the corset embodied traditional feminine ideals and encouraged the adoption of socially acceptable feminine roles. Steele (2001) notes repeated use of the word "control" in advertisements for foundation garments. In one sense, the word "refers to control over flabby, unsightly excessive flesh. It also implies a more comprehensive control of the body, sexuality, and desire" to conform all three to (patriarchal) cultural standards (p. 155). However, the corset also provided opportunities, or freedoms, to transgress gender norms.

Masculinization through the corset. The corset is generally viewed, both in previous scholarship and in popular culture, as a quintessential signifier of femininity, especially during the Victorian era. However, it also "embodies masculine associations" (Kunzle, 2006, p. 22). Such assertions go beyond the fact that both men and women modify their bodies at times with corsets.

The corset's blurring of the gender divide is apparent in its associations of strength and weakness. Some argue that the corset literally weakened the female body to signify an idealized weakness or fragility (Banner, 2006; Summers, 2003). However, the ability to endure the discomfort of the corset could be viewed as a type of strength. The boned garment is also a kind of literal and metaphorical armor (Fields, 2007, p. 3; Kunzle, 2006, p. 22). Associations with armor connote the strength to fight but also aggression, a traditionally masculine trait.

At times, the corset has been discussed as a form of physical and metaphorical discipline (e.g. Fields, 2007, p. 78). However, Steele (2001) argues that the corset also conveyed "self-discipline" or "self-control" - which has positive connotations (pp. 1, 13). Incidentally, such traits fall along the logical or male side of the divide.

Nead's (2002) discussion of the female nude helps to illustrate how the corset signifies masculinity. The art historian discusses the female body in art in relation to the *naked* and the *nude*. Building on concepts of gender difference and dichotomy, she notes how masculine *culture*, *mind*, and *logic* are defined in opposition of feminine *nature*, *body*, and *emotion*. Additionally, the male body is hard, while the female body is soft. However, through a process of containment, the *naked* female body is transformed into *nude*. It is molded into a hardened, logical, masculine form and becomes a part of high culture through its depiction as art (p. 7).

This concept could be extended to the rigid corset, which literally molds women's bodies into a symmetrical, logical form. In fact, Steele uses Nead's observations in her discussion of the eroticism of the corseted female body, also noting parallels to the ideal masculine body. While the former is controlled by a material corset the latter controlled by a "corset of muscles" (p. 137).

Thus, containment of the female body into a "feminine" hourglass form can be interpreted as a masculinization of the female body. Such claims could be challenged. Previous scholarship indicates the corset and its uses had predominantly feminine connotations. However, I have ended with this contradictory meaning to reiterate the many dualities embodied within the Victorian corset.

Final Thoughts on the Victorian Corset

These conflicting meanings and the variety of ways the corset functioned in different women's lives reinforces the notion that - while the corset was ubiquitous during the Victorian era - its cultural meaning was complex. This complexity is also apparent in discussions of the foundation garments that followed in the 20th century.

1900-1918: The "Decline" of the Corset

Women's dress shifted between several fashionable silhouettes during the early-20th century. Many cite changes in women's lives - such as increasing involvement in sports, exercise,

education, and work - as the cause of these sartorial shifts (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 1; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 8–9; Roberts, 1977, pp. 567–569). Various cultural movements are also attributed varying degrees of credit, including the dress reform and the Aesthetic movements (Banner, 2006, pp. 213–214; Fields, 2007, p. 50; Roberts, 1977, p. 567).

The turn of the century saw a shift away from the corseted-hourglass silhouette of the Victorian era towards new physical ideals. This was followed by what some refer to as a "decline" of the corset. The corset was increasingly abandoned after 1907, as Poiret released new fashions, but this fashion was not literally "corsetless" (Steele, 2001, p. 146). Nevertheless, manufacturers employed a variety of strategies to "keep" women in foundation garments during the early-20th century. "Old" styles of corsets were replaced by "new" designs, which were eventually called girdles to distance themselves from their predecessors (Fields, 2007, p. 59).

Designs and Styles

Straight-front corsets. In the late-19th century the straight-front or "health" corset was created (Fields, 2007, pp. 49–50; Lynn, 2014, pp. 96, 180). The shift was encouraged by discourse that *claimed* this new design was physically better for women's bodies, correcting issues created by the previous design (Steele, 2001, p. 84). It was intended "to free the diaphragm" (Lynn, 2014, p. 180). However, both designs equally restricted the waist, as well as other parts of the body (Banner, 2006, p. 216; Fields, 2007, pp. 49–50).

Gau (1999) conducted a study on the physical effects of the "hourglass and straight-front (health) corsets" (p. 63). The straight-front corset had a more negative impact on women – affecting their physical performance and balance, as well as causing back pain. Citing Gau's study, Steele comments, despite "decades, indeed centuries, of medical advice and appeals from dress reformer," the supposed health corset was in fact "more uncomfortable" (p. 85).

This corset, which is also referred to as the "S-bend corset", was the predominant fashion during most of the Edwardian era (1900-1910), declining around 1908 after the noted shift in fashion. Lynn notes that, like many aspects of this culture, corsets were often quite "luxurious and opulent." In addition to the use of fine materials, the design of the corsets was quite complex. Lynn also observes that, "as many as fifteen separate pieces each side, not including gussets" with various types of boning placed in different directions and firm steel busk (p. 96). The latter component was often lined with plush material to form a barrier between the interior of the corset and the body as it was molded into the fashionable S-bend.

Corsets for specific activities. While these corsets were widely used, they were by no means the only design available. A number of other corset and foundation garment designs were worn during this era. Corsets continued to be created for specific activities. As social dancing -

especially the tango - became increasingly popular women began to question and, at times, discard their restrictive foundation garments. Manufacturers responded accordingly. The “tango corset” was one of many corset designs that shaped the hips and thighs but allowed the upper body to move more freely (Fields, 2007, p. 47; Lynn, 2014, p. 98). Lynn discusses a circa 1914 example with a woven ribbon front panel, which “deliver[ed] both flexibility and a flat stomach” (p. 98). However, these new styles did not necessarily replace other corsets. Citing a 1914 *Vogue* article, Fields argues the number of corsets “needed” actually increased during this period (pp. 50-52).

1890s-1910s: breast supporters to brassieres. In their history of the brassiere, Farrell-Beck & Gau (2002) note the first breast supporters appeared in 1863 as a “more comfortable and healthful alternative to the constriction of the fashionable corset” (p. 1). However, this and other “proto-brassieres” were not widely used. Breast supporters and “bust bodices,” which were close to what became the brassiere, gained some acceptance in the 1890s (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 12; Thesander, 1997, p. 111). These foundations were worn on their own with empire waist hostess gowns or by Aesthetes, athletes, or pregnant women (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 12). However, these alternative foundation garments were not widely used until outer fashions changed.

Lynn (2014) discusses some designs that enhanced the bust during both the 1900s and 1910s. While the monobosom and Directoire silhouettes clearly differed, both featured full busts within softer bodices. At times padded “bust improvers” were used (p. 180). Other alternatives included the “bust extender.” Lynn discusses an example from 1910-1914 that uses boning running horizontally and vertically to enlarge the chest without padding and in accordance with the periods fashionable silhouette (p. 182). Farrell-Beck and Gau cite the princess style of 1907 as a major reason for the acceptance of brassieres, given that the structured S-bend or straight-front corset was too bulky for the “trim lines” of the new fashion (p. 21). The even soft bodices of the 1910s followed this silhouette, which looked better over brassieres and corsets cut below the waistline (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 21; Lynn, 2014, p. 143).

By 1917 the brassiere was largely a part of mainstream fashion (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 33). However, these means for supporting and modifying the breasts were not worn on their own, as was also the case with some 19th century designs. Rather, the brassiere was generally paired with foundation garments that shaped the lower body. However, this aspect of women's dress was also undergoing changes.

1910s: corsets to girdles. There was not a definitive shift from corset to girdle. Early iterations of the girdle can be traced to the early-1900s “but the term itself began to assume its

contemporary meaning in the mid-1910s" (Farrell-Beck, 2010). Foundation garments' names became increasingly important (Fields, 2007, p. 159; Lynn, 2014, p. 98). Steele (2001) notes foundations - whether they were called corsets or girdles - had some form of boning in them until 1919 (p. 148). Yet, despite similarities within the designs, Fields notes, "the importance of renaming corsets as girdles to shake off the notion that corsets were passé" (p. 159).

Uses and Functions

Fashionable ideals. Women continued to use foundation garments to modify their bodies as part of fashionable dress and shifting ideals influenced their choice of foundations. The ideal of Edwardian era (1900-1910) - epitomized by Charles Dana's illustrations of the "Gibson Girl" - featured a cinched waist and unnatural posture, both of which were achieved with the S-bend corset (Ewing, 1989, pp. 78–79). However, as noted, the "corsetless fashions" that followed were rarely worn without foundations. This silhouette also required some form of foundation for the vast majority of women (Fields, 2007, p. 50).

Activities. Women's roles or activities influenced the foundations they choose to adopt and their lives increasingly changed during these decades. Bicycling is often discussed as offering more mobility and as a means of physical exercise (Banner, 2006, pp. 204–212; Thesander, 1997, pp. 101–102). Other activities like dancing, which also had both social and physical implications, initially resulted in an abandoning of the corset in some settings. However, as noted, manufacturers were quick to respond and soon offered corsets specifically for these various physical activities (Fields, 2007, p. 50).

Women's professional lives also impacted their choice of foundation garments. Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002) point out that women working at desks would have found the corset very uncomfortable. This physical experience encouraged the adoption of the brassiere with a girdle as the 20th century progressed (p. 29).

Use based on the user. Women's ages and physical bodies also influenced adoption and use of the various designs available. During the 1910s more flexible options became available. However, adoption differed by age and body shape. Younger and thinner women might wear lighter foundations, while older and larger women continued to wear straight-front corsets (Steele, 2001, p. 76). It was not so much that women stopped wearing corsets. Rather, the foundation garments they used changed.

1918-1945: Between the Wars

As Steele (2001) notes, World War I (WWI) impacted the lives and dress of both men and women. However, "contrary to popular belief… [it did not] end corsetry." Rather, it merely "hastened" changes in dress that had already begun (p. 151). Silhouettes continued to narrow

and hemlines rose from 1918 into the 1920s. The era's beauty ideal has been described as "boyish" with a "non visible waist, bust or hips" (Thesander, 1997, p. 112). Others describe the 1920s ideal as youthful (Banner, 2006, pp. 410–413; Steele, 2001, p. 154). The feminine beauty ideal of the 1930s was notable "more mature," as the "waist and bosoms reappeared," which continued into the 1940s during WWII (Banner, 2006, p. 412).

The later more-womanly silhouette is at times contrasted with the slim, youthful one of the 1920s (Banner, 2006, p. 412; Fields, 2007, p. 105). However, Steele argues the 1920s ideal did, in fact, have curves. Granted, these curves were minimized by loose fitting fashions (p. 154). Additionally, the later period's ideal could also be viewed as youthful, given its uplifted, firm breasts and the slimness of the waist. Throughout the entire period, foundation garments were used to modifying the body to either fashionable silhouette, albeit in different ways.

Foundation Garments Design

1918 into the 1920s. Steele (2001) quotes famed fashion designer Coco Chanel, who claimed to "liberate" women from the corset. However, this was an exaggeration. "Although the traditional boned corset gradually disappeared during the 1920s, most women still wore some kind of corset, corselet, or girdle" (p. 152). Diet and exercise - both other forms of body modification - also became popular during this period. Steele adds that discourse surrounding the corset made connections between these practices (p. 153). As with the "corsetless" fashions during previous decade, this era's slender deal (despite loose fitting fashions) could not be naturally achieved by women with more curvy figures. Larger women molded their bodies with corsets to fit the ideal (Ewing, 1989, p. 91; Steele, 2001, pp. 153–154; Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 462). More-flexible versions, increasingly using elastic, were also utilized to bind the figure during this period (Ewing, 1989, p. 91).

Brassieres were widely used during this decade (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 34; Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 462). The bandeaux style become particularly popular and was used to bind or minimize the breast. Some were made of light net with minimal shaping, while others "were made from firmer materials such as silk covered rubber" (Lynn, 2014, p. 100). However, around 1928 brassiere designs shifted towards an uplifted rather than bound style (Ewing, 1989, p. 97; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 59; Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 462).

The growing number of professional women had practical needs, as well. There was an increasing demand for foundations that could easily be washed and dried at night and then worn the next day without ironing. As a result, there is a shift towards lightweight fabrics like silk and rayon (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 38).

Great Depressions to WWII. A visual foil to most of the 1920s, women's breasts were a prominent feature of the 1930s ideals. Brassiere designs continued the noted shift from bound to uplifted breasts (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 469). This period could be described as a return a "feminine" and "natural" figure (Thesander, 1997, pp. 131–132). However, the notion of what constituted a "natural bust," as well as the products used to achieve it, changed throughout out the decade (Fields, 2007, p. 97). Initially "rounded" in 1930, brassiere cups became "pointed" by 1932 and eventually reached the "cone" or "torpedo" style that would prevail from 1935 into the 1940s (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 59).

Girdles were central to molding the waist during this period. They generally extended just above the waist and both boned and elasticized versions were available, with use varying based on body type (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 469). New styles were created. Perhaps most notably, the panty girdle was introduced in 1935 (Steele, 2001, p. 155).

1930s fashions were more form fitting and frequently cut along the bias, hugging the body and revealing the figure below. As Farrell-beck and Gau point out, "Figure revealing clothing required complementary styles of foundations" (p. 62). Indeed, foundations during this period did become notably thinner and more flexible - largely due to innovations like Lastex, invented in 1931.

Lastex. Numerous scholars cite Lastex as a major influence on foundation garment designs (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 1; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 63; Fields, 2007, p. 97; Lynn, 2014, p. 102; Nelson, 2007, pp. 195–196; Steele, 2001, p. 155). Dunlop Rubber Company created the new fiber. Previously, rubber had largely been used to create stretch within foundations; Lastex was much more "lightweight" (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 63). The yarn, itself, was made of "strips of rubber covered with silk, cotton, wool, or rayon" (Steele, 2001, p. 155). It also proved to be more resilient, holding up with wear and washing (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 63; Fields, 2007, p. 93). It offered a "two-way stretch," which allowed for greater flexibility in foundation garments (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 63; Lynn, 2014, p. 102; Nelson, 2007, p. 195; Steele, 2001, p. 155).

Other innovations. Foundation designs and manufacturing techniques evolved throughout this period. For example, Hollywood-Maxwell developed and became known for its spiral or whirlpool stitching, released in 1934, which helped to stabilize the uplifted cups (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 66). Other innovations like under and over wires were developed during this period - available in some brassieres during the mid-1930s (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 101–102; Lynn, 2014, p. 154). Additionally, zippers started to appear in outer garments during the

same period. However, they would not make it into foundation garments (Lynn, 2014, p. 138). The use of both metal features was delayed until the late-1940s, after WWII.

Wartime-restrictions. Compared to other manufactured goods, WII had minimal impact on foundation garment designs. They continued to be made. The war initially impacted them as their materials, as well as the factories and staff used to create them, were enlisted into the war efforts in both in the United States and Great Britain. However, female workers protested, arguing they needed the support of their brassieres and girdles (Lynn, 2014, p. 152; Steele, 2001, p. 147).

Concessions were made but rationing did continue to impact the designs of the foundations. For example, girdles featured as "little steel as possible," instead using fabric panels to shape the body (Lynn, 2014, p. 138). The metal used for underwire in brassieres was also rationed. As result, while they had been used "as early as 1934," they would not become common until after the war (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 101–102). Nevertheless, while other goods were greatly impacted, foundations were largely seen as necessary – even to the war effort, itself.

Uses of varying foundation from 1918-WWII

The youthful, slim silhouette of the 1920s does visually differ from the mature, curvaceous ideals of the following decades. However, throughout this period women often used foundation garments for similar reasons. They served as a means of differentiation (first in terms of age and then gender), of modifying the body in line with a fashionable ideal, and of expressing one's sexuality. During World War II they were also believed to provide physical support.

Differentiation. Adoption of new styles of fashions following WWI, as well as the new foundations beneath them, provided young women with a way to visually "reject the moral codes of the elders that led them to war" (Lynn, 2014, p. 110). Shorter hemlines and the discard of more rigid foundations were paired with other behaviors that all visually asserted their independence. As noted, the slender silhouette, itself, suggested youthfulness. The 1930s ideals could also be viewed as youthful. However, foundations also functioned to visually emphasize gender differences.

Fields (2007) attributes the shift back to a feminine figure in the 1930s to the Great Depression. She notes that women often continued to work while many men could not, the jobs of the former remained while those of the latter were lost in the harsh economic downturn. Thus, the traditionally feminine figure became a way of "assuaging gender concerns." Additionally, as women increasingly wore trousers, any visual gender differentiation was limited to above the waist (p. 105).

Granted, brassiere designs had shifted towards a curvier uplifted design prior to the stock market crash in 1929. Women's adoption of trousers during the 1930s was limited to certain

context and not as widespread as in following decades (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 475). Yet, the noted introduction of the panty girdle suggests the bifurcated garment was gaining acceptance and arguably supports Field's claim that gender difference became more concentrated on the upper body. Her observations are notable because they suggest that responding to gender relations through foundation garment use was not specific to the Post-WWII era.

Fashion necessity. Foundation garments during this period were central to achieving both noted physical and fashionable ideals. Women led increasingly public lives beyond work. This "offer[ed] women new opportunities for self-expression - including the chance to display fashionable clothing, supported by fashionable underclothes" (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 29–30). This use did not change after 1929. In facts, throughout the depression sales remained high for brassieres and corsetry (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 58; Fields, 2007, p. 75). Despite women's small budgets, foundation garments were largely viewed as a necessity and women purchased them to be "rescued from frumpiness" (Fields, 2007, p. 77). This stresses the importance of the foundation garments and, arguably, their positive connotations in women's lives.

Sexual appeal. The changes in women's lives also "put conflicting demands on underclothes, to sustain a stylish silhouette while not being too sexy or inflicting distracting physical discomfort" (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 38). Yet, while there were certainly concerns about being *too sexy*, scholarship suggests women's socially acceptable behaviors did change following WWI.

Respectable sexuality. The flapper, an icon of the 1920s, was "seem[ingly] free from all the restraints of the past" (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 449). This included a more open expression of feminine sexuality (Banner, 2006, pp. 411–412). While some view the physical ideal as boyish (e.g. Thesander, 1997), which might suggest a lack of feminine sexuality, Fields (2007) argues that it embodies a strong feminine eroticism. She describes the ideals as a "feminization rather than a masculinization" of the body. According to Fields, restraining the body is key to women's dress, as well as discomfort. Thus, the binding of the breast acted as a "respectable form of bondage" and a means of eroticizing the female body (p. 90).

Banner reiterates the notion of "respectable" or acceptable expressions of female sexuality. In her discussion of Hollywood stars – "It Girl" Clara Bow and "Vamp" Theda Bara – Banner notes that both embodied a strong eroticism. However, she suggests their sexuality was depicted as comic, noting, "The name 'flapper' itself bore overtones of ridiculousness." Their overt sexuality was accepted because "[Americans] could laugh at them" (pp. 411-412). They were not a real threat to normative femininity.

Feminine sexuality and the breasts. Expressions of feminine sexuality continued, if not intensified, during the 1930s. The breasts were a point of emphasis, although Fields points out that the same could be said of the 1920s. With the bound bust, attention was drawn through the apparent absence of the beasts; during the 1930s this was accomplished via uplifted, pointed breasts (p. 94).

However, Nelson (2007) notes that breasts became a "visible metonymy of femininity" during the latter decade (p. 36). The body parts, themselves, became a metaphor for the whole woman. Fields suggests this resulted in, not only an eroticization but also, a fetishization of the breasts. However, she also argues that "glamour" resulted from this separation of the breasts from body – using the examples of Lana Turner and later Jane Russell in the 1940s, "whose celebrity was galvanized by attention to [their large] breast" (p. 109).

Power and pleasure. This period's fascination and idealization of the buxom bosom should not be solely interpreted as oppressive. The breast, and by extension the brassieres that supported and molded them, became a "source of power and pleasure" (Fields, 2007, p. 81). Fields suggests the noted "mingling of glamour with large breasts," which began during this period and persisted in later decades appealed to women, resulted in a kind of feminine power. Large breasts appealed to women not "merely a means to strengthen their attractive force for men but also a method to enhance their power as a force to be reckoned with within themselves" (p. 112). Thus, women's use of the foundation garments was motivated by not only their necessary role in creating a fashionable figure but also due to the positive experiences or sensations they potentially encouraged within women's lives.

Necessary support. Foundation garments continued to be viewed as a necessity during WWII, although for new reasons (Dione, 2009, p. 71; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 84; Lynn, 2014, p. 152; Steele, 2001, p. 157). The workforce changed dramatically as women assumed more active jobs that were traditionally considered more masculine. This more "strenuous work called for more protective and supportive undergarments and outerwear" (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 84).

A *Times* article suggested in Britain "95 percent of women did not consider the corset a luxury and that working women especially depended on them for 'support and comfort'" (Lynn, 2014, p. 152). Similar claims were made in the US, as well as capitalized upon by manufactures (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 99–100). Thus, despite women's changing roles, foundation garments remained an ever-present part of their lives throughout WWII.

1945 into the 1960s: The Post-WWII Era

Post-WWII culture and ideals

Scholars make several, at times contradictory, assertions about the culture that emerged following WWII. These observations influence analyses of the foundation garments women wore during this era. Before discussing their designs and uses, it is useful to review how scholars describe post-WWII culture and its feminine ideals.

The post-WWII years are often viewed as a single, homogenous narrative. As GIs returned from the war, women were pushed out of the jobs they had assumed during the war and back into the domestic sphere (Dione, 2009, p. 54; Fields, 2007, p. 264; Kunzle, 2006, p. 221). Kunzle suggests women submission to this shift reflects a broader passivity during the postwar era, as women assumed "the passive role of consumer, sex object, and servant to man" (p. 221). However, Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002) point out that women's lives following WWII did not match the stereotypical "1950s image of homemaker." In reality, many women worked (p. 113).

Nevertheless, the post-WWII era is discussed in terms of conformity, reflected in multiple aspect of the culture, including dress (Thesander, 1997, p. 176). The idea of conformity, as well as uniformity, is also seen in suburban ideal of the era. Dione argues the exodus to the suburbs reflects many Americans' desires to "'contain' and seal themselves off from the cities" (p. 10). Dione parallels this to the "containment" of women within the home (p. 14). As noted, others also assert that women were pushed back into the domestic sphere following the war (Fields, 2007, p. 264; Kunzle, 2006, p. 221). The resulting "containment culture" idealized domesticity but also "closed bodies" – contained within foundations and molded into feminine forms to reiterate the gender divide (Dione, 2009, pp. 52–53).

Drawing from the ideas put forth in Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), several scholars argue the postwar culture reflected a "resurgent Victorianism" (Banner, 2006, pp. 417–419; Thesander, 1997, p. 158). They suggest the period idealized feminine domesticity and passivity, while also sexualizing women. Drawing parallels between Victorian and 1950s fashion, Banner argues the latter era reflects a "combination of social repression and sexual exploitation" (p. 419). Nelson (2007) reiterates Banner's observations and describes the ideal as demanding both sexuality and modesty (p. 194).

The post-WWII era did see a shift towards what many interpret as a hyper-feminine beauty ideal (e.g. Nelson, 2007, p. 194; Thesander, 1997, p. 173). The waist was notably narrower. The ideal size in 1949 was suggested to be 20-inches, a stark contrast from 29-inches in 1929 (Lynn, 2014, p. 104). The bust continued to be very uplifted, although the ideal shape did change throughout the 1950s (Thesander, 1997, pp. 161–162). As with the previous decades,

this silhouette is discussed in terms of both youthful and mature or "voluptuous," femininity (Banner, 2006, pp. 417–418). This beauty ideal was arguably created, or at the very least encouraged, by changes within fashion, namely Christian Dior's "New Look."

1947: The New Look

In 1947, just two years after WWII, Dior released his New Look. The fashion is generally described as featuring rounded shoulder, a cinched waist, and full hips. Skirts were notably longer than during WWII and were either very full or extremely fitted to the body in a pencil-style (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 507). However, cinched waist fashions had appeared in 1939, reflected in the corset by Detolle for Mainbocher (Lynn, 2014, p. 104; Steele, 2001, p. 156). There was a general awareness of this Paris-led fashion. Horst's well-known image of the corset was feature in *Vogue* ("Fashion: Paris Openings," 1939) and it was discussed in other more general publications, like LIFE magazine (Luce, 1939, p. 39). Films like *Meet Me in Saint Louis* (1944) also reflect the shift towards a "wasp-waist revival" prior to 1947 (Kunzle, 2006, p. 221). Dior was by no means the only designer to release cinched waist fashions that emphasized feminine curves after the war (Steele, 2001, p. 158). Both Lynn and Steele note the work of Jacque Fath. Lynn also cites 1946 discussions in *Harper's Bazaar*, to illustrate this point (p. 102). All that being said, Dior is attributed with the creating what was viewed as the new fashion.

"Return" to the corset. The New Look led to increased use of corsets following WWII. Some garments had boning built-in, particularly higher end or couture versions; other did not and required additional foundation garments to cinch the waist (Fields, 2007, p. 264; Steele, 2001, p. 158). *Guêpière* or waspies were initially used (Lynn, 2014, p. 104). This style of foundation was similar, of not based on, the corset Marcel Rochas originally created for Dior's New Look (Kunzle, 2006, p. 223). However, this style declined in popularity by the early-1950s, succeeded by other foundation garments.

Meanings. Some interpret the New Look as ultra-feminine (Steele, 2001, p. 158; Thesander, 1997, p. 155). However, the new fashion also signified freedom. Its long, full skirts marked the end of wartime rationing of fabrics. The reemergence of once-occupied Paris as a fashion center also signaled the end of WWII. The full skirts also literally freed the hips (Fields, 2007, p. 264). Granted, this fails to consider the pencil-style skirts also worn. However, Fields notes that the longer length, which applies to both designs, obstructed views of the legs and freed them from "public scrutiny" (p. 264). Kunzle (2006) also comments that, while the fashion could be read as feminine and "delicate," the structured suits often worn could be read as "strong" and masculine (p. 223).

Criticism. The New Look was not without scrutiny. It was criticized for its excessive use of fabrics when many countries were still experiencing shortages, especially Great Britain (Fields, 2007, p. 259; Thesander, 1997, p. 156). Fashion designers, particularly Adrian, also criticized it. However, Fields point out his reaction was "based in his aesthetic and financial investment in a mode that had suddenly become passé" (p. 260). More generally, some viewed the new fashion as a return to an "old fashioned" ideal (Thesander, 1997, p. 156). Alternatives to the structured New Look also emerged, particularly the work of Claire McCardell (Fields, 2007, p. 263).

Adoption. Nevertheless, the New Look was hugely successful and described as a "revolution" within the fashion industry (Benaïm & Müller, 2015; Steele, 2001, p. 158). The change was welcomed by the foundation garment industry (Fields, 2007, p. 263). However, some scholars raise questions regarding exactly how women adopted the New Look and suggest a delayed acceptance (Fields, 2007, p. 263; Kunzle, 2006, p. 225).

Fields spends some time debating women's experiences with the New Look and the foundations that accompanied it. As noted, some discuss postwar fashion in terms of oppression (Banner, 2006; Dione, 2009). Fields argues that women may have experienced pleasure through "turning away from fashions" associated with WWII (p. 263). She also argues that "mass versions of the New Look were not as constricting" (p. 264). Additionally, Fields and several other scholars (Kunzle, 2006, p. 222; Thesander, 1997, pp. 158–159) suggest the most extreme versions were only worn for special occasions – which will be explored at greater length later. All this points to the fact that women's experiences with the New Look and the foundation garments used to obtain the fashionable silhouette were quite varied.

After 1947: Foundation Garment Designs

Foundation garments were central to women's appearances but some scholars put forward simplified, and at times inaccurate, views of the objects (Banner, 2006, p. 420; Nelson, 2007, p. 4). For example, Nelson suggests that "foundations were fairly consistent from the late-1940s to the early-1960s," contrasting this period with the mid-1960s and the influence of the second-wave feminist movement. The New Look of 1947 did not remain dominant through the whole of the next decade. Silhouettes did change during the 1950s – reflected in Dior's "H-Line" and later Saint Laurent's "Trapeze-Line" for the house of Dior (Kunzle, 2006, p. 226; Thesander, 1997, pp. 163–166). These new silhouettes required different foundations beneath.

Brassieres. Within brassiere design, padding became particularly important, helping to achieve the buxom ideal (Banner, 2006, p. 420; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 121; Lynn, 2014, p. 184). Banner suggests that the brassiere was used to make breasts appear "as large as possible" and "held [the breast] rigid and straight" through the 1950s. However, Thesander (1997)

discusses subtle changes in brassieres and their treatment of the breasts during the decade. She notes Dior created his “H-Line” because he “wanted to get away from the ideal of the exceptionally full bust” (p. 163). The changing shape of the bust is also illustrated by the heighten popularity of pointed cups until 1957, declining with the release of the “Trapeze-line” (Lynn, 2014, p. 184; Thesander, 1997, p. 165).

Wire was crucial in creating the uplifted breasts (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 126–128; Lynn, 2014, p. 152). Farrell-Beck and Gau observe that wire became an “essential component [as] manufacturers tried to outdo each other” (p. 126). The resulting designs were by no means the same. Rather, “breasts were not only encapsulated with wire encircling cups; they were separated or otherwise positioned in anatomically astounding configurations “(p. 128). Boning was also used to “separate and define” the bust, often in attempts to provide support within strapless brassiere designs. Although these designs were short lived (Lynn, 2014, p. 152).

Girdles. Foundations that shaped the waist also changed throughout the period. As noted, the “boned belt corset” – or waspie – introduced in 1947 quickly declined in popularity (Thesander, 1997, pp. 159–160). Thesander provides a summary of early-1950s girdles, which tended to be high waisted and made of elastic net with “fixed front panel[s]” (p. 161). Girdles were generally offered in black, white or pink. On the other hand, corsets tended to be black or white, and were used into the early-1960s (pp. 161-166). However, it is not entirely clear what designs Thesander is referring to when she discusses corsets.

Burns-Ardolino (2007) notes several practical features of foundations, namely garter clips to hold up stocking (p. 4). For some women, post-partum girdles helped them to restore their figures (p. 5), an interesting parallel to the Victorian era. There were also alternative to wearing girdles. Around 1952, broad belts began to be used to cinch the waist, at times without foundation garments, depending on the wearer (Kunzle, 2006, p. 223).

Other details. Lacing declined. Closures were generally hooks-n-eyes, zippers, or a combination of both (Lynn, 2014, p. 138; Thesander, 1997, p. 161). New fabrics also became increasingly important. Greater access to washing machines led to new demands with regards to care and cleaning.

The economic boom and “post war affluence” led to a wide of variety of foundation garments being marketed and sold (Dione, 2009, p. 64; Nelson, 2007, p. 134). Many of the foundations were designed with specific settings or users in mind. Nelson discusses this as a negative change. However, similar shifts were seen in many consumer goods and were not inherently bad. The mass production of goods at a variety of prices, at least to some extent, allowed consumers more choice.

Existing scholarship (e.g. Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002) highlights the variety of foundation garments available and how the designs changed during the post-WWII era. Thus, to describe them as a static entity is misleading. This interpretation also, to some extent, parallels discussions of the broader culture that seek to interpret it through a single lens.

Use and Functions Following WWII

Physical ideals. In her examination of discourse surrounding post-WWII foundations, Nelson (2007) notes the decline of the medical or health arguments for the corset, suggesting that during this period foundations were adopted solely to modify the body to the current feminine ideal (p. 197). Others reiterate this use of foundations, specifically brassieres, to emulate the physical ideal (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 116; Thesander, 1997, p. 166).

Both Dione (2009, pp. 72–73) and Thesander (1997, p. 170) discuss this body modification in terms of men's desires, suggesting that women did not prefer it. However, given Field's (2007) discussion of large breasts as a source of "power and pleasure" for women during previous decades (p. 81), this may not necessarily have been the case.

Attracting a husband. Both Fields (2007) and Dione (2009) suggest women modified their bodies as a means of attracting a husband. To some extent this parallels the Victorian era. As previously noted, women did continue to work after the war. However, Pidgeon (1944) report on women's employment suggests a re-gendering of the labor force, which would have left many women without the means to support themselves.

Fields suggests for many women securing a husband became an economic necessity. She adds that this was not new. "Complying with conventions of femininity in dress and manners was a long-standing means of attracting a husband and obtaining the economic benefits of marriage" (p. 264). On the other hand, Dione argues that during the postwar era marriage had become an "essential institution" in the fight against the Soviets. Thus, women adopted foundation garments to attract a husband for a *social* reason – to avoid the stigma of being unmarried (p. 72).

Special occasions. Given the variety of foundation garments available, it is not surprising that use varied by event and activity. As noted, more restrictive or extreme styles tended to be worn for special occasions (Banner, 2006, p. 420; Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 25; Fields, 2007, p. 267; Kunzle, 2006, p. 222; Thesander, 1997, pp. 158–159). These public settings were places for women to attract potential suitors, a concern noted by Dione and Fields. Burns-Ardolino argues that foundations shape the body into an "image of the ideal feminine body" and that the ideal body is equated to ideal femininity (p. 26). She goes on to suggest ideal femininity is

more celebrated at special occasions and, as result, there is greater adherence to dress and gender norms.

Kunzle and Fields discuss the difference between “everyday” and special occasions dress. Kunzle notes the latter was a “complement to more practical and prosaic styles of home and office wear” (p. 222). Somewhat similarly, Fields notes the “use of corsets to construct the unique pleasures of proms, weddings, and New Year’s Eve parties” – again contrasting this use to women’s everyday lives. The use of these versions for special occasions infused them with glamour (p. 267). Thesander also notes the use of the corset to obtain a “glamourous” ideal and that such associations encouraged women’s adoption” (pp. 158-159).

Teenagers. In addition to varied use based on event or context, use of foundations differed based on age. This was not unique to the 1950s, as seen in discussions of the previous periods. However, teenagers became an increasingly important consumer group during the post-WWII era. They had more spending power than during previous decades (Nelson, 2007, pp. 139–140; Thesander, 1997, p. 170). Thesander adds, they did not have the same regard for high fashion, dressing differently than adults (p. 170). Nelson also points out they were viewed by the fashion industry as more malleable (p. 140).

Various strategies were employed to reach this group. A different rationale was needed to encourage foundation garment use. Teens already had “firm, youthful bust[s],” so manufacturers created “fuller size and more padded models” to allow teens to emulate the more mature aspects of the era’s ideal (Thesander, 1997, pp. 170–171). Advertisements were created specifically for this age group (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 15; Nelson, 2007, pp. 141–142). While mothers had played a role in their daughters’ adoptions of foundation garments directly following the war (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 15), Nelson suggests advertisers prompted a sort of “maternal exile” through both their advertisements and staff interactions with teenage customers. Foundation garments were positioned as a means for teens to differentiate themselves from adults (p. 192).

As with earlier periods, foundation garments still functioned as a rite of passage for young women (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, pp. 7–15; Nelson, 2007, pp. 114–125). Burns-Ardolino suggests this involved a “deculturation” and “reculturation” through a shift from undergarments to women’s foundations (p. 7). Granted, use may not have been as clearly divided (out of girlhood into womanhood) as Burns-Ardolino suggests.

Different styles were worn by different ages. Younger women – particularly teenager - generally wore “roll-on” girdles, which were more flexible than the girdles previously described (Thesander, 1997, p. 161). However, the girdles worn by all women became increasingly flexible

towards the end of the 1950s and in the 1960s, in part due to the introduction of Lycra – discussed later.

Influences on use. Media like fashion magazines and other dress advice both informed and reinforced the practice of girdling. Prescriptives within this discourse shaped not only the purchase of a foundation garment but all subsequent interactions with it (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, pp. 8–11). Some suggest mothers also continued to play an instructive role in young girl's adoption of foundations, at least directly following the WWII (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 15).

Hollywood continued to be, if not increasingly became, an influence on women's use and experiences with foundation garments (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 110). Many film stars embodied the era's ideals, perhaps none more than Marilyn Monroe (Nelson, 2007, p. 110). Interestingly, Banner (2006) views Monroe as the epitome of the established feminine ideal, encapsulating "the child-like model and the voluptuous one" (p. 417). Dione argues that Monroe, who did not wear a girdle, was an image of "transgressive" femininity, a counter to the "post war norm." However, the actress was still contained within the "playboy" ideal (pp. 88-89).

Like the Victorian era, it would be inaccurate to assert that men "forced" women back into corsets - at least in an overt sense. Men did dominate the industries responsible for the designs of and innovations within foundation garments (Nelson, 2007, p. 201). This was also true of the advertising industry, which greatly shaped women adoption of and experiences with foundation garments. Given its notable influence, advertisements and other visual media are discussed at greater length.

Foundation into the 1960s

Many scholars position the culture of the 1960s, more specifically the mid- to late-1960s, opposite that of the post-WWII era (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 16; Dione, 2009, p. 8; Kunzle, 2006, p. 221; Thesander, 1997, p. 177). The two periods' beauty ideals are also contrasted with one another. The feminine curves of the 1950s are juxtaposed with a "vogue for extreme thinness" during the 1960s (Banner, 2006, p. 423). Likewise, Nelson (2007) described the slim ideal as "extreme" and "boyish" (p. 194). Like some discussions of the 1920s, these assertions fail to consider the subtleties of the silhouette.

Several scholars attribute cultural shifts during the later decade to the second-wave feminist movement (Banner, 2006, p. 427; Nelson, 2007, p. 4). Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002) acknowledge the influence of this movement but suggest the sexual revolution had the "greatest implications" for women. Access to contraceptives gave women greater control over their reproductive functions and life. As a result, "some women expressed their sexuality more openly, wearing provocative apparel and 'underfashions'" (p. 141). While the second-wave feminist

movement did have an undeniable impact on women, there were numerous changes within the culture that influenced both women's lives and dress.

New designs and innovations into the 1960s. Several scholars note the growing idealization of youth during the 1960s (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 142; Nelson, 2007, pp. 73–75; Steele, 2001, pp. 161–162). This was reflected in foundations, which became increasingly colorful (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 142). The shift began with younger women's undergarments (Thesander, 1997, p. 171). This ideal also resulted in an increasing emphasis on "smoothness" in girdles (Steele, 2001, p. 162). By the 1960s, foundation garments also became "less conspicuous and more flexible" (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 139). Such qualities were attainable because of key innovations.

Lycra. Lycra, created at the end of the 1950s by Du Pont, also significantly impacted foundation garments during the following decade (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 1; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 142; Lynn, 2014, pp. 110–112; Steele, 2001, p. 161; Thesander, 1997, p. 170). Thesander described it as an "epoch making innovation" (p. 170). Likewise, Steele comments the "synthetic elastomeric fabric…immediately revolutionized foundation wear" (p. 161). Lycra was "three times more powerful than previous elastics with twice the recovery power" (Lynn, 2014, p. 110). It allowed for more "close fitting garment" (Steele, 2001, p. 161) that dramatically shaped the body "with minimal bulk" (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 142). It was crucial in meeting demands for a smooth, natural-appearing silhouette.

Girdles and new foundations. Lycra allowed girdle designs to adapt to the 1960s slim, youthful ideals. The new fabric could "shape the body without boning" (Lynn, 2014, p. 112). The increasingly thinner, more flexible foundations could be worn beneath outer garments' less-structured and more-revealing designs.

Bodysuits, foundation garments that shaped the torso and ended at or above the hip, shaped the abdomen and provided an alternative to longer, thigh-length girdles. This design aligned well with popular fashions like the mini-skirt (Lynn, 2014, p. 112; Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 551). Interestingly, the Mary Quant bodysuit discussed by Lynn has detachable garters (p. 112). However, pantyhose (a later innovation) made garters unnecessary and led to the decline of these more-flexible girdles and other foundations (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 19; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 143; Steele, 2001, p. 161).

Brassieres. Brassiere designs also changed to achieve what was considered a more natural (foundation free) look. Rudi Gernreich's "No-Bra" is one of the most iconic examples (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 147–148; Lynn, 2014, p. 158; Steele, 2001, p. 162). The sheer, minimal design helped to achieve the "natural nude look," although the use of this lightweight

style was limited to women who needed minimal or no support (Lynn, 2014, p. 158). Other designs were more substantial than Gernreich's design but aimed to achieve a similar silhouette.

Use of foundation garments into the 1960s. Farrell-Beck and Gau's (2002) analysis of foundations during the 1960s – which centers on the brassiere but also discusses girdles - is less polarized than some of the other research reviewed. They posit that, previously, women had been more willing to "accept restraint and moderate discomfort" but during the 1960s comfort became a chief concern (p. 147). While their comments are not far off from other scholars', it is notable that they suggest women during both periods made active choices based on different priorities.

The bra. Cultural images of the 1960s like feminists symbolically burning brassieres outside the Miss America Pageant have contributed to assumptions that women discarded these foundation garments during the 1960s. Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002) note there was "hostility towards traditionally feminine trappings" but most women continued to wear brassieres. However, they also observed that manufactures struggled due to other reasons, including changes in manufacturing and retail, and shifts within the workforce (p. 139). The brassiere did not, in all actuality, decline but the girdle did.

The girdle. Some women continued to use girdles, which transitioned into "shapewear," but these foundation garments were largely replaced by pantyhose (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 19; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 143; Steele, 2001, p. 161). Farrell-Beck and Gau point out this was not the first instance of this type of undergarment; tights had been worn for sports, theatre, and casual occasions. However, the sheerness of pantyhose moved them into more, if not all, settings. They began to appear alongside the short skirt fashions of 1966, which could not be worn with girdles and stockings. Pantyhose were widely used by 1969 (p. 143). Steele also attributes the decline of waist-alerting foundation garments to an internalization of the corset, suggesting women have replaced them with other means of modifying the body (p. 161).

Overarching Meanings or Themes in 20th Century Foundation Garments

Foundation garments from the early-20th century into the 1960s clearly changed in terms of their designs and to some degree in terms of their uses and functions within women's lives. However, previous research highlights several persisting, and at times contradictory, meanings that have been attributed to foundation garments across this period. They also parallel some of those discussed in relation to the Victorian corset.

Freedom and Control

Many scholars discuss foundation garments in terms of freedom and control or restriction, often involving interplay between the concrete and the abstract. Some focus more heavily on the concept of control. Other scholars consider how foundation garment designs or

discourse that either literally have or suggest freedom can function as a means of control. Discussions of the post-WWII era often touch on these illusions of freedom.

Control. Nelson (2007) interprets foundation garments as "symbols of sexual containment" resulting from fears of feminine sexuality, especially related to seemingly more autonomous single women, during the mid-20th century (p. 59). Other scholars have similar interpretation of foundation garments during this and other periods (Banner, 2006; Burns-Ardolino, 2007; Dione, 2009). The literal control of women's bodies is a primary concern within these scholars' cultural critiques.

All argue foundation garments functioned as "a perpetual form of social control," quoting Burns-Ardolino (p. 95). Based on observations from surveys and interviews, Burns-Ardolino extends this type of control to all forms of feminine dress. This is based on the idea that gender is constructed through dress, as well as other means. Controlling women's appearance becomes a way to control gender performance and gender roles in society (pp. 95-96). In line with this assessment, Banner (pp. 417-420) and Dione (p. 54) parallel what they view as women's forced domesticity with the constriction of the women's waists during the post-WWII era.

Control through freedom. The 1920s offers an interesting look at the complex interplay between freedoms and restrictions within women's lives. Some scholars suggest the 1920s ideal signified women's new freedoms like that of the hard won right to vote (e.g. Thesander, 1997). Indeed, the outer- and undergarments were comparatively less restrictive than previous designs. However, the bound breasts of the 1920s can be read as an attempt to "infantilize" women in order to counter their growing freedoms (Fields, 2007, p. 89).

Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002) also argue this period should not wholly be discussed in terms of female emancipation. Women's more public lives led to greater, more persistent demands to appear attractive (p. 39). Banner (2006) also discusses the "democratization rhetoric" used to describe beauty products – which became increasingly available. The argument was if all women could be beautiful, all women should (at least attempt to) be beautiful (pp. 295-298).

Fields explores the typing and classification practices used to sell foundation garments during the 1920s using Adorno's concept of "pseudo-individualism." The marketing practice encouraged women to identify with and pick a certain type, creating the illusion of freedom while, in fact, restricting their choices (pp. 101-102). With all this in mind, while women did achieve notable civil and social freedoms during the 1920s, it is an oversimplification to interpret the decade's feminine ideal and the foundation garments used to construct it as solely an expression of freedom. Rather, like other periods, both reflect tensions between multiple meanings.

Such tensions are also seen in the 1960s, another period interpreted as embodying varying types of freedom. Burns-Ardolino (2007) proposes the 1960s mini-skirt was "fashions articulation of the feminist movement" and women's increasing social freedoms (p. 16). Conversely, the garment could be read as a means of sexualizing women and restricting them to the role of sex object.

Freedom and control in the post-WWII era. Meanings of both freedom and restriction are apparent in discussions of the foundation garments worn after WWII. The New Look, itself, symbolized "freedom from restriction… [through] corsetry that constricted the waist" (Fields, 2007, pp. 260–261). Interestingly, Kunzle (2006) does not attribute the same positive connotations to 1950s foundation garments that he did the Victorian corset. He discusses illusions of freedom within the former culture, seen in "choice and change, multiplicity of styles, to suit the individual personality and particular occasions" (p. 221). This is like Banner (2006, pp. 295–298) and Fields' (Fields, 2007, pp. 101–102) discussions of freedom and control in previous periods.

Kunzle acknowledges the "dual role of the corset" during the 1950s due to its "historical dimensions." The visual reference to the "old stays" resulted in "sexualization," arguably a type of gendered control by relegating women to the role of sex objects. However, the new corsets – or perhaps corselets – did offer women more physical "freedom" than their Victorian predecessor (p. 222). Burns-Ardolino (2007) also concedes that women exercised some degree of freedom in their adoption of foundation garments from the 1930s into the 21th century. She acknowledges foundation garments acted as "structures of domination and resistance" because the accompanying rationales, meanings, and practices were "in flux" (p. 97). Other scholars also examine the use of foundations to adhere to and challenge cultural ideals (e.g. Steele, 2001).

Public and Private

Notions of public and private are also frequently discussed in existing research. Like the corset, use varied in different contexts. Certain public sphere (e.g. special occasion) required, or at least encouraged, the adoption of certain foundation garments. However, Burns-Ardolino (2007) suggests "girdling" was both a "public and private phenomenon." While it was shaped by "public discourse," private interactions reflected in "the personal narratives of women" also impacted the practice of girdling (p. 3).

The material garments on women's bodies also have public-private, as well as seen-unseen, dimensions. Fields (2007) notes, "Underwear, although worn ostensibly next to the body and thus ostensibly hidden from outside view, is a crucial part of the gendered fashion system…Private and sexualized, yet essential to the shaping of the publicly viewed silhouette"

(pp. 2-3). This is particularly true of body-altering foundation garments, whose effects can often be clearly seen, despite the fact they are covered by publicly viewable outer garments.

The foundation garments also can allude to more private actions, namely sexual intercourse (Kunzle, 2006, p. 26). However, Fields suggests the New Look made "corsets' status as fetish objects more ordinary… [and special occasion use] brought these restrictive garments back into the mainstream of the American public as well as private life" (p. 267). The dynamic between public and private spheres, as well as bodies, are also apparent in advertisements for foundations, discussed shortly.

Modesty and Sexuality

Discussions of foundation garments also center on dynamics between modesty and notions of respectability, as well as feminine sexuality. Burns-Ardolino (2007) and Dione (2009) argue the girdle was not only central to a modest, socially appropriate appearance, but also a means of protecting young women's sexual morality. Both equate the garment and its functions to a "chastity belt" (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 21; Dione, 2009, p. 65). Dione goes even further, suggesting in post-WWII culture girdles acted as a "symbolic defense against rape." Citing various contemporary films and discussions of rape from the following decades, she suggests that this function emerged out of cultural "myths", which suggested certain appearances could incite rape (p. 67).

Nelson (2007) argues the New Look served as armor or a "fortress" and men disliked it for this reason. She quotes a 1953 *New York Time* article calling it "the Maginot Line," suggesting the garments' impenetrability (p. 63). This is like discussions of the Victorian corset as real and symbolic protection (Kunzle, 2006, pp. 22–23). Nelson also notes the fashion's sexualizing effects. The sexualizing of women bodies through foundations, as well as the objects' necessity in creating socially acceptable appearances, is seen in varying degrees throughout the decades discussed. There is strong tension between feminine modesty and sexuality during the post-WWII era.

Naughty and nice in the 1950s. Fields (2007) makes similar observations to Nelson (2007), suggesting that the New Look and the foundation garments worn to achieve it reflect the era's "naughty and nice" ideal (p. 269). Banner (2006) describes it as an idolization of both adolescent innocence and mature female sexuality. She argues this ideal reached its apogee in Marilyn Monroe, who simultaneously embodied the period's "adolescent" and "voluptuous" beauty ideals. The former represents innocence and, given 1950s views on sex, virginity, while the latter conveys a mature sensuality and sexuality (pp. 417-418).

Unlike discussions of the corset, existing scholarship on the post-WWII era generally does not suggest women utilized foundation garments as a means of expressing their sexuality in a socially acceptable way. The garments were used to attract men by signifying feminine sexuality (Dione, 2009, pp. 65–72; Fields, 2007, p. 264). However, Dione describes a "balanced negotiations," where a woman must hold a men's attention, while also taking full responsibility for cultural "demands [of] abstinence" (pp. 65-66). Thus, these dual meanings are used to suggest an unattainable ideal and that women adopted foundations to embody both traits.

Feminine sexuality and black lingerie. Field's (2007) examination of the cultural meanings of black lingerie in the 20th century touches on the concepts of purity and deviant sexuality. In comparison to the other works reviewed, Fields spends considerably more time exploring issues surrounding race. She discusses "white goods" (e.g. petticoats, drawers) and black lingerie in relation to historical understandings of white and black female bodies. She cites various examples of longstanding associations of "whiteness" and "white femininity" with "beauty, purity, and virtue" – dating back to pre-Elizabethan Europe. This was contrasted by black, which was associated with "disfigurement, depravity, disease, and dirt" (p. 116).

Fields also argues white women wearing black lingerie can be read as a "racial masquerade," allowing them to safely express the eroticism associated with black women through a "removable black skin" (p. 114). In a discussion of the life of Saartijie Baartman, Fields outlines the treatment of black women's bodies and efforts to position them as "animalistic" or "inhuman" and deviant sexual beings (p. 117). She also examines a variety of other sources from medical and scientific texts, to paintings like Manet's *Olympia*, to films like *Black Venus*. Fields argues these sources gave meanings to the garments, which were then appropriated by white women wearing black lingerie.

Fields posits the erotic significance of black lingerie also results from the color's association with sex and death, the creation and ending of life. This stems from cultural meanings surrounding mourning and the widow during the Victorian era. Widows had an "ambiguous social status." They functioned outside of traditional gender division. They were more independent but also respectable women. Having been married, they possessed sexual knowledge. However, women in mourning, signified by their black dress, were also removed from society. Thus, widows had a "transgressive aura…as sexually experienced, yet unavailable" (p. 132).

Fields goes on to discuss the shift of black from mourning to fashionable dress in the 20th century. Trade journals reflect concerns about the "overt sexuality" of black lingerie, suggesting nude was a more "modest alternative" (pp. 155-156). She also notes the rise of "the little black dress," which was associated with "urban femininity." As with the Victorian widow, this

also contributed to black clothing's connotations of "sexual knowledge" (p. 158). Her discussion of color highlights the many aspects of a culture that can imbue foundation garments with meaning.

Advertisements and Other Cultural Media

Many of the sources discussed use advertisements as sources of data. Advertisements provide data about the objects - cost, when a style was released, the range of styles available. However, they have also been used by researchers to gain insight into the meanings of the foundation garments within contemporary culture. Other cultural sources, including film, art, and literature, are also analyzed in the previous research reviewed. While the types of foundation garments differed over time, discussions of visual culture highlight key themes - many of which parallel those embodied by the objects, themselves.

Freedom and Control

Advertisements for foundation garments often include discourse on both freedom and control. At times this refers to the qualities or effects of the designs. Kunzle (2006) uses advertisements to illustrate a shift in the 1960s, noting they "eliminate the idea of compression altogether" (p. 226) Others identify images or advertising copy that suggest an exchange between freedom and restraint, going on to position this discourse within its cultural context (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, pp. 63–75; Dione, 2009, pp. 58–73; Fields, 2007, p. 185; Steele, 2001, p. 155).

References to these opposing qualities were often used to sell the foundations (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 63). Advertising during the 1930s and 1940s frequently spoke of freedom and restraint or control. This was often to highlight the use of Lastex in the foundation garments (Fields, 2007, p. 97; Steele, 1997, p. 155). However, Dione argues the purported freedom was contrasted by real restriction (p. 58).

Based on observations made in Barthes' *Fashion System* (1993) and Goffman's work on advertisements (1979), Burns-Ardolino seeks to "read" advertisement in terms of freedom and restrictions. It is worth noting Goffman's study, particularly the gender signs he identified, have been criticized because of his purposive sampling of advertisements (Kang, 1997, p. 983; Lindner, 2004, pp. 411–412); however, his more general discussion of gender in advertisements is very insightful. Using these previous works, Burns-Ardolino identifies several types of freedom in advertisements, including physical freedom, "socio political" freedom, and the "freedom to consume" (pp. 63-64). Dione also notes the variety of foundation garments available to women in the post-WWII era, but does not see this potential consumption as positive. Rather, she argues more choices leads to restrictive obligations (pp. 69-70). This could be equated to Banner's (2006) noted discussion of democratic beauty.

Burns-Ardolino explores how advertisements "convey not only an ideal, but also the freedom and hope of achieving this ideal" (p. 75). Although, she goes on to question this type of freedom. Dione also discusses ideals in post-WWII advertisements. She notes advertising copy frequently proclaimed their foundations could achieve the ideal with "no effort," free from the demands of physical exertion. However, the ideal was achieved through "constriction" rather than liberations "via sports and exercise" (p. 73). This highlights the varying ways claims of freedom in advertisements can be interpreted.

Steele (2001) and Nelson (2007) cite discourse in advertisements that suggests control of the body and, more abstractly, femininity. Steele argues advertisements promising to control "flab and flesh" also reflected broader desires to control "[the female] body, sexuality, and desire" (p. 155). Nelson posits post-WWII advertisements reflect Cold War fears of the "destabilization of the family." Because of these fears, advertisements served as a means of "containment for both communism and women" by reinforcing heteronormative gender roles (p. 29).

Dione argues that WWII advertising indicates "foundations 'policed' and 'controlled'" the gender transgressions that resulted from demands of WWII" (e.g. images like Rosie the Riveter and women working in manufacturing). Advertisements served as a means of "contain[ing]...female sexuality" to combat fears of resulting from women's increasing independence and more masculine roles (p. 57).

Containment and normative femininity are also frequently themes discussed in Dione's analyses of post-WWII films. For example, she suggests that the musical comedy *Silk Stockings* (1957) indicates the role of underwear in the "formation of the normative postwar American woman" (p. 53). She also cites *How to Be a Millionaire* (1953) as an example of the "waist-bound and homebound" ideal of the era (p. 54). She references numerous other films and analyzes several at great depth to explore femininity in relation to American Cold War culture.

Body Modification

As previously notes, foundation garments were used to modify the body into the current physical ideals. Advertisements often stressed this ability and can serve as a means of examining the "construction of fashion's ideal body" (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 63). This function became increasingly important following WWII. During the war foundation garments were a "fundamental need" due to women's physical work (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 84; Lynn, 2014, p. 152). However, as women left their more active wartime jobs - either for domesticity or different types of employment - advertisements repositioned foundation garments as vital to molding the body into the new ideal (Dione, 2009, p. 71).

Flaws. Nelson (2007) observes advertisements from this era positioned "foundations as problem-solvers." The "problems" were both women's inability to naturally fit the "hyperfeminine" ideal and the need for "women's physical containment" to, in turn, contain communism (p. 29). This reiterates the relation between body-modification through control and more abstract efforts of containment.

The molding of the body via foundation garments was frequently described as a kind of "transformation" within the advertisements (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 63; Fields, 2007, pp. 188–198; Nelson, 2007, pp. 27–37). This transformation drew from the idea of the female body as inherently flawed (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 63; Nelson, 2007, p. 61). The resulting demands could be perceived negatively, given that "perfect femininity commands women's time, dedication, and resources" (Nelson, 2007, p. 61). However, Fields' analysis of advertisements suggests this transformation could also have pleasurable, or at least positive, connotations.

Masquerade. Fields (2007) argues advertisers positioned intimate apparel as part of a "[feminine] masquerade." She outlines instances of mystery and secrecy and hidden knowledge, in advertisements to illustrate how the noted transformation of the body as an (almost) undetectable masquerade. This "secret" or "hidden knowledge" could be viewed as a source of power (pp. 188-189).

Fields adds that visual and textual references to "magic and sorcery" also achieved these means and were particularly popular during the post-WWII era. Advertisements suggested the garments could help women to "lure" men, a noted concern amongst women during this era (Dione, 2009, p. 72; Fields, 2007, p. 264). These advertisements also positioned "undergarments as a tool of sorcery to gain power over men" (Fields, 2007, p. 190). Nelson (2007) also discusses the "magic in girdles" (p. 73) and advertisements claims that their garments can help women to attract or "bait" returning soldiers (p. 65). She discusses advertising copy from the 1930s to 1960s, focusing on foundations' abilities to "magically" and "secretly" shape the body (p. 230).

The concepts of transformation and masquerade via dress are also apparent in Fields' analysis of the film *The Merry Widow* (1952). Fields discusses the films depiction of the main character (played by Lana Turner) and the use for black and white costumes, which allow her to be both a respectable widow and masquerade as a prostitute. The scholar notes Turner dons black in the former role - the respectable color of mourning but also, as noted, a color associated with eroticism. Then, Turner is costumed in white as a prostitute. Fields argues the changing roles paired with sartorial transformations reflect contemporary cultures "notion of femininity and sexual attractiveness," which demand women be "naughty and nice" (p. 269). In her discussion of the film, Fields also touches on the corset, which is prominently featured within Turner's wardrobe

in the film, and the resulting body-modification as a form of “witchery” - providing women with the ability to temporarily transform into someone else (p. 269-271).

Cultural Implications of These Visual Media

While examining advertisements and other visual media, existing research comments on several cultural implications tied to the depictions in these images. For example, Summers (2003) discusses corset advertisements during the Victorian era. She observes they frequently featured private, domestic settings, which she interprets as reinforcing gendered divisions of public and private spheres (p. 177). These advertisements also bought depictions of women in the private sphere into the public spheres, dressed in a way they would never appear in the latter.

According to Summers, Victorian corset advertisements were “major forerunners to the sexual objectification of women in the public realm in the 20th century” (p. 174). She goes on to compare contemporary advertising and pornography to support her argument. Summers identifies similar poses, frequent dressing of the hair down, and direct or averted gazes within both. She concludes that sexualization of women in advertisements increased during the second half of the 19th century and by the 1890s there was “little difference” between the two media (pp. 200-203). However, Summers could have more critically considered the differences between advertising and pornography, such as viewing contexts, the creators, the models, and the intended audiences. This kind of interrogation of the sources could challenge some of her assertions.

Kunzle (2006) also discusses 1950s advertisements and their alleged sexualization of women, as well as other negative implications. He argues they conveyed and encouraged female narcissism, insecurity, and sexual frustration (p. 224). Like Summers, Fields (2007) utilizes pornography to study the meanings of intimate apparel, specifically black lingerie. She notes the shift from women wearing “white goods” - which allowed view of pubic hair - to black lingerie as the garments took on increasingly erotic meanings by the 1920s (pp. 158-160). This illustrates how the meanings attached to foundations shape the meanings of their depictions. Although, the opposite could also be said given the objects uses in pornography, which has its own, equally strong cultural meanings.

Fields makes similar observations about advertisements’ abilities to sexualize or objectify women, as well as the presentation of private images in public. She writes, “[advertisements] encouraged a view of women in public as sexualized objects. Thus, they worked to contain women’s public presence in the 1950s through objectification” (p. 195). Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002) note ‘sexuality was openly espoused in the late-1940s and 1950s” and this was reflected

in brassiere advertising (p. 116). However, they do not dwell on the sexualization of women in their analysis.

The sexualization, and at times objectification, of women is also explored using other sources from contemporary cultures (Banner, 2006; Fields, 2007; Steele, 2001). For example, Fields discusses how the cinematic techniques used in *They Won't Forget* (1937) objectified Lana Turner's breasts, solidifying Turner's image as a "sweater girl" and epitomizing the period's fixations with and objectification of women's breasts. In her discussion of *The Merry Widow* (1952), Fields also argues the corset scenes and Warner's advertisements for their corresponding corselet both reflect how the culture positioned women as "to-be-looked-at" (p. 271). On the other hand, Dione (2009) discusses the absence of foundations on screen. She notes the rape themes in several Marilyn Monroe's films, which extends to "not only to sexual trickery (*Some Like It Hot*) and physical abduction (*Bus Stop*) but also to forcible penetration (The Seven Year Itch)." Dione suggests the frequently sexualized and objectified Monroe was "susceptible" due to her "girdlelessness" (p. 100).

Scholars also use sources more generally associated with High culture. Fields examines Manet's *Olympia* (1863) in her discussion of black lingerie. While the iconic and controversial figure is largely nude, the painting is used to consider the sexualization of both white and black women's bodies (p.120). Steele draws heavily from fine art, utilizing paintings like Manet's *Nana* (1877) to explore the erotic and sexual qualities of the corset (pp. 113-118). Banner frequently quotes 19th century poet Lord Byron in her discussion of the "Steel Engraving Lady" - referencing the poet's work to illustrate the underlying sensuality of the ideal (p. 92-94).

To explore the roles of these sources in women's sexualization and objectification, several scholars use feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of "The Gaze" (Dione, 2009, pp. 75–77; Fields, 2007, p. 210; Nelson, 2007, pp. 39, 69–70; Summers, 2003, pp. 181–183). Summers suggests that because men created corset advertisements the depictions reflect "male wish fulfillment" (p. 181). She adds that a number of advertisements featuring corseted women - whether selling corsets or other products - were often directed at men (p. 183).

The "male gaze" can be literally shown but also implied within visual media (Fields, 2007, p. 210; Nelson, 2007, p. 39). In Manet's *Nana* the male gaze is overtly depicted. A man is clearly shown on the right side of the painting (Steele, 2001, p. 113). On the other hand, the use of pin-up poses in advertisements imply the male gaze, because it "typically assumes that the spectator is male" (Fields, 2007, p. 209).

Fields suggests this implied male presence encourages a woman to see herself through the male lens. She becomes both spectator and object. As a result, the woman begins to

construct herself as “to-be-looked-at” - another one of Mulvey’s key concepts (p. 210). Based on Foucault’s (1977) concepts surrounding discipline, Nelson argues the male gaze in advertisements “grants approval” while resulting in “self-monitoring” by women” (p. 69). She also argues when multiple women are depicted in advertisements they are often positioned to suggest they are “monitor[ing] each other for adherence to femininity” (p. 70).

Summers acknowledges Victorian women could have “appropriated” the gaze by sexually objectifying the woman depicted. This would have, in turn, resulted in pleasure. She suggests lesbians may have engaged in an “oppositional reading” of these images of corseted women, countering the images’ heterosexual-normative meanings (p. 185). However, Fields argues all women, regardless of sexual orientation, can assume the gaze. She cites the example of feminist artists, who “reclaim the female body from its many centuries of objectification by male artists and its subjection to the male gaze in Western art” (p. 273). Fields also discusses how all women potentially experience pleasure from viewing intimate apparel advertisements and certain techniques are used to encourage or thwart feminine pleasure.

Advertising Techniques

The invisible woman. The seemingly empty and yet also filled corset, or the “invisible woman,” continually reemerged in corset and foundation garment advertisements during the 19th and 20th centuries (Fields, 2007, p. 211; Steele, 2001, p. 41; Summers, 2003, pp. 204, 207). Fields defines this advertising technique as, “images in which undergarments seem to be worn, though by a female body that is not visible” (p. 174). Summers and Steele’s discussions are in line with Fields’ definition. However, Fields adds that “invisibility” can also be accomplished by obscuring parts of the body with shadows or positioning them outside of the frame of the image (pp. 174-175). This visual technique has been interpreted various ways.

Steele notes for much of the 19th century advertisers were hesitant to show the female body in corsets. As a result, advertisements up until about 1870 tend to feature “disembodied corsets” (p. 44). On the other hand, Summers interprets this as a “violent representation of female dismemberment... [and] indisputable visual evidence of Victorian misogyny” (pp. 202, 204). However, Steele suggests these images were most likely used because of cultural views of propriety. Depicting a woman within the corset would have been “indecent” (p. 44).

In the 20th century, Fields interprets the “invisible woman,” not as an assault, but as a means of dispelling any homoeroticism that might result from women viewing the advertisements. Other graphic device used included averted gazes and ensuring that when multiple women were in advertisements they never touched (p. 211). While these techniques were used to counter pleasure, others were used to encourage pleasure.

Pleasure. Steele (2001) notes that the images and text in advertisements across decades tell what manufacturers thought women wanted and reflect women's (at least perceived) desires (p. 133). Dione (2009) discusses several advertising innovations during the 1950s, including "motivation analysis" based on the work of Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957). Advertisements increasingly sought to subtly influence consumers based on insights from science and psychiatry (p. 3). These efforts to capitalize on consumer's desires are apparent in existing scholarship on pleasure within foundation garments advertisements.

Fields (2007) proposes that pleasure was achieved in advertisements in three ways: narcissism, voyeurism, and exhibitionism. Narcissism was often conveyed in advertisements through mirrors, suggesting the pleasure of looking at oneself. Voyeurism was achieved with open doors or windows. This resulted in the pleasure for women by temporarily shifting from being viewed to becoming the viewer. On the other hand, exhibitionism offered women a thrilling, erotic danger. Graphic elements like stage curtains, lights, frames, and pin-up poses helped to signify this pleasure (pp. 201-209).

Fields further explores voyeurism in her examination of the Maidenform *I dreamed...* campaign. She notes that women within these advertisements were both "spectator" at an event and "spectacle" because of their semi-undress (p. 194). However, while these advertisements challenge the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior (at times showing women in various powerful positions), the copy suggests women would "only dream of such endeavors" (pp. 194-195). Dione (2009, pp. 78–81) and Burns-Ardolino (2007, p. 87) also examine the iconic Maidenform advertisements, each noting themes of feminine fantasy and potential pleasure. Both reiterate Fields' observations that the advertisements encouraged, yet also restricted, women's desires. Based on the Maidenform archive, Dione notes male advertisers expressed concerns and anxieties about the advertisements. She also notes, that the advertisements could be read as a recognition of "female agency" - although she is not emphatic about this point (p. 78).

Glamour. The concept of "glamour" repeatedly comes up in discussion of women's foundation garments, particularly during the post-WWII era (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 73; Fields, 2007, p. 190; Nelson, 2007, p. 60). "Glamour" can be defined as "an exciting and often illusory and romantic attractiveness" and an "alluring or fascinating attraction —often used attributively" ("Glamour," 2016). Within foundation garment advertisement, this glamour is generally a quality or attribute that can be conferred onto the wearer.

References to glamour appear as early as 1910. It is conveyed through "skills such as charm, magic, and occult practices, as well as allusions to style, grace, and sexual attractiveness" (Fields, 2007, p. 190). Advertisements suggest the latter qualities can be "possessed" by

purchasing the promoted products. Additionally, because of the democratization of beauty, any "woman can achieve glamour" - seen in products like the "Equalizer bra" (p. 191). Burns-Ardolino, discussing the Maidenform advertisements, notes that quite often the concept of "glamour" was conveyed through references to "cultural icons," like Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra (p. 111). This is in line with the other key advertising innovation noted by Dione (2009), capitalizing on the "impact of Hollywood as a cultural institution" (p.3). The implied meanings of such advertisements are that you too could achieve this level of Hollywood glamour if you purchase right products.

Nelson also explores glamour. She argues it was a reaction to fears regarding women, using advertisements to support her claim (pp. 56-57). She suggests glamour, at least in the post-WWII era, was equated with "hyperfemininity." She cites advertisements that suggest a "glamour imperative," which promised "instant glamour," which was immediately conferred through foundation garments and other products. Nelson believes this emphasis on glamour began in 1945, while others claim it can be seen throughout earlier decades (e.g. Fields, 2007, pp. 190–191). This apparent start is used to support her claim that glamour was used as a means of combating cultural anxieties that resulted from women's more masculine roles during WWII.

Existing scholarship indicates the importance of considering foundation garments in relation to cultural conceptions of glamour. The sources also suggest this is a particularly important theme during the post-WWII era. Discussions of glamour touch on the more abstract effects of the garments beyond simply changing how the body appears. However, by and large, glamour is positioned as a deceptive tactic to encourage women's adoption of certain foundations - whether aimed at selling a product or maintaining a heteronormative society. However, one could argue connotations of glamour also contributed to pleasurable experiences with the foundations. Thus, this was a key theme examined during my analysis and interpretation.

Insights Gained from Literature on Foundation Garments

The research reviewed suggests that, while the corset was widely used, women's experiences with the foundation garments varied and were influenced by many factors. Additionally, the meanings of the objects were context dependent and frequently changing. Several key themes or dualities emerged from the literature: freedom and control, modesty and sexuality, public and private (or, similarly, seen and unseen). Based on previous discussions of cultural media, I also considered the concept of glamour in relation to the corselet. Previous scholarship also provides several other insights that guided my own research.

Need for Additional Perspectives

A number of the texts reflect a strong second-wave feminist viewpoint, including Banner (2006), Burns-Ardolino (2007), Dione (2009), Nelson (2007), and several others to a lesser

extent. This seems to be most apparent in the research on Post-WWII foundation garments, particularly when compared to discussions of the Victorian corset. For example, Kunzle (2006) generally speaks of the Victorian corset (both fashion and fetish) as having positive connotations related to feminine sexuality (p. 207). Yet, he is very critical of New Look era, viewing the foundations worn as largely oppressive (p. 221). Thus, there was a need to investigate foundation garments from the mid-20th century through a different lens.

Under- and Outer-Garment Relationship

Several the texts clearly articulate the relationship between outer garment fashions and foundation garments (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002; Kunzle, 2006; Steele, 1997, 2001; Thesander, 1997). Dior, himself, observed, "without foundations there can be no fashion" (quoted in Steele, 2001, p. 158). Farrell-Beck and Gau's research highlights how fashion influenced the acceptance of certain foundations. Citing trade press, they attribute the shift from the corset to the brassiere, at least in part, to the "softening of silhouettes" during the mid-1910s (p. 11). Their research highlights how fashions also created new demands. For example, "the figure revealing clothes [of the 1930s] required complementary styles of foundations" (p. 62). Similarly, Thesander discusses the use of underwire in brassieres after 1954 and the creation of "3/4 cups to achieve the silhouette of Dior's H-Line (pp. 162-163).

The relationship between fashions and foundations has also involved exchanges in the other direction. Designers have drawn inspiration from the design of the corset. Steele (2001) cites the work of Jacque Fath, particularly a 1947 pink evening dress with a boned bodice that laces up the back (p.158). Likewise, Kunzle references the work of Balmain to illustrate how elements of the corset, boning and lacing, began to appear in outer garments (p. 227). This trend continued, reflected in underwear as "fashionable outerwear" in late-20th century fashion (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 167; Steele, 1997, p. 88, 2001, pp. 167–168). Fashion not only impacts the designs of foundation garments but visa-versa. A general understanding of women's dress and its history was crucial to understanding the corselet.

Sources of data

The research reviewed is based on an array of traditional and non-traditional historical and cultural sources. In general, those who drew from a wider variety of sources (e.g. Fields, 2007) tended to present more complex analyses of the objects and their meanings. This stressed the need to consider multiple sources of data.

Objects. Those that include material objects in their research (e.g. Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002; Steele, 2001) offer more new insights into the subject, rather than reiterating previous findings. These scholars' work also tends to highlight the subtleties within the objects, as well as

in relation to their functions and uses within a culture. While they acknowledge the more negative or oppressive connotations of foundation garments, their interpretations also unearth a variety of positive meanings.

This may reflect the dress historians' more positive views related to the subject. However, I would argue that examining the physical objects provides a means for approaching the often-contested subject in a more neutral way - a belief also expressed by others studying material culture. These sources reinforced my own decision to begin with and focus heavily on the material objects.

Advertisements. There are some concerns with using advertising as a primary source. Like objects, advertisements can be used to illustrate an already determined point, rather than as a means of open investigation into a subject. The editorial context of the advertisements must also be considered. Quite often magazines like *Vogue* are used as "the sole source for their 'typical' period fashion images" and "mass-oriented journals" are rarely considered (Taylor, 2002, p. 140).

Dione (2009) puts considerable effort into selecting a variety of publications to explore a wider-range of women's experiences. She examines *Ladies' Home Journal* and *McCall's* as "one-half of "the 'big four' [of women's magazines] in terms of circulation" during the postwar years. She also analyzes advertisements in *Harper's Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*, to consider fashion magazines directed at different age groups. Lastly, she considers advertisements in *LIFE*, which was read by both men and women (pp. 56-57). This careful selection included readers from different classes, of different ages, with specific interests, and even of different genders.

Previous research suggests a tendency to consider the same advertisements or advertising campaigns. Many, if not all, sources discussed Maidenform's *I dreamed...* campaign in some fashion. This penchant for more iconic advertisements, as well as the positive example set by Dione, reinforce the need to carefully select publications.

It is crucial to consider the very nature of advertisements - especially when studying gender. Goffman (1979) suggests gender depictions in advertisements are based on rituals and convey ideal conception of gender. Advertisements represent how we *think* we act, rather than how we *actually* act. In advertisements, extraneous information is edited to create standardized, exaggerated, and simplified depictions of gender (p. 84). These qualities make advertisements an excellent source for exploring feminine ideals. However, they should not be treated as unbiased sources of cultural data.

Continued Relevance

Finally, the research examined reiterates the continued relevance of dress history. Several scholars conclude by reflecting on the role of the corset and other foundation garments today. Burns-Ardolino (2007) and Fields (2007) note 21st century women's use of shapewear. Summers (2003) cites the persistence of tiny waists in fashion, arguing, "the waist is still a site of sexual objectification... [and] of fetishism" (p. 210). Furthermore, both Fields (2007) and Steele (2001) argue that, while most women currently do not wear corsets, the practice has become internalized. Steele suggests this began with diet and exercise and has expanded to encompass bodybuilding and plastic surgery (p. 143). Fields adds that this internal shift is due to a range of forces from "dominant ideologies" to continued notions of "flawed bodies" (p. 78). These arguments made by previous researchers supported and motivated my study. Their work reminded me how my own research was positioned within the much larger body of scholarship on dress and gender.

Gendered Dress

The relationship between dress and gender has been examined within many fields: sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, gender or women's studies, women's history, dress history, dress research – the list goes on. Existing scholarship is wide, diverse, and massive, as well as situated within the even larger body of research on gender. Thus, to review and synthesize the literature on this subject would be a massive undertaking.

The primary goal of my research was not to further interrogate the role of dress in the construction or communication of gender. Rather, I sought to explore the meanings associated with a gendered object. However, I did briefly review some research on dress and gender.

Communicating Difference

According to established dress researchers Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992), "Dress is a powerful means of communication and makes statements about gender roles…Furthermore, specific types of dress, or assemblages of types and their properties, communicate gender differentiations that have consequences for the behaviors of females and males throughout their lives" (p. 8). Some believe this differentiation with dress emerges from an innate, evolutionary need to reproduce (e.g. Lurie, 2000, pp. 213–214). Eicher and Roach-Higgins note other evolutionary views, as well as a shift away from such interpretations (pp. 9-10).

Steele (1989a) challenges the notion that differences in dress between men and women are "natural," stating, "biological differences between men and women do not cause different social roles or lead to different forms of clothing" (p. 12). Rather, these desires emerge from within cultures or societies. Eicher & Roach-Higgins suggest "multiple societal systems" use

gendered dress to “define, support, and reinforce the relative power and influence of the sexes” (p. 20).

Garments. Scheier (1989) observes that, historically, gender dressing has involved a “system of opposition” (p. 4). As a result, masculine and feminine dress is often viewed in terms of opposing garments – such as pants and skirts. However, these garments have not always signified masculinity and femininity, respectively. In medieval Europe and classical Roman and Greek cultures, as well as modern cultures like the Scotts, men have worn garments that would be classified as skirts. Similarly, in cultures like Turkey women have traditionally worn pants (Laver, 2012, p. 7; Steele, 1989a, p. 13).

Subtle details. Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992) note, “gender distinctions can be clearly communicated by a minimum of manipulations of dress” – particularly in complex societies (p. 16). So, in addition to entire garments, aspects of garment have also served as gender symbols. A frequently cited example is rounded and angular lines. Lurie (2000) suggests men’s dress conveys dominance, either physical or social, by enlarging the body with rectangular shapes and sharp points. Conversely, women’s dress symbolizes maternity with rounded shapes to emphasize the breasts and waist (pp. 215-216). Kidwell (1989) strongly object to Lurie’s analysis (2000), noting men and women’s fashions from the 1830s and 1840s featured rounded, hourglass figures. However, dress from this period was, in fact, highly differentiated along gender lines in terms of material, texture, and construction (p. 129).

The 1830s and 1840s example indicates the need to approach dress in a manner that considers the “minutiae” of the object, as suggested by Taylor (2002, p. 3). More generally, these discussions of men’s and women’s dress illustrate the arbitrary and context-dependent nature of signs. One should never assume the meanings associated with a garment or an aspect of its design will remain the same in different contexts.

Opposition to and Adoption

Previous research also suggests that, at times, both sexes have used the opposite’s gender symbols. Women’s efforts for emancipation have included adoption of traditionally masculine symbols in dress (Davis, 1992; Foote, 1989; Lurie, 2000; Rubinstein, 2001). However, Foote notes the public acceptance of this adoption can only follow “new definitions of masculinity and femininity,” not precede it (p. 151). Thus, the 19th century Bloomer costume was largely rejected for public dress but adopted for private exercise via gym boomers. Women later adopted bifurcated garments following various cultural changes during the 20th century (p. 157).

The same argument could be used to explain initial rejections of bust supporters in the 19th century and eventual adoption of brassieres in the 20th century. Such changes rarely have

abrupt starts. As Steele (2001) points out, WWI merely quickened changes that had already begun and were reflected in earlier dress (p. 151). This point was also crucial to consider when examining an era directly preceding notable cultural shifts.

While only briefly discussed, this scholarship indicates the role of dress in visually and materially differentiating between genders and that this practice occurs within a broader cultural context. Such differences may be subtle, especially in complex societies. While aspects of dress have been associated with certain genders, these meanings are culturally specific. It is crucial to consider the contexts surrounding the objects. There are several ways to approach the arbitrary, context-dependent meanings associated with the gendered dress - such as a semiotic approach to material culture, reviewed below.

Material Culture

There are a variety of ways to research the significance of dress within a specific historical and cultural context. Taylor, in her influential text *The Study of Dress History* (2002), explores many ways to research the subject, from using literary sources (a traditional source of historical data in many fields) to artifact-based approaches. However, there is a longstanding division between the methods used (p. 64). Steele (1998) makes similar observations about the divide between studying dress history through written sources versus objects (p. 327). Both scholars suggest material culture as an alternative that often draws from both these approaches to study the history and culture of dress (Steele, 1998, pp. 327–332; Taylor, 2002, p. 69).

Background on the Methodology

A material culture approach involves studying a culture through its objects. It is not just about the object itself, as is the case with some artifact-based approaches, but also the culture that created and surrounds it. It involves a back and forth examination between the two, each of which informs the interpretation of the other. Thus, the methodology has a dual focus. It is interdisciplinary and has been influenced by a range of fields, especially the descriptive practices of archeology and art history (Fleming, 1974, p. 153; Prown, 1982, p. 7). Theories from other disciplines have also shaped the methodology, such as structuralism (Prown, 1982; Zimmerman, 1981). Berger (2009) makes connections between this methodology and psychoanalysis, semiotics, sociology, and Marxism.

Purpose. The purpose of the methodology is to use objects as primary sources of data, an alternative to the written sources generally preferred by academics (Hood, 2009, p. 176; Nicklas & Pollen, 2015a, p. 3; Prown, 1980, p. 198; Steele, 1998, p. 327). This is significant because changing what is accepted as a source of data changes what (or who) can be studied, particularly regarding history. Many people's experiences are not reflected in traditional archival

data. This is generally those who are *not* in a position of power; however, their culture and histories are preserved in the "things" within their lives. A central premise of the material culture methodology, which shapes the entire research process, is that objects literally - that is materially - reflect the culture in which they were made. Objects like extant garments provide dress historians with a tangible means of connecting with the past.

Challenges. The methodology has several challenges. Some within academia disregard the study of objects, especially dress (Steele, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Taylor observes, "The main criticism leveled at object-based dress historians has centered on their 'descriptive' concentration on the minutiae of clothing" (p. 348). However, this "description" is a crucial first step in material culture research. Steele notes even dress scholars are hesitant to use actual dress in their researcher (p. 327). This may be due in part to persisting insecurities within the field (Faier, 2015, p. 15; Taylor, 2002, p. 59). However, the systematic nature to the processes described below challenges the conception that object-based research is not rigorous. Hopefully, as the methodology becomes increasingly used and accepted across disciplines this will be less of a concern. Such criticism did not deter my study. If anything, such criticism motivated it.

One challenge that will not diminish is that dress and textiles are some of the most fragile elements of material culture. For various reasons, many cultures' dress has not been preserved. Some scholars address this issue by comparing primary sources with other cultural artifacts to gain insights into dress (e.g. Clynk & Peoples, 2015). This is a very real obstacle for dress historians. Thankfully, this was not a concern for my current study, given that the majority of the objects had been well preserved and documented. Nevertheless, this challenge was a reminder of the importance of examining these historical sources while they are available.

Benefits. Those studying material culture tend to be more concerned with mundane, everyday objects (Attfield, 2000; Miller, 2010). Material culture diverges from art history, which focuses on "High" culture. The methods described below could be used to investigate these objects, as well. However, everyday or mundane objects are often better indicators of the true nature of a culture than written and visual sources (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 67; Prown, 1980, pp. 199–200, 1982, p. 2). Such objects certainly include dress.

This methodology also provides a means of countering our personal and cultural bias by starting with observation and detailed description of a physical object. Using our senses is especially beneficial when studying other cultures and other times. Both Prown (1980) and Schiffer (1999) note that minds differ but human senses remain relatively the same. Additionally, the shift from the object outward has the potential to help researchers "become aware of their cultural biases" as they make deductions regarding the object and speculations about the culture

(Steele, 1998, p. 330). This was important, given my noted positive views of the subject and my broader third- and fourth-wave feminist perspective. Additionally, I was trying to ascertain the meanings and cultural significance of objects that were produced and used in a very different context than my own. So, it was crucial to both bracketed off and remain aware of my own biases.

Processes

Several scholars have developed processes to research material culture (e.g. Fleming, 1974; Prown, 1982; Zimmerman, 1981). They share some similarities. As noted, objects are used as primary evidence, rather than to illustrate findings. Thus, there is generally a shift from concrete to abstract within each process. All tend to start with the material aspects of the object, itself, and then move outward. This "leading out" from the object is argued for by Prown (1982, p. 7) and reiterated by Taylor (2002, p. 98), who focuses more specifically on studying dress. The object's position within or interactions with the culture are considered. Lastly, hypotheses are made about the culture and often further explored with other sources. Theories are also applied or considered at this later stage.

There are several differences between the processes. For example, one of Fleming's primary and initial concerns is identifying the object and determining its authenticity. This is also somewhat the case for Zimmerman who builds on Fleming's process. However, Prown initially pushes off knowledge of what the object is in order "To keep the distorting biases of the investigator's cultural perspective in check" (p. 7). Withholding initial judgments by focusing on the physical qualities of the objects was particularly important for my research, given my noted biases and the aims of my research.

Prown offers a three-stage process, each with sub-stages. The process expands its scope with each stage, shifting from the object, to the object and a person, to the object within a culture. Prown succinctly describes his process, saying:

> The analysis proceeds from *description*, recording the internal evidence of the object itself; to *deduction*, interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver; to *speculation*, framing hypotheses and questions which lead out from the object to external evidence for testing and resolution (p. 7).

He suggests these stages be conducted in order and as separately as possible. The researcher should avoid speculating about the object before it has been thoroughly described and its interactions with the researcher, or "perceiver," have been considered. However, once the final stage is completely there is a "continual shunting back and forth between the outside evidence and the artifact" (p. 10). The object is not discarded after data have been gathered from it. Rather, it remains central to the entire research process.

Zimmerman makes several valuable observations about comparing classes of object. He described Fleming's model as “centripetal” and inwardly focused. “Questions are asked about, rather than of, the artifact.” As a result, “[interpretations of objects] tend to confirm known historical facts” (p. 283). He foregoes Fleming’s initial *Identification* stage and examines the workmanship of objects, evaluating how the workers created the objects. This focus on “intrinsic data” allows for empirical observations that are not reliant on other external “facts” (p. 284). By studying groups of objects researchers can identify “various patterns reflecting similarities and differences within the data” (p. 289). Given my focus on mass-produced objects, Fleming's workmanship-focused model is not as appropriate for my research. However, his insights about comparing objects are valuable to my study of the history of the corselet.

Previous Material Culture Studies of Dress

Severa and Horswill (1989) adapt Zimmerman’s workmanship model to consider three 19th century dresses. Little was known of their origins and the focus on the construction of the dresses proved valuable. As noted, Zimmerman’s process was less suitable for my research. However, I also compared material qualities across multiple objects.

Banning and Kuttruff (2015) use Fleming’s framework to examine one woman’s dresses made from commodity bags. Rosa, a rural Louisianan, would be missing from most historical accounts. However, she left behind a vibrant collection of garments from the 1940s through 1960s. The material culture methodology provided a systematic way to examine the objects and learn not only about her life, but also about cultural factors that shaped the experiences of many rural women during the mid-20th century.

As noted, while the focus is on the object, material culture situates the object within its historical context. It does not consider the object in isolation. Many scholars have stressed the context dependent nature of the meaning of dress. Visual similarity by no means guarantees the same meanings in different cultures. Studying the material objects can help to counter sartorial myths about dress or conflicting interpretations of it. Such efforts are apparent in Steele’s (2001) study of the cultural history of corset, already reviewed at length. I hope my findings also advance our understanding of the history of women’s foundation garments and body-modification with dress, in general.

Material Culture and History

The three processes (Fleming, 1974; Prown, 1982; Zimmerman, 1981) disagree on whether objects can convey facts - indisputable claims. Fleming believes the material culture process can serve as a means of elucidating the “bundle of fact” within an object (p. 160). However, Prown and Zimmerman question this view. Prown states, “Artifacts are disappointing as

communicators of historical fact; they tell us something, but facts are transmitted better by verbal documents" (p. 16). Prown also discusses western preferences for "mind over matter" and the "hierarchical ordering" of historical sources, in which "abstract, intellectual, spiritual elements are superior to material and physical things" (p. 2). Hence the noted preference of many researchers for archival material over objects as primary sources of data.

Riello (2009) makes similar observations about the research preferences and practices of historians. He argues that studying material culture is crucial to moving history, as a field, forward because it "helps historians to do things differently" (p. 24). He explores three uses of objects in historical inquiry, which he calls *history* from *things*, *history* of *things*, and *history* and *things*. All involve different relationships between sources, methodologies, and narratives. His discussion of history of things was particularly pertinent to my research.

Studying the *history* of *things* comes out of a relatively new field, history of consumptions, and involves "examination of the patterns and meanings of consumption through history" (p. 32). This could be closely equated to the history of design, more specifically the designed-things that are consumed within a culture. Examining these "patterns and meanings" closely aligns with my research purpose to study the functions and meanings of the corselet.

In a *history* of *things,* the object is the "subject on which to write about" (p. 41). It requires examining multiple objects over a period of time. The research is often interdisciplinary, using concepts or methods for anthropology and literary criticism. However, the aim goes far beyond the history of one object. This approach to history is used to "cast doubt" and "rethink wider historical narratives" (p. 36). Thus, my study of the *history* of the *corselet* identified and questioned the meanings and practices surrounding these things in order to interrogate of post-WWII narratives. The concept of questioning narratives or "reading against the grain" is also central to post-structuralism, discussed below in relation to semiotic theory.

A Post-Structuralist-Semiotic Approach to Material Culture

Dress conveys a host of meanings. This communication is by no means simple or straightforward. It is influenced by the qualities of the object, the wearer, the viewer, and the cultural and historical contexts in which interaction between these three takes place. There are numerous ways to consider this subject. One approach to considering dress within a materials culture study is semiotics.

Semiotics, Structuralism, and Post-Structuralism

Semiotics is generally defined as the study of signs. It seeks to explore and explain the meaning of signs. "Signs" do not merely refer to literal posted signage, but to the language and objects that surrounds us - that which represents something other than itself. This approach

supports the belief that objects, including dress, are more than just things. Their material qualities, which act as *signifiers*, have *signified* meaning. This approach also situates these signs and their meanings within their specific cultural contexts, which was crucial to my research.

Semiotics comes out of linguistics: the study of language. Saussure, a linguist, is noted as one of the forefathers of semiotics. *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) is one his most influential works. Barry (2002) outlines three key observations Saussure makes about language (pp. 41-43):

1. The meanings of words are *arbitrary*. There is no inherent connection between the sign and what it conveys.
2. Meaning is also *relational*, formed through "binary oppositions." Good is defined in terms of bad, woman in terms of man.
3. Language *creates* the world around us.

The third concept has since been used to examine the performative functions of language and other means of communication, including dress. Barry cites the frequently used example of "terrorist" and "freedom fighter" to illustrate Saussure's last assertion about language (p. 43). The choice of either term not only defines but also, effectively, creates the individual. Language does not so much describe the structures but creates and upholds them. It brings things into being.

Saussure also views language as dyadic, suggesting signs have two parts –*sound-image* and *content*, which were later replaced by *signifier* and *signified*. The signifier (the word) is tangible, while the signified (the meaning) is intangible. The two are needed to create the sign. However, Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, argues that language is triadic: *sign, object,* and *interpretant* (Berger, 2009, p. 44).

Structuralism, which emerged during the mid-20th century, comes out of this 19th and early-20th century work. Barthes has greatly contributed to what is now viewed as semiotic theory. In *Mythologies* (1957), one of the literary theorist's most notable structuralist works, Barthes uses semiotic theory to study mundane objects, everyday practices, and images from popular culture. By considering these aspects of culture through semiotic theories (as signifiers), he reveals their significance (signified meanings) in relation to their cultural contexts or structures.

Structuralism gave way to post-structuralism or deconstructionism. Theorists began to feel structuralism did not go far enough in questioning the underlying structures believed to create meaning. Examining binary oppositions became a central focus, which post-structuralists believe are not inherent. They seek to highlight the ways in which these oppositions are constructed. They "often begin by calling into question what is usually taken for granted as simply the way things are" (Barry, 2002, p. 63).

Barthes's essay “Death of the Author” (1967) is often cited as a turning point, as he was both a structuralist and post-structuralist. In the essay, he discusses a separation between the author and the writing, with a greater focus on the reader. Thus, there is a shift in where the meaning of an object is coming from.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida also greatly contributed to post-structuralism and, in turn, the use of semiotic theory to understand “signs” and their meanings. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), one of the foundations of deconstruction, Derrida describes the approach as “always aim[ing] at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he used” (p. 158). Thus, we seek out those choices, and the resulting conveyed meanings, that are unintentional.

Semiotics and Material Culture

According to Berger (2009), “a semiotic approach to material culture regards artifacts as signs whose meaning and significance have to be determined using semiotic concepts. Signs are things that stand for other things or anything that can be made to stand for something” (p. 39). Objects – including dress – can be read as signs.

Material culture scholars must consider the various aspects of the material signifier to determine the signified meanings. However, as Berger reiterates, this relationship is “arbitrary, a matter of convention” (p. 41) Thus, they must consider the contexts surrounding an object. Additionally, a signifier can have multiple signified meanings (p. 43). Berger suggests this can present challenges for researchers. However, these observations also offer insights into the varying meanings ascribed to the corset. The “arbitrary” nature of signs is, arguably, why the Victorian corset can signify both feminine repression and the freedom to express feminine sexuality.

Berger also cite Saussure’s concept of relational meaning, noting these “oppositions...confer meaning on…objects that are part of material culture” (p. 42). Berger later adds, “from a semiotic perspective, nothing has meaning in itself; an object’s meaning always derives from the network of relations in which it is embedded” (p. 45). In addition to once more reiterating the need to consider the context surrounding the sign, this also suggests it is valuable to consider multiple objects to elucidate these relationships.

Berger also discusses the concept of “sign systems.” This involves multiple signs within one object. Those studying material culture from a semiotic perspective not only consider the object as a whole, but its many intricate parts (p. 52). The various material culture processes discussed fulfill this need, promoting the researcher to conduct detailed observation. However, it

is important to not only consider these parts as they relate to the meaning of the whole object but to also consider their (potentially contradictory) individual meanings.

Berger raises the issue of veracity, citing the influential work of Umberto Eco, a literary critic. In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), Eco makes the notable observation that signs can "lie." He writes, "If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all" (p. 7). Berger illustrates this with examples like "elevator shoes" and "wigs," which are "means of misleading" (p. 46). This concept is interesting to consider in relation to body-altering foundation garments, which can also be read as "means of misleading."

Semiotics and Dress

Given semiotics origins in linguistics, it should be noted that dress scholars have expressed opposition to studying clothing as a "language" (Davis, 1992, p. 5; Hollander, 1993, p. xv; Steele, 1989a, p. 6). They note that dress draws its meaning from its context and, as Davis notes, "does so allusively, ambiguously, and inchoately" (p. 5). I concur that clothing does not literally function like verbal language, lacking the latter's clearly articulated (although arguably also changing) grammar. However, the noted arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified allows researchers to consider the complexity and context-dependent nature of dress. This approach does not treat dress as a verbal or written language but as a sign.

Miller (2010) also challenges the semiotic approach to material culture, speaking specifically of clothes. He is opposed to the idea of clothes functioning merely as signs for an identity or internal sense of being and argues for a consideration of the objects' materiality. He discusses clothes in several contexts. The objects function differently but are all central to individuals' ways of being. He raises a valuable concern. However, I do not take this to mean that semiotics should never be used in dress studies. Rather, it is a caution against wholly focusing on the signified meanings; it is crucial to remain focused on the physical objects under investigation.

On the other hand, one of the greatest benefits of semiotics (within post-structuralism) is its ability to challenge existing meanings. As noted, poststructuralists challenge binary oppositions that, while culturally constructed, are often taken for granted. Johnson (1992), who has written several influential texts on "difference" notes, "Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction'. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo'" (p. 5). This type of analysis involves oppositional or resistant reading - often called *reading against the grain*.

Several dress historians have recently carried out this type of *reading*. Hattrick (2015) examines couturier Norman Hartnell's professional work and private cross-dressing in light of his

homosexual identity, which had been “sidestep[ped]” in previous scholarship (p. 145). Clynk and Peoples (2015) examine the biases within one museum’s collection “by investigating gaps and silences, and by reading historical archives against the grain” (pp. 61-63). Steele’s (2001) discussion and challenging of medical discourse and letters in *EDM* are also examples of reading cultural discourse against the grain. Steele, as well as Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002), do not necessarily use a semiotic approach. However, their discussions of foundation garments challenge previously held misconceptions, which suggests similar aims to the noted approach. Given my desire to further investigate the corselet, whose meanings had largely been left unquestioned, a semiotic approach was quite appropriate.

Summary

I reviewed literature on women’s foundation garments from the mid-19th century to mid-20th century. Previous scholarship indicates designs changed throughout this period, and were influenced by changes within fashion, women’s lives, and the broader culture. In some respects, foundation garment use changed over time. However, they were frequently used to differentiate between the genders or between different groups of women. Throughout the periods discussed, foundation garments were also central to achieving a fashionable silhouette and other ideals.

The symbolic functions of the objects somewhat changed over time. Yet, previous research highlights a variety of persisting meanings relevant to studying the corselet. These themes are reiterated in visual depictions of foundation garments. They include freedom and restriction, modesty and sexuality, public and private, and glamour. The reviewed research is also positioned within larger discussions of how men and women modify their bodies with gendered dress.

Existing scholarship offers several insights related to the research process, which shaped my study. I concluded this chapter with an overview of material culture methodology and the use of semiotic theory with this approach. Both are also discussed in the next chapter on the methods I used to research the post-WWII corselet.

Chapter 3: Methods

The following chapter discusses the methods used to *explore and better articulate the functions and meanings of the corselet during the post-World War II era*. I provide rationale for my material culture approach to the subject and the purpose of the research. I then briefly touch on the cultural context and provide a justification of this choice. I go on to specifically describe the multiple data sources used. Next, I describe how I collected this data and analyzed it. Finally, with my desire to illustrate the rigor of object-based dress research in mind, I address the limitations of my study.

Rationale: Why a Material Culture Study?

To explore my research purpose and accompanying questions, I conducted a material culture study of corselets, as well as other foundation garments. The choice to begin with the objects was a deliberate one. Objects were rarely studied in the literature reviewed, only at times referenced to illustrated already determined findings. However, in my study objects served "actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations" (Prown, 1982, p. 1). Other scholars (e.g. Taylor, 2002, p. 98; Zimmerman, 1981, p. 284) have also noted the value of "leading out" from the object (Prown, 1982, p. 7).

Discussions of the corselet have not included examinations of the actual objects. More generally, objects have been largely neglected in research on women's foundation garments from the post-WWII. Instances where objects have been used (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002; Steele, 2001) have resulted in (what I believe is) stronger research that offers more multi-faceted interpretations of the meanings and roles of foundation garments in women's lives.

Previous literature also highlights how women's foundation garments - especially the corset and quite often the brassiere - are contentious and controversial topics. Given their central place in women's dress and experiences, foundation garments often elicit impassioned interpretations from the female scholars examining them. I, myself, am included among them. This passion is not in and of itself a bad thing. I believe it can be a powerful motivator; however, the accompanying biases must be consciously countered during the whole of the research process. Direct sensory engagement with objects is a means of countering a researcher's biases (Prown, 1980, p. 208, 1982, pp. 4–5). Reflexivity was also utilized through the iterative process I will outline shortly.

Material Culture approaches frequently draw from other cultural sources in order to supplement and interpret data found within the objects later in the process. In addition to traditionally used archival sources, this includes media like advertisements. Previous studies of foundation garment advertisements often view the sources through feminist lenses - apparent in

frequent references to feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey, and the male gaze. The same advertisements have often been used (e.g. Maidenform's I dream... campaign). Findings have tended to confirm one another, rather than push the boundaries of previous understandings of the subject. Thus, I considered these sources of cultural data after my initial observations and analysis of the objects. This ordering proved to be more effective, as objects are often better indications of the true nature of the culture than written (and visual) sources (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 67; Prown, 1980, pp. 199–200, 1982, p. 2; Wahl, 2015, pp. 97–99).

Research Subject: Foundation Garments in the Post-WWII Era

The Objects

The postwar economic boom made a vast array of various styles of foundation garment available to women. I chose to focus on the corselet, sometimes referred to as a merry widow – after Warner's iconic version of the foundation garment. While the corselet emerged during earlier decades, post-WWII era corselets differed slightly in their design (discussed in Chapter 4). They were crucial in constructing the fashionable and feminine ideals of the era. While Farrell-Beck and Gau (2002) only momentarily touch on the garment, they note, "As the fashion focused on the pinched waist, the corsetlike Merry Widow by Warner led the way" (p. 126). Other scholars make similar observations (Fields, 2007, pp. 267–271; Kunzle, 2006, p. 225; Lynn, 2014, p. 108). As one of the more iconic foundation garments, the corselet has the potential to offer insights into other foundation garments, as well as into the lives of the women who wore them and the culture surrounding both.

The Era

I focused the scope of my research on corselets from the post-WWII era through the rest of the mid-20th century: 1945 into the 1960s. This period encompassed the first appearances of corselets in sources like mail order catalogs through what appears to be the decline of wider corselet use. However, given the artifacts I had access, the research focused more heavily on the mid-1950s and early-1960s.

Some scholarship on women's intimate apparel and foundation garments depicts the post-WWII era as largely homogeneous (e.g. Banner, 2006). Dior's New Look is discussed as dominating throughout the 1950s, although a few scholars (e.g. Thesander, 1997) touch on other fashions that emerged. Some researchers position the presumed idealized femininity and restriction of women within their dress and homes during the 1950s opposite the feminist movement and women's growing freedoms of the 1960s (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 16; Dione, 2009, p. 8; Kunzle, 2006, p. 221; Thesander, 1997, p. 177). Scholars note the decline or

abandonment of restrictive, body-modifying foundations in favor of relaxed silhouettes during the 1960s as a sign of these cultural changes.

In addition to being overly simplistic, such divisions fail to account for the fact that fashion and cultural changes are rarely delimited by decades. Because I desired to challenge this binary view of these two decades I deliberately chose a period that straddles both. Additionally, there has been less consideration of the period following wider adoption of the cinched waist fashions but prior to the shift away from them. Studying what could be considered a more transitional period was particularly helpful to identify recurring themes related to both foundation garments and broader definitions of femininity.

The Object and the Era: Encouraging Advance in Dress History

While the postwar "New Look" was created by Dior in 1947, my study focused on a slightly later period. There were benefits to examining foundations several years after the iconic fashion. Roger's (2003) discusses the diffusion of innovations in terms of five groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards (pp. 279-285). By studying a period several years after the release of the New Look, a greater majority of women had adopted the fashion and the foundations that went underneath it.

The noted shift in focus towards wider adoption is important, given dress history's focus on couture fashion in the past (Nicklas & Pollen, 2015b, p. 9). By focusing on this later period, I explored an aspect of dress that was arguably experienced by more women. I chose to focus on ready-to-wear corselets for a similar reason. Such choices are in line with the field's current efforts to move beyond high fashion and elite dress.

"Bigger" Goals

My chosen subject also stemmed from several broader goals. My methods were influenced by a desire to illustrate the value of dress history as a field, object-based research as an approach, and women's dress, experiences and history as subjects of academic inquiry. Foundation garments have frequently been discussed in various fields but the findings have largely been the same. Dress history, as a different approach, offers new insights.

The materiality of women's foundation garments has very rarely been considered. Previous research has relied *heavily* on visual and written sources. It is my hope that this study not only shows the value of, but also emphasize the necessity of, detailed examination of artifacts when studying dress.

The subjects of dress and fashion have historically been viewed as feminine, and by extension frivolous topics to research. I hope my findings illustrate how foundation garments tell

us about far more than “just” the clothes women wore decades ago. Rather, they offer insights into the ways we all modify our appearances, regardless of historical context or gender.

Sources of Data

In their discussion of the future of dress history Nicklas and Pollen (2015a) note objects “must come first, and remain central, for the study of dress to be meaningful and materially grounded” (p. 6). With this in mind, my research began with and returned to examinations of the corselet (the specifics of which are discussed shortly). However, while my focus was very much on objects, I also considered other sources of data. This included archival material and cultural media like advertisements, which helped to situate the objects within their contexts.

Objects

I used several resources at the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) - primarily their sizable Munsingwear collection. This collection was selected not only because of the vast number of well-cataloged foundation garments in the textile collection but also because of the large archive of supporting documentation in the Historical Society's library. Given the collections size, it was essential to focus on a very small aspect of the collection. This was an additional factor in my decision to narrow my research to the corselet.

Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselets. My study of the corselet focused on designs from Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette. Both brands are connected to the Munsingwear Corporation. Surviving examples of these designs were a crucial source of data. The majority of the objects came from the MNHS collection, as well as from my personal vintage foundation garment collection.

Based on descriptions in the MNHS’s catalog, I identified six objects that could be considered corselets - boned, elasticized foundations that mold the bust, waist, and (at least to some degree) hips. This criterion is based on my own previous observations of Warner’s “Merry Widow” corselets and other subsequent designs, as well as definitions by Farrell-beck and Gau (2002) and Lynn (2014). Because the collection is organized in drawers roughly based on designs, I was able to find additional examples while retrieving the initially identified corselets from storage. I found three more designs that aligned with my noted definition but had been missed during my initial search because there was minimal information in the catalog. I also have five corselets from the noted companies in my personal collections. These were examined alongside those from the MNHS collection, making for a total of fourteen.

I began my study by analyzing these fourteen corselets: three Hollywood-Maxwell corselets from approximately 1955-1957 and eight Hollywood Vassarette corselets from approximately 1957-1963. These objects are by no means representative of all corselets.

However, given the nature of the MNHS collection - a large number of foundation garments from one company that are dated and accompanied by additional written and visual resources - these objects served as an excellent foundation for considering the history of the corselet.

Other Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette foundation garments. After examining the corselets, I compared them with other Munsingwear, Hollywood-Maxwell, and Hollywood Vassarette foundation garments from approximately the same period. I selected objects that served at least one of the functions I observed in the corselet - like waist cinchers that modify the waist or strapless brassieres that support the breasts without shoulder straps. I slightly expanded the date range of these objects to 1945-1965 in order to get a sense of the postwar foundation garments that directly preceded the corselets, as well as those that accompanied or shortly followed the designs examined.

With the help of the collection's curator, I searched the catalog and generated a list of objects associated with Hollywood-Maxwell or Hollywood Vassarette from approximately 1945-1965. I determined the recurring nomenclature associated with foundation garments (brassiere, bra, corset, girdle, and foundation) and further narrowed my search. I then reviewed each objects' catalog entry to identify all waist cinchers, longline strapless bras, shortline strapless brassieres, strapless brassieres, step-in girdles, panty girdles, and all-in ones from the noted period.

I found over 160 potential foundation garments in the MNHS collection. The objects' dates varied in specificity (e.g. late-1940s, 1950-1969), so I further limited my list to objects that were attributed to an exact year. There were still far more objects than were realistically needed for comparison to the corselet, requiring me to further narrow my list.

While the post-WWII period technically begins in 1945, I chose to focus on designs beginning in 1950, which were slightly closer in proximity to the corselets examined. I selected 9 objects of each type of foundation garment (e.g. shortline strapless brassiere) from 1950-1965, picking three objects from 1950-1954, 1955-1959, and 1960-1965. This allowed me to consider how these designs changed during the period I was studying. I also reasoned any features that appeared in three examples of a foundation garment from a limited date range was notable and could be compared to the corselet designs.

I sorted my final list of potential objects by accession number, object type, and date; I then selected the first three objects listed from each of the three noted date ranges (e.g. three shortline strapless brassiere from 1950-1954). In some cases, I was not able to identify enough objects. For example, there were only four waist cinchers made by Hollywood Vassarette in the MNHS. The list was also amended to ensure there were no duplicates (the same design in different colors). I also decided to examine several objects that were from the same lines as the

corselets examined, such as a strapless brassiere from the “Her Secret” line and a brassiere-girdle set from the “Gay 90s” line. These final additions were made of the same fabrics and visually resembled the corselets, allowing me to further identify similarities and differences between each foundation garment design. Ultimately, I completed detailed observations of 57 foundation garments from roughly the same period as the corselets examined.

Corselets from other brands. I also compared the Hollywood Vassarette corselets to other brand’s versions of the foundation garment from the same period. This include both "name" and lesser-known brands - like Warner’s “Merry Widows” and those from mail order catalogs – in order to explore the range of ready-to-wear corselets women may have worn. I noted similarities across the corselets in order to identify significant aspects of the design and to gain a deeper understanding of the potential meanings of the corselet, in general.

The “Merry Widow” corselets examined were part of my personal collection, which includes eleven “Merry Widows” from 1952 to the early-1960s, reflecting various designs and price points. These corselets had the benefits of all being the same size. Additionally, because they are not part of a museum collection, they could be worn to compare the objects’ various interactions with and aesthetic effects on the body. The lesser known and mail order corselets primarily came from the Goldstein Museum Design. They have a Carol Brent corselet (sold by Montgomery Ward) in their collection, as well several all-in-ones from the same brand – again allowing for comparison across foundation garment designs. I also examined another Warner’s “Merry Widow” and a corselet called “Hi-A by Marja” from the Goldstein’s collection, as well as a corselet by the company Lady Marlene from my personal collection. I examined a total of fifteen additional corselets to support my analysis of the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs.

Because I only had access to a limited number of lesser known or lower-end designs, I also analyzed depictions of corselets in *Sears* and *Montgomery Ward* catalogs from 1949 to 1969, the first and last years corselets appear in these sources. These sources were especially useful in confirming my speculation based on the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs. Because they were dated and regularly released (twice a year), they helped to support my analysis of not only the typical corselet design but also how it changed over time. These catalogs were one of several sources I used in addition the noted objects.

External Sources of Data

I supported my study of the objects by analyzing external sources of data (as in *external to* the objects), mainly contemporary written and visual sources on corselets. They were incorporated into the third-speculation stage of the process discussed below. As noted, they were

used to question and confirm the data found within the objects, providing information about the varying contexts shaping the meanings of the corselet.

Munsingwear archives. These additional sources include the wide range of resources in the Munsingwear archive at MNHS, which includes 44 boxes of materials in 24 volumes and totals 50.4 cubic feet. Only a small portion data was pertinent to my research but I did find a number of valuable sources related to foundation garments from the mid-20th century. These documents played crucial role in understanding how foundation garments were "produced, bought, and consumer" (Riello, 2009, p. 32). This understanding, in turn, helped to elucidate the objects functions and meanings in post-WWII culture.

I used the "Collection Finding Aid" created by the Historical Society to initially identify sources (*Munsingwear: An Inventory of Its Records*, n.d.). The document outlines the contents of each box and their general years. I noted any that boxes that contained materials from the decades I was studying, as well as at least a decade on both side to consider the periods preceding and following it. I also noted any materials associated with Hollywood-Maxwell, Vassar Company, or Hollywood Vassarette, since the former two became the latter.

I reviewed the contents of each box in person at the Historical Society. I identified any sources that *might* be relevant to my study of the corselet (I ultimately relied more heavily on some over others). They fell into several categories: design and production, marketing and promotion, or price lists. The latter was especially valuable to this study, revealing not only when designs were sold and for how much, but how they were described – one of the ways the objects were imbued with meaning.

I recorded the location, date, and notes on each source in a spreadsheet. I also photographed them so they could be further reviewed at a later date. I analyzed each source individually using the steps outlined below. When a source was analyzed I also added it to a citation manager (Zotero) to ensure it could be accurately referenced as I wrote my findings.

Other sources. I examined additional sources to augment the information found in the archive. I analyzed contemporary media directed towards and experienced by the consumer of the corselet. I focused heavily on advertisements for the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs within newspapers and magazines. These sources assisted in better dating objects, which was necessary in order to consider the designs over time. The language and images used also helped to articulate the functions and uses of the objects. Additionally, I found a number of references to the corselet within dress advice in contemporary books and magazines. These sources provided additional information about how and why the corselet was worn, as well as how this related to general foundation garment use during the period examined

I also examined discourse in trade journals. Articles in the "Corsets-Brassieres" sections of *Women's Wear Daily* were particularly valuable to this study. These sources mainly provide information about those involved with the corselet before it reaches the consumer - the designers and manufacturers, the marketers, the sellers. However, they also yielded helpful insights into women's experiences with the corselets and the forces that shaped these experiences.

The majority of these resources were found and accessed digitally through the database ProQuest. I initially identified over 11,000 referenced to either "Hollywood-Maxwell" or "Hollywood Vassarette" within the database, with over 2,500 sources from 1950-1965 – approximately the same years as the corselets examined. My literature review and survey of the Munsingwear archive provided me with the key words specifically used to refer to the companies' corselet designs ("Torso" and "Torsolette"). I used these terms and the more general "corselet" to further narrow my search to several hundred sources - a more realistic number to begin with.

I conducted a quick, initial review of each source. In some cases, the company and the design were only mentioned in minor, unrelated ways; these sources were not further analyzed. I worked very hard to focus on those that were most useful to my current study of the corselet. As noted in my research journal on October 11, 2017, "[I] went through and selected only those [sources] that dealt directly with Hollywood-Maxwell or Hollywood Vassarette torso and torsolette designs…[as well as] those that referenced these designs and spoke to important general trends within corselets (e.g. low back) or foundations as a whole (e.g. color)." I found 50 external sources that depicted Hollywood-Maxwell or Hollywood Vassarette corselets from either the ProQuest database or the Munsingwear archive. Images of the sources were saved digitally and added to the noted citations manager so they could easily be accessed as I analyzed each one individually (discussed below).

These additional sources of data strengthened the research. They served as a means of triangulation, providing "multiple perceptions to clarify meaning" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 154). By considering the objects in relation to the data found in visual and written sources I was able to better understand and articulate the connections between the corselets, the women who wore them, and the contexts that surrounded both.

Data Collection and Methods

My research was guided by Prown's (1982) material culture process. This established process involves a systematic, three stages process. Each stages includes sub-stages (pp. 7-10):

1. Description
    a. Substantial Analysis - measurements, material
    b. Content - iconography or decorative designs

    c. Formal Analysis - layout or “configuration”
2. Deduction
    a. Sensory Engagement - interactions between the researcher’s senses and the objects
    b. Intellectual Engagement - questioning of its functions or purposes
    c. Emotional response - considering any emotional responses that arise from viewing or interacting with the object
3. Speculation
    a. Theories and Hypotheses - reviewing and analyzing the data from the previous two stages to develop theories or hypothesis about the relationship between the object and its culture
    b. Plan of Research: Developing a plan to “validate” any hypothesis or theories formed, often through evidence external to the object

The process is very iterative and reflexive (Prown 1982, p. 10). While it is systematic, with clearly laid out steps, the application of Prown’s process to multiple objects required a more flexible research process, as is typical of most qualitative research.

In an effort to incorporate Zimmerman’s (1981) observations about comparing classes of objects, I conducted the first two stages for each object within the groups listed (Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselets, other Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette foundation garments, corselets from other brands). I gathered data for each object individually and examined each group of objects separately in the order listed. I also briefly dwelled on the speculation stage for individual objects, recording anything notable I wanted to return to after examining all of the objects.

Observations were written by hand based on a standard guide (Appendix A) to ensure that Prown’s process was followed in a consistent way. These observations were then transcribed into an online Google Form (Appendix B), largely for ease but also accuracy, which populated the data into a central spreadsheet. The uses of a spreadsheet allowed for easy comparison across objects based on certain categories. I first analyzed the “Description” data for all objects across all three sub-stages, recording observations within my research journal. The same was then done with the “Deduction” data, again recording additional observation or deductions. Both inductive and deductive coding was used based on themes that emerge from the objects and the overarching themes identified by previous literature, respectively. I believe that the latter is important to consider. However, given the often-singular views of foundation garments, inductive analysis was crucial as I sought out new information about the objects.

The final speculation stage was conducted based on analysis of the first two stages, beginning with Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselets. I recorded additional questions and speculations that emerged. I then followed the same process with the other foundation garments. Their data was compared with that of the initial group of corselets, primarily focusing on differences in order to understand what was unique about the corselet. I then observed and analyze the other brand corselets, focusing on similarities. In addition to observing these designs using the standard guide (Appendix A), I also used them to explore several specific questions about the design that emerged from my analysis of the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselets (Appendix C). This helped to confirm my understanding of the typical corselet design. This type of comparison across objects aligned with my poststructuralist-semiotic approach, which asserts that meanings are determined through binary oppositions. By analyzing the corselets in relation to other classes of objects I began to ascertain their meanings.

After analyzing all of the noted objects, I developed my final speculations. I kept Prown's (1982) instructions in mind. He describes this stage as "the time of summing up what has been learned from the internal evidence of the object itself, turning those data over in one's mind, developing theories that might explain the various effects observed and felt" (p. 10). I reflected on the data gathered in my research journal and also wrote a summary in a separate document. I organized my speculations into three categories: design, functions, and meanings of the corselet. I then developed a plan of research for examining the external evidence.

I used my speculation to create a standard guide (Appendix D) for examining each source and then recorded these observations in a google form (Appendix E). This enabled me to first consider each source individually, although I did include a "notes" section to record any observations or speculations about how a source related to the larger study.

Some of the data gathered was used to address specific questions related to each object (e.g. date, how a certain feature was described). However, all of the data was compared and analyzed using Lichtman's (2010) "3 C's" model and a resource from UC Davis on qualitative coding (*Analyzing qualitative data*, n.d.). The latter suggests you begin by reading through your data multiple time to "get to know" it and note any "initial impressions" (p. 2). I read through all data several times and reflected in my research journal. Then with Lichtman's model in mind, I developed "codes," then "categories," and finally "concepts" or themes. This was done using both pre-set, or *a priori*, and open coding. The preset codes were based on themes (e.g. "freedom") from literature review and some keywords identified as I initially analyzed the external sources individually (e.g. "hidden"). The process was very iterative. Each step was recorded and reflected upon in my research journal.

My analysis of external sources was also shaped by a poststructuralist-semiotic approach. I *read these sources against the grain.* This was not a haphazard process. As Johnson (1992) points out, “The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text” (p. 5). For example, while reviewing price lists or advertisements I not only noted what features of the designs were mentioned and how they were described, but also considered what features were downplayed or not mentioned at all. The latter proved to be equally, if not more, important as I considered the cultural meanings of the corselet.

While this theoretical approach has been largely developed based on the written word, this study is driven by the belief we also communicate with a host of visual media. Based on this view of language, the images in external sources and the objects, themselves, were also utilized to *tease out* concepts like freedom and control, modesty and sexuality, and even man and woman were in order to determine the signified meanings the corselet and its role within the larger culture.

Limitations

Some may be concerned about how the examination of the objects could to the formation of theories (although this could be equated to a grounded theory approach). Additionally, the research was not structured around clearly articulated hypothesis, although I did have a number of themes and assumptions to explore. However, several scholars have noted the value of *leading out from the object* and delaying hypothesis till the final stage (Miller, 2010; Nicklas & Pollen, 2015b; Taylor, 2002). As Miller notes, “my only real hypothesis is that I really have very little idea of what I am actually going to find...I assume that the most important findings are going to be about things one didn't even suspect existed” (p. 7). While Miller is speaking of conducting fieldwork and observing people, I believe his observations equally apply to observing objects.

Given my own noted biases, some may be concerned that my hypothesis or theories will be heavily influenced. However, Prown’s makes a very important observation, “Speculation takes place in the mind of the investigator, and his cultural stance now becomes a major factor. However, since the objective and deductive evidence is already in hand, this cultural bias has little distorting effect” (p. 10). Thus, the research process itself helped to counter these biases. Additionally, I used a research journal throughout the research process to ensure I constantly remained aware of and reflected on my personal and cultural biases.

Studying objects, particularly dress, has additional challenges and limitations. This includes both the vastness of potential objects to consider and also the limited number of objects fitting the desired criteria that have actually been kept and preserved. With this in mind, I

intentionally confined my current study based on the resources available to the corselet during the post-WWII era.

This study was not driven by a desire to generalize findings in order to establish facts about all foundation garments or their use during the post-WWII era. Some will view this as a weakness. However, this potential critique did not in any way detour my research. This study sought to consider the cultural meaning and functions of a foundation garment widely adopted by a variety of women following WWII. However, men and women modified their bodies using various means for generations and still do today. This study was about more than one object in one historical context.

Summary

I have discussed the methods used to *explore and better articulate the meanings and functions of the corselet in the post-World War II era*. I provided a rationale for using a material culture methodology and noted how this related to my broader goals: illustrating the value of dress history as a field, object-based research as an approach, and women's dress, experience, and history as subjects of academic inquiry. To do this, I used multiple sources of data, including both internal evidence within objects and external evidence in written and visual sources. I outlined how I used Prown's three-stage process to examine and analyze this data based on a poststructuralist-semiotic approach to material culture. Lastly, I acknowledged limitations in my study.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Introduction

This research sought to *explore and better articulate the functions and meanings of the corselet during the post-World War II era*. A multitude of manufacturers released their own designs during the first half of the 1950s. The prices of these ready-to-wear foundations varied, from the costlier Warner's "Original Merry Widow" to more affordable versions from mail-order catalogs. However, the physical, fundamental designs themselves were similar. To delve into the subject of the postwar corselet, this research focused largely on the designs produced and promoted by Hollywood-Maxwell, which became Hollywood Vassarette in the late-1950s.

As noted in Chapter 3, I began my research with meticulous observations of multiple designs from several foundation garment manufacturers to determine what a typical design entailed. I begin my analysis with a brief overview of mid-20th century corselets based on the research done for this study. Then, to move beyond a cursory summary of the many objects examined, I focus on one design: the Hollywood Vassarette "Temptress Torso" in black and pale pink (style #1049, released 1959). This was one of the more visually interesting designs but still aligns with the typical corselet design. Other Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs are compared to this design to discuss elements of a typical corselet, changes over time, and uncommon features offered at various points throughout the period examined.

I then analyze the functions of the corselet based on observations of and deductions based on the physical design. I also move beyond the objects, themselves, and discuss the external sources depicting them. The functions of the corselet discussed in these sources are compared to those apparent in the physical designs. While some are frequently reiterated, others are rarely mentioned.

The external sources are also used to explore my speculations that emerged from observations of the objects about how the corselet was (at least intended to be) used or worn, and by whom. I also analyze why the corselet was worn, based on evidence in the objects and external sources. This last question begins to touch on the abstract meanings of the corselet. This is explored in the following chapter, which interprets the findings analyzed here.

Background on Mid-20th Century Corselets

Before analyzing the design, it is helpful to begin with a general overview of corselets in the mid-20th century, also referred to as post-WWII or postwar corselets. As noted in Chapter 2, the first foundation garments called "corselets" were released around 1919 as women shifted from wearing corsets to brassieres and girdles. Some consumers felt the latter combination segmented their bodies. Manufacturers responded by releasing the corselet (Fields, 2007, p. 91).

Similar foundation garments were designed and produced during the decades that followed. However, the strapless foundation garment that came to be considered a corselet during the mid-20th century differed from earlier corselets and was promoted as a new design.

References to Hollywood-Maxwell's first corselets appear in December of 1954 ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1954; "Take Your Pick," 1954). Other brands had created their own versions earlier in that decade. Around 1952, Warner's released their "Merry Widow," initially referred to as a "Cinch Bra" ("Warner's Cinch-Bra," 1952). The design was "inspired by MGM's forthcoming film 'The Merry Widow' starring Lana Turner" ("Warner's Lace-Up Merry Widow," 1952). Their design is the most well-known, evidenced by the fact that the foundation garment is sometimes called a merry widow. Mail order catalogs also sold corselets around the same time, if not earlier (*Montgomery Ward Spring and Summer Catalog*, 1952, p. 182; *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1951, p. 258). These designs more closely resemble a corset, with stays running the full length of the foundation garment over the breasts. In 1953 companies like Sears shifted to an underwire design in line with Warner's version (*Sears Spring Catalog*, 1953, p. 262).

By the spring of 1955 Hollywood-Maxwell had three of its own designs: two shorter "Torso Bras" designs called "Her Secret" and "3/4 Time," as well as a slightly longer "Torsolette" design named "Pink Champagne" (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 3–5). That season, they also sold a mink-covered version of the "3/4 Time" design. However, with a suggested retail price of $1,200, it probably was not widely purchased and was more likely intended to promote the other corselet designs (p. 2).

From the mid- to late-1950s the number of corselet designs increased and diversified. However, in the early-1960s advertisements for corselets from Hollywood Vassarette, as well as other brands like Warner's, decline and are rarely seen by 1963. Yet, while not widely promoted, corselets appear to have still been manufactured and sold by some companies during the rest of the decade. Sears offered various versions of the foundation garment until 1969 (*Sears Fall Catalog*, 1969, p. 184).

Classification of Initial Designs

In mail order catalogs, these foundation garments were initially shown with garter belts and waist cinchers. They were separate from brassieres and other foundations, like all-in-ones - which more closely resemble earlier corselet designs. This offers some insight into how the corselet was classified during the early-1950s, and potentially why Hollywood-Maxwell released their designs a few years after both mail order catalogs and brands like Warner's.

As a brassiere manufacturer, Hollywood-Maxwell may have been reluctant to create their own design because of the postwar corselet's association with the waist, as opposed to the

breasts. On the other hand, Warner's began as a corset company in the 19th century and by the mid-20th century was manufacturing both brassieres and girdles, as well as things like waist cinchers. Likewise, mail order catalogs sold a wide range of foundation garments. It would have been less daunting, not to mention easier logistically, to create and sell this new combination foundation garment.

Interestingly, by spring 1955 corselets in mail order catalogs are grouped with strapless brassieres (*Sears Spring Catalog*, 1955, p. 200). This suggests the corselet had shifted to being viewed as a type of brassiere, rather than a version of a garter belt or waist cincher. It is at this point Hollywood-Maxwell released their own corselets. This also appears to be the case for similar companies, such as the brassiere manufacturer Maidenform. Like Hollywood-Maxwell, they only offered shortline and longline strapless bras during the early-1950s. It is not until late-1954 that they released their own corselet design: the "Pre-Lude Once-Over" ("Maidenform Pre-Lude," 1954a; "Maidenform Pre-Lude," 1954b).

The delay between corselets from brands like Warner's or mail order catalogs and Hollywood-Maxwell or Maidenform could also be due, in part, to the needs of the latter to build the infrastructure required to create and sell foundation garments that extended over the hips and had garters. However, the way the corselet is viewed and classified seems to have shaped it history, mainly who produced it. As a combination of strapless bra, waist cincher, and garter belt it blurred the boundaries of foundation garments, much like designs from the early-20th century discussed in the literature review.

Different Names for Initial Designs

The ambiguous nature of the postwar corselet is also reflected in the variety of names it was initially assigned. One of the challenges of this study was the different names used to refer to essentially the same foundation garment design. Names not only varied across brands but within the brands, themselves. As noted, the mid-20th century corselet was arguably a new design. So, each manufacturer came up with its own name. For example, Warner's initially labeled their designs "cinch-bras" (e.g. "Warner's Merry Widows," 1954) but eventually just referred to them as "Merry Widows" ("Warner's Merry Widow," 1956).

Mail order catalogs also used a variety of terms. Sears initially called its designs "corselette" or "corselet" (*Sears Fall Catalog*, 1952, p. 374; *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1951, p. 258). Then in the mid-1950s they title the corselets "Figure Charmers" (*Sears Spring Catalog*, 1955, p. 200). Montgomery Ward referred to their design as a "New 3-in one." The name was derived from its combination of "a strapless bra, waist whittler, [and] a garter belt" (*Montgomery Ward Spring and Summer Catalog*, 1952, p. 182). Then in 1953 they used the term "bracelette" for similar

designs. This name was used by Montgomery Ward until at least 1963. The brand Lady Marlene also used the somewhat similar name “Bra-S-’Lette” throughout the period examined (“Lady Marlene Bra-S’lette,” 1951; “Lady Marlene Bra-s’lette,” 1966).

Hollywood-Maxwell released two different length corselets. The shorter “Torso bras” ended at the hips, while the slightly longer “Torsolettes” extended down in back to also shape the “derriere” (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 3–5). Interestingly, by the late-1950s Sears also used the term “Torso Bra” (e.g. *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1959, p. 240). However, by this point, the shorter version corselet from Hollywood Vassarette was also referred to as a “Torsolette” (“Hollywood Vassarette Wardrobe of Strapless Bras,” 1960; “Minimizing the Maximum,” 1962) or “Torsolet” (“Selling Summer Foundation,” 1962).

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the design as a “corselet,” unless quoting a design’s name in an external source (e.g. “Her Secret Torso Bra”). This aligns with the nomenclature used by the Minnesota Historical Society based on The Getty Research Institute’s *Art & Architecture Thesaurus*. Additionally, contemporary fashion magazines like *Vogue* use the term “corselet” to refer to the general design in instructive articles on topics like foundation garment use (e.g. “What Goes Under What?,” 1956). Trade journals like *Women’s Wear Daily* also used this term during the period this research examined (e.g. Holman, 1959), although other terms were also interspersed.

Why Classification and Naming Matters

How corselets were classified (either as a type of garter belt versus a strapless brassiere) and what they were called changed during the postwar era. This suggests expectations around use and the meanings of these objects were also not firmly established. This period reflects efforts to define what a corselet was and how it should be used. External sources include directives like where it should be worn or what it should be worn with. This, in turn, impacts the meanings of the corselet.

For example, some early external sources suggested the foundation garment could be worn day and night but by the end of the period researched the corselet is largely promoted as an evening foundation garment for special occasion wear. The shift can be placed within the larger trend toward promoting foundation garment wardrobes, with numerous, specific foundations worn with different fashion or in different settings. It also arguably emphasized the more positive connotations of the corselet, like glamour, to encourage adoption or continued use. The influx status of the corselet indicates the functions and meanings of the corselet were not concrete, rather they were evolving and culturally dependent.

The Release of the "Temptress"

A bit of additional information is useful before beginning my analysis of the corselet. In the spring of 1957 the Minneapolis-based company Munsingwear acquired Hollywood-Maxwell ("Munsingwear acquisition," 1957; "Munsingwear Buys California Garment Firm," 1957). This Hollywood-based brassiere manufacturer was merged with the also recently acquired girdle manufacturer, Vassar Company ("Munsingwear Merging Two Bra Operations," 1957). This gave "Munsingwear a larger share of the market in the corset and brassiere industry" ("Munsingwear Purchases California Firm," 1957). By the end of the decade Hollywood Vassarette - the foundation and lingerie division of Munsingwear - was formed.

One of the first corselets released by Hollywood Vassarette was part of the "Temptress" line. The cup design promised a "bewitching swell of bosom," while the body was "low-back and waist-cinching" ("Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959). The quoted advertising copy was paired with an illustration of women in the brassiere and corselet designs seductively posing with sideways glances at the viewer (Figure 3). This was arguably a sultrier depiction of a corselet than previous Hollywood-Maxwell examples. However, the physical design of the "Temptress Torso" is like both earlier and later corselets in numerous ways. Its release in 1959 places it at a useful mid-point in the era explored - offering insights into what elements of the design remained constant and which changed over time.

Key Measurements of the Corselet

The "Temptress"

By the post-WWII era the use of standardized band and cup sizes in bras was established (Fields, 2007, p. 99). While corselets shaped more than just the bust, they used this type of sizing during the era examined (and many still do today). The particular "Temptress" examined is size 34B. However, like many aspects of dress, there are many other measurements to consider with regard to the physical size of this corselet.

The almost perfectly symmetrical object is 11 3/8 inches high at its center, which would run along the center front of the body when worn (Figures 4-6). However, its tallest points (14 inches) are slightly further out from the center at the peaks of the dual arches forming the upper line of the foundation. The arches descend on the sides to 11 1/2 inches. The corselet drops to 7 1/2 inches high at its outer edges, which would hit at center back when enclosed around the body.

The measurements of the stays (also called bones or boning) running vertically along the corselet and offer insight into the overall shape. The foundation has a total of eight stays. The four on center front are all 9 inches long but are positioned under the cups, so they do not reflect

the full height of the objects. However, the remaining four are positioned on the sides and back of the corselet. The stays closest to the outer edges, or center back of the foundation, are 8 inches high. The next pair increase to 9 1/2 inches and are closer to the noted highest point, running along the side back of the body when worn. These measurements illustrate the steady decline towards the center back of the foundation.

With regards to width, the "Temptress" is narrowest across the middle at 26 1/2 inches, aligning with the natural or narrowest part of the waist. It is widest along the bottom edge, which would run around the hips and lower abdomen, measuring approximately 31 inches. The corselet also gets slightly wider towards the upper portion of the foundation, roughly 27 inches at the underbust area beneath the raised cups. Interestingly, while band size of this example is 34, the underbust measurement is smaller by 7 inches. This indicates the foundation garment would stretch around the body.

Comparison of Measurements across All Corselets

The measurements of the other corselets were similar to those of the "Temptress." More specifically, the proportions within the objects were generally the same across the designs examined. I will focus on the lengths and widths, and what they reveal about the typical corselet.

Length: covering and exposing the body. As noted, when Hollywood-Maxwell released its corselet designs it offered two different lengths. Some other brands examined had similar offering. Warner's original "Merry Widow" was initially released as a shorter "cinch-bra" and a longer "waltz-length corselette" ("Warner's Merry Widows," 1954). Despite these different versions, comparison of measurements across all the corselets examined reveal repeated efforts to cover and expose certain areas of the wearer's body.

Front versus back. The other designs examined are each higher at center front than center back. All also extended even higher in front to curve over the bust. Generally, the top of the bust is 2-3 inches taller than center front, so the typical corselet curves over the bust from center front and then back down towards the sides - resulting in a dual arch or "m" shape along the upper edge of the front of the corselet. The biggest difference found (4 inches) was in Hollywood-Maxwell's "Backless Strapless Torsolette" (Style #8139, released 1957), which has a hook between the cups, lessening the appearance of the curve and making it more visually similar to the other designs. Proportions like the "Temptress'" vertical stays were also observed in the other designs. All increase incrementally in length from the center back to the sides of the foundation garments.

These measurements indicate efforts to cover the breasts but expose the back, although the latter is to varying degrees depending on design. The "Backless Strapless" design referenced

was technically longer in the back by 1 inch. Similarly, the earlier “Pink Champagne” design (style #4039, released 1955) was nearly 2 inches longer in back. However, their appearance when closed and images of the designs on models in price lists (e.g. Figure 7) indicate the backs angled down and are lower than the fronts of the corselets when on the body. In fact, the name of the latter - “Backless Strapless” - suggests exposing the back was a key aspect of the design.

Based on the designs examined, corselets offered varying amounts of exposure. Some only slightly decline in back, like the “Her Secret” design (style #1629, released 1954). This is one of the first designs released by Hollywood-Maxwell but was also sold by Hollywood Vassarette, which indicates it was produced until at least the late-1950s. Low-back or “backless” designs were also offered throughout most of the period examined. The first “Torsolette” is promoted as having a “back cut very low” (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 3–4). The noted “Backless Strapless” design was released just a couple years later and was followed by other back-revealing designs.

This variation in the designs indicates the consumer had some degree of choice. However, there was a limit to how much of the back could be exposed without straps in the earlier designs. The backless design cited required additional means of support: an elastic “X” across the back panels (Figure 8). A 1957 price list notes the “floating elastic sections in back insure proper hugging control for bust and back” (*Supplementary Price List*, 1957, p. 5). Another backless foundation - a long line brassiere from Hollywood-Maxwell (Style #8059) - uses a curved wire, similar to an underwire but larger, to support the larger, more-revealing back opening (Figure 9). Both 1957 designs, especially the redesign of the torsolette just a couple years after its release, suggest there was a demand for foundation garments that exposed more of the back. However, the current textile technology could not accomplish this on its own. The materials used for the panels could not maintain proper tension (alluded to with words like “hug”) when the upper back edge had a steeper decline. As new fibers like Lycra are released - discussed shortly - these additional means of support are abandoned.

Shift towards “backless” designs. Low back and backless designs were offered throughout most of the period. However, there seems to be a shift towards more lower back designs, overall. The shortest center back measurement - 6 5/8 inches - is on a design sample (style #1649) from 1963, with a difference of over 5 inches from its center front. Granted, these measurements alone do not indicate how the corselet looked when worn and since it is in a museum’s collection it cannot be worn. However, this design is cut straight across. The bottom edge most likely ran parallel to the ground and a dramatic dip in back would have occurred when the foundation was on a body.

Additionally, the designs examined from 1959 into the 1960s all had the shortest center back measurements: between 7 inches and 7 1/2 inches. Of these designs, the “Temptress” and two other lace-on-sheer corselets released in the early-1960s were the shortest (style #1079, 1963; style #1089, 1960-1965). Based on images of the objects closed and lying flat, they all appear to end lower in the back (below the line of the underbust), especially the latter two 1960s designs. This supports my speculation about an overall shift towards more low-back corselet designs.

While the degree of the back exposed seems to have shifted over time, all the strapless corselet designs - by their very nature - revealed the shoulder and upper chest. This ability was touted in most of the external sources on corselets I examined as part of this study. Over half of those specifically on Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselets reference exposing the back, shoulders, or both. This was frequently stressed in earlier advertisements as Hollywood-Maxwell sought to promote the new designs. These sources tend to focus on revealing the shoulders (“Hollywood-Maxwell Party Dressing,” 1954; “Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time,” 1954). By comparison, sources from the 1960s place an emphasis on revealing the back; the shoulders are mentioned less often but are implied (“Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair,” 1963; “Hollywood Vassarette Wardrobe of Strapless Bras,” 1960). Sources from the 1960s also place a much heavier emphasis on the corselet’s upper body-revealing ability in relation to other functions. Several sources focus almost entirely on baring the back. For example, a 1962 article in *Harper’s Bazaar* titled “The Vamp's New Guide to Back Magic” features numerous foundations - including one of the Hollywood Vassarette corselets examined (style #1079) - that allow the wearer to “show off her back” (p.174).

Width: “hourglass” shape. Like the “Temptress,” each of the corselets examined are narrowest across the center - approximately at the natural waist - compared to the lower or hip area. The underbust measurements were taken when possible, although the designs with the lowest backs are difficult to measure. When measured, the underbust areas are all wider than the waists but narrower than the hips. It is worth noting, the measurements discussed do not take into account the breasts, which may have visually balanced the fuller hips. The consistent combination of these measurements result in what is generally referred to as an hourglass silhouette.

Interestingly, the term “hourglass” was never used in the external sources examined. However, the shaping function of the corselet is often mentioned. Advertisements frequently promote the foundation garment’s abilities to shape or mold the wearer's body in line with current fashion silhouettes. For example, in the Hollywood-Maxwell “A Bra for Every Fashion” folio (1956)

the “3/4 Time” design (style #1039, released 1954) is suggested for “molded middle” fashions. However, despite the measurements noted in the objects, themselves, this silhouette appears to have been viewed differently than the extreme curves of the earlier New Look. The mid-1950s design featured in the folio distances itself from earlier versions, promising to “hug but not cinch.” Yet, the design promises “to shape [the wearer's body to] the long, easy lines of her new-look fashion” (*A Bra for Every Fashion*, 1956, p. 2). Similar language is used in many of the external sources analyzed as part of this study.

Materials and Their Organization: What Makes Up a Corselet?

The label for the “Temptress” corselet indicates it is made of “Nylon Ban-lon®.” However, observation of the object reveals several other materials. Additionally, the design is defined not only by the physical materials (nylon, rubber, metal) but how they relate to one another, how they are laid out or distributed within the object. Based on observation of numerous corselets, the design can be broken into three general parts: body, cups, and garters. Each will be discussed for the “Temptress” and then more generally based on all the objects examined.

The Body of the “Temptress”

The body of the “Temptress” is constructed out of nine separate panels. They are made of either black rib knit elastic or dual layers of a woven semi-sheer synthetic material in black or pale pink. There is also black floral lace on top of the three center front panels. Lace was a hallmark of Hollywood Vassarette lingerie. Jean Hall, the head designer, worked to elevate the brand during the latter part of the period studied. Hall even traveled to Europe for inspiration (Marks, 2011, p. 89). The company also put out an instructional pamphlet on the history lace making and various type (*The Lace Story*, n.d.). The use of fine laces could help to set the corselet apart from the plainer foundation garments worn on a more regular basis.

As previously noted, the foundation garment has eight stays varying in length. They are made of 1/4-inch-wide spiral steel and run along the vertical seams on the interior of the nine panels. They are all encased in 1/2-inch-wide strips of black woven material, separating the metal from the wearer's body. The texture of the spiral steel can still be felt through the material when you run your finger along the stay but would not have been noticeable during normal wear.

There are no stays on the vertical edges of the corselet. Instead, bands of black woven cotton with rows of silver-metal hook-and-eyes run along the outer edges. There are two sets of “eyes” running parallel to one another on one side, allowing for an adjustment of 3/4 inch to the width of the foundation when closed. The horizontal edges are lined with two different widths of elastic: 3/4 inch along the bottom and 1/2 inch along the top.

The nearly symmetrical “Temptress” corselet is formed by panels that mirror one another from center. When the foundation is folded vertically the two halves are clearly identical, except for the bands of hooks or eyes on the outer edges. The front of the foundation is made from three pale pink woven panels. The crosswise grain or weft of the woven panels runs vertically and has a slight give, while the horizontal lengthwise grain or warp is more unyielding. The woven front provides a stable ground to attach the lace and hold it in place.

The black floral lace partially covers the center front panel and completely covers the side front panels. Two coordinating sections of lace are used, most likely from different areas of a larger piece. Both have daisy-like flowers in several different sizes. The lace used on the side panels has a diagonal grid, whereas the lace on the front has a plainer ground. The latter also has a scalloped floral border that runs vertically down the front. The overall design is not terribly dense, so the pale pink woven material beneath can be seen.

Moving away from the front three panels, either side consists of an elastic panel, a woven panel, and then another elastic panel on the outer edge. When the corselet is closed the alternating layout results in elastic panels across the center back, as well as along the sides. All six panels are black - creating some visual continuity between the different materials. The line of the ribbed elastic panels runs vertically at center back and diagonally along the side. The grain of the woven panels is the same as the front.

By comparison, the front is more unyielding than the sides or back of the foundation. This corselet still has some stretch: approximately 1/2 inch per panel. However, unfortunately, most of its elasticity has been lost due to age and wear. Examinations of other corselets from the same period (late-1950s) in better condition suggest the “Temptress” originally had much more stretch. On this specific corselet, elastic panels on the back have been taken in with folds and vertical seams run roughly parallel to the back opening (Figure 10). This suggests efforts on the part of the wearer to maintain the foundation garment’s width and horizontal tension as it became stretched out.

The stays support the overall vertical rigidity within the design. As noted, they are placed along the seams of each panel. Their spiral steel construction allows them to follow the slight curves of the vertical edges. They also allow the body to move but keep the foundation garment flush against it. The elasticized panels can technically be stretched vertically by pulling at their centers; however, the spiral steel stays provide the structure needed for them to maintain their vertical height and shape.

Another instance of horizontal stretch and tension within the “Temptress” design is the placement of elastic along its horizontal edges. The wider elastic band runs along the full width of

the bottom and is placed on the exterior. The narrower elastic bands begin at the outer edges of the cups and run along the top of the corselet. The varying widths suggest the lower edge required more support than the upper edge to maintain the ideal level of tension. The lower portion of the foundation corresponds with a wider area of the body, the hips. This area forms the foundation on which the "Temptress'" underlying structure (stays) sit. Maintaining tension in this area is essential to keeping the entire corselet in place. The narrower upper elastic also plays an important role, holding the structured cups against the body. However, without the support provided by the tension surrounding the lower torso the whole garment would slide down.

Comparison of Materials across the Bodies of All Corselets

The materials used in the "Temptress" are fairly standard. All the corselets examined, regardless of brand, have bodies constructed using a combination of woven and knit-elasticized panels. Closures run down the vertical edges. Hook-and-eyes similar to the "Temptress" are often used but some later designs shift to zipper closures. Stays are placed along the seams of the panels and elastic is attached to the horizontal edges.

Materials used for the panels. In general, the woven panels are made of cotton, cotton blend, or a synthetic material like nylon or Dacron (polyester). The knit panels combine a synthetic fiber with some kind of elastic material. It is difficult, particularly in earlier designs, to determine what precisely these fibers are based solely on object analysis. These foundation garments either do not have labels, the labels do not list the materials, or fibers are listed on the labels but do not indicate where they are used within the design. External sources help to augment observations of the objects, themselves.

Knit panels: shift to Lycra. The price lists from the manufacturer offer additional information about these materials. The 1955 spring-summer *Illustrated Price List* features the "3/4 Time" design made of nylon sheer and lace panels and "Two-way stretch nylon Lastex" panels and the "Her Secret" design made of cotton and "nylon leno panels" (pp. 3-4). It also promotes longer "Pink Champagne" design and reveals the woven panels, as well as the lace, are made of nylon but the other panels are simply listed as "elasticized fabric" (p. 5). The price list from the fall of the same year describes the same design as also having "Two way stretch nylon leno Lastex" (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955, p. 3) Thus, the knit panels in the initial Hollywood-Maxwell corselets were made of elasticized nylon.

The 1957 *Supplementary Price List* indicates that later designs examined like the "Front Closure Backless Strapless" included materials like "nylon Alençon lace, long stretch leno"; the "stretch leno" used in the knit panels may have also been made of nylon (like the lace) or another synthetic fiber (p. 6). Articles and advertisements in trade journals and fashion magazines also

provide more specifics. Throughout the latter half of the 1950s, a range of synthetic fibers were used in the elasticized panels of Hollywood-Maxwell corselets, including nylon, Dacron polyester, and rayon ("A Big Color Story," 1955; "Pretty Control," 1957; "Strapless or Halter Bras," 1955).

By the early-1960s Lycra replaced these other synthetics. "Lycra Spandex" is listed on the label of a Hollywood Vassarette corselet (style #1089) from the MNHS collection dated between 1960 and 1965. An illustration of a similar looking design called a "Lycra leno torsolet" is promoted in a Hollywood Vassarette advertisement from 1961 ("Spring Corsets-Bras," 1961). "Lycra Spandex" is also on the label of a corselet (style #1079) featured in several advertisements from the early-1960s (e.g. "Hollywood Vassarette is Famous," 1963). With all this in mind, there appears to have been a widespread shift to using Lycra for the corselet's elasticized panels.

This shift to Lycra was also observed corselets made by other brands from Warner's to mail order designs (*Montgomery Ward Fall and Winter Catalog*, 1963, p. 462). As noted, the innovative material was "three times more powerful than previous elastics with twice the recovery power" (Lynn, 2014, p. 110). Thus, this change makes sense. Lycra was a much more effective choice. Previous research on foundation garments also supports my observations about this change in corselet designs.

Woven panels: natural and synthetic options. While knit panels transitioned from several different elasticized fibers to Lycra, there was not a similar shift in the woven panels. Rather a variety of materials are used throughout the period. Corselet designs begin to appear in newspaper advertisements and mail order catalogs at the beginning of the 1950s and have panels made of materials like "rayon satin" ("Dayton's Strapless Bras," 1951) and "cotton broadcloth" (*Montgomery Ward Spring and Summer Catalog*, 1952, p. 182).

In line with previous research (Fields, 2007), the corselet does appear to grow in popularity after the release of Warner's "Merry Widow" corselet around the end of 1952. Warner's initial design had synthetic woven panels and was shortly followed by a cotton version, which also made fashion news ("The Summer Figure," 1953, pp. 134–135). Hollywood-Maxwell did not release its corselets until the middle of the decade. Responding to not only the growing popularity of the design but to the variety of materials already being used, their initial corselet designs had woven panels in natural or synthetic fibers. Based on the objects and external sources examined, a variety of woven fabrics continued to be used throughout the period examined by this research.

Hollywood-Maxwell and then later Hollywood Vassarette both put efforts into continually designing corselets in both natural materials like cotton and synthetic fibers like nylon. The previously discussed "Temptress" is an example of the latter, as well as early-1960s designs like

a zippered front corselet examined (style #1079). During the same period, Hollywood Vassarette developed and manufactured a variety of unique cotton designs. Around the release of the "Temptress," they also created cotton corselets with corset-inspired embroidery in multiple colorways (style #1619 & style #1069, released 1959) as part of their 1890s or "Gay 90s" inspired line ("Munsingwear Gayest Underpinning," 1959). The company also designed a cotton corselet with elasticized gussets in the early-1960s (style #1028).

Based on observations of both physical objects and external sources, the woven panels were constructed using a variety of natural and synthetic materials from the 1950s into the 1960s. In some instances, designs were simply copied using the material. From spring 1955 to fall, the "Pink Champagne" and "3/4 Time" designs were both recreated in cotton (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955, pp. 5–6). This seems to more so be the case early on as Hollywood-Maxwell released its initial corselet designs. Later, specific designs are released in one or the other, like the previously noted nylon "Temptress" and cotton designs used in the "Gay 90s" line.

Options and choice. Using various materials for the panels that make up the body of the corselet was one of several ways the consumer was given a choice. As touched on in Chapter 2, a wide variety of foundation garments were offered during the economic boom following WWII. The corselet was no exception. With access to both cotton and synthetic versions, a woman could choose a design to fit her specific needs. Analysis of the materials used in the panels begins to suggest the variety factors that influenced this choice.

The specific purpose for picking a corselet with synthetic woven panels was not mentioned in the external sources examined. However, materials like nylon wash easily and dry quickly. So, their appeal might be ease of care. Previously, lightweight, easy to wash foundations and lingerie were popular because they allowed women with modest incomes to wear the same foundations each day, washing them overnight (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 38). This convenience would no doubt have continued to be appealing during the post-WWII era. However, a corselet was most likely one of several foundation garments a woman owned; she may even have had different corselets to serve different needs. The concept of a "foundation garment wardrobe" is often promoted during this era (e.g. "Hollywood Vassarette Wardrobe of Strapless Bras," 1960). Having multiple foundations with specific functions reflects the consumerism often associated with post-WWII culture.

Materials like nylon may have also connoted freedom, since their use was restricted during the war (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 143; Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 451). Fields (2007) argues the excessive fabric requirements of Dior's New Look, and the corsetry that underlined it, signified "freedom from wartime restriction" (p. 561). This idea can be extended. Even though a

consumer may not have been aware of it, the ability to purchase goods like nylon foundations, perhaps even multiples of them, may have had a strong appeal because it represented the noted freedom.

While nylon was not directly discussed, the benefits of cotton were frequently touted in external sources. It was continually promoted during the summer as a “cool” options that provided the wearer with a more comfortable experience (“Corset Ads Favor Control, Comfort,” 1960; “Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl,” 1955; “The Summer Figure,” 1953). The benefits of wearing breathable, natural fibers like cotton in warm climates has long been established. The cotton corselets served as much cooler and more comfortable options than synthetic versions during the hot summer months.

Based on comparison across external sources, cotton versions were also cheaper. This was undoubtedly influenced by things like the cost of materials. However, the specific prices were deliberate choices by manufacturers. Desires to keep designs at certain price points are apparent in a 1963 design sample in the MNHS collection (style #1649). A penciled note on the foundation itself reads, “Jack says cost in at $12.50 4/3/63” - most likely referring to the retail price. Similar cotton designs released a few years earlier like the “Gay 90's Look” corselet also retailed for $12.50. On the other hand, nylon designs like the “Temptress” cost $15.00. This indicates efforts to both keep certain types of designs (e.g. cotton) at specific prices and to maintain differences in prices between designs (e.g. cotton and nylon). This difference was also seen in designs from other companies that consistently offered corselets with cotton or synthetics panels, like Warner’s or Sears.

Even after only considering the fibers used in the body of the corselet, it is clear women during this period had choices when it came to foundations. Granted, in some cases, like the elasticized panels, they are given little to no choice; the manufacturer selected the most effective material (hence the shift to Lycra). This is true of many designed goods. For the corselet, decisions are influenced by the time of year, the price someone was willing to pay, and additional factors discussed later. Yet, these choices were made within the boundaries of what was a corselet. The continued analysis below indicates the extent to which the fundamental design (layout, construction, shape, form) and functions were largely similar across the corselets examined.

Layout of the body. Generally, the body of a corselet is made of nine or ten panels, depending on if the center front is split into two panels or not. In every case, as with the “Temptress,” the corselets observed are symmetrical and the panels mirror one another off the vertical center. The panels are also all considerably narrower in width than in length. It is helpful

when considering a typical corselet design to think of the panels in terms of some of their most basic qualities. The elasticized panels offer stretch and flexibility. This is contrasted by the far more unyielding nature of the woven panels.

Analysis of the layout of the woven and knit panels across the back of the corselet indicate the impact of textile innovations on the design, as well as relationship between the design and the wearer's body. The layout of the front panels also begins to illuminate a function of the corselet in relation to this body. Both are discussed below.

Back panels. The layout of the back panels was very similar across all corselets from the mid- to late-1950s. The designs combine woven and elasticized panels, generally alternating the two materials. The latter type of panels is usually at center back and on the sides, separated with a woven panel in between.

Around 1960, the designs examined shift to all elasticized backs. This is likely due to the release of materials like Lycra, which are much stronger and more resilient. The stretch offered by Lycra allowed the body to move but its strength holds the body in and more effectively molds it. So, the addition of woven material on the back became unnecessary for the corselet to mold the body and maintain its shape over time. As previously noted, textile innovation also allowed additional means of support - like the elastic "X" on the 1957 "Backless Strapless" design - to be discarded, without sacrificing how much of the back could be revealed.

The "Her Secret" corselet was the one exception to the noted alternating panels observed in earlier designs. It released in 1955 and utilized both woven and elasticized panels, like the other designs from that period. However, it has fewer elasticized panels and the layout differs. Two elasticized panels are positioned on the sides of the body and three woven panels run across the back. Unlike other designs from the same period, there is not an elastic panel at center back.

Considering the intended wearer helps to explain why this design differed from others. An advertisement from Dayton's department store suggests the "Her Secret" design was for women who "need a little padding" - in other words, those with smaller breasts and most likely smaller figures, in general ("Hollywood-Maxwell Shoulder Barings," 1955). This anomaly may be because women with smaller figures require more structure for the corselet to stay in place, hence more woven panels. On any sized body, a corselet that is too large or has too much stretch is likely to slip down. This is especially true on a wearer who does not have the full hips or softer flesh around the torso needed to provide the bodily base on which the corselet sits. This difference in design indicates the relationship between the wearer's body and the foundation selected.

Front panels. While there is variation in the layout of the back, the front half is almost always made entirely of woven panels on all the designs examined. The one exception is the previously discussed corselet design with gussets. This design offers more flexibility across the lower abdomen. It is from the later portion of the period examined, appearing in a 1962 issue of *Women's Wear Daily* ("Selling Summer Foundation," 1962). A similar gusset-design was manufactured by Lady Marlene ("Lady Marlene Bra-s'lette," 1960). I would argue these corselets are exceptions that were only offered for a short period of time.

By and large, the front of a typical corselet is made entirely of woven panels during this period. Even the Hollywood Vassarette design with gussets is decidedly more rigid in front than in back. This was key to the corselet's ability to shape and smooth the torso, which is discussed in a later section.

Closures. The most common type of closure is hook-and-eye with two rows of eyes, which allow for some adjustment to the width of the corselet. The closure is generally placed down center back. An exception is the "Backless Strapless" design, which has hooks-and-eyes down center front. At a preview for the 1957 spring line, a Hollywood-Maxwell sales manager commented the shift to "front closures... [were] of utmost importance for the coming season ("Front Closures and Low Back," 1956). Other brands also released center front opening corselets around the same time (e.g. *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1957, p. 246).

It is worth noting the widths of front closing designs are more static, lacking the multiple rows of eyes. However, they were often "sized by the inch" to correctly fit more figures ("Hollywood-Maxwell Safest Plunge," 1957). The new design from Hollywood-Maxwell was promoted as allowing the wearer to "fastens it herself" ("The Magic is in the Fit," 1957). Speaking from personal experience, it is difficult and time consuming to maneuver each tiny hook-and-eye when they run down your back. Front closures are much easier to fasten by yourself.

Designs from the 1960s continue the shift towards center front closures (e.g. style #1079) but instead use a separating metal zipper with hook-and-eyes behind. There are fewer hook-and-eyes, intended to lessen the tension on the zipper. Similar closures were observed across the other brands of early-1960s corselets examined. The addition of a zipper appears to be widespread. For example, at the end of 1963 Montgomery Ward only sold corselets with center front zippers, while other strapless bras in varying lengths had center back hook-and-eye closures (*Montgomery Ward Fall and Winter Catalog*, 1963, p. 462).

A center front zipper arguably makes closing the corselet easier. However, it also makes this area of the foundation garment more rigid, which can make bending at the waist difficult and uncomfortable. The added ease of putting on the corselet is countered by the added discomfort

experienced while wearing it. This may be reasons why current corselet designs seem to have returned to hook-and-eye closures down center back.

Elastic edges and metal stays. Finally, the body of each corselet examined has elastic along its top and bottom edges. This adds to the essential horizontal tension in the design. The Hollywood-Maxwell's 1955 *Illustrated Price List* states this elastic provides a "superb hugging quality with comfort" (p. 3). The word hug is often used to refer to the body-encasing tension experienced when wearing a corselet. This word choice is most likely intended to lessen the potentially negative connotations of the tight foundation garment. As noted, this tension is a necessary part of the design. It helps to hold the foundation in place and flush against body. The elastic is often plush-back, resulting is a softer, more pleasant physical experience for the wearer.

Another aspect of the design that remains constant through this period is the stays along the seams of the panels. They appear to have all been made of metal, often spiral steel, although many times the stays could not be viewed. In all the designs, they are encased in a woven material. On some objects with more wear the stays have broken through, helping to confirm what they look like. External sources also confirm spiral steel was frequently used (e.g. "Take Your Pick," 1954). The noted casings not only hold the stays in place but protect the wearer's body from being pressed against the cold, hard metal.

Almost every corselet examined has one less stay than the number of panels, indicating a relationship between the two materials. The panels create the overall shape of the corselet's body and the stays provide the support necessary to maintain this shape. This relationship is acknowledged in external sources. An advertisement in the Minneapolis Morning Tribune noted the two together create "the high-fashion line" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955b). Another in *Vogue* commented, "leno elastic panels and gentle boning gives slim new length to your torso!" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955a). The second quote highlights an often-used technique. As with the elastic, references to the stays or their body modifying abilities are paired with words like "gentle" - countering the idea of harshly molding the flesh.

A few of the 1960s corselets examined have two additional shorter stays on the front (e.g. style #1089), creating a "Y" shape beneath the bust and resulting in a total of one more stay than the number of panels. This addition provides more support for both the body of the corselet and the cup section above it and is referred to as a "Buttress" design ("Minimizing the Maximum," 1962; "Spring Corsets-Bras," 1961). This term reinforces the roles of the stays as an essential structure within the corselet.

The Cups of the "Temptress"

While the bodies of the corselet suggest a tension between rigid and flexible materials, the cups are more structured. On the "Temptress," they are made with the same pale pink woven material and black lace used on the front panels of the body. Also like the body, the cups vertically mirror one another.

They are constructed with three separate pieces, each with two layers of the pale pink material. Two pieces cover the lower portion of the breast and are joined with a vertical seam that leads up to the apex of the breast. A third piece runs along the top. Here the woven material is folded in half to achieve the dual layers without creating a seam along the top edge of the cup. A dart emanates from the apex of the breast and ends 1/4 inch from the top to create a round shape. Black lace overlays the entire cup, closely copying the three panels described. The scalloped edge of the lace is positioned along the upper edge of the cup. As a result, there are alternating instances of the lace extending above the pale pink and the pink peeking out as the lace edge dips down.

Additional materials are used on the interior: black netting, an opaque pale pink material, wire, and a soft black woven material. A 3/8-inch-wide band of black netting covers the horizontal seams, providing additional stiffness to this area of the cups. Two layers of a pale pink, opaque synthetic material are sewn together and cover the bottom half of each cup. The edges of the opaque material follow the line created by the horizontal seams and black netting. The lower edge of this material is attached to the rest of the cup along the bottom curve. In this corselet, the "pouch" created (for lack of a better word) appears at first glance to be empty. However, small remnants of a filler can be felt along the edges of the enclosed space. A "Temptress" brassiere examined has similar cup construction and the opaque areas are filled with the remnants of light padding. The padding on this corselet has most likely been removed by the previous owner or has disintegrated with age.

A curved wire, or underwire, runs along the sides and bottom of each cup. They end slightly lower at center front, extending up 2 1/4 inches compared to 4 inches along the outer side. One of the ends has poked through on this corselet, revealing the underwires are capped with metal balls, most likely to blunt otherwise sharp ends. The wires are cased in a flannel-like black material. While it is difficult to tell based on visual analysis, these strips were most likely cut along the bias to smoothly follow the curve of the wire. A 3/4 inch band of this black material is also used to cover the center front area where the underwires meet.

Comparison of the Materials across the Cups of All Corselets

Like the "Temptress," the cups on each corselet examined are made from woven materials, generally the same used in the bodies. Some designs examined incorporate net into the exteriors of the cups (style #4039, style #8139, style #1069). The purpose of the net is noted in an early price guide, which describes the use of "fine nylon net for exquisite molding" (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 4). None of the designs used elasticized fabrics on the cup. While the bodies of the corselets offered flexibility, the cups are rigid. Netting is often placed over internal seams and along the top edges, helping the cups to maintain their shape.

On all the designs, regardless of whether they use a self-fabric or net, any embellishments from the body are also used on the cups. This creates continuity between the two areas of the corselet. There is also generally lace or a scalloped-edge trim along the upper edges. This helps to soften the line between the body and the structured cups when garments are worn over a corselet.

Curved wire (or underwires) run along the bottoms of the corselet cups examined. Additionally, the interiors of the cups are covered with a fabric lining and foam padding. Each material is discussed below.

Wire. The use of wire is central to creating the unyielding structure of the cups. A few designs examined from other brands had "overwires": m-shaped wire that arches over the breasts. Hollywood-Maxwell produced some strapless brassieres with this technology. However, all of their and Hollywood Vassarette's corselet designs had underwire. All were encased in plush materials, or "padded" as some external sources describe it ("Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets," 1955). Like the stay casings, this material holds the underwires in place and protects the wearer's body from the rigid, cold metal.

The use of underwire in the first Hollywood-Maxwell designs was promoted as a key feature. A "3/4 Time" advertisement notes the cups have, "No top wiring with gentle underscoring to create this youthful line" ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1954). Likewise, another advertisement in *Vogue* promised, "no wire on top so all the lift is upward, no downward pressure" ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1955). The cups on the overwire designs examined were very high cut and would offer minimal support beneath the bust to uplift the breasts. On the other hand, underwires offer shaping and support of the breasts with lower cut cups.

Lining. Nearly all the cups on Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs are lined. A smooth material is used. It is opaque and usually similar in color to the woven fabric used on the exterior. In some cases, the entire interior is covered, including early designs like "Her

Secret" by Hollywood-Maxwell and later designs like a zipper-front corselet by Hollywood Vassarette (style #1079). Others, like the "Temptress," are partially lined.

Of the designs examined, the "Backless Strapless" corselet has the sheerest cups. They are constructed using net and could be considered unlined. However, lace covers the entirety of the exterior of the cups, somewhat obscuring the view of the breasts. The 1957 price list reveals this design was also offered with "contour shell cups," which entirely covered the breasts. A corselet from the noted "Gay 90s" line (style #1069) also has net cups but the bottom half is lined in cotton, only revealing the upper breast.

Other manufacturers offer designs with much more sheer cups. Warner's first "Merry Widow" has unlined cups. The top half is entirely sheer and could even be "turn[ed] down" for an extremely low cut ("Warner's Merry Widows," 1953). That being said, Warner's also offered a variety of corselets with lined cups (e.g. Style #1321, released 1960). Based on their catalogs, mail order brands also offered corselets with various degrees of lining and coverage. The type of lining is generally closely tied to the type of padding within the cup.

Padding. All the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselets examined had padding or a stiffening material as part of the cups. This was also true of most of the designs from other brands I examined. A couple of the Warner's "Merry Widow" designs from the early-1950s were an exception, which have semi-sheer cups that are entirely unpadded. Some corselets promoted in mail order catalogs from the same earlier period have similar cup designs (*Montgomery Ward Spring and Summer Catalog*, 1952, p. 182; *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1951, p. 258). An overwire-design corselet from Lady Marlene (Style #960) also has completely unpadded cups. Padded designs were readily available by the mid-1950s. Even early unpadded designs like Warner's first "Merry Widow" were shortly released with padded cups ("Warner's Merry Widows," 1954).

This widespread use of padding in the cups was expected; previous research notes that padding was a key feature of brassieres during the postwar era (w, p. 121). Yet, the amount and placement of the padding varied. The different designs were often referred to as being fully-padded, boosted, or contoured. Each is discussed below. Additionally, and perhaps even more revealing about the culture, external sources suggest that while each design utilized padding to augment the breast, they were described differently.

Fully-padded cup designs. The "Her Secret" corselet features cups that are fully lined in 3/8-inch-deep padding between the cotton interior and exterior. The padding is molded into a rounded shape and maintains this form on its own. This cup design was first used on shortline and longline strapless brassieres, then adapted for the longer corselet version. The padding in

the “Her Secret” line is made of foam rubber (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 12). This specific corselet was intended “for those who want the ‘new Look’ but require a padded bra” (p. 4). The “Peek-Ette” design soon followed (style #1699, released 1955). This nylon lace corselet has molded “push-up pads” that are also made of foam rubber (“A Big Color Story,” 1955; “Hollywood-Maxwell Peek-Ette,” 1956).

These corselets were intended for women with small busts, evidenced by the fact that both were only offered in A or B cups, and in more limited, smaller band sizes than other corselets. Other brands carried similar padded designs. For example, during the mid-1950s Frederick of Hollywood offered a variety of padded strapless brassiere and “torsolette” designs. However, they too were limited to A or B cups (Gottwald & Gottwald, 1973, pp. 26–29). I was somewhat surprised by this example, given the history (or lore) of Fredericks of Hollywood - started by the inventor of the push-up bra - and the company's long standing association with overt sexuality (pp. 8-9). Today, padded push-up bras are offered in a wide variety of sizes. This was not the case during the 1950s and early-1960s, when fully-padded, bosom-augmenting corselets (and brassieres, in general) were reserved for the small-chested wearer.

For these designs, the padding and its enhancing abilities are more directly acknowledged. They are openly described as a type of “padded bra” (e.g. “Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl,” 1955). These corselets are positioned as assisting the wearer. Hollywood-Maxwell’s *A Bra for Every Fashion* folio (1956) suggests “in fashions that emphasize the bosom, belittle the waist...HER SECRET is your secret of how to achieve it” (back cover). However, the padding is sometimes downplayed. One advertisement notes the “Her Secret” corselet is for those who “need a little padding...” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Shoulder Barings,” 1955). While the presence of padding is acknowledged, it is described as minimal.

Boosted cup designs. Several of the corselets examined had partially padded cups, including two of the initial Hollywood-Maxwell designs. On the “Pink Champagne” design the lower half of the cup is lined with a 1/8-inch layer of foam beneath black lining. A price list refers to this aspect of the design as a “foam-rubber-petal ‘booster’ feature” (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 5). It promised to “give [the wearer] a new firm lift to the rounding bosom” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne,” 1955b). Similar boosting terminology is used to describe the cups in the “3/4 Time” design (#1039, 1954), which I was not able to examine in person. The corselet is noted as having “Foam rubber booster feature in lower cup sections” (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 4). Images in the quoted price list suggests the padding on this design was more U-shaped, following the underwire, rather than covering the entire lower half of the cup.

The U-shaped padding appears in some of the later corselets I examined, such as Hollywood-Maxwell's "Backless Strapless" design. It is also used in several Hollywood Vassarette corselets from the late-1950s and early-1960s (style #1069, style #1089). The Hollywood Vassarette "Temptress" is more closely akin to the Hollywood-Maxwell's "Pink Champagne," with light padding on the entire lower half of the cup in a "petal" shape.

Based on analysis of the objects and external sources, both types of boosted cup designs were used throughout the period examined. The partial padding varied slightly in their design, either "petal" or u-shaped. Yet, their aims seem to be the same. The lower parts of the cups are padded to boost or "lift" the breasts up, as noted in the advertising copy for the "Pink Champagne" corselet.

Like the fully-padded designs discussed, these "booster pads" were noted as being made of "foam rubber" ("Pretty Control," 1957). However, they are rarely described as padding or increasing the size of the breasts. Instead, terms like "boosting" are used to describe the effects of these cups throughout the period examined (e.g. *Supplementary Price List*, 1957, p. 6). For example, the "Temptress" corselet's cups are described as "gently boosting you" ("Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959). The language used implies the cup design offers *just a little* help or encouragement, conjuring up images like a friend giving you a small boost as you climb a tree. Additionally, describing the cup design as "boosting *you* [emphasis added]" suggests the resulting figure is largely the result of the wearer's own breasts, downplaying the role of the padding.

Contoured cup designs. Other corselet design examined had "contour cups," a name used to generally refer to the style. The whole of each cup is lined with a stiff material, giving them a semi-rigid shape (e.g. style #1079). In one instance, stiff net is used to stiffen and shape the cup (style #1619). However, foam padding is the most common material used. This padding is not as thick as fully-padded designs like "Her Secret" - generally 1/8-inch compared to 3/8-inch.

Corselets with contour cups design appeared in mail order catalogs in the mid-1950s. The cup design was offered slightly earlier by brands like Warner's. They first appear in Hollywood-Maxwell designs around 1957. As noted, the "Strapless Backless" corselet was released that year with "contour shell" cups, in addition to "booster" cups (*Supplementary Price List*, 1957, p. 6). These cups seem to have been used in corselets throughout the rest of the period examined.

External sources describe the nature and function of this type of padding much less often than full-padded or boosted designs. An advertisement for a "Merry Widow" with contour cups notes, "thin film of foam lines the cups for never-before control" ("Warner's Merry Widow Corselette," 1955). The price list quoted above offer minimal description of the contour cup

version of the corselet. While only sold with B cups, it was “adaptable to A figures as well as ‘shy’ B figures” (p. 6). Contour cups may have been a sort of middle option between the other two designs discussed, with thinner padding like the boosted designs but the full coverage of the fully padded design. They could be worn by women who were *not quite* as well-endowed as those who wore the boosted cup designs, or by small-chested women if they adapted the cups with additional padding. However, the latter is merely implied.

The contour cup design is listed in a Hollywood Vassarette pamphlet called *Janie Got a Bra Today* (1960-1965), which instructs young consumers about various styles of brassieres. Its inclusion again suggests contour cups were worn by women with *slightly* smaller or less developed breasts (like adolescents). The pamphlet notes a “Contour bra has thin cup lining; smooth under a sweater” (p. 3). It is listed as a separate style from “padded” brassieres, which augment the breasts to “make you the size you want to be” (p. 3). Positioning contour cups as different than fully-padded designs suggest deliberate efforts to distance the former from the latter. Describing the contour cups as being “thin” and their effects as controlling or smoothing the breasts also illustrate how the presence of padding was often downplayed.

Varying descriptions of foam rubber padding. Nearly all the corselet cups discussed - padded, boosted, and contoured - have foam rubber as part of their design. However, the ways in which this material was described varied. As noted, the word padding was used to describe designs like the “Her Secret,” whereas others from the same period like the “3/4 Time” or “Pink Champagne” designs use different terminology like “‘booster’ feature” (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 5). Granted, the foam rubber is thinner in the latter two designs but it still pads the breasts.

These differing descriptions in external sources, despite the same material being used, suggest padding the breasts was only acceptable for some women, like adolescent wearers or those with small breasts. This was not specific to corselets. Lines of padded brassieres like Hollywood-Maxwell’s “Ingénue” were also directed at “the youngest [customer] segment,” as the line’s name suggests (“A Big Color Story,” 1955). The other brands examined also had their own lines of padded brassieres for young developing figures. As noted in Chapter 2, adolescents were a key demographic for foundation garment manufacturers during this period (Nelson, 2007, pp. 139–140; Thesander, 1997, p. 170).

On the other hand, external sources on corselets with booster pads or contour cups repeatedly describe the padding as thin or do not mention it at all. They downplay notions of padding the breasts by instead emphasizing effects like uplifting or smoothing. Advertising copy also uses the word “you” to stress that the resulting figure is the result of the wearer’s own body, merely helped (rather than padded) by the foam paddng in the cups.

This was also not specific to Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs. The copy for a corselet from Sears reads, “Charmode ‘Vibrant’ with sensational push-up pads...not to pad you, but to lift and give you ‘above-the-bra’ fullness” (*Sears Spring Catalog*, 1957, p. 246). The language used to describe the design makes it explicitly clear that the “push-up pads” in this corselet are not worn to augment the breast. The emphasis is again placed on boosting or uplifting the wear’s own breasts to create the desire “fullness.”

Even with fully-padded brassieres, the role of the padding was sometimes downplayed. An advertisement for the “Peek-Ette” corselet suggested, “The curves are yours, all yours, but lovelier than ever before!” It also noted the design’s “elevating” abilities, positioning the resulting modification of the body as an uplifting rather than padding the breasts (“Hollywood-Maxwell Peek-Ette,” 1956). A “Her Secret” advertisement suggests the wearer’s figure was “aided, abetted, and supported” by the cups (“Hollywood-Maxwell Shoulder Barings,” 1955). In both instances the resulting silhouette is because of the wearer’s own body, which is merely helped by the padded cups of the corselet. The name “Her Secret” also suggests wearing a brassiere with padded cups, while acceptable for some, was still something a wearer desired to keep hidden. Similarly, the name "Peek-Ette” alludes to hiding beneath something - like a corselet hiding beneath clothes.

The concept of hidden foundation garments (with visible effects) appears in external sources on corselets with all of the cup designs discussed. The advertising copy for the “Pink Champagne” design promises the boosted cups offer “an upward lift with the secret completely hidden from sight,” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets,” 1955). Warner’s makes similar claims, noting the contour cups in one of their “Merry Widows” (style #1327) are “Invisibly responsible for the beautiful effect” and will stay “hidden from view” (“Warner’s European Travel,” 1955). This aligns with previous research, which highlights the seen-unseen dichotomy within all foundation garments. While their effects may be highly noticeable, they remain out of sight.

Again, the varying uses and descriptions of foam padding indicate augmenting (or padding) the breasts was acceptable for some: those with small or developing breasts. For others, this was inappropriate. To counter this, external sources deliberately described the foam rubber padding in ways that created a distinction between the fully-padded designs and those with boosted or contour cups. Additionally, all the cups designs were intended to go unnoticed when the wearer was fully-clothed. Yet, their effect, shaping the breasts, were certainly meant to be seen.

Layout of the cups. All the corselets examined have cups constructed with multiple pieces of the noted woven fabrics and often corresponding pieces of other materials, like lining or

foam padding on part or all of the interior. This is central to the cups' shaping abilities, as it literally creates the shape the breasts are molded into. The pairs of cups are made of 2 to 4 pieces each. At times darts are used for additional shaping. All seams or darts within each cup emanate from the apex. The pieces making up each cup mirror one another off center front, in line with the overall symmetrical nature of corselets.

The number of the pieces and their layout vary depending on factors like the cut of the cups. For example, the "Her Secret" design's cups are made of four triangular shaped with slightly rounded edges (Figure 11). This creates an evenly rounded shape with a slightly higher cut. On other designs, oblong shapes with horizontal orientations across the tops of cups allow for lower cut. The "Temptress" is one example of this layout, which has a narrow band on the top half with a small dart in the center. The earlier "Pink Champagne" design is constructed using similar shapes (Figure 11). Both designs measured 5 inches high, whereas the "Her Secret" was 5 3/4 inches. Additionally, the former two designs examined have size B cups and the latter has size A cups. I believe I would have found an even greater difference if the corselets were the same cup sizes.

While I was not able to examine the "3/4 Time" design, the cups on the "Pink Champagne" appear to have a similar cut ("Strapless or Halter Bras," 1955). This style was referred to as a "three-quarter cup" and was promoted by Hollywood-Maxwell as a new design during the mid-1950s. Hollywood Vassarette used the 3/4 cup design through the end of the period examined, and potentially longer. For example, the cups of the early-1960s zipper-front design (style #1079) have narrow bands across the top that are very similar to the earlier designs discussed and approximately the same height (Figure 11).

"3/4 cups" were not exclusive to Hollywood-Maxwell (e.g. *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1955, p. 200). As the name suggests, this design offers more coverage than low cut designs like Warner's first "Merry Widow," which can be folded over to only cover the lower half of the breast. On the other hand, 3/4 cups are more revealing than those that fully covered the breasts. The slightly lower cut supported the breasts, while also uplifting them to highlight the "décolletage," a term often used in external sources from the late-1950s and 1960s (e.g. "Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959; "Minimizing the Maximum," 1962).

Analysis of the layout of the cups, in addition to the materials used, indicates some of the additional choices made when selecting a corselet. Designs like the 3/4 cups indicate a careful balancing - exposing the breasts while simultaneously covering and supporting them. Decisions might be based on how much of the breasts the wearer desired to reveal, or how much they wanted to support or augment the breasts with padding. There were a number of factors to weigh.

However, as noted in the previous section, external sources suggest that certain materials like foam rubber padding had prescribed use. This begins to indicate the many factor beyond the wearer that also influenced their choice.

The (Missing) Garters of the "Temptress"

The "Temptress" corselet examined did not have garters. However, short lengths of 3/4-inch-wide elastic are attached to the lower, interior edges of the front and back sides of the corselet. These pieces of elastic form loops to hold removable garters in place over the fronts and backs of the thighs. Examination of numerous other corselets confirms this was the function of the small elastic loops.

Comparison of the Materials across the Garters of All Corselets

The materials and construction of the garters are generally the same across all the designs from different brands. Each corselet has a pair of garters on the front and a pair on the back, for a total of four. Each end with a garter clip made of metal and rubber. These clips are crucial to the key function of these garters: holding up stockings. On some designs coordinating satin ribbons are placed over each clip to hide them from view. These ribbons often repeat satin decorations within the body of the corselet and results in a greater visual continuity within the entire foundation. This ribbon feature was observed on more embellished (and more expensive) designs.

The placement of the elastic for the garters varies between the shorter and longer corselets. On the former, one end of each garter has a rectangular metal hook that slips in and out of elastic loops like those on the "Temptress." In addition to being removable, all four garters can adjust in length with metal sliding clasps. On the longer design, the garters are attached and are much shorter. The elastic on the back is positioned to create "V" shapes. This is intended to "give [an] evenly distributed pull over buttocks" ("Strapless or Halter Bras," 1955).

This noted pull, or tension, is essential to holding the stocking taut, while still allowing the stretch necessary for the wearer to move. The noted different styles of garters for different lengths of corselets ensures the clips are properly positioned along the thighs to hold the stockings smooth over the legs. Hence, the longer design has shorter garters.

Compared to the rest of a corselet, the garters are comparatively simple and they are less visually interesting. However, they are by no means an insignificant part of the design. Corselets in major mail order catalogs were originally shown alongside garter belts. At least in this context, the corselet was initially positioned as a new version of a garter belt, rather than brassiere. The stocking holding function was key. Additionally, corselets decline during the 1960s

alongside the rise of pantyhose, which made garter belts unnecessary. This underlines the importance of the garters within the overall corselet design.

Fabrication

How these various materials are joined together to create the corselet also provides insight in to the typical design. There are two main types of stitches used to construct the "Temptress" corselet. A straight stitch joins the longer sides of the panels to one another. It is also used along stays to firmly affix them along these vertical seams, as well as to attach the underwires along the edges of the cups. These areas of the corselet are very unyielding. A straight stitch is also used to attach the cotton bands of hooks or eyes to the outer vertical edges of the corselet, which runs down the center back of the body. This stich is also used on the front to attach the lace trim. All are areas that need to maintain their shape when worn. Conversely, the horizontal edges of the panels are finished with a serger and a zigzag stitch is used to attach elastic along the top and bottom of the "Temptress'" body. These areas have much more stretch, especially along the knit panels.

This type of fabrication was standard across all Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs. In fact, the same combination of straight and zigzag stitches is used on all the corselets examined, regardless of brand. These stitches reiterate the contrasting flexibility and rigidity previously noted in the materials.

On the "Temptress," as well as other design, a slightly-modified straight stitch is also used to quickly secure the individual hook-and-eyes. Using a continuous machine stitch is more efficient than attaching the small pieces by hand. The raw edges of the cotton material behind the closures are finished with a short zigzag stitch, an easy means of finishing the ends. Given the consistent, continuous stitches and finishing technique used, I suspect the closures came from larger rolls hook-and-eyes pre-attached to the cotton, which was cut to the necessary length for each foundation. This reflects the mass-produced nature of this individual corselet.

There were two other notable uses of stitching within the corselets examined. Several designs examined had cups with "whirlpool" stitching, an iconic feature of Hollywood-Maxwell designs. A few also appear to have been altered, with stitches added after the corselets had been produced. Each is discussed in sections below.

Whirlpool stitch. While not seen on the "Temptress," whirlpool stitching on the cups is a key feature of the Hollywood-Maxwell brand and used in several of the other corselets examined. A *Women's Wear Daily* article lists the whirlpool stitch as one of several American innovations in foundation garment design and notes the "First stitched styles by Shirley Maxwell appeared in mid-1930's" ("Corset Firsts," 1954).

This feature is a top stitch that spirals from the apex of a cup all the way out to its edge, mimicking the lines of a whirlpool. The continuous stitch goes over the seams that join the individual pieces making up the cup, indicating the whirlpool stitch is applied after the cup's overall form is created. The close stitching connects the layers of material that make up each cup and further stiffens their overall form. As a top stitch, the whirlpool feature is also decorative and draws attention to the breasts.

Other brassiere manufacturers adopted this type of stitching, prompting Hollywood-Maxwell to stress that their whirlpool design was the first. Into the 1950s, the brand continues to incorporate the spiral stitching in many of their brassiere designs and describes itself with taglines like "the original stitched cup line" (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, cover). Whirlpool stitching appears in some of the initial Hollywood-Maxwell corselets, like the "Her Secret" and "3/4 Time" designs released in the mid-1950s. It is also used in a few of the late-1950s corselet from Hollywood Vassarette examined by this study (e.g. style #1069).

I could not find instances of whirlpool stitching in corselets from other brands. This does not confirm there were none; other brands did carry brassieres with the feature. Hollywood-Maxwell's use of whirlpool stitching in their corselets is not surprising, as it was a long-standing feature of the brand. Hollywood Vassarette efforts to continue to incorporate it also suggest a hesitation to give up the iconic feature. However, by the early-1960s it seems to have been abandoned in favor of designs like the contour cup, stiffened with thin padding.

Alterations. A couple of the designs examined, including the "Temptress," show signs of alterations. These stitches are not the work of the manufacturer. Rather these changes were made by the wearer (or someone else in their life). For example, the center back elastic panels of the "Temptress" have been taken in with tucks on the interior, reducing the width by approximately 2 inches on either side. These elastic panels have lost nearly all their stretch. Reducing the width indicates an effort to restore the horizontal tension needed to mold the torso and keep the foundation garment in place.

I also examined two Lady Marlene corselets (#960). They are identical except for their colors: black or white. Both have darts on either side of the cups, running down the side elastic panels. These examples have considerably less wear than the "Temptress." The elastic panels retain most of their stretch. This suggests these alterations may have been done from the outset. They indicate a need to take in and increase the tension of the area around the bust but not the waist and hips. This serves as a good example of the fact that corselets are ready-to-wear goods and some wearers' bodies did not align with the standard proportions, requiring alterations.

These examples of alterations both clearly reiterate the need for horizontal tension for a corselet to function correctly. They also demonstrate how the objects themselves are not static. Corselet can naturally change with use and can also be deliberately changed by the user.

These corselets are also altered in inconspicuous places: down the back and under the arm. These choices suggest these parts of the corselet were less important to the wearers than the front views, which were left untouched. You could argue the front panels are less effective areas to alter; the rigid cup areas make this difficult. I still think these choices are interesting. It highlights the differences between the more decorative fronts and the plainer, more functional sides and backs. How and where the corselet was decorated supports this observation about the front view, which is discussed in the next section.

Content within Corselets

Prown (1982) suggests researchers should purposefully consider the content within an object. He describes this step of the process as, “iconography in its simplest sense, a reading of overt representations” (p. 8). In the case of the “Temptress” corselet, the content is various floral designs. Bands of daisy-like flowers wind along the side front panels and across the bottom of the cups. The blossoms range in size from 3/8 inch to 1 1/2 inches wide. A diamond grid fills the background. It is visually reminiscent of a trellis, giving the impression the flowers are climbing up the front of the body.

Coordinating pieces of black floral lace border, most likely cut from the edge of the other lace, are used on the center front panel and top of the cups. Similar flowers form scalloped lines, which run vertically along the sides of the center panel and then up over the edges of the cups. It is also positioned to approximately follow the curves within the other lace, creating a less detectable transition between the pieces. Lastly, there is a small black satin bow attached between the cups.

Recurring Iconography: Florals

The content observed on the “Temptress” is similar to that on many corselets. Floral embellishments are repeatedly used. Laces with floral patterns are used on more ornate corselets, like the “Temptress” and style #1079. The open laces are layered over semi-sheer materials. These floral designs are generally more intricate and the combination of materials creates additional visual interest. Other corselets have more modest floral designs added using machine embroidery, often on less expensive cotton designs. These patterns are stitched to the material before the woven panels or cups were cut - saving time and money. There is also occasionally a small floral embroidered accent between the breasts (e.g. style #1079).

Floral motifs have a long history and complex, culturally dependent meanings. Within Western culture they are frequently viewed as symbols of femininity and youth. Embellishing a corselet with soft, delicate symbols like flowers helps to balance hard, rigid features like the stays. Visually referencing nature can be viewed as an attempt to counter the heavily engineered nature of the foundation garment. This is an artificial representation of nature and could potentially highlight the artificial body modification achieved with the corselet. However, the concept of "woman as flower" inspired many designs following WWII (McNeil, 2010, para. 25). In the postwar context, the repeated use of floral imagery most likely evoked feminine connotations.

An Exception: "Corset" Lacing

Hollywood Vassarette did produce a particularly interesting exception. The "Gay 90's Look" corselets feature embroidery resembling the laces of a corset (#1619, #1069). An embroidered band with scalloped edges runs up center front and is also positioned to curve along the bottom of the cups. Within the design, circular embroidered eyelets punctuate the curves of the scalloped lines. Straight lines in the same or an accent color run diagonally between the holes to create the "Xs" of the laces (Figure 12). The same embroidery is used on bras and girdles from the same line in a range of colors: white, blue on white, black, and red on black.

This use of corset imagery creates a stronger connection between these 1959 foundation garments and those worn during the previous century. The corselet design is by no means a reproduction of an 1890s corset. The nonfunctional laces run up the front and the corselet closes in the back with hook-and-eyes, as opposed to having a functional laced closure in back. The corselet is also considerably more flexible than its predecessor. However, the company was not trying to recreate the corset; historical accuracy was by no means the goal of the "Gay 90s" line.

Hollywood Vassarette sought to create a longing for the past. As one advertisement openly acknowledges the line was intended to "prompt a whole new lingerie nostalgia for that old-fashioned-girl prettiness" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl," 1955). This tactic makes sense, given that in 1959 America was recently out of the Korean War, in the Cold War, and in the early stages of the Vietnam War. Many undoubtedly desired to escape to an earlier time. The 1890s or "Gay 90s," while equally troubled in its own right, had come to be remembered for a kind of merry romance that would appeal to mid-20th century consumers. Corset embroidery was a direct way to evoke these cultural memories.

Placement

The iconography noted is primarily placed on the fronts of the corselets and is often more heavily concentrated at the bust. This is illustrated by many of the examples already discussed, including the "Temptress." On this design, lace adorns the center and side front panels, as well as

the cups. These sections are underlined with pale pink. The light color contrasts the black, making the lace stand out. The floral pattern is further emphasized by the all black sides and back, which fall into the background compared to the more visually complex front.

The earlier Hollywood-Maxwell designs examined have embroidery or lace on both the front and back woven panels. This results in a more cohesive look that encapsulates the entire body, although the bust area is still more interesting with a small center embellishment to draw the eye. The later Hollywood Vassarette designs all shift to only embellishing the fronts of the corselets. I noticed a similar trend from the 1950s into the 1960s in the other brands of corselets analyzed.

Additional research is needed to confirm this but the observation is worth noting. The shift from all around to front only embellishment may have been to cut costs. Manufacturers would want to make sure the corselets were competitively priced, especially if they were starting to decline in popularity during the 1960s. The later designs clearly place visual importance on the front view of the body. Granted, at the same time more and more of the back was being revealed. This would also be a focal point, resulting from the contrast between the covered breasts and the exposed skin of the back.

Formal Analysis: Parts to Make a Whole

The corselet is a complex object. To understand the design, it is crucial to delve into the previously discussed details. However, to establish what a typical corselet is, it is also crucial to consider the object as a whole. To do this, I start by analyzing recurring shapes and lines within corselets. I then move out to consider the overall form, as well as color, light, and texture within the corselets examined.

Shapes and Lines within the "Temptress"

There are several distinct shapes within the "Temptress" corselet. Its side and back panels are all four-sided and relatively rectangular. The longer, vertical edges curve inward, making the panels narrower in the middle. The upper horizontal edges of the six outer or back-most panels are angled down towards center back to achieve the noted gradual decline.

The bottom horizontal edges of the two side front panels are also angled. In this case, it is down towards center front, making the corselet longer in front than in back. The angled edges also mean the woven fabric is cut on the bias, giving these edges a little more give than the rest of the woven panels. Lastly, the center front panel has five sides. It is shaped as if a triangle was placed on top of a rectangle. The top two edges are angled up towards center and curve inward so the panel can extend along the lower lines of the cups. The lower edge runs perpendicular to

the sides of the center panel, creating a straight horizontal line along the bottom that is more unyielding than the angled sides.

Edges of the panels are emphasized by other materials, which create distinct lines within the “Temptress.” Two of the most noticeable vertical lines are created by the lace on the center front panel. The scalloped edges run parallel to one another and lead into the scalloped lace running over the top edges of the cups. The stays positioned along the seams of the panels also create repeated vertical lines throughout the corselet. They are encased in an opaque black material, so these lines appear slightly darker than the panels.

There are also several instances of horizontal or angled lines. The elastic along the front bottom edge of the corselet is quite dominate. The stark contrast between the pale pink panels and the black elastic results in a hard line along the bottom. The line runs straight across center front and then angles up on both sides over the hips. This elastic continues to run along the entire bottom edge of the corselet, so the line is carried across the back, as well.

The narrower elastic on the interior of the corselet creates angled lines along the upper edge of the back. These lines are less visually apparent on the black panels but can still be seen when worn, given that the panels are semi-sheer and the elastic is opaque. The lines highlight the “V” across the back and the body exposed above it. They also smoothly lead into the dual arches over the cups.

The cups on the “Temptress” are rounded but are not perfect circles. Each has a deep curve along the sides and bottom, whereas the top has a much shallower curve to give the cup a slightly lower cut. The rounded cups contrast the more angular nature of the rest of the corselet. This helps to make the cup area a focal point of the corselet. Within each cup there is a cross created by the seams and darts used to join and shape the three separate pieces discussed. These lines intersect directly over the center of each cup, further leading the eyes to this area.

Comparison of Shapes and Lines across All Corselets

The shapes and lines noted within the “Temptress” also appear within the other corselet designs examined as part of this research. The panels making up the bodies are longer than they are wide. Most have four sides, except for some front panels, which are angled up between the cups like the “Temptress” design. The vertical sides of most panels curve in, making them narrower at the center. This is necessary to achieve the hourglass-like measurements previously discussed. The upper horizontal edges of the back panels are angled; they decline towards center back to achieve the low-back or “backless” designs discussed.

The lines noted in the “Temptress” also appear in the other corselets. Each design has lines created by the elastic running along the top and bottom edges. Similar vertical lines were

also observed in all the corselets. Like the “Temptress,” these lines are created by the placement of trims or embellishments, as well as by the stays running along the seams of the panels. Additional vertical lines are also created by the garters, which were missing from the “Temptress.”

All the corselets examined in this study have cups that are rounded in shape. Like the “Temptress,” these are not perfect circles and the more intense, shallower curves are along the tops. These upper edges create the dual arches over the bust and contrast the wearer's skin exposed above. The bottom, deeper curved edges are less visually defined. The cups are generally made of the same materials as the bodies of the corselets. As a result, these areas often blend together. The overall circular nature of cups contrasts the angular shapes and straight lines within the rest of the design. This is one of several ways a typical corselet draws attention to the breasts.

In addition to these similarities across all corselet, I noticed a change in their lower edges. While comparing the designs, I was also struck by the impact of the elastic edges and repeated vertical lines within the corselets; both influence the appearance of the corseleted body. Each of these observations are discussed below.

Changes to the bottom edges of the panels. On some designs, the lower edges of the panels are angled down towards the center. This gives the front of the corselet a rounded bottom edge that curves over the hips and then down in front. These designs also slightly extend down in back. They include the” Temptress,” as well as the shorter 1950s “Torso bra” designs examined (e.g. style #1039, style #1069). There appears to be a shift by the 1960s towards corselet designs (e.g. style #1079) with bottom edges that are cut straight across the front (Figure 13).

The sample gusset design (style #1028) is an exception and could be viewed as a transition between the curved and straight-front designs. Its lower edges are angled to curve over the hips and down towards the garters, but then curve up at center front. As a result, the elastic edge is placed higher on the front of torso than earlier designs. The center front panel and its stays are angled to create a “V.” This combination (placement of the elastic and stays) puts pressure on the lower abdomen. The straight-front designs have a similar effect on the body. They apply even more pressure across the stomach because their front panels are all made of woven materials, as opposed to having elasticized gussets like the sample. The elastic along the lower edge also runs straight across the lower abdomen.

This shift in design is noted in external sources. One of the earliest instances of a change is the “3/4 Time” design, which was “lengthened slightly and given an even hemline” (“A Big Color Story,” 1955). The new design appears in an advertisement in *Harper’s Bazaar* (“The Far Reach,” 1956). It does look longer and slightly straighter across the front than the original design, with a

less defined curve over the hips (Figure 14). This change also occurs in corselets from the other brands examined in this study, slowly beginning around the same mid-1950s period and growing in popularity into the 1960s. This change is further discussed in terms of form, shortly.

Impact of the lines created by the elastic edges. The elastic along the edges of the corselet create very defined boundaries between the foundation garment clad torso and the rest of the body above and below it. Consider how the "Temptress" design would look if the elastic was replaced with scalloped lace. The edges would appear softer and less defined. Granted, the overall appearance depends on the other undergarments worn. Black panties beneath would impact the thick, hard line created by the black elastic, which might fade into the background. Pale pink panties could make this line stand out.

Additionally, because the elastic is opaque and the panels are semi-sheer, the appearance of these lines vary based on the colors of the corselet and the wearers skin tone beneath. Black will appear more pronounced on lighter skin tones and white more apparent on darker skin tones. This is a reminder that the corselet did not exist on its own. Its appearance was influenced by factors like the wearer's body and the undergarments accompanying it.

Impact of the vertical lines. As noted, there are several vertical lines within the corselets examined. Some of the most visually apparent lines are created by trim. Lace borders or bands of embroidery often run up the fronts of many corselets, generally continuing over or across their cups. These lines draw the eye up the torso to the breasts.

Additional vertical lines are created by the stays. These lines are fairly hard; however, as with the elastic, their appearance varies depending on the corselet's color and the wearer's skin tone. These lines are reiterated and elongated when the corselet is worn with the removable garters, which create additional vertical lines down the fronts and backs of the thighs. These repeated lines around the torso emphasize its verticality, leading eyes up and making the torso appear slimmer.

The Form of the "Temptress"

The form of the "Temptress" can be considered two different ways: lying flat on a table and enclosed around the wearer's body. When laying open, the area across the horizontal center (or waist) lays flat. The areas above and below slightly rise off the table, with excess material ruffling at the bottom and the top (to a lesser extent). The cups on this black "Temptress" stand out from the body and are semi-spherical. They somewhat holding their own rounded forms but can easily be pressed flat against the table. These differences indicate the fullness of the hip and bust areas compared to the waist area.

This corselet shows distinct signs of aging and wear. The elastic has clearly lost most of its stretch. As a result, it gives the edges of this “Temptress” a wavy appearance that would not have originally been there. Another sign of wear is the stays, which are bent along the horizontal center of the corselet. This wear may have slightly influenced the overall form of the corselet. However, I observed similar qualities (waist area with raised hips and bust) on corselets with less wear, including a “Temptress” corselet in white in better condition.

Based on personal experiences as a wearer and images from external sources, I can make assumptions about how the “Temptress” is intended to look when worn. It closes in back to encircle the body. The form narrows around the middle or waist area and becomes fuller at the top and bottom - resulting in an hourglass silhouette. This is also indicated by the noted wear of the stays. Despite some of the shapes and lines previously described, the overall form does not consist of harsh angles. Rather, the “Temptress” stretches over the body to create a smooth curve in at the waist and then back out. This is reiterated by the bottom edge of the corselet, which curves over the hips and down in front over the abdomen.

The cups extend out from the body of the corselet. They hold the rounded form of the breasts, rather than stretching over them, since they are constructed using woven and not elasticized materials. The cups cover much of the breasts but, because of the shallower curves across the top, the upper area of the bust is exposed.

The top edge of foundation garment is angled down towards it closure at center back, so the upper back is also exposed. Additionally, the lack of straps means the shoulders themselves are completely uncovered. The whole of the wearer’s décolletage is revealed. On the other hand, the rest of the torso is covered from bust to hips.

Comparison of Form across All Corselets

When unworn and on a table, all the corselets examined lay flat across the horizontal center. They also have excess material at bottom and somewhat at the top. This indicates the typical corselet’s form is narrowest at the middle or waist and wider at the bottom or hips, as well as the top or bust.

The corselets’ cups are all semi-spherical. They hold their form on their own to varying degrees depending on their design. Fully padded designs like “the Her Secret” corselet have the most rigid cups, barely moving when touched. Contour designs (e.g. style #1079) are slightly more pliable but firmly keep their shape. Boosted designs like the “Pink Champagne” corselet are softer; when the padding has not disintegrated (as was the case with the “Temptress”) the lower half of each cup stands out from the table, holding its form, but the top falls limply.

Similar instances but varying amounts of wear appear across the corselets. The samples from MNHS have fairly straight stays with only slight bends at the waist, most likely from the minimal wear needed to test the designs. The other corselets' stays are distinctly bent, the result of more wear. These instances are significant because they indicate not only was the corselet capable of bending to follow the curves of the wearer's body but with prolonged wear it conformed to its shape.

When worn, each corselet creates an hourglass silhouette, narrowing around the waist. However, the overall form of the torso changes slightly over time. This is elaborated on in the next section. Across all designs, the elasticized panels allow the corselet to stretch around the wearer's figure, while elements like the stays keep it flush against the body.

As noted, the cups across all design were semi-spherical in form; all hold and round the soft tissue of the breasts. The resulting modification differs depending on the type of padding. The boosted cups support the breasts below and gently shape them, as opposed to the more defined molding of the other two designs. All of the corselets cover the lower halves of the breasts when worn, as well as varying amounts of their tops. The amount of exposure depends on the cut of the cups.

The angled back edges of the corselets examined vary between designs, exposing different amounts of the back. However, all designs leave the shoulders strap-free and cover the torso from the breasts to the hips. In the case of longer "torsolette" designs, coverage extends further down over the derriere. All the corselets examined suggest a similar covered-exposed dynamic.

Change in Form of the Corselet

As noted, the stays in many of the corselets I examined were bent. Which stays were bent, as well as the degree, differed between the earlier curved-front and later straight-front designs. This supports my speculation about their differing effects on the abdomen. On the former, front and side stays are both bent in at the natural waist. On corselet designs with straight bottom edges, the stays are slightly bent at the side, curving in at the waist and out over the hips. However, the front stays are straight. The front areas of these corselets also tend to lay flat on the table, whereas where the lower front frequently rises up on the curved designs. I noticed these difference on designs from other brands, as well.

The noted shift not only indicate a change in the corselet's overall form but suggests a change in physical and fashion ideals. On a corselet with a curved bottom edges, the stomach is pulled in at the natural waist; the front then curves out and over the lower abdomen (hence the bend in the center front stays). The narrowing is achieved by pushing the soft flesh around the

natural waist down. This is similar in principle to Victorian era corset designs (Figure 2). There is greater emphasis on obtaining a small waist size. These curved front corselets were created during a period when High fashion had released some looser garments, but the cinched waist styles of the New Look were still widely worn (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 518).

Conversely, the resulting form of a corselet cut straight across its bottom edge involves more of a flattening than cinching. It creates a straighter line from the bust down the lower abdomen. An hourglass form is still created, with the waist as the narrowest part of the torso. However, this design indicates greater emphasis on an overall smoothing. This change suggests a preference for a flatter stomach by the early-1960s. At the same time, garments with straighter silhouettes were becoming more widely popular (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 518). This shift in design hints at the close relationship between the corselet and the culture surrounding it.

Color, Light, and Texture: Other Elements of Design to Consider

Amongst the remaining elements of design, Prown (1982) specifically instructs researchers to consider color, light and texture as they approach the end of the initial description stage (p. 8).

The "Temptress." The "Temptress" is black and a pale yellowish-pink. On the front, the pink panels are partially covered by black lace. The same combination is used on the cups. The floral design has an open ground, so the pink shows through. The sides and the back of the corselet are made of various materials in black.

Strictly speaking, the "Temptress" consists of only the noted two colors. However, when the corselet is worn there is more variation in its appearance. The woven material used on the panels and cups, whether pink or black, is semi-sheer. The black elasticized material is opaque but has an open knit. As a result, the wearer's torso can be seen to varying degrees throughout the majority of the corselet. The former would impact the appearance the latter. The exception is fully opaque components like the stays and elastic. They stand out on the black portion of the corselet, particularly against lighter skin tones, appearing truly black against the combination of the semi-sheer panels and the wearer's body. The impact of these black opaque materials was previously discussed.

The appearances of the different black materials further vary depending on how they interact with light. The most reflective component is the small black satin ribbon on center front between the cups. To a lesser extent, light also reflects off the floral lace, particularly the edges of the flowers. The woven panels have a slight sheen and the elasticized panels are more matte. As a result, one of the smallest features, the satin bow, serves as a focal point due to its reflective nature. This is also aided by the contrast of the black bow against the pink panel.

The “Temptress” can be considered in terms of both literal and visual texture. For the former, the lace on the front has small ridges throughout but the satin thread used feels silky and smooth. The elastic panels are also ribbed. However, there is no part of the exterior I would consider to be rough or abrasive. On the interior, soft flannel-like fabrics cover the metal stays and underwire, which would feel hard and cold on their own.

Visually, the body of the “Temptress” has a sleek look. The solid color panels and the vertical stays lead the eye continuously along the body, in from the bust to the smooth curve of the waist and then back out over the hips. There is also a softness to the front, especially the upper edges of the cups, with their delicate scalloped lace and the soft pink edges peeking through from behind. This appearance is an interesting contrast to the cups’ literal, rigid underwires beneath.

Colors of other corselets. Hollywood-Maxwell’s first corselet designs were offered in all white (“Her Secret” and “3/4 Time”), white and pale pink (“Pink Champagne”), or black with pale pink (“3/4 Time” or “Pink Champagne”). These colors - black or white, at times with shades pale pink - were used into the 1960s. For example, the “Temptress” and style #1079 were offered in black with pink or all white.

Some predominantly white designs have accents in pastel colors. For example, a 1963 design sample (style #1649) has small pink and green small flowers embroidered on the woven panels. Corselets like “Her Secret” and the gusset design (style #1028) have pink ribbon bows between the cups. One of the white cotton “Gay 90's Look” corselets examined (style #1069) has pale blue corset-like embroidery.

I was not able to examine many brightly colored corselets. I have one hot pink “Merry Widow” from the 1960s in my personal collection (style #1308). However, I suspect it was dyed by a previous owner, most likely to masque signs of wear like yellowing or stains. I found no sources indicating Warner’s released the design in this color.

While the vast majority of the corselets I examined were black or white with pastel accents, external sources indicate corselets were occasionally offered in other colors. Hollywood-Maxwell released a version of the “3/4 Time” corselet in “the softest blue” as part of its “Candlelight” collection (“Hollywood-Maxwell Candlelight Colors,” 1956). Hollywood-Maxwell is cited as being one of the first companies to offer pastel options in response to consumers’ growing preferences for colorful foundation garment (“In Los Angeles,” 1956). The brasserie manufacturer offered “[d]elicate tones of pink, blue, yellow, green, lavender, and beige” and partnered with other companies to create matching lingerie (“A Big Color Story,” 1955). Color is also used to market foundation garments during this period. Advertisements emphasized their

relationship to colors in outer fashions and the idea of foundation garments, themselves, being a fashion (“Hollywood-Maxwell Candlelight Colors,” 1956).

Hollywood-Maxwell continued to add new colors in subsequent seasons. They were often named for flowers, like “primrose” or “fresh lilac” (“American Corsetry,” 1956). Natural elements were also occasionally worked into the colors’ names, like “aquamarine... [or] peach bloom” (“Front Closures and Low Back,” 1956). Other brands started offering corselets in pastel colors during the mid- to late-1950s, also using the noted floral or natural naming convention. Sears released a “Peony Pink” version during the spring of 1957 (pp. 260-261). Around the same time, Warner’s created a “Merry Widow” corselet “in a new colour: pinky-lilac” (“Lilac,” 1957). Like Hollywood-Maxwell, Warner’s went on to release a range of pastel colors, including: “Lilac Mist, Sea Mist, Heaven Blue, [and] Dawn Pink” (“Warner’s Merry Widow,” 1957).

As noted in Chapter 2, 1960s fashions saw a dramatic increase in bold colors and prints, including in undergarments (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 149). This shift is apparent in Hollywood Vassarette’s “Matchmaker Colors” line. Initially, this included pastels like “Golden Pearl, Pink Pearl, Blue Diamond, [and] Grey Pearl” (“Hollywood Vassarette Matchmakers,” 1959). By the early-1960s they added brighter colors like “Flare Red” and “Lemon White” (“Hollywood Vassarette Lemon White,” 1963; “Hollywood Vassarette Matchmakers,” 1962). The company also created colorful prints, like the “‘Monet’ French Print” (“Hollywood Vassarette Monet,” 1961). Both the Matchmaker and print lines included a variety of bra, girdle, and slip designs but not, to my knowledge, corselets.

Hollywood Vassarette did offer its “Gay 90s” corselet in black with bright red embroidery, in addition to all-white and blue on white versions (“Munsingwear Gayest Underpinning,” 1959). I was not able to view this corselet in person but I did examine a brassiere and two girdles from the same line in red on black. The contrast between the two colors was very eye catching. The red embroidery boldly stands out against the black. Around the same time, Warner’s released a “Merry Widow” in Bright “Red Pepper” (“Warner’s Red Pepper,” 1960). However, all-over, bright colors do not appear to have been common in corselet designs, despite their increasing popularity in other types of foundation garments. This may be because corselets were waning in popularity as the demand for colorful foundations and lingerie was increasing. A corselet is also more expensive than other foundation garments but is worn less often. Consumers may have preferred to purchase the corselet in a more timeless, as opposed to fashionable, color: black or white, perhaps accompanied by a pastel.

Light on other corselets. Like the “Temptress,” light interacts differently with the variety of materials making up each of the corselets examined. The satin ribbon bows often placed

between the cups are one of the most reflective elements. Other small adornments are also used, like satiny embroidered flowers (“3/4 Time”, #style #1079) and gemstones (Warner’s “Merry Widow”, style #1311). In addition to reflecting the light, these decorative elements are often a different color than the rest of the corselet, drawing attention through both light and color. The embroidery and lace on the woven panels and cups also catch the light. On some earlier designs, these embellishments are used throughout the body of the corselet (e.g. “3/4 Time”) but later designs concentrate these reflective materials on the front of the torso (e.g. style #1079).

In all these cases, the interplay of light with the objects results in an emphasis on the breasts. For example, on the “Gay 90s” corselets (style #1619, style #1069), the thread used for the “corset” embroidery has a very high sheen and contrasts the matte cotton behind it. It is positioned in a way that leads the eyes up to the breasts. Even the earlier designs with all-over lace or embroidered panels draw the eyes to the breasts with features like the small ribbon bows. Of course, all these corselets would be covered when worn in public. But light would play a key role in highlighting certain parts of the body in private settings and when they are photographed for advertisements.

Textures within other corselets. Overall, the corselets have smooth textures. I observed a *slight* difference between the woven and elasticized panels. Many of the later are ribbed, contrasting the sleek nature of the former. All designs (regardless of brand) also use the softest materials on the interiors of the corselets to encase the metal stays and underwires. Many also use plush backed elastic.

The choice of textures indicates consideration for the wearer’s physical experience in a corselet. The soft casings lessen discomfort from the cold, hard components of the design, though they would still be rigid and put pressure on the body. Comfort was a key theme used to promote corselet designs throughout this period, whether talking about cool cotton panels, elastic that hugs the torso, or cups that comfortably follow the body. This is by no means unique to the period examined by this study. Research on previous eras frequently touches on manufacturers’ attempts to make foundation garments more comfortable and advertisers’ efforts to highlight this quality. Based on personal observations, comfort still seems to be a crucial part of women’s undergarment design and promotion.

Finally, like the “Temptress,” all the designs examined - regardless of brand - have very sleek visual textures. While lying flat on a table, a corselet is clearly wider than tall. However, despite its technical specifications, the stays and vertically oriented panels create a sense of long lines within the design. On the body, the foundation garment also creates sleek lines from bust to hips; this, in turn, would visually lengthen the body - one of the functions discussed, shortly.

Summary of a "typical" corselet design

The corselet can be broken up into three essential parts - body, cups, and garters - which combine to create one foundation garment. There are a number of other key aspects to the typical design. The objects' measurements indicate efforts to cover the breast while exposing the décolletage: back, shoulder, and upper chest. The amount of the wearer's body exposed varies. While offered throughout the period, low back and "backless" designs increase beginning in the late-1950s and into the early-1960s.

A typical corselet also narrows the torso at the natural waist and then curves back out over the hips. This is evidenced in the measurements of corselets, as well as other aspects of the design. The panels are almost all narrowest at the middle, indicating the shaping function. The corselets examined also all have woven panels in front, providing more shaping and smoothing of the soft flesh of the abdomen. However, there appears to be a shift in the lower front edge of the corselet from being curved to being cut straight across. This change in design impacts the overall form and suggests changing fashion and body ideals.

The body of every corselet has metal stays along the seams of the panels, elastic along the upper and lower horizontal edges, and metal closures, which shift from center back hook-and-eye closures to center front zippers during the period examined. These materials are combined to offer horizontal stretch but also vertical rigidity. The use of horizontal zig zag stitching and vertical straight stitching illustrates this balanced quality. This tension allows a corselet to shape the body, while still allowing for flexibility and movement, at least more than in a 19th or early-20th century corset. It is also crucial in keeping the corselet smooth against the body and in place.

On the other hand, the cups are comparatively fixed in form. They are made of only woven materials and underlined in rigid underwires. The cups are stiffened with padding but to different degrees. The cut of the cups also varies depending of the shapes and layout of the small pieces used to construct their rounded forms, resulting in varying amounts of coverage for the breasts.

A corselet also has garters, which hold up stockings. Designs differ depending on the length of the corselet to maintain the tension needed to keep the stocking taut but also allow movement. While the garters are much simpler than the other areas of the corselet, they are a significant part of the design. As noted, the early corselets appear to have been categorized as a type of garter belt. Additionally, the decline of the corselet is followed by the rise of pantyhose, which rendered foundation garment with garter clips largely unnecessary.

The corselet is often embellished with floral motifs, which are positioned to create visual emphasis on the breasts. Contrasting colors and light also help to achieve this. Corselets from

this era were predominantly black or white, with pastel accents. While other foundations were increasingly offered in a myriad of vibrant colors and prints, this was not the case for the corselet.

Overall, the materials making up a corselet all have smooth textures. The softest are placed on the interior to reduce discomfort caused by the hard metal components. The typical design is also visually sleek, accentuating the smoothing abilities of the corselet. The corselet's ability to smooth the torso is frequently noted in external sources. This and other functions are discussed next.

What Does It Do? The Function of the Corselet

The physical objects analyzed suggest the corselet had multiple functions in relation to the body. Most involve modifying the body's form. These functions are paired with additional qualities that are all simultaneously achieved within the one foundation garment. The breasts are modified and supported, *while* the upper body is exposed. The torso is molded into a new form, *while* being able to move. The latter modification involves shaping the waist, hips and buttocks, individually. However, perhaps more importantly, the corselet also creates an overall smooth line along the whole torso. Other functions are quite basic, like holding up stockings. Yet, the corselet also serves more complex and abstract functions, mainly sexualizing the wearer's body.

In the sections that follow, I discuss how each function is reflected in the physical design, followed by how each is described in external sources. It was generally understood that the corselet was a type of foundation garment. Occasionally, sources touch on the elementary notion of what a corselet is - explaining the design as a combination of strapless brassiere, waist cincher or girdle, and garter belt. However, by and large the external sources focus on what it does. They frequently speak to its ability to modify, mold, and shape the body within. On the other hand, functions like sexualizing this body initially seem less apparent but, upon close examination, are also there.

Support and Mold the Breast *While* Exposing the Upper Body

As with nearly every brassiere, a key function of the corselet is to support the breasts. This "is not anatomically or physiologically necessary;" rather, a supportive brassiere "is strictly a fashionable or socially demanded item" (Gau, 2010). With this in mind, it is not surprising that the noted support must be achieved while meeting other demands. This was not specific to the corselet. There were a wide range of brassiere designs available to mold the breasts into a fashionable silhouette. Designs like the "Her Secret" corselet were part of lines that offered a range of brassiere styles (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 10–11). The corselet differentiates itself by also exposing the shoulders and varying amounts of the back.

Strapless brassiere designs could also be worn to support and mold the breasts while revealing the décolletage - leaving the shoulder, back and upper chest exposed. However, as I discuss below, the corselet was more effective. It also had several other functions, discussed in later sections.

Design. Achieving the noted functions simultaneously involves an interplay between the various parts of the design. However, before analyzing the design of the corselet, it is helpful to first discuss how brassieres commonly support the breasts.

Brassiere designs generally support the breasts with straps that run over the shoulder and a band that runs horizontally around the body beneath them (Gau, 2010). The straps pull the cups up to support the breasts. Some designs also incorporate underwires to further support the breasts from beneath. The band creates the horizontal tension needed to keep the brasserie in place, pulling it into the body. Most bands run straight across the back, as it is the simplest way to maintain the noted tension; this positioning limits how much of the back can be revealed without showing the brassiere. Similarly, the straps make it impossible to bare the shoulders without the brassiere being seen (something that would have been viewed as taboo). So, these common means of support conflict with desires to reveal the shoulders and the back.

On the corselet, stays are positioned below the underwires to push the cups up from beneath, as opposed to pulling them up with straps from above. The stays run the full length of the body, resting on the hips, and the elastic band along the bottom keeps the corselet in place. This creates a very firm foundation. The woven panels also add to the overall vertical structure supporting the cups from beneath.

This support is crucial to the corselet's ability to modify the bust. The breasts are held up and direct forward, giving them an uplifted form. This is partially achieved with the underwires, which round the bottoms and sides of the breasts. The shapes used to construct the cups also play a key role in creating the semi-rounded forms, as previously discussed. These pieces often meet at the apex of each breast, resulting in cups that come to a slight point. However, the shape is much subtler than the dramatic point of the earlier bullet or torpedo brassieres.

Both the underwire and the panels are made of rigid materials. So, the resulting form largely remains the same as the body moves. Placing materials like bands of net over the cups' interior seams adds to their already study form. The size of the breasts is often augmented with padding. This material aides the underwires, further lifting the breasts to fill the cups or even extend above them. It also adds to the noted rigidity of the cups. This is most likely why brassieres created for women with small or underdeveloped breasts feature thicker, full padding

lining the cups. The desired form is achieved whether or not their breasts are large enough to fill out the cups.

The elastic band along the top edge of the back of the corselet pulls the cups into the body, somewhat like the underbust band in other designs. The elastic is angled down, following the back panels as they decline towards center back. This angling maintains the tension around the body needed to support the breast, while also revealing the back.

There is, however, limitations to how much of the body can be revealed. The steeper the angle in back the less support the corselet potentially offers. During much of this era, more exposure required additional means to create the required horizontal tension, such as the elastic "X" on the "Backless Strapless" or the large U-shaped wire on the longline brassiere previously described (Figures 8-9). The release of stronger elasticized fabrics like Lycra allowed for these additional means of support to be abandoned without sacrificing how much of the back was revealed.

Corselet versus strapless brassieres. Corselets and strapless brassieres share several functions. They often mold the breasts into similar forms. As noted, some of the corselets examined were a part of larger brassiere lines. I examined a strapless brassiere from the "Her Secret" line and the cups were essentially the same. Neither a corselet nor strapless brassiere have straps (as the latter's name suggests), leaving the shoulder totally exposed. They also both reveal varying degrees of the upper back. I noted similarly angled edges across the backs of many short and longline strapless brassieres from this era, suggesting a larger trend towards revealing as much of the back as possible. However, based on the designs observed, the back of corselet was typically more steeply angled, exposing more of the body.

This difference is due to the fundamental designs of the two foundation garments. There appears to be an inverse relationship between supporting the breasts and exposing the body. Because the corselet incorporates additional means of support, like rigid steel stays, it could be cut lower in back. On the other hand, strapless brassieres primarily rely on the elastic bands running around the body to hold the cups in place. The decline across the back has to be subtler, resulting in a higher cut. So, while both revealed the shoulder, the corselet showed off more of the back.

The corselet was also more effective at supporting and uplifting the breasts. I (and probably many others) have witnessed firsthand how strapless brassieres struggle to stay up. It might initially cup the breasts but as you begin to move it slides down the torso; it does not have enough support from below to stay in place. Some longline strapless brassieres, which extend down to the natural waist, attempt to address this issue. Like the corselet, they utilize stays,

panels and elastic bands to add more support beneath the breast. However, the soft flesh around the narrow waist is not nearly as firm a foundation as the bedrock offered by the hip bones. By the nature of their designs, strapless brassiere cannot offer the same degree of vertical support as the corselet, which is essential to uplifting the breasts.

So, like the corselet, the strapless brassiere sought to support and mold the breast while exposing the upper body. However, the corselet not only revealed more of the body, but was more effective at combining this with the other noted functions. These abilities are not only apparent in the designs themselves, but also noted in external sources depicting the corselet.

External sources. The corselet's ability to support the breasts is mentioned in external sources, but often briefly and in relation to other functions like exposure of the upper body. For example, a Dayton's advertisement for Hollywood-Maxwell's strapless brassieres reads, "That bare 'n' beautiful look is a Hollywood-Maxwell specialty...and its aided, abetted, and supported by such ingenious designs and construction details" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Shoulder Barings," 1955). Several sources note the corselet's ability to stay in place without straps (e.g. "Dayton's Shoulders Showing," 1957). Support is also occasional mentioned when promoting new designs, like a Hollywood Vassarette corselet with "buttress like boned construction for easy support" ("Spring Corsets-Bras," 1961).

This infrequency is perhaps because the idea of a brassiere supporting the breasts was already widely understood and expected - thus, not worth mentioning in the limited word count of an advertisement. Additionally, as my discussion of the design indicates, how the breasts are supported is quite complex. In an interview on brassiere design, a Hollywood-Maxwell designer notes, "'Today, designing a bra is more like building bridges, there is so much engineering to it'" (Morrison, 1957). Explaining the complexities of support within the corselet would have little payout for advertisers, especially when this function was generally expected from brassieres. So, it is not surprising that the corselet's ability to support the breasts is rarely promoted directly, despite this being an important function. It is, however, often implied when discussing the corselet's ability to modify the breasts.

Many of the mid-1950s advertisements analyzed stress the uplifting effect of the corselet on the breast. This modification is often attributed to the underwire. While this feature had appeared in brassieres during the 1930s (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, pp. 101-102), it is positioned as innovative and as a more effective alternative to *overwire* designs ("Hollywood-Maxwell top fashion news," 1954; "Seven Clues to Figure Magic," 1954). This lifting is paired with a rounding of the breasts by the cups. The uplifted, rounded bust was part of the "new" silhouette of the mid-

1950s. The resulting form was also characterized as “natural.” Both these descriptions are discussed at greater length, shortly.

External sources also frequently stress the corselet’s ability to reveal the shoulders, back, and upper chest - an area of the body sometimes referred to as the wearer’s *décolletage*. Hollywood-Maxwell (and other brassiere manufacturers) had been producing strapless brassieres prior to the release of corselets. As noted, strapless brassieres reveal the upper body but generally did not reveal as much of the back. One of the ways the longer corselets were differentiated from strapless brassieres was by highlighting these back-revealing abilities (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 3–4; “Strapless or Halter Bras,” 1955). For example, one advertisement for the “Pink Champagne” design comments on its “unusual lowered back” (“American Corsetry,” 1956). The use of the word “unusual” to describe the low back of the recently-released corselet suggests this was different from previous foundation garment designs.

Analysis of the sources depicting the corselet also indicates there was an increasing emphasis on its body-revealing function. Advertisements for low-back designs increase from the late-1950s into the 1960s; this is In line with my analysis of the physical artifacts. Additionally, while the corselet’s cups continue to be described as uplifting and rounding the breast, designs are later described as lifting and rounding then *above* the cups. These changes are also discussed in a section below.

A “new” bust. In 1955, the corselet’s ability to lift and round the breasts was promoted as a crucial part of the new, fashionable “look” (*A Bra for Every Fashion*, 1956; “Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne,” 1955b; “Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time,” 1955). Uplifting and rounding the breasts held them closer into the body. This was a notable change from the earlier pointed bust that directed the breasts prominently out in front of the body. Around the same time, Dior released his H-line and accompanying corselet with the intention of moving away from the previous silhouette, which he believed made the bust “the object of vulgar attention” (Thesander, 1997, p. 163). To attribute this change solely to Dior’s 1954 collection is an overstatement. However, this High fashion example demonstrates how changes to the fashionable ideal were reflected in ready-to-wear foundation garments like the corselet.

Descriptions of similar shaping (and its fashionable appeal) appear in more general sources on brassieres and corselets. Quoting copy from Saks 5th Avenue, *Women’s Wear Daily* says, “‘the new Paris look...[the] high rounded look instead of the pointed separated look of recent times’” (“First Fall Promotions,” 1954). The trade journal reports on numerous advertising campaigns from retailers and manufacturers around the country that describe this high rounded look (e.g. “In Retail Promotions,” 1956).

The new cup design challenges Thesander's (1997) description of the era, which suggests pointed cups were most popular in 1957 and then declined with the release of the trapeze line by Yves Saint Laurent for Dior in 1958 (p. 165). Granted, what constitutes a pointed form versus a rounded one is somewhat subjective. Based on my own definitions, the cups of the mid-20th century corselets appear pointed compared to 21st century brassieres. I even noted the "pointed" nature of some cup designs during my initial descriptions of the objects. So, Thesander's comments may also reflect her own cultural biases. Based on contemporary external sources examined in this study, it appears that the cup shape of the mid-1950s was viewed as rounded within that context. This is the perspective that is of interest to this study.

The new silhouette is also positioned as a subtler treatment of the breasts. Sources on Hollywood-Maxwell corselets describe the resulting bust as "soft[er]" and less extreme than previous styles (e.g. "Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets," 1955). Sources also describe the uplifted bust as central to creating the fashionable, "youthful line" ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1954). There are inherent connotations of youth and virginity attached to uplifted breasts, which generally droop and lengthen with age and childbearing. The move away from the full bust or mature feminine ideal from earlier in the decade to a more subtle, youthful shape suggest the adolescent ideal generally associated with the 1960s was at least nascent by the mid-1950s.

A "natural" bust. Sources also describe the "new" bust of the mid-1950s as "natural." For example, one advertisement notes the "3/4 Time" corselet "gives you a...more natural look" ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1954). The new cup designs were also generally described as "follow[ing] the natural contours of the body" ("First Fall Promotions," 1954). The high rounded bust was viewed as a more natural or inherently feminine shape.

I find descriptions of the cups and their modification of the breasts as "natural" interesting, especially in light of the fact that all the corselets observed have some degree of padding. This was true of most brassieres during this period, since "Padding was all the rage" (Farrell-Beck and Gau, 2002, p. 121). However, augmenting the breasts with padding to obtain this silhouette runs counter to the idea that the shape is innately feminine. As noted, the presence padding in the cups is frequently downplayed. When it is mentioned, it is positioned as merely enhancing the wearer's own body. The carefully chosen language could be attributed efforts to position the bust as *natural*.

Some view this period's silhouette as anything but natural. In particular, Thesander (1997) comments, "the ideal was glamour, not naturalness. The shape of a woman's body was suggested through a series of artifices" (pp. 158-159). I concur that glamour (discussed later) was a key meaning associated with the period's beauty ideal and with the foundation garments used

to attain it. Yet, this does not mean that “naturalness” was not also associated with the corselet and the silhouette it helped to create.

Whether the form of the body was a truly a “natural” shape is questionable but for the purposes of this study that is not overly important. By today's standards, when minimalist bralettes are popular, it might appear unnatural. However, this does not mean the form of the breasts and the foundation garments responsible did not hold *meanings* of naturalness during the period examined, especially when compared to the more dramatically pointed shape that preceded.

Additionally, the concept of a natural body is by no means fixed. It is highly culturally dependent. As Hollander (1993) points out, speaking specifically of the body and clothing in art, “The medium and conventional style of these images change throughout time, but at each moment they are seen to look natural” (p. xii). At this moment in time, the rounded, uplifted breasts (while achieved with artifices like the corselet) was considered part of natural silhouette. The significance of this is explored in the next chapter.

Increasing emphasis on exposure. A key function of all corselet designs is revealing the upper torso, while also supporting and molding the breasts. However, during the period researched, this revealing function became more and more important. This is evidenced by things like the increasingly lower backs of the corselets examined.

The growing popularity of low back fashions and foundations is also noted in external sources (e.g. “Here’s Support,” 1956). By the mid-1950s, Hollywood-Maxwell was well aware of the impending trend. At the end of 1956, sales manager Sam Ginsberg commented, “‘low back strapless bras are of utmost importance for the coming season’” (“Front Closures and Low Back,” 1956). The following spring the company released it “Backless Strapless” corselet, which was advertised in major fashion publications and described as the “Safest plunge on the market...this V-ette shaping that dips to a bare, breathless beauty” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Safest Plunge,” 1957). The preference for these “low back strapless” designs intensified in the years that followed.

Sources from the late-1950s and 1960s more heavily emphasizes the revealing natural of the corselet. For example, the “Bare Flair” advertising campaign includes the “bare in back” corselet, which reveals the upper body with it “very-v back.” This is promoted alongside a longline with a new “underarm design” also intended to expose as much of the back as possible (“Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair,” 1963; “Hollywood Vassarette is Famous,” 1963). This shift in the sources aligns with the shift observed in the physical objects and both reflect a larger trend.

The growing importance of exposing the back in wider fashions can be seen in articles like *Harper's Bazaar's* "The New Vamp's Guide to Back Magic" (1962). It comments, "The new vamp creates her following by turning her back...There is no surer way, we think, to cause a following than to walk away-strategically" (p. 174). This article also clearly indicates the sexual connotations that accompany revealing the body and of the foundation garments that make this possible. Yet, it was not just about showing off the back.

During the late-1950s, the bust was still described as rounded and uplifted. However, the focus shifts to the corselet's ability to lift the breasts *above* the line of the cups. For example, the "Temptress" line promised to "give you a bewitching swell of bosom...By gently boosting you above the cup curve itself!" ("Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959). The new rhetoric highlights the lower cut of the cups and their revealing nature. Lower cut cup designs were sometimes referred to as "Décolleté Styles." This cup design, named for the part of the upper body it revealed, was noted as popular by the end of 1959 (e.g. "Fashion Joins Up with Corsets," 1960; "Foundation Ads Tie-In," 1959). In the years that followed, sources increasingly stress the design's ability to lift the breasts and round them "above the cups" ("Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair," 1963; "Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959; "Hollywood Vassarette Temptress Bra," 1960).

So, while all corselet designs reveal the upper body, this function became increasingly important during the latter part of the era studied. Additionally, it was not a question of revealing more of the back *or* the breasts; the corselet allowed wearers to do both, offering "low back and front décolletage" ("The New Vamp," 1962). This reflects the wider trend towards body-revealing fashions that were aimed at the "most extreme exposure" ("Shift to the Shape," 1964). However, it was not about baring it all; desires for exposure were still balanced with the noted demands for supporting and molding the breasts.

Modify and Smooth the Torso *While* Offering Freedom of Movement

The corselet not only modifies the wearer's breasts, but the whole of their torso. This generally involves a curve inward to narrow the waist and then back out over the hips. The lower abdomen is also shaped and smoothed, as well as the buttocks in some designs. In addition to shaping these individual parts, the corselet creates a smooth line between them.

This smoothing distinguished the corselet from other foundation garment options. The majority of the functions discussed so far could be achieved by combining other foundation garments - such as a girdle or waist cincher with a strapless brassiere. However, these combinations have the potential to create a bulge of flesh where they meet along the torso, which was also a noted issue around 1919 when the initial corselet design was created (Fields, 2007, p.

91). Like earlier iterations, the postwar corselet is a more effective way to create a smooth, continuous line from the bust down to the hips.

Corsets also have similar effects on the torso. They dramatically narrow the waist and smooth the entire torso to create a curved hourglass figure. The shape created by the corselet is generally not as extreme. However, a corset is an incredibly rigid foundation garment. On the other hand, the corselet shapes and smoothes the torso *while* allowing at least some movement of the torso. This freedom of movement is another key function of the corselet.

These functions are apparent in the designs examined. The corselet's ability to modify the torso, create a smooth line from bust to hips, and allow the body to move are also conveyed in the external sources analyzed. Both sources of data are discussed below.

Design. Several aspects of the typical corselet design indicate the noted functions. The panels play a crucial role in modifying the torso, especially their shapes. As noted, the majority are narrowest in the middle and widen towards either end. This pulls in and narrows the soft flesh around the natural waist. The lengths of the panels impact how far down the torso the corselet extends and, in turn, the degree to which the hips and buttocks are molded into a smooth, curved form.

The layout of the panels and other materials also indicate efforts to control the form of the lower abdomen. All of the designs examined use woven panels in front. The concentration of this rigid material helps to flatten the stomach. As noted, the later straight-front designs place even more tension across this area. The elastic along their lower edges runs straight across the torso, as opposed to curving down. The panels and the stays on some of these designs create trapezoidal shapes (e.g. style #1079). These changes increase the pressure on the lower abdomen, further flattening the stomach and holding it in.

The longer length of the corselet is crucial to its smoothing ability, covering the body from bust to hips or buttocks. The vertical stays also play a key role. They are placed along the longer, vertical edges of each panel and help to keep the whole foundation garment taut. This ensures the corselet stays flat against the torso. The design places pressure on the entire torso to redistribute its flesh into a smooth shape.

The rigid vertical stays are contrasted by the horizontal stretch of the elasticized panels, which enables the corselet to stretch around and mold the torso. These panels are generally positioned on the sides and back of a corselet to offer freedom of movement. Even the steel stays are not entirely inflexible. They are made of tightly spiraled wire, allowing them to follow the curves of the body and bend with it.

It is worth noting, the corseted woman is also not totally restrained by their woven foundation garments. During the Victorian era, working women wore corsets throughout their very active lives, though they were worn looser (Steele, 2001, pp. 1, 48–49). Having worn both, I can also offer insights into the wearers' experiences. A corset, which is made entirely of woven panels, molds the torso to fit its form. A cinched corset pulls the body in and redistributes excess flesh above or below the foundation garment. Movement is limited to the lower body, bending at the knees or potentially at the hips. On the other hand, the elasticized panels and spiral steel stays of the corselet shape the body *but also* stretch over and around it. In a corselet, the torso can move, bending in various directions at the waist, as well as through the lower body. So, by comparison, the corselet offers considerably greater range of motion while still modifying the torso, albeit in a less extreme manner than many corsets.

The corselet design seems to reflect more literal contradictory qualities than its predecessor: the corset. The corselet, itself, is neither a rigid garment nor entirely pliant. It can be pulled in various directions but is quick to return to its original shape. Likewise, the corselet-clad body can move but is pulled back into the defined form of the foundation garment. While the corset largely produces an inward force on the body, the corselet exhibits a back and forth between body and object.

External sources. The external sources analyzed also note the corselet's ability to modify and smooth the torso, while also allowing it to move. The corselet is often described narrowing the waist, but in a relaxed, natural way. It is also noted as modifying the hips and buttocks, more often in relation to the longer designs. Sources also promote the corselet's ability to smooth, lengthen, and slenderize the torso, which was positioned as crucial to current fashions. All of these functions are acknowledged less or not at all by the late-1950s for various reasons, which are discussed in the sections below.

Freedom of movement is often visually implied in many of the sources analyzed. However, it is rarely directly acknowledged. When advertising copy briefly touches on this or related concepts, like comfort, it is paired with references to controlling the body - indicating the duality of the corselet. External sources on the freedom afforded by the corselet, as well as its control of the body, are also discussed below.

Modifying the waist. The corselet's ability to narrow the waist is frequently mentioned in sources from the early-1950s, which is prior to the release of Hollywood-Maxwell's designs. Warner's first "Merry Widow" (#1311, 1952) promised to "belittle your waist...[and noted] all at once you're inches smaller" ("Warner's Merry Widow," 1952). Other sources employ similar language, using *nip*, *whittle*, and *cinch* to describe the corselet's waist-reducing function (e.g.

"Dayton's Strapless Bras," 1950; *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1951, p. 258). Somewhat like the Victorian corset, the early corselets are worn to reduce the waist as much as possible.

The corselet's ability to shape the waist continues to be mentioned during the mid-1950s but the resulting form is described as less extreme. An article from *Women's Wear Daily* notes the change, citing Hollywood-Maxwell's "3/4 Time" design as one example. It reports on a growing preference for "slightly released but not loose waistlines" ("Take Your Pick," 1954). Similar descriptions appear in promotional materials for Hollywood-Maxwell corselets. The "Pink Champagne" design provides the wearer with an "easy, natural, controlled waistline" (S1955 price list). Likewise, the "3/4 Time" corselet offers a "gently controlled waist" ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1955). Some sources occasionally promise to "minimize the waistline" ("A Big Color Story," 1955). However, in general, the modification is described as less extreme, using words like "easy" and promising to "hug but not cinch" the wearer's waist (*A Bra for Every Fashion*, 1956). The waist is still molded into a narrow form, but one that is not as extreme as earlier corselet designs.

I observed a similar shift towards a more relaxed waist in corselets from other brands, like Warner's. Their earliest design (style #1311) has a horizontal ribbon along the center of the corselet to cinch the body in at the natural waist. Some subsequent "Merry Widows" also feature this ribbon (e.g. #1316, released 1954; #1317, released 1955) but it begins to be abandoned around the mid-1950s (e.g. #1328, 1954). Mail order corselets also shift from designs aimed at cinching the waist to a "new...relaxed waist design" during the mid-1950s (*Sears Spring Catalog*, 1955, p. 214). Having worn both styles, I have personally experienced this shift. The mid-1950s corselets and those that followed certainly narrow the waist but without the extreme constriction or cinching of the earlier designs.

This change corresponds with a shift in the fashions worn over foundation garments. In 1954, Balenciaga released dresses with much looser silhouettes. The next year Dior released his A-line, which was shaped like an "A" and contrasted his iconic narrow-waisted New Look (Ellis Miller, 2010; Pujalet-Plaà, 2010). Changing the typical design and accompanying advertising copy suggests attempts to ensure the corselet continued to be worn as fashionable silhouettes relaxed. One article from this period writes, "Even dresses without long-torso treatment need uninterrupted control--slim sheaths with unmarked waistlines are one example" ("Take Your Pick," 1954). Granted, the noted high fashions were not widely accepted at this point (Tortora & Eubank, 2010, p. 518), but manufacturers may have acted in anticipation of broader acceptance. The period can be viewed as a transition between silhouettes and the foundation garments used to achieve them. This helps to explain the somewhat contradictory external sources from

Hollywood-Maxwell, which noted some corselets' waist *cinching* abilities, while also promoting the *easy* or *relaxed* waistlines of the same designs.

References to modifying the waist appear less frequently after the release of Hollywood-Maxwell's first corselets. Sources on Hollywood Vassarette design from the late-1950s and early-1960s *occasionally* describe the waist-modifying effects of a corselet (e.g. "Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959). However, in generally, this function stopped being promoted - although designs certainly continued to modify the waist. This omission may be because this function was widely understood and, thus, did not need to be stated. Also, given the noted changing fashions, narrowing the waist most likely became slightly less important. There was less incentive to discuss this function in sources like advertisements.

Modifying the hips and buttocks. Contemporary advertisements and fashion articles also describe the corselet's ability to modify the hips and buttocks. Words used frequently include *control*, *pull* or *take in*, and *sleek* or *smooth* ("Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955a; *Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 3–4; "Strapless or Halter Bras," 1955). This area of the body is primarily discussed when promoting the longer corselet designs but is occasionally mentioned in earlier sources on the shorter versions. An advertisement for the "3/4 Time" corselet notes how it "Takes in the hipbone but leaves slender hips free to take care of themselves" ("American Corsetry," 1956). The "Her Secret" corselet is described as having "Wonderfully controlling swallow tail derriere control" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl," 1955). However, these were the only two examples found.

It makes sense that advertisements for the shorter designs mention the hips and buttocks less often. They smooth the torso down to these areas but have less of an effect on them. Wearers would most likely select the longer designs if they wanted to more dramatically modify the lower torso. On the other hand, a shorter corselet would be chosen if this shaping was not needed - as touched on in the Hollywood-Maxwell "Gay Whirl" advertisement quoted above.

Modifying the hips and buttocks could be unnecessary because the wearer's body already adhered to the current physical ideal or because the clothes worn over the foundation garment did not necessitate shaping the lower torso. In fact, this is often visually conveyed in advertisement. The longer designs are shown next to with dresses that are tightly fitted over the waist, hips, and thighs. On the other hand, shorter designs are paired with dresses with fitted waists and full skirts that obscure the hips (e.g. *A Bra for Every Fashion*, 1956).

References to specifically modifying the hips and buttocks were not found during the latter half of the period examined. As with narrowing the waist, this ability may have been generally understood by this point. Additionally, shaping the hips and derriere were less of a

concern for most wearers as loose fashions grew in popularity. So, advertisers appear to have focused on other functions to promote the corselet.

Creating a smooth, long line. The overall figure created by the corselet is also discussed in external sources. They stress how it molds the *whole* of the torso, not just the various *parts*. Sources often reference the corselet's ability to create a continuous line from the breasts down to the hips. As a pamphlet from Hollywood Vassarette puts it, "[the corselet] give[s] a smooth unbroken line" (*What Goes Underneath It All*, 1959, p. 6). Common verbs used to describe this function include *smooth* and *lengthen*.

A number of external sources from the mid-1950s discuss the corselet's ability to create a sleek silhouette. The act of smoothing the torso is paired with lengthening it or, perhaps more accurately, making it appear longer (e.g. "Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955b; "Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets," 1955). As one advertisement puts it, the corselet molds the body into "a long smooth line" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Fits You," 1955). Likewise, the 1957 Price List suggests the corselet for women who want a "Smooth torso, [an] elongated line for sheath look" (*Supplementary Price List*, 1957, p. 6). As the later quote points out, this need arose from wearing certain garments.

Both the shorter and longer corselets are cited as a way to mold the body to fit current fashions. The *A Bra for Every Fashion* folio (1956) produced by Hollywood-Maxwell notes the "3/4 Time" design should be worn "to shape the long, easy lines of her new-look fashion" (interior). The guide includes an illustration of a woman wearing the corselet next to an image of the same women wearing a strapless gown with a very fitted bodice and slightly dropped waistline that mirrors the lower edges of the foundation garment. The folio also instructs "[the] Pink Champagne Torsolette lends a smooth-flowing look to the new silhouette." It is shown alongside another strapless gown with a fitted bodice that extends down over the hips. The models' identical poses further underscore the relationships between the different under and outer fashions (Figure 15). Despite their differing lengths, both corselets mold the body into the "long" and "smooth-flowing" fashionable silhouette reflected in both the outer fashions shown.

More general sources also stress the corselet's important role beneath current fashions. A *Women's Wear Daily* article suggest corselets, which offer "uninterrupted control," are the "proper corseting of new ready to wear fashions" and should even be worn beneath garments "with unmarked waistlines" to achieve the needed smooth line ("Take Your Pick," 1954). A spread in *Vogue* suggests different lengths should be worn with different fashions "to carry the smooth line down as far as needed" ("The Good Long Look," 1955). While the garments worn might vary,

a long, smooth torso was seen as essential and the corselet was promoted as an ideal way to achieve it.

The corselet's ability to smooth and lengthen the body is sometimes accompanied by claims that it created a slender figure. The word "slim" is often used to describe the corselet-clad torso (e.g. "Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets," 1955). "Willowy" is also used to describe the long, slender ideal achieved with the corselet ("Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl," 1955; "The Far Reach," 1956). The slenderizing function is attributed to the corselet's panels and stays ("Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955a), reinforcing my observations about the design.

The corselet does not technically make the body smaller. Rather, it redistributes the soft flesh of the torso to make it *look* slimmer; it visually tricks the eye. The waist is made to look narrower in contrast to the hips. Repeated vertical lines also make the body look long and lithe. The corselet indicates the importance of *appearing* a certain way. Today, women modify their bodies through means like exercise, diet, and plastic surgery - which literally alter the shape of the body. Steele (2001) argues this indicates women have "internalized [the corset]" (p. 143). I agree but think it is important to acknowledge this difference (temporary versus permanent modification) in order to understand the corselet and the culture that surrounded it. The importance of appearance is discussed in the next chapter.

Smoothing, lengthening, and slenderizing are rarely mentioned in the sources examined from the late-1950s and 1960s. Analysis of the objects indicate that this function by no means went away. A smooth figure would play an important role under contemporary fashion, even under lose or unstructured silhouettes, by helping the garments to lay correctly over the body. This ability may also have become more widely understood and less important in comparison to others. In external sources, it seems to be replaced by other concerns, like an increasing emphasis on revealing the body.

Freedom of movement. While capable of meeting numerous needs, the corselet was not promoted as a "catchall," worn for any situation. This is perhaps in part because of the era's promotion of "wardrobes" with a variety of designs worn for specific needs, outfits, and occasions (e.g. "Hollywood Vassarette Wardrobe of Strapless Bras," 1960). The body-modifying corselet is also not the most comfortable foundation garments, making it unsuitable for constant use. As noted, it literally embodies a tension. It molds the torso while also offering freedom of movement. The latter is rarely mentioned directly. However, the range of movements possible within the design are visually implied.

Numerous sources include photographs or illustrations of women wearing the corselets bending at the waist ("First Fall Promotions," 1954; "Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne,"

1955b; “Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time,” 1954; “The Good Long Look,” 1955). For example, a price list shows the “Pink Champagne” design on two models. One arches her back and the other curves her hips forwards. In another photograph, a model wearing the cotton “3/4 Time” corselet bends her upper body to the side (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955, p. 6). Similar poses were observed in sources from throughout the period researched. An advertisement for the late-1950s “Gay 90's Look" corselet includes a photograph of a model leaning back with her hips directed forward (“Munsingwear Gayest Underpinning,” 1959). An illustration of a woman in the 1960s gusset design has a distinct bend forward at the waist (“Selling Summer Foundation,” 1962).

A Dayton’s advertisement for Hollywood-Maxwell is one of the strongest instances of visually implying the movement allowed by the corselet (“Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl,” 1955). The black and white watercolor-esc illustration includes three women in short and long corselet designs. Their elongated figures are all bent at the waist, either to the side, back or front. There is a black square framing a ballerina with a similar physical figure behind them. The dark background highlights the dancer, her back arched as she leaps with one leg stretched back behind her. Her presence alongside the models wearing the corselets implies similar degrees of movement are possible in the foundation garments.

Most of the images examined also feature women with their arms raised. This visually conveys the freedom of the arms and shoulders, unhindered by straps. While I have focused largely on the freedom of the mid- and lower-torso, the corselet also “[leaves] your shoulders strapless, free” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl,” 1955). The lack of shoulder straps can also be read as a kind of physical freedom.

The cited images of corselet-clad women suggest a degree of physical freedom. However, their poses are comparatively less active than women in other foundation garments. A 1963 promotional kit for Hollywood Vassarette’s “Stay There” line includes illustrations of women sitting, laying, staying (*Stay There*, 1963). Advertisements for the line include photographs of women in similar positions. This difference is also true for brands like Warner’s. The “Merry Widows” are promoted with images of women bending at the waist in various directions, while the company’s girdles are shown in a wider range of more active poses. This could be because the corselet was worn in formal setting that did not involve as extreme amounts of movement - explored later in terms of how the corselet was intended to be used.

As mentioned earlier, the physical freedom afforded by the corselet is rarely mentioned directly. In fact, the word “freedom” was almost never used to in the external sources analyzed. Advertising copy touches on the concept of freedom of movement by claiming the corselet follows the “natural body” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne,” 1955a). Aspects of the physical

design, such as the elastic panels and boning, are referenced to explain how the corselet "move[s]-with-the-body" and provides a comfortable experience for the wearer (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 3–4). These descriptions counter the idea of the corselet acting as a solely inward, constricting force. Additionally, the mid-1950s silhouette is described as more relaxed and gentler than those before it ("Take Your Pick," 1954). The concept of freedom is relative, with the less confining corselet offering comparatively more freedom of movement.

Freedom* and *control. References to freedom are paired with words like *control* or *mold*, which suggest restraint and an inward force. A description of Hollywood Vassarette's zipper-front design is a particularly good example. It reads, "The confined shape, the free feeling of a black torsolette with buttressing bone construction" ("Minimizing the Maximum," 1962). The design offers the physical sensation of freedom, conveyed by a photograph of the model bending backwards with her arms thrown over her head. Yet, it simultaneously controls her body, molding the breasts, waist, and hips into the "confined shape." This too is visually apparent. The smooth line of the narrow torso is emphasized by the stays, which run down the body and are very pronounced against the model's pale skin.

Some of the external sources analyzed attempt to diminish the degree of control with adjectives like "gentle" and "comfortable" (e.g. "Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1955). As one advertisement puts it, the corselet is "Comfortable in its shapely control" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Fits You," 1955). Manufacturers and advertisers would not want to completely downplay the corselet's ability to control the body, as this is essential to its body modifying function. However, they would not want to overemphasize this either, as concepts like control can have negative connotations. Discussing control alongside images or text that imply freedom helps to temper the former. This was successful, at least in part, because the design itself combines opposing qualities of stretch and rigidity within one object. This and other dualities within the corselet are further discussed in the next chapter.

Hold up stockings

Corselets typically have garters, enabling them to hold up the wearer's stockings. On all the design, the garters are made from bands of elastic and metal clips that grasp the stockings. They run down the fronts and backs of the wearer's thighs, with the clips hitting at roughly the same point for an even pull on the upper edge of each stocking. The elastic offers stretch when the wearer moves but also maintains the tension needed to keep the stocking taut. The garters on the shorter corselets have hooks at the ends, so they can be removed if stockings are not worn. They also have clasps that allow the wearer to adjust the length of the garters for proper fit.

Holding up stockings seems simplistic in relation to the other functions discussed. Yet, it is equally important. As noted, this was actually a key function when the design was released. The corselet was originally shown with garter belts in early-1950s mail order catalogues. It eventually shifts to being associated with brassieres. However, the garters were still a central part of the corselet. In fact, the foundation garment declined in use as pantyhose rose in popularity, making the garters unnecessary.

The garters also extend the lines within the body of the corselet. This visually lengthens the wearer's figure and leads the eye along it. Additionally, the combination of stockings and a corselet almost entirely encases the wearer's body from breasts to feet. The stockings act as another means of smoothing the body. They even out the skin tone of the legs and create a sleeker appearance. In this sense, they continue the work of the corselet.

Sexualize the Body

In addition to the more tangible, body-modifying functions discussed, the corselet also sexualizes the wearer's body. Previous research on foundation garments and other aspects of intimate apparel note how the objects have been viewed as inherently sexy or as a means of eroticizing the female body within a culture (e.g. Fields, 2007, p. 216; Steele, 2001, pp. 114-115). I also repeatedly observed this quality while engaging in the emotional response phase of Prown's (1982) material culture process, particularly when reflecting on the colors of the corselet.

As noted, the corselet was primarily offered in black and white. I felt the designs produced in black had a stronger eroticism. This is not to say those in white were not sexy. However, I noted "There [was] something kind of youthful and innocent about these designs," compared to the more illicit sexual connotations of the black corselets (research journal on April 11, 2017). My personal response is in line with Fields' (2007) observations about the sexual connotations of the colors black and white, discussed in the literature review.

Deeper analysis of the designs suggested sexualizing the wearer's body was another key function of the corselet. This is evidences in several aspects of the design. Compared to the others discussed, this function is not as openly acknowledge in external sources. However, it became more pronounced in later sources and is visually implied throughout the period. These subtle references, as well as the lack of references in many sources, help to position the corselet within its cultural context. They are analyzed following my discussion of the design.

Design. Many have commented on women's use of foundation garments during the postwar era to embody the culture's physical or sexual ideal (Dione, 2009, p. 71; Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 116; Nelson, 2007, p. 197; Thesander, 1997, p. 166). While perhaps true of all postwar foundation garments, this function is particularly apparent in the design of the corselet,

which sexualizes the body in several ways. All of the corselets examined draw attention to the breasts, a complex symbol of femininity that is often viewed as one of the “sexiest” parts of a woman’s body. The previously discussed functions also aid in this function, mainly modifying the torso into an hourglass silhouette and revealing the upper body. Several of the designs examined also allude to the naked body beneath, further heightening connotations of undressing and other erotic meanings associated with the corselet. Some of these aspects of the designs would not be seen in public, where the corselet was covered by clothes. However, the nature of the corselet is such that it is both seen and unseen. This duality is also explored below in relation the corselet’s ability to sexualize the wearer’s body.

Drawing attention to the breasts. Breasts have long been viewed as symbols of feminine beauty and mature female sexuality. Their alluring power has also been noted, frequently acting as a “[sexually] attractive force for men” (Fields, 2007, p. 112). Emphasizing the full, rounded bust created by the cups is one way the corselet sexualizes the wearer, making them *sexy*. The corselet repeated draws attention to the wearer’s breasts using various elements within the designs, including embellishments, stays, contrasting colors, and shapes.

All of the corselets examined have tiny embellishments between the cups. While small, these details are often made of reflective materials to catch the light more than the rest of the foundation garments. This draws attention to that area of the wearer’s body. Other trims and embellishments are also positioned to lead the eyes to the breasts and to ensure they are a focal point, especially on later designs. Designs like the “Temptress” and “Gay 90's Look” corselets very strategically position their embellishment. The parallel scalloped edges of the lace or the corset-like embroidery on these designs run up the center front of the body and then across the cups. As a result, the eyes are directed up the torso to the bust.

The breasts are further emphasized by the stays, which create vertical lines that also lead the eyes up to the cups. The stays could potentially lead the eye down but, based on my observations of the objects, the heavier concentration of details on the bust draws the eyes up. The cups rounded forms also literally stand out from the rest of the body. The lines within each cup generally converge at the apex of the breast, drawing the eyes further in.

At times, contrasting colors are also used to emphasize the breasts. Pale pink woven material is placed behind white or black lace in several of the designs examined. In earlier designs this combination is used on the front and back (e.g. “Pink Champagne”). However, the contrasting back panels would not be viewable from the front. So, the front of the body is still emphasized. Plus, the noted small embellishment pulls a viewer’s gaze up to the breasts. On

later designs contrasting panels are only used on the front (e.g. #1079). This increases the visual emphasis on the front of the body to direct attention to the breasts.

In addition to color, shapes are also used to direct the eyes towards the breasts. On the 1960s zipper-front design the lighter color of the center panels and cups contrasts the largely black body of the corselets, drawing attention to the front. Then, then trapezoidal shape created by the pink panels leads the eyes up to the breasts. The shape is almost like the beam of a spotlight, directing a viewer's attention to the breasts.

Creating an hourglass silhouette. As noted in a previous section, a key function of the corselet is modifying the torso. The overall form slightly changed during the period examined. However, it never diverged far from the "hourglass" silhouette. The waist is narrowed and curves out over the hips, also topped by rounded breasts. I have already established how this was accomplished by the typical corselet design. However, it is worth noting *why* this sexualizes the wearer's body, especially during the mid-20th century.

An hourglass silhouette is a longstanding symbol of feminine beauty. Across numerous cultural contexts, the narrow waist has been found to be sexually attractive. A healthy ratio for women is .67 to .80, compared to .85-.95 for men. However, a ratio of .7 is repeatedly cited as most attractive to men (Etcoff, 1999, p. 191). Steele (2001) posits the corset may "function as an artificial sexualizing device for women who lack such spectacular sexually dimorphic curves" (p. 165). The same could be said of the corselet. Interestingly, while Marilyn Monroe and Twiggy seem to embody different ideals, both have a .7 HWR (Etcoff, 1999, p. 193). Similarly, the corselets examined changed in form, but all narrowed the waist to continually achieve this persisting aspect of feminine beauty and sexual attractiveness.

The hourglass figure not only symbolizes femininity, but also signifies fertility. Etcoff notes the ideal hip to waist (HWR) ratio is linked to sexual difference. Fuller waists are often the result of androgen, a male hormone, whereas slimmer, smaller waists indicate higher levels of estrogen. Citing studies on these hormones and fertility, she argues the hourglass feminine ideal stems from our biological need to reproduce (p. 191-192).

During the postwar baby boom, the ability to bear children was closely bound to notions of female attractiveness and desirability. The hourglass figure as an indication of fertility, while not directly related to being sexually attractive, would have very positive connotations. Its noted relationship to sexual difference would also be important, given the culture's heavily demarcated views of gender. Appearing sexy would be tied to appearing feminine.

In addition to indicating the ability to bear children, the feminine hourglass figure is also associated with virginity (or at least having never been pregnant), as well as youth. Etcoff

observes the hourglass, or “gynoid” shape “emerges at puberty... [but] disappears with pregnancy and is hard to regain.” The waist also typically widens as a woman ages and her estrogen levels drop (p. 191). Eicher (2001) makes similar observations about the role of a slender figure in “implying virginity.” However, she adds that this is more specific to “EuroAmerica” cultures and is not true of other, like the Kalabari women in Africa (para. 26).

There were cultural expectations that women remain virgins until they were married. Having a narrow waist was a way to appear to adhere to this demand. While this might seem somewhat antithetical to being sexually attractive, it was crucial to a woman being viewed as desirable. Additionally, youth and virginity were essential to the culture’s feminine ideal. While youthfulness is more often associated with the 1960s, the postwar era idealized “adolescent beauty” and demanded youthful innocence - hence the demands for a narrow waist (Banner, 1982, pp. 283). The era’s maternal demands made this physical ideal difficult to maintain. The corselet (like corset before it) offered women a way to mold their bodies back into a slim, youthful figure and to embody a “seemingly virginal state” (Summers, 2003, p. 60).

Granted, the postwar ideal required more than merely looking youthful and embodying virginal innocence. It demanded these qualities be balanced with a more “voluptuous” physical ideal and a mature feminine sexuality (Banner, 2006, pp. 417-418). Having an hourglass silhouette was essential to this “naughty and nice” ideal. The narrow waist not only conveys youth and virginity, but through visual contrast draws attention to mature feminine symbols like voluptuous breasts. Thus, the corselet’s ability to modify the torso into the idealized hourglass, paired with its ability to draw attention to the breasts, makes it a potent symbol of feminine sexuality.

Revealing the body and suggesting nakedness. As I have already discussed, revealing the upper body is a key function of the corselet. It simultaneously exposes the back and shoulders, while also supporting the breast. Designs also revealed varying amounts of the breasts and upper chest. Public displays of skin are used to construct gender by visually distinguishing men from women, often “call[ing] attention to the sexed body” of the later (Eicher, 2001, para. 30). The body-revealing functions of the corselet are closely tied to its ability to sexualize the wearer.

Yet, as indicated by the measurements across all designs, the corselet is actually characterized by a covered-exposed dynamic between the breasts and back, respectively. The breasts might be slightly pushed up above the line of the cups but they are never blatantly exposed, with the exception of a few early “Merry Widow” designs. Covering the body could evoke meanings of modesty. However, I would argue the designs are such that they actually

heighten the sexual connotations of the corseleted-body. This is done by alluding to the naked body hidden beneath the corselet.

A number of the designs examined create the illusion of revealing the breast. The black lace “Temptress” and the zipper-front (#1079) corselets have opaque cups but use pale pink or nude-colored materials beneath the lace. This combination suggests the breasts beneath without actually showing them (as well as allowing for the cups to be lined in padding). The pale colors are first referred to as pink (e.g. “Pink Champagne”) but names like “French nude” are used by the end of the period (“Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair,” 1963). This suggests efforts on the part of the manufacturer to increase the erotic connotations of the foundation garment.

It should be noted these pinkish “nude” fabrics were directed at light skinned wearers. Today *nude* brassieres include a wide range of colors (e.g. Naja, 2019). However, during the period examined by this research nude colored foundations appear to have been limited to pale pinks and light tans. This arguably reflects postwar culture’s mainstream notion of feminine beauty, which centered on white women.

The visual suggestion of the breasts is interesting in relation to Steele’s (1989b) comments on clothes we consider to be “sexy” and the importance of concealment. Citing examples as early as “the original fig leaf,” she notes the “partly covered body [is] often perceived as being sexier than the nude” (p. 56). Steele later adds, **“**clothes are especially sexy when they call attention to the naked body underneath…Sexual displays are inextricably connected with this strategic concealment” (p. 57). The cups of the corselets examined, which hint at the body within, are arguably sexier than those that blatantly expose the breasts.

Some of the corselets examined even further allude to the naked body within. On the “Temptress” the pale pink material also runs down the front panels of the body. Lace is placed over the sides but not the center. The resulting visual effect not only creates the illusion that the breasts are being revealed but that the corselet is coming open in the front. Similarly, the faux-laces down the center front of the “Gay 90's Look” corselets imply undressing and opening in the front. There is also a literal front opening on the zipper-front design.

These examples of alluding to the nude body further blur the relationship between the corselet, the body beneath, and the clothes place over - something inherent to all foundation garments. Fields (2007) notes, “Adorned in undergarments, the body is clothes but not dressed. And as the first layer of clothing, they are also the last barrier to full disclosure of the body” (p. 3). The corseleted body is not naked or fully clothed. It falls somewhere between the two. The place between “dressed and undressed... [is a] transition often perceived as a prelude to sexual intimacy” (Steele, 2001, p. 114). This ambiguous status is crucial to the corselet’s ability to

sexualize the body. Using elements within the design to further allude to the naked body draws attention to it and heightens this ability.

External sources on sexualizing the body. Various aspects of the corselet's design play a role in sexualizing the body within, drawing attention to the breasts, creating a sexually attractive (hourglass) figure, revealing parts of the body, and suggesting nakedness. While these functions are occasionally referenced, they are generally not discussed in terms of their abilities to make the wearer's figure *sexy*. This is especially true of sources from the mid-1950s. Advertising copy begins to acknowledge this function by the late-1950s, although references are still somewhat veiled. The noted shift in advertising copy is discussed in the sections below.

While rarely written about, the sexual connotation of the corselet and its ability to sexualize the wearer are visually conveyed. The images in external sources are analyzed below based on several recurring themes and techniques. I also conclude the section by reiterating notable changes in the words and images used to promote the corselet. This starts the move away from the objects themselves toward examining their uses within postwar culture - which are analyzed in the last portion of this chapter.

Advertising copy from the mid-1950s. Many of the sources examined touch on the corselet's ability to mold the torso into an hourglass form - rounding the breasts, narrowing the waist, and creating a smooth curve over the hips and buttocks. However, despite the fact that contemporary sex symbols certainly had this physique, sources on the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselets *very rarely* describe this modification as a means of creating a sexy figure. The closest example I found was an advertisement for the "Pink Champagne" design. It promises "a really intoxicating new figure"; however, said figure is quickly related to keeping up with current "fashion dictates" rather than looking sexually attractive ("Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955a).

At times, sources vaguely allude to the sexual connotations of reveal the body or alluding to its nakedness. Another advertisement for the "Pink Champagne" corselet describes the woven panels and lace overlay as, "'Pink Champagne' blushing through filmy white lace inserts" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955b). Similarly, the 1955 *Illustrated Price List* notes, "Delicate pink...a mere blush of it...underlays either white or black nylon lace" (p. 5). The idea of this semi-skin toned color peeking through the lace touches on the corselet's ability to create a pretense of nudity without actually revealing the naked body beneath. The word "blush" not only references skin but arguable alludes to the flushed complexion that accompanies sexual arousal. However, more overt references to the body do not appear until later, like naming fabrics colors "French Nude" ("Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair," 1963). Even then, the corselet's ability to

suggest nakedness seems to be more apparent in the objects themselves than in the sources describing them.

Advertising copy from the late-1950s to early-1960s. The sexualizing function of the corselet is *slightly* more acknowledged by the late-1950s. Designs like the "Temptress" are noted for their ability to draw attention to the breasts. An advertisement in *Vogue* describes the line as "giv[ing] you a bewitching swell of bosom for wide-eyed necklines. By gently boosting you above the cup curve itself!" ("Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959). As noted, "Above the cup" is used to describe the cleavage effect created by other corselets from the late-1950s and early-1960s ("Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair," 1963). It is also described as a "décolletage" look ("Selling Summer Foundation," 1962). Referencing "wide-eye[s]" in the "Temptress" advertisement alludes to the attention this boosting of the breast into view can garner. The "swell of [the] bosom" could also be related to the classic *heaving bosom* - another sign of sexual arousal.

The sexual connotations of the corselet are more openly acknowledged during the 1960s. As discussed, many of the sources examined discuss the corselet's ability to reveal the body and there is an increasing emphasis on this function. A spread in *Harper's Bazaar* titled "The New Vamps Guide to Back Magic" specifically positions this revealing as a sexy practice. While it focuses on the current fashion of exposing the back, it also touches on a more general display of the upper torso. The words sex, sexy or any other derivative are never used. However, it begins by exclaiming:

> Behold, the vamp '62 - modernized as to methods, but relying on the same snares of vampery known and practiced from Cleopatra down to this day. Theda Bara used her eyes. Clara Bow just used "It." The new vamp creates her following by turning her back ("The New Vamp," 1962, p. 74).

All three women mentioned are well known sex symbols of the ancient and 1920s eras. In fact, Bara actually played Cleopatra in a 1917 film. This spread was published during the filming of another version of *Cleopatra* (1963), with contemporary sex symbol Elizabeth Taylor playing the Egyptian Queen. These women's cultural meanings would not be lost on readers, the link between revealing the body and attracting (or ensnaring) the opposite sex is clear.

The recurring use of the word "Vamp" in the title and copy indicate this is a more illicit sexual ideal. Other sources on the corselet suggest this type of feminine sexuality was becoming increasingly popular. Hollywood Vassarette released their "Naughty 90s" line around 1959, which included corselets, as well as other foundation garments and lingerie. *Women's Wear Daily* quotes a local advertisement that describes the corselets as a "wickedly wonderful way to

achieve a tiny waistline and youthful uplift" ("Foundation Ads Tie-In," 1959). Fields (2007) argues the *Merry Widow* (1952) and the foundations named after the film reflect the "1950's notions of femininity and sexual attractiveness, in which women needed to be both naughty and nice whether dressed in black or white" (p. 269). The Hollywood Vassarette corselets and the external sources depicting them suggest that by the late-1950s the ideal was shifting more towards *naughty*.

Names like "Temptress" also suggest an illicit sexuality, especially compared to earlier names like "Pink Champagne." Additionally, recurring themes like *secrecy* take on a more come-hither quality. An advertisement for the "Temptress" brassiere describes the cup design, saying, "Speak low...with a whisper of lace...low, persuasive, and with a hint of mystery...The hidden intrigue: wafer-thin booster pads" ("Hollywood Vassarette Temptress Bra," 1960). While copy like this does not blatantly declare the foundation garment will make you sexy, it has much more seductive undertones than earlier sources.

Images in advertisements. While the language used to describe the corselet was often quite chaste, its ability to modify the body in line with sexually attractive ideals was *visually* conveyed in the external sources examined. This is not specific to Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs or corselets more broadly. Rather, it is true of many foundation garment and lingerie advertisements. Fields (2007) found that from the early- to mid-20th century "undergarment promotions frequently depicted erotically charged scenes of narcissism, voyeurism, mirrors and pinup poses" (p. 175). Researchers like Summer (2003) echo many of Fields observations, adding that these public depictions convey the private act of dressing (p. 197). Summers "close reading" of advertisements leads her to interpret them "as major forerunners to the sexual objectification of women in the public realm in the 20th century" (p. 174). This view is shared by other researchers.

Several of the themes and techniques noted by Fields also emerged during my analysis of visual depictions of the corselet. While I partially agree with previous analyses of these images as objectifying, I believe in some instances these techniques had more practical purposes. I also would argue the images are better understood when specifically considered in relation to the object's sexualizing function. In the sections below, I explore the use of pinup poses, the theme of voyeurism, the role of the *female* gaze, the function of mirrors, and the public-private duality.

Pinup poses. A number of women in the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette sources assume similar pinup-esq poses, serving as one visual means of communicating the sexualizing effects of the corselet. For example, in the 1955 *Supplementary Price List of New Styles* the model in the new cotton version of the "Pink Champagne Torsolette" raises her arms

and crosses them in front of her face, one eye playfully peeks out from behind her elbow (Figure 16). The arch of her back is contrasted by the curve of her breasts, which are slightly projected forward. The garters run down the model's bare legs, continuing the curvy lines within her figure. This model's pose resembles one assumed by pinup models. This example aligns a little more closely than others with the stylized image of the pinup. However, the women in the other sources examined assume elements of the pose describe, particularly the raised arms and arched backs.

Some researchers discuss the use of pinup poses in foundation garment advertisements as objectifying (e.g. Summers, 2003, pp. 180-183). This is largely due to the implied voyeuristic male gaze. Fields (2007) notes that "Images of pinups...typically assume that the spectator is male" (p. 209). The depictions of women I analyzed do have passive and objectifying qualities. The raised arms can be read as a symbol of surrender, presenting the female form for view. However, this pose also serves a more functional purpose: clearly showing the corselet. The arched back - in addition to making the breasts prominent and being a sign of sexual pleasure - also emphasizes the smooth, continuous line created by the corselet. So, while these images may have objectifying intentions, they may also reflect more practical motivations.

There is a perceivable change in the poses towards the end of the period. The stances assumed by the women begin to convey a more active sexuality. Rather than remaining still and leaning passively back, the illustrated woman modeling Hollywood Vassarette's zipper-front corselet is shown walking forward ("Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair," 1963). The image communicates the literal freedom of movement offered by the corselet. Yet, it also signifies another kind of freedom. It conveys a woman moving directly towards something. Given the erotic qualities of the image, as is typical of many foundation garment advertisement, one can assume her pursuit is sexual in nature. Instead of demurely hinting at her desires, she is openly expressing and seeking to fulfil them.

Voyeurism and "The Wizard". While the male gaze is generally implied in advertisements (Fields, 2007, p. 210), I came across several instances where it is shown. The Hollywood-Maxwell mascot, "The Wonderful Wizard of Bras," is often depicted with a small cartoon: an illustration of a turban clad man waving his wand to create the women's figures. However, from 1955 to 1956 an advertising campaign ran with a real man playing the wizard. He is photographed behind a screen. His blurred figure is repeatedly positioned above the foundation garment models, literally looking down at them.

This depiction of the Wizard is used on the cover of *the Supplementary Price List* from the fall of 1955. The model in front of him assumes a pose with distinct pinup qualities (Figure 17). Her arms are lifted above head as she stretches, arching her back and raising her breasts. It

is almost as if her figure is being plied by the Wizard's wand, the tip of which is positioned just above her.

The symbol of the wizard could signify the fulfilment of women's own wishes and their active modification of their bodies. However, even as someone who generally views foundation garments through a positive lens, I cannot help but see this and similar images as objectifying. Staging the man above the woman, with his wand wielding arm raised over her figure, more likely depicts an image of woman based on male fantasy.

In a sense, these advertisements hint at reality. The majority of foundation garment designers during this period were men. They also created the accompanying advertisement. Some researchers read this as men literally shaping the female body according to their sexual desires (e.g. Summers, 2003, p. 181). This view of foundation garments and their advertisements as means of objectifying women to maintaining male dominance has merit. However, it is worth noting this live iteration of the wizard was only briefly used - suggesting it was not an effective campaign. It was also followed by advertisements that convey a more active feminine sexuality.

The female gaze. Previous research discusses both actual and implied masculine viewers in visual media. Analysis often focus on the role of the "male gaze" and its ability to transform women into sexual objects (Dione, 2009, pp. 75–77; Fields, 2007, p. 201; Nelson, 2007, pp. 39, 69–70; Summers, 2003, pp. 181–183). I believe it is also worth considering the literal women's gazes within the images, as they are central to the overall depictions of feminine sexuality.

Averted gazes are very common in the external sources from the mid-1950s. Avoiding eye contact can imply a more passive or weak nature, as opposed to the power conveyed by directly looking at and engaging with another person. It suggests a submission to and acceptance of being viewed as a sexual object, particularly when paired with the poses previously described.

Some mid-1950s depictions diverge from this trend. For example, the model wearing the cotton version of the "Pink Champagne" design peeks out from behind her raised arms (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955, p. 5). A similar pose is used in an advertisement for Hollywood-Maxwell brassieres and corselets. One of the models holds multiple brassieres in front of her face but peers out from behind them ("Hollywood-Maxwell V-ette," 1956). These instances of peeking allude to the playful innocence idealized during the post-WWII era. They are paired with clear views of mature female figures, suggesting the era's "naughty and nice" demands discussed by other researchers (Banner, 2006, pp. 417–418; Fields, 2007, pp. 269, 271). Yet, these depictions could also be read as the beginning of the trend towards more engaging interactions between the women in these depictions and the viewer.

Direct gazes are increasingly used in external sources from the latter half of the period examined. An advertisement for the “Temptress” corselet and brassiere features sly, seductive glances forward from sideways positioned bodies (“Hollywood Vassarette Temptress,” 1959). The women in other sources continue the move away from averted eyes or peeking to looking head on, often beckoning the viewer. An early-1960s advertisement features a corselet-clad woman directly facing the viewer, her body in a sultry slump to one side (“Selling Summer Foundation,” 1962). Images of women with direct gazes should not be underestimated. This gaze can be a powerful tool for signifying active feminine sexuality. In Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), the nude’s forward gaze was one of its most shocking elements, openly contradicting cultural demands for feminine passivity. The use of a direct gaze in the external source examined here also suggest changes, or at least challenges, to feminine ideals.

Previous researchers (Fields, 2007; Summers, 2003) read the direct gaze as signifying exhibitionism. I agree but would add that this is not necessarily a negative thing in terms of women’s subjectivity. Exhibitionist acts like performing burlesque can be sexually liberating. They can also be viewed as objectifying (e.g. Siebler, 2015). Nevertheless, within these acts, whether in an image or on a stage, there is an acknowledgement of being seen and a choice to continue with your actions. Pleasure can come from exhibiting and expressing your own sexuality. Suggesting such pleasure in advertisements potentially impacts the meaning of the corselet and the experiences of the wearer in a positive, empowering way.

Mirrors and Narcissism. I came across one instance of a mirror in the sources examined (“Hollywood-Maxwell Safest Plunge,” 1957). This arguably implies a level of narcissism and pleasure from seeing yourself. Yet, as with the poses, the mirror also serves a very practical purpose. It is an efficient way to simultaneously show the front and back of a foundation garment. This is particularly appropriate in the cited advertisement, which promotes a new backless design with a front opening. Both the front and the back of the corselet have features that needed to be shown. This example is a good reminder that while aspects of an image may have deep signified meanings, they may also reflect pragmatic choices.

Public-private duality. A tension between the public and private spheres is reflected in the sources examined and helps to communicate the sexualizing function of the corselet. Summers (2003) notes that 19th century advertisements brought images of the private sphere into the public sphere (p. 197). The same appears to be true over a half-century later. The images I examined would have been seen in the public sphere and some depict private domestic settings - blurring the lines between the two.

For example, in advertisement for Hollywood-Maxwell's "Backless Strapless" design features wallpapered walls and a hanging candelabra to the side. The model stands before a mirror and a table with a vase of flowers. Within this intimate setting, her hands adjust her hair. This allots the public a view of not only the private sphere but of the private act of dressing. By showing the model in the middle of this process - neither fully nude nor fully dressed - the image emphasizes the ambivalent nature of the foundation garment, itself. And as Steele (2001) points out, this ambiguity heavily contributes to the erotic meanings of the object (p. 114).

Notable changes in the advertisements. The sexualizing function of the corselet is less apparent than the others discussed. Yet, just because it is not printed across advertisements in bold letters does not mean wearers were unaware. The subtler references of the mid-1950s may have afforded women's similar opportunities to those offered by the 19th century corset (Steele, 2001, p. 35). As a piece of mainstream, respectable fashion, the corselet may have allowed women to express their sexuality in a socially acceptable way. Then, as this expression became more accepted within the culture it also became more openly communicated.

As noted, during the late-1950s and 1960s, advertising copy started to include more direct references to the sexualizing function of the corselet, which was also visually implied. While the images analyzed convey feminine sexuality through the period examined, they shift towards more active depictions. This occurred as references to some of the other functions discussed were waning - suggesting the growing importance of revealing and sexualizing the body.

It is very important to note that this shift starts *prior* to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The corselets and sources depicting them suggest the massive cultural change was in nascent form during the previous decade. This serves as a reminder that dress and culture are continually evolving. It is important to consider the full trajectory of both, not just the milestones we often focus on. The close relationship between the object and the culture is further explored in the next section on how the corselet was intended to be used.

Analysis of Corselet Use

In addition to discussing the corselet's various functions, external sources also reveal the ways the corselet was intended to be used. They answer questions around where the corselet should be worn, as well as *who* should wear it. These sources also indicate various reasons women choose to wear the corselet. Questions like *how* the corselet was worn go hand-in-hand with *why*. For this reason, after discussing who wore the corselet, I go back and forth between the hows and whys of corselet use - reflecting their interconnectedness.

Who Wore the Corselet?

Certain sized wearers. Corselet use appears to have been limited to certain bodies. More specifically, it was intended to be worn by women with smaller figures. This may be due to limitations of the corselet design. However, this may also reflect restrictions imposed by the culture and its ideals. Both are explored after discussing how women were instructed whether or not they could wear a corselet.

Interestingly, who wore the corselet was often implied through absences rather than direct instructions. *Fuller* figures are not discussed in sources that specifically focus on the corselet. Sources like the Hollywood-Maxwell price lists offer different products for this group, such as the "NuVu" line (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 26–27). These brassieres came in band sizes up to 44 or 46 with C or D cups, respectively. A variety of strapped short- or long-line designs made up the "NuVu" line. While the corselet was incorporated into other brassiere lines, it does not appear to have been a part of lines for larger women during the period examined.

The corselets previously discussed in this chapter were offered in a fairly narrow range of sizes. Early Hollywood-Maxwell designs like the "3/4 Time" came in four band sizes (32 to 38), while the "Pink Champagne" and "Her Secret" were offered in three (32-36). Each design was also limited to two or three cups sizes between A and C (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 3–5). Similar sizes were offered throughout the period. Hollywood Vassarette designs came in roughly the same size. The early-1960s zipper-front design was offered in sizes 32 to 38 with A to C cups. However, the "Temptress" was limited to smaller women who wore sizes between 32 and 36 with A or B cups.

Brands like Warner's also offered limited sizing. The "Merry Widow Cinch-Bra" design was initially released in sizes 32 to 38 with B cups ("Warner's Cinch-Bra," 1952). Based on object in my own collection, they at least expanded offerings to include C cups.

On the other hand, the first corselet offered by Sears came in sizes 32 to 42 (*Sears Spring Catalog*, 1951, p. 258). The mail order company continued to offer corselets up to size 42 or 44 and included D cups during the 1960s (*Sears Fall Catalog*, 1969, p. 184; *Sears Spring Catalog*, 1965, p. 228). I observed a size 44 corselet by Joan Browne, a Montgomery Ward label (style #7376). The essential elements of the design were the same (e.g. vertical bones, elasticized panels with horizontal stretch). However, this particular corselet has straps attached, suggesting the shoulder-exposing function of the typical corselet was not achieved. Additional research is needed to determine if, while technically available, larger sized corselets were actually effective in terms of the functions previously discussed.

Limitations due to the design. Based on analysis of the sizes offered, there were limitations to the corselet design. It appears to have only been able to mold certain (smaller) bodies into the noted ideal hourglass figures, while still supporting the breasts without straps. This may have been influenced by the technology available. The cited Hollywood Vassarette zipper-front design was made of Lycra, which offered a more effective balance of tension to support and mold the body and flexibility to allow the body to move. As discussed, such changes in materials allowed additional means of support to be abandoned. Yet, the sizes offered do not appear to have changed dramatically - still only up to size 38C. This suggests that the typical corselet design - which aimed to expose the shoulder, support the breasts, and mold the waist - could only achieve such results on certain sized bodies.

Even today, ready-to-wear corselets seem to come in more limited sizes than other foundations. The company "What Katie Did" creates vintage inspired ready-to-wear foundation garments and caters to a wide range of sizes. They are able to offer strapped bras in sizes ranging from 30F to 46E. However, their "LuLu Noir Merry Widow" corselet is offered in 32B to 38D ("What Katie Did's Merry Widow," 2018). This is not terribly different than the mid-20th century brands discussed, supporting my speculation that the design itself can only effectively serve some (smaller) figures.

The noted difference in sizes offered by brands like Hollywood Vassarette or Warner's compared to mail order companies is also worth briefly exploring. It reveals less about the corselet, itself, and more about the culture surrounding it. As briefly noted, this difference may be because the larger sized corselets were less effective than smaller ones. So, the noted foundation garment companies - which prided themselves on their well-engineered designs - may have deliberately kept their offerings limited to the most effective sizes the corselet could support.

Limitations due to the culture. Limited sizing may also reflect the culture's beauty ideals. As discussed, one of the corselet's functions is to mold the body into fashionable and physical ideals. So, sizing would be limited to those bodies that are most capable of aligning with these ideals. Additionally, the corselet is worn to expose the upper body. The smaller bodies that fit within the corselet are arguably those deemed worthy of being seen - bodies that *fit* the culture's beauty ideal.

The mail order corselets came in bigger sizes but were less cultural visibility than the other designs discussed, which appeared in widely respected fashion sources like *Vogue*. Plus, while larger sizes could be purchased from mail order catalogs, they were still shown on women with smaller figures. This further illustrates the physical ideal of the era.

This is largely speculation at this point. It is a valuable avenue for future researchers to pursue, especially those with more knowledge of plus-size fashion. They could sort through the physical limitation of certain designs compared to the cultural constraints around who wears what.

Age of wearer. While external sources do not directly address the size of the wearer there are some references to age. The corselet was openly suggested for specific age group: juniors. Articles in fashion magazines from the early-1950s identify the corselet as an appropriate foundation garment for younger wearers ("What's Beneath the 1952 Look for the Young," 1952). While discussing various cotton designs, an article in *Vogue* features a photo of a Warner's "Merry Widow" and describes it as "an introductory offer to the woman who's never worn an all-in-one before" ("The Summer Figure," 1953). Teenagers or juniors would fall into this category.

As noted in previous research, these young women were an important consumer group. They had more disposable income than in previous decades and were easily influenced (Nelson, 2007, p. 140). Manufacturers created designs specifically for them, often with padded cups, since their bodies generally did not naturally align with the era's ideal (Thesander, 1997, pp. 170–171). This would include designs like Hollywood-Maxwell's "Her Secret" line, which included a corselet.

Other early Hollywood-Maxwell design were also suggested for young women. For example, a *Women's Wear Daily* report on "Control for the Student Body" discusses "ads promoting foundations for the junior figure." The trade journal cites the "3/4 Time" design as a "back-to-school" option for young women ("Seen in Retail Promotions," 1955). The text is accompanied by an illustration of a woman wearing the corselet. She is wearing glasses and holding a book and pencil - underscoring the back-to-school theme of the article. The corselet appears to have been promoted to more youthful wearers throughout the period examined. It is listed in an instructional pamphlet for new brassiere-wearers (*Janie Got a Bra Today*, 1960).

Steering young women towards corselets would have appealed to retailers. These designs were more expensive that most other brassieres. They are noted as being a "highly profitable part of [a store's] bra business" ("Hollywood Vassarette is Famous," 1963). These early interactions could help to build lifelong customers. Pamphlets like *Janie Got a Bra Today* not only stressed the necessity of wearing foundation garments but showed which designs to wear for specific occasions or with certain outfits. To some extent, this was about encouraging sales. However, this also had cultural implications. Young women were not only being taught how to look but, essentially, how to act.

Instructing young women with regards to the *proper* foundation garments - often by older women - was a well-established practice by this point. It has been discussed in previous research (Steele, 2001, p. 49; Summers, 2003, p. 64). Learning to wear a corset not only acted as a rite of

passage into womanhood, but also taught young girls the roles and traits expected of them by society (Banner, 2006, p. 150). Even today we still have “training bras”, which teach pre-teen girls how they are expected to clothe their bodies, even before their figures truly require supportive foundation garments. The postwar corselet is part of this long-standing, ongoing practice.

The corselet was by no means only worn by adolescents but does appear to have generally been worn by younger women. Sources imply the corselet was not intended for mature figures. As noted, the corselet was limited to smaller sized figures. Women’s breasts grow as they mature and their waists widen as they continue to age (Etcoff, 1999, pp. 187–191). Given that obesity was fairly low during the era examined (“Overweight & Obesity Statistics,” 2007), the larger figures excluded from corselet wear were also most likely more mature figures.

The models for lines like “NuVu” generally look older than those wearing corselets. For example, in the recently cited 1955 price list, the “NuVu” model has longer hair smoothed back into a low, subdued style, whereas the model in the “Her Secret” corselet has short, fashionably cropped hair. Based on my own perception, the latter also has a younger looking face. She visually aligns with the models for the “Debutante” line (a name that *clearly* denotes a young wearer), who also sport short hair and fresh, taut faces (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, pp. 4–5).

I observed a similar difference during my analysis of mail order catalogs. In a *Sears Catalog*, the model wearing the corselet, as well as those alongside her in garter belts and brassieres, also has short hair and a bright smiling face, as well as a slim figure. The woman in a “full-figure all-in-one” on the next page has a hairstyle very similar to the “NuVu” model described, as well as a more restrained expression and slightly lined face (*Sears Spring Catalog*, 1951, pp. 258–259). This visual contrast with youthful exuberance subtly instructs wearers which foundation garment is appropriate not only for their figure but their age.

Interestingly, while arguably intended for older women, the “NuVu” line promises to give the wearer an “uplift[ed]” and “youthful” bust (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 27). There were expectations that older women also modify their bodies to fit the era’s youthful physical ideal. However, the corselet was not viewed as an appropriate figure molding options for the mature woman. Other foundation garments would have certainly been more effective choices for molding the flesh of larger, older bodies. Strapless designs would be particularly troublesome, offering little support to less buoyant, mature breasts. Yet, the difference seems to go beyond functionality.

The visual differences discussed suggests clear divisions of foundation garments based on age. Older women with smaller bodies could have *chosen* to wear a corselet, but they were

not the intended wearer. As noted, the corselet's physical design has connotations of youth and virginity. It would be at odds with the older body within, bucking expectations to *dress your age.*

Another key function of the corselet is to expose the upper torso and allow for garment like strapless dresses to be worn without the foundation garment being seen. Conversely, the "NuVu" brassiere's wide straps and full coverage cups would require more concealing fashion for the foundation to remain hidden. In fact, the "Nu-Vu" model's body is posed with a lace shawl draped around her shoulders and upper arms. This visually implies expectations that larger, older bodies be covered up. An older woman wearing a corselet and the corresponding body-revealing fashion would have gone against social norms. There is a long history of older bodies being both literally more covered with clothing and less culturally visible within society. This too is an area for future researchers to explore at greater length.

Whose figure fit? So, the intended wearer of the corselet had a small figure and was relatively young. The sizes noted in external sources give us a fairly good idea of what size bodies could and could not wear a corselet. The age of the wearer is slightly more difficult to determine but certainly included adolescents and most likely women in their 20s or 30s. While sources never state outright who is too old, they at least visually suggest a differentiation between the wearer of a corselet versus other foundation garment like full coverage brassieres and more rigid all-in-ones, which would have more effectively served mature bodies.

These limitations, both in terms of size and age, are in part because of the limits of the corselet design. However, they also reflect the culture's ideals. There were no sumptuary laws dictating who could purchase which foundation garment. An older woman could wear a corselet. Similarly, a younger woman could wear a "NuVu" brassiere, if her figure demanded it. But this would not have been in line with the *intended* wearers of the designs. The corselet, while used to mold the body to the physical ideal, was also limited to those who were most likely to obtain it.

The post-WWII beauty ideal involved qualities of both youth and maturity (Banner, 2006, pp. 283–285). The corselet design reflects this duality. The wearer did, as well. They could not be too big. A fuller middle would make the hourglass silhouette difficult to achieve and have connotations of old age. However, the figure could also not too small or undeveloped. These figures run the risk of being too childish to achieve the mature aspects of the beauty ideal. A certain level of flesh was required to fill out the hourglass form of the corselet.

We can also glean a bit more about the wearer. As previously touched on, the colors used in the corselet during this era suggest it was directed towards white or light-skinned women. Furthermore, the depictions of the corselet in external sources all featured white models or sketches of what appear to be white women. So, in addition to age and size, the corselet and its

wearer also speak to how the dominant feminine ideal at the time viewed “whiteness” as the apogee of feminine beauty. The corselet also suggests a level of affluence, as it was a comparatively more expensive foundation garment but worn less often - discussed shortly.

An analysis of the corselet in relation to race or class is outside of the scope of this study but should be considered in the future. I cannot say definitively that the intended wearer was white and well-to-do, but these qualities also arguably reflect the values of society. The alignment between the corselet, its wearer, and the cultural ideals surrounding both are very important to note. The design was created with the culture and (either consciously or subconsciously) with these ideals in mind.

Why: Fixing a Flaw

The sources analyzed often instruct potential wearers that certain designs should be worn by certain women to fix certain figure problems. This aligns with past research on more general use of foundation garments to address “flaws.” This was a longstanding means of encouraging foundation garment adoption and continued use (Burns-Ardolino, 2007, p. 63; Fields, 2007, pp. 188–198; Nelson, 2007, pp. 27–37; Steele, 2001, p. 54). However, positioning “foundations as problem-solvers” was particularly popular during the post-WWII era (Nelson, 2007, p. 29). This was apparent in the sources analyzed.

As the pamphlet *Janie Got a Bra Today* (1960) instructs, “There's a bra for every figure type, every fashion need” (p. 2). Either a *figure* or a *fashion* could present its own problems. This particular argument for wearing foundations was used as the “new” fashions of the mid-1950s were released. At times, perceived figure flaws are also discussed. As an article in *Harper’s Bazaar* observes, “It's not a season when the woman-of-fashion can trust to her clothes to camouflage any less-than-perfect dimensions” (“The Far Reach,” 1956). Hollywood-Maxwell’s then recently released “3/4 Time” design is listed as one means of *camouflaging* these undesirable *dimensions*.

Some designs address very specific problems. The “Her Secret” corselet and the other brassieres in the line are prescribed for small-chested women to fix their inability to align with beauty standards (e.g. “Hollywood-Maxwell Shoulder Barings,” 1955). As the 1955 *Illustrated Price List* notes, the “Her Secret” corselet is “the answer for those who want the ‘new Look’ but require a padded bra” (p. 4). Words like “answer” convey the idea of the body as having figure problems or flaws. This language also suggests there is a correct, socially acceptable way to fix the flaw (a right “answer”), such as the corselet.

Other sources do not necessarily identify flaws but do prescribe the corselet as a way to make the wearer look better. They stress the corselet’s ability to *make the most* of the wearer’s

figure. They also note the foundation garment can *make the most* of the clothes worn over it, helping them to look their best. In fact, the phrase “make the most” is repeatedly used by Hollywood-Maxwell in the external sources analyzed (e.g. *A Bra for Every Fashion*, 1956). This positions the corselet as a means of improvement rather than a remedy to a problem. The former arguably has more positive connotations for the wearer than the latter.

An advertisement for the padded “Peek-Ette” corselet expresses a similar sentiment. It notes, “The curves are yours, all yours, but lovelier than ever before...shape you, yourself, up to new dimensions of beauty” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Peek-Ette,” 1956). The advertising copy reflects the tension between the natural and unnatural feminine body previously noted within the corselet. It describes the resulting the silhouette or “curves” as the product of the wearer’s own body - which is *merely* improved by the foundation garment. As previously discussed, attaching such meaning to padded designs was important, given the emphasis on and idealization of a “natural” bust and silhouette during the period.

Within the advertisement quoted above, the repetition of *you* or similar pronouns emphasizes the wearer. The call to “shape you, yourself” places the wearer in an active position. She is making the decision to *improve* her body. This counters views that foundations were passively adopted by women during the post-WWII era or forced upon them as a means of objectification. Choosing to modify your own body (at least in my experience) can have positive connotations. Framing corselet use this way also positions it within the broader practice of body modifications, which we all engage in.

That being said, the concept of improvement is based on the idea that something is flawed, or at least not as good as it could be. There are also unspoken restrictions on the wearer’s choice. This modification takes place within the confines of the products offered by manufacturers and of the “shapes” deemed beautiful by current cultural ideals.

How: Foundation-Fashion Relationship

The general relationship between foundation garments and the fashions worn over them has been noted by other researchers. This is particularly true of ready-to-wear garments, which did not have built-in support (Fields, 2007, p. 261). The sources I analyzed support this previous research and indicate the relationship existed throughout the period examined (e.g. *A Bra for Every Fashion*, 1956; *Janie Got a Bra Today*, 1960).

The corselet was used to achieve the fashionable silhouette, as well as broader beauty ideals. Advertisements and fashion spreads often claimed it was needed or required by either (e.g. “The Good Long Look,” 1955). As one source puts it, “Low back foundations [are] keyed to

low back fashions" ("Here's Support," 1956). As fashions or ideals changed, corselet designs adjusted accordingly to meet various needs.

The relationship is so close that foundation garments follows the spring-summer and fall-winter fashion seasons ("Take Your Pick," 1954). Articles, especially those directed at the fashion industry, frequently draw clear connections between changes in foundation design and "significant fashion developments" in the clothes worn over them ("Front Closures and Low Back," 1956). However, this is not a one-way relationship. Rather, "Fashion...as always, is the product of designer and corsetière" ("The Far Reach," 1956). It is the work of the two together that creates the overall popular silhouette.

With this foundation-fashion relationship in mind, it is not surprising that corselet use was very prescribed. The decision of what to wear was based on variety of factors. While the wearer certainly had a degree of free will, the sources analyzed indicate there was a clearly articulated "right" choice. Foundation garments were expected to be worn beneath very specific garments; the corselet was primarily intended to accompany evening wear. These various aspects of how the corselet was intended to be worn are explored below.

Decision factors. The sources analyzed indicate a number of things taken into account when choosing a foundation garment based on the clothing worn over it. Several practical reasons are cited. The correct foundation garment is noted as playing a crucial role in "fit," as well as "comfort" for the wearer ("Take Your Pick," 1954). It helps clothes to lay correctly and look their best. One source describes the corselet as a "SHAPELY fashion accessory" ("Spring Corsets-Bras," 1961). In addition to being a catchy play on words, the use of the word *accessory* directly acknowledges the supportive role the corselet plays for outer fashions.

The cut, silhouette, and materials of the outer garments also determined which foundation garments were worn. As previously discussed, the corselet was shown alongside fashions with strapless or wide neckline and fitted, structured bodices. On the other hand, it is never suggested as a partner to garments like tight knit sweaters. The rigid stays might show through the softer material. Leaving the shoulder exposed would be unnecessary. Instead, strapped brassieres with cups that cover the breasts are suggested for clingy, form-fitting sweaters. Their primary function is noted as creating a "smooth" bust, making them a more appropriate choice (*A Bra for Every Fashion*, 1956, p. interior; *Janie Got a Bra Today*, 1960, p. 3). The proper foundation garment was the one that went unnoticed beneath the clothes worn over it.

The sources analyzed continually note the corselet's ability to remain unseen. As one advertisement puts it, "Bare summer fashions demand an upward lift with the secret completely hidden from sight" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets," 1955). While its effects would be

viewable, the foundation garment itself was expected to remain hidden from view. This is in line with previous research that highlights the seen-unseen nature of foundation garments (e.g. Fields, 2007, pp. 188-189; Steele, 2001, p. 114). Words like *secret* are often used in the external sources examined. Even the term *natural* suggests similar abilities, imply the resulting shape appears to be naturally occurring and not the result of artificial means. It was imperative that foundation garments stay hidden.

The colors of under- and outer-garments were also related. An article in *Women's Wear Daily* notes black foundation garments are "appropriate for underlining the many navy fashions which are a major trend in spring ready-to-wear categories" ("Take Your Pick," 1954). Black would certainly be much less noticeable than white beneath navy and other dark-colored garments. On the other hand, black is liable to show through thin or lightly color garments. The decision is again influenced by the requirement that foundation garments go unnoticed.

As color became more popular in the 1960s, coordination with outer fashions becomes key. While somewhat still based on practical purposes, the color of foundation garments also becomes part of creating a larger fashionable appearance. The pamphlet *Janie Got a Bra Today* instructs young women about "color coordination," saying:

> "[G]one is the dreary sameness of underwear. You can have your bras and girdles in almost every color imaginable-and prints! Match them to your outerwear, or have fun and color mix..." (p. 13).

The growing importance of color is also evidenced in a *1964 Fashion Report* from Hollywood Vassarette. It provides an "intimate apparel color story keyed to ready-to-wear fashion" (*Fashion Report*, 1964, cover). In addition to color, the report discusses trends in fabrics and silhouettes for ready-to-wear. This underscores the various facets of the relationship between foundation garments and the fashions worn over them.

The "right" choice. The economic boom following WWII meant there were *a lot* of foundation garments to choose from. That being said, those involved in the production, promotion, and sale of foundation garments like the corselet seem to have gone to great lengths to dictate the relationship between foundation garments and clothing. Many wearers undoubtedly selected foundation garments based on what they perceived as looking good or feeling comfortable. However, the sources examined frequently stress there is a "right" or "proper" foundation for certain styles or silhouettes (e.g. "Take Your Pick," 1954). These prescriptions would have influenced a wearer's choice.

A commonly used device during the period examined is claiming that a certain fashion *requires* a certain foundation. A variety of tones are used. At times, this is a firm, definitive

requirement, with fashions “demanding” specific foundations. These sources have a very authoritative tone as they noted the “fashion dictates” what is worn beneath it (“Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne,” 1955a; “Seven Clues to Figure Magic,” 1954). A fashion “asks for” or “needs” a specific foundation garment because of the former’s features like a smooth, elongated line or a strapless neckline (“Hollywood-Maxwell Safest Plunge,” 1957; “Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time,” 1954).

The notion of the correct foundation is also discussed in terms of acceptability. The corselet is identified as being “appropriate for underlining” specific fashion (“Take Your Pick,” 1954). Certain designs are suggested for “achieving the right bareness” (“Selling Summer Foundation,” 1962). This approach reflects broader views within the culture that there was a correct way to dress, discussed by researchers like Przybyszewski (2014) in her analysis of the *Art of Dress* during the first half of the twentieth century. The external sources examined in this study indicate expectations regarding what should be worn together, as well as where they can be worn, persisted during the mid-20th century.

The fashion, foundation, *and body* relationship. While the language varies, the message is the same: there is a strong, defined relationship between the corselet and the clothes worn over it. However, this relationship also involves the body within. This was already touched on with regards to the corselet’s ability to address a problem or flaw with the wearer’s body. Yet, it is crucial to stress the often-discussed relationship is in fact a trinity involving the body.

Foundation garments plays the mediating role, molding and supporting the body to achieve ideals reflected in the garments worn over them. The needs of both the body and the clothes are weighted against one another. This back and forth dynamic is touched on in varying degrees throughout the sources analyzed. It is succinctly articulated in the previously quoted pamphlet *Janie Got a Bra Today* (1960), “There's a bra for every figure type, every fashion need” (p. 2) In short, the foundation is chosen based on *both* the wearer’s *figure* and the *fashion*.

The corselet has several functions related to the wearer’s “figure.” It supports and molds breasts into the fashionable high, rounded bust; at the same time, it reveals the upper body. It also not only narrows the waist and rounds the hips but smooth the entire torso to create the idealized hourglass figure. As a result of the corselet’s effects on the body, it was frequently listed as the proper option for certain fashions, mainly those with revealing necklines, narrow waists, and long, fitted bodices.

It should come as no surprise that the strapless corselet is frequently listed as the proper foundation garment for strapless or “Bare shoulder fashions” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets,” 1955). However, a variety of other revealing necklines are mentioned. As a Dayton’s

advertisement featuring the “Pink Champagne” design suggests, the corselet works well beneath “plunging... [or] deep necklines,” as well as “low backs” (“Dayton’s Shoulders Showing,” 1957). The connection is also visually shown. The *A Bra for Every Fashion* folio (1956) illustrates how brassieres were chosen based on the neckline of a garment. Several strapless garments are shown but the “Pink Champagne” corselet is paired with the most revealing dress. Both are shown at a 3/4 view, revealing the low cuts angled down the models’ backs (Figure 15).

Strapless or backless brassieres also reveal the body and were often promoted alongside the corselet (e.g. “Hollywood-Maxwell Party Dressing,” 1954; “Selling Summer Foundation,” 1962). But, as previously discussed, the corselet more effectively supports the breast. It also narrows the waist, a function these other designs lack. As a result, the corselet is also paired with cinched-waisted fashions. This quality is both written about and visually conveyed in the sources analyzed. Nearly all of the outer garments paired with the corselet have very defined, fitted waistlines.

Finally, because the corselet smoothes the entire torso it is an ideal understructure for fashion’s that follow the lines of the body. This is noted in several sources (“First Fall Promotions,” 1954; “Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne,” 1955a). One advertisement for the “Pink Champagne” design includes an illustration of a model in a suit with a jacket that is fitted at the waist and then tailored to curve over the hips (“Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne,” 1955b). Beneath the jacket, she wears a slim skirt that closely follows the line of her leg. The jacket also has a wide neckline, highlighting the revealing function discussed. The clothed woman is similar in appearance to the woman wearing the corselet, visually reinforcing that it is a suitable foundation garment for the ensemble pictured. Again, the narrow waist and smooth torso could be achieved by combining other foundations, but the corselet met these multiple figure and fashion needs all at once.

The corselet and eveningwear. In addition to aligning the corselet with features like revealing neckline or fitted waists, it is also repeatedly paired with a specific class of dress: formal evening wear. For example, the “3/4 Time” design is suggested for “after dark fashions” (“Take Your Pick,” 1954). It is also promoted as a “self-supporting” option for “bare-topped evening dresses” (“The Far Reach,” 1956). Both revealing and supporting the body was needed by these evening dresses and the corselet was an ideal choice.

A key way sources differentiated the corselet from other brassiere designs is pairing the latter with evening wear. This is apparent in fashion-foundation garment pairings in the promotional folio *A Bra for Every Fashion* (1956). Similarly, in the pamphlet *Janie Got a Bra Today* (1960) most of the designs are suggested as underlinings for various casual fashions, like

the strapped “contour bra...under a sweater.” The strapless brassiere could also be worn "beneath bare-shoulder dresses," presumably casual or formal. However, the corselet is specifically listed for "your most exciting dress-up dates" - when more formal outfits would be worn (p. 3).

The difference between the corselet and other strapless brassieres is also noted in a *Women’s Wear Daily* article on “Bra ‘Wardrobes’.” It quotes an advertisement for the Saint Paul store Newman’s, which encouraged customers to “Wear the 'correct' strapless bra.” It goes on to note the need for “different styles for different type[s] of dresses--cocktail, play, evening, day" (“In the Ads,” 1954). Based on the other sources analyzed, the corselet was most likely one of the strapless options the retailer had in mind for the evening.

Additionally, a number of the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs physically examined actually visually resemble evening wear. Based on a casual survey of post-WWII formal dresses, lace was a popular embellishment. A 1950s gown by Karen Stark for Harvey Berin bears a particularly strong resemblance to some of the corselets examined (Figure 18). The black-over-pale-pink base of the evening dress is largely covered with black Chantilly lace. This mirrors corselets like the “3/4 Time” from 1955 and the zipper-front design from the 1960s. Additionally, the pink peeks out and borders the strapless neckline of Stark’s dress, which is very similar to the upper edge of the “Temptress.” This use of similar materials strengthens the intended connection between the corselet and eveningwear.

This relationship is not specific Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs. The designs from other brands and their sources also reflect the connection between the corselet and evening wear. Specific designs like Warner’s “Merry Widow” were frequently suggested for “evening fashion” (“First Fall Promotions,” 1954). Like Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette, Warner’s created promotions that literally positioned their corselets alongside current fashions, generally evening wear (e.g. “The Beauty of Your Own ‘Creation,’” 1953). An article in *Vogue* discusses general corselet use, citing it as the “the only foundation needed under a fullskirted evening dress” (“Foundations for Mrs. Exeter,” 1953). This also touches on the notion of wearing a corselet instead of pairing a strapless brassiere with a waist cincher. The corselet’s unique combination of the functions analyzed meant it was the *only* thing needed beneath revealing, form-fitting evening gowns.

There appears to be clear efforts on the part of foundation garment manufacturers, as well as the general fashion industry, to shape how the corselet was worn. The sources examined indicate repeated attempts to position the corselet as a crucial companion to certain fashions, like

evening wear, and to the bodies within. Yet, expectations around the use of the corselet did not stop at what was under or over it.

How: The Clothes-Environment Relationship

Within postwar culture, certain foundation garments (as well as the garments over it) were expected to be worn in certain settings, including certain places, events, and activities. This is not necessarily specific to this era. However, previous research (e.g. Przybyszewski, 2014) and the external sources analyzed in this study indicate there was a particularly strong, clearly articulated relationship between dress and the environment in which it was worn. This is seen in the trend of promoting a foundation garment "wardrobe" (e.g. "Hollywood Vassarette Wardrobe of Strapless Bras," 1960), which not only aligned specific foundation garment designs with outer fashions, but also with events, activities, or even seasons or times of day.

This relationship is also conveyed in an advertisement for the "3/4 Time" corselet, which reads, "three-quarter time...A time for waltzing, New Year's Eve...a time for bare, beautiful shoulders...Time for new Hollywood-Maxwell three-quarter length bras" ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1954). In addition to emphasizing the name of the design, the repetition of the phrase "time for" stresses the relationship between the foundation garment and the specific setting in which it was intended to be worn. Activities like "waltzing" and events like "New Year's Eve" suggest the corselet was worn for formal, rare, special occasions. Indeed, many of the source examined associate the corselet with this type of setting.

In addition to mentioning winter holidays, some sources suggest the corselet could be worn during the warm summer month. But this time of year is not proposed very often. The corselet is associated with a specific time of day: evening. This is a way to separate the corselet from "day-to-day" foundations in order to strengthen its relationship with special occasions. The sections below explore how the corselet was positioned as an option for each of these settings: *special occasions, summer,* and *evening*. After discussing each individually, I concluded with a summary of the intended setting for corselet use.

Special Occasions. The corselet is repeatedly described throughout the period examined as an appropriate foundation garment for formal, public special occasions. The names of some designs, as well as the advertising copy promoting them, reference this setting. For example, an advertisement for the "Pink Champagne" describes the design as "'The "Toast' of fashion-conscious bra departments" (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955, p. 4). References to champagne and toasting openly denoting the special, celebratory setting where the corselet was intended to be worn. Young women were also specifically instructed on the correct settings for a

corselet. The pamphlet *Janie Got a Bra Today* (1960) teaches young wearers that it should be worn for special occasions like their "most exciting dress-up dates" (p. 3).

Several sources also position the corselet as a proper foundation garment for specific events like weddings (e.g. "Dayton's Strapless Bras," 1950). An advertisement for the white "3/4 Time" corselet notes, "the bride chooses bras for beauty's sake" ("Hollywood-Maxwell for Beauty's Sake," 1956). Its use in this setting is also visually conveyed by the quoted advertisement. The white lace foundation garment, itself, is evocative of bridal wear. Additionally, the model wearing the "3/4 Time" design is dressed in a full white petticoat and pearl accessories - emphasizing the visual relationship between the corselet and a wedding dress. The model is also holding floral bouquets in her hands, driving home that the corselet is an ideal foundation garment for the *most special* occasions, like your wedding.

The winter holiday season and holiday fashions are also repeatedly referenced in advertisements for corselets ("Foundation Ads Tie-In," 1959, p. e.g.; "Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1954). New Year's Eve parties are a particular focus. For example, an advertisement for the "Backless Strapless" design notes it is a necessity during the "hearty party season of the year…a time for glamour and glitter, with New Year parties highlighting low backs, deep necklines" ("Dayton's Shoulders Showing," 1957). As this example touches on, social events like New Year's Eve parties were settings where evening dresses were worn. The "glamour and glitter" of these settings also made them more appropriate for revealing fashions. Hence, the corselet was an ideal choice.

Social activities like dancing are also mentioned. The recently quoted "3/4 Time" advertisement aligns the foundation garment with "A time for waltzing." This design's name is also a direct reference to dancing, as 3/4 timing is used for a waltz. The images within the advertisement also depict a special occasion setting. Black boxes are interspersed with the models. Inside, men in suits hold various instruments, presumably playing a waltz. The models are also decked out in sparkling jewelry: bracelets, earrings, and even a tiara-like headband. Overall, the advertisement evokes the image of a lively, formal party, with the corselet firmly situated within it.

The use of the corselet for special occasions logically makes sense and aligns with previous research. This was arguably a time when wearers wished to more dramatically modify their bodies. 19th century corsets were cinched tightest during formal, public settings (Roberts, 1977, p. 558; Steele, 2001, p. 108). The most extreme versions of the mid-20th century "New Look" were also adopted for special occasions (Fields, 2007, p. 267). This was also a setting

when increased body exposure was more acceptable. Given the corselet's ability to reveal the upper body while still supporting and modifying the torso, it was a very practical choice.

Summer. The corselet is occasionally suggested as a foundation for summer, usually in relation to this season's revealing fashions (e.g. "Selling Summer Foundation," 1962). A Power's advertisement for Hollywood-Maxwell observes that "Bare summer fashions demand an upward lift with the secret completely hidden from sight" and lists the "3/4 Time" corselet as one option ("Hollywood-Maxwell Summer Secrets," 1955). Other nylon corselets are occasional promoted. A *Women's Wear Daily* article describes the "Pink champagne torsolette" as a "new summer three quarter cup basque bra" ("Strapless or Halter Bras," 1955). However, cotton brassieres (both corselets and other designs) are generally the focus of summer advertisements. An emphasis on cottons makes sense. It breathes more easily than synthetics, making it a cooler choice for the hot summer months. Based on the objects and sources I analyzed, there were a variety of cotton corselet designs available thought the period examined.

Like holiday parties, summer is a time when the body is generally more exposed. However, the most revealing fashions appear to still be reserved for special occasions in the evenings. An article on "low back...fashion and foundations" for summer in *Women's Wear Daily* suggests that the level of exposure increased throughout the day. It comments, "Bare backed halter dresses are a daytime fashion… [While] Deep U- and V-cuts are seen everywhere in late day dresses." However, the most "Extreme, but by no means rare, are backs that are slashed to the waist in dressy evening styles" ("Summer Corsets," 1957). This final fashion is supported by foundations like the corselet, which are cut lowest in back.

Evening vs. daytime or all-day use. Evening is generally cited as the time of day to wear the corselet ("Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair," 1963; "The Far Reach," 1956). This is in line with the formal, special occasion settings previously discussed. Daytime is generally described as a time for comparatively more casual dress.

I came across a few early sources that suggest the corselet could also be worn during the daytime ("What's Beneath the 1952 Look for the Young," 1952). For example, an article on "long-torso" foundations, including the "3/4 Time" corselet, suggests they can be worn day or night. It claims, "These are [foundation] garments slated for daytime wear, and not only for dress-up, after dark fashions" ("Take Your Pick," 1954). Early reference to the daytime may be because the meaning of the corselet was not set within the culture. However, it would soon become established as a companion to evening wear and took on meanings like glamour, which are discussed shortly.

Additionally, references to “all day” wear were most likely intended to suggest the comfort of the new, mid-20th century designs. Due to their more “relaxed” waistlines, they could be worn for “a longer period of time” (“Take Your Pick,” 1954). These corselets were so comfortable that they *could be worn* all day but perhaps were not *actually worn* all day.

Intended Setting for Corselet Use. With all this in mind, I believe the corselet was largely worn for *formal special occasions*, such as holiday parties or weddings, in *public settings* that took place during the *evening*. As already discussed, the concept of foundation garment “wardrobes” was popular during this period. So, it stands to reason that there were specific foundations for the noted specific occasions.

My analysis is supported by and reinforces previous research. Fields (2007) argues that the waist was most severely constricted during special occasions (p. 267). The corselet would be an excellent option for achieving this. Its full torso design, which includes body sculpting panels and bones, provides a more dramatic, all-encompassing type of body modification compared to other foundation garments. It stands to reason that this more extreme transformation via the corselet was worn less frequently for a limited period of time. It was not a practical choice to wear daily during activities like cleaning or grocery shopping. As with the 19th century corset (Roberts, 1977, p. 558; Steele, 2001, p. 108), the most extreme body modification was reserved for select, public events.

The corselet is often shown and described as a partner to evening wear. This too would have limited how often the corselet was worn. Amy Vanderbilt book on etiquette (1958) comments on formal evening wear, saying, “except for a very social woman, an evening dress is a luxury worn only a few times a season” (p. 196). Vanderbilt also discusses slightly less formal garments, like “dinner dresses.” They were worn *more frequently* and *exposed less* of the body. Such a dress “rarely leaves the arms and shoulders completely bare” (p. 196). This contrasts the strapless low-back evening dresses often paired with the corselet in the external sources analyzed. In addition to the special occasion settings, the rareness of this extreme modification and exposure of the body gives these practices and the foundation garment worn to achieve them very *special* meanings of their own. This, in turn, helped the corselet to imbue the wearer with abstract qualities like glamour. Such meanings would influence *why* the corselet was adopted and continually used - discussed next.

Why: Transformation and Conferring Abstract Qualities

The external sources analyzed repeatedly touch on the corselet’s ability to literally transform the body into fashionable silhouettes. The concept of transformation also appears in previous research on foundation garments. Some scholars relate this to the idea that the female

body is inherently flawed, casting this body-modifying practice in a negative light (Burns-Ardolino, 2007; Nelson, 2007). However, the practice of wearing foundation garments and the resulting transformation could be pleasurable. External sources on the corselet indicate that in addition to an external, physical change the wearer also experienced an internal, abstract change. The latter transformation could have particularly positive connotations and may have been a key reason why women wore the corselet.

Glamour. The concept of glamour is discussed in previous research on foundation garments and their abilities to transform the wearer. It is also emerged in my analysis of the corselet. "Glamour" can be defined as "an exciting and often illusory and romantic attractiveness" and also an "alluring or fascinating attraction —often used attributively" ("Glamour," 2016). It is that certain *je ne sais quoi* - a quality we are drawn to but cannot fully put into words.

There appear to have been deliberate efforts on the part of Hollywood-Maxwell to instill meanings of glamour into their corselets when they released the initial designs. The clearest example is the luxurious, mink-topped corselet that leads the designs in the 1955 *Illustrated Price List*. Unlike the other corselets, it was "Made to special order only, of course, with 60 to 90 day delivery", increasing the rareness and allure of the object. This fur-covered design would have been impractical as foundation garment. In fact, the "foundation and glamorous mink 'topper'" were intended to be worn with "any formal-wear skirt" to create "an ensemble of breath taking splendor" (p. 2) This is another example of the clear association between the corselet and special occasions. However, with a suggested retail price of $1,200, it was far outside the average customer's budget.

I have not been able to determine how many (or if any) of these mink corselets were sold. I suspect this design was primarily used to stir up interest in the other new designs, particularly because, the mink is "molded over a Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time Torso" (p. 2). While most women could not afford the mink version, they could purchase the *same* foundation garment to wear beneath their own formal-wear ensembles. This design helps to imply the glamour and luxury of the other corselets.

Advertisements and other marketing materials also conveyed the glamorous nature of the corselet. At times the actual word is used (e.g. "Dayton's Shoulders Showing," 1957). However, a variety of other means were employed, including associations between the corselet and *Hollywood* or *high culture*, and its *special occasion use*. The corselet's glamorizing abilities were also explained with references to *fantasy and magic*. Each is discussed below.

Associations with Hollywood and high culture. Sources directly and indirectly reference Hollywood to convey the glamour conferred by wearing a corselet, as well as other

foundation garments. This technique was heavily used by the company prior to the release of the corselet, evidenced in Hollywood-Maxwell promotional materials like a 1930s pamphlet highlighting brassieres that appeared in Hollywood films (*Brassieres Used in Paramount Pictures*, 1935). Advertisements for other post-WWII foundation garments also visually evoke Hollywood glamour. For example, one advertisement features marquee-like lettering, bring to mind images of the red carpet ("Hollywood Vassarette Brassiere," 1960).

One of the clearest examples in sources specifically on the corselet is the reference to Hollywood starlets in a *Harper's Bazaar* spread ("The New Vamp," 1962). There is also repeated use of the word "Famous" in a number of advertisements (e.g. "Hollywood Vassarette is Famous," 1963; "Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl," 1955). While this is largely to suggest the renown of the designs, it also implies the larger Hollywood aura surrounding the objects; this is somewhat in a literal sense, since the company began in Hollywood. The company names - Hollywood-Maxwell and then Hollywood Vassarette - no doubt also added to this association between the corselet and the glamour of Hollywood. Keeping "Hollywood" as part of the company's name after it was bought and moved to Minnesota indicates the importance of this connection.

The fine arts are also referenced to instill and convey the glamour of the corselet. The objects, themselves, are described as "masterpieces" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Pink Champagne," 1955b; *Illustrated Price List*, 1955). The ballet features prominently in one of the advertisements examined. In addition to an image of a ballerina dancing, the corselets are promoted as "ballet-figure torsolettes" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl," 1955). Theatre is also denoted with words like "costume" and "understudy" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Shoulder Barings," 1955).

Such advertisements promise that, within the corselet, the wearer will garner the same rapt attention as a painting on a gallery wall or a dancer on stage. References to the performing arts are similar to Hollywood - both hold the glamorous appeal of light, crowds, and fame. However, they also differ. The latter is situated within popular culture and the former more solidly within High culture. More often aligning the corselet with the arts suggests efforts to further elevate the ready-to-wear foundation. This would help to instill a special quality to the corselet, making it something worthy of wearing for those rare formal events.

Special occasion use. While the object itself holds meanings of glamour, I believe its prescribed special occasion use contributed additional elements of glamour. The settings in which the corselet was worn was also described as glamorous ("Dayton's Shoulders Showing," 1957). As noted, the corselet was primarily intended for formal events like New Year's Eve parties ("Hollywood-Maxwell 3/4 Time," 1954). This is in line with observations from other researchers like Fields (2007), who notes more extreme foundation garments were worn to "construct the

unique pleasure of proms, weddings, and New Year's Eve parties" (p. 267). The direct association of the corselet with special occasions imbues the object itself with glamour and givens it positive, *pleasurable* connotations.

The corselet is donned by the wearer to transform herself into a glamorous being for that moment - much like Cinderella for the ball. I believe the *temporar*y nature of this modification is crucial to its meaning of glamour. It creates the noted elusiveness that is central to glamour. It is attainable but only for a moment - lost when the wearer leaves the event, returns home, and takes off the corselet. One could wear the corselet every day in an attempt to prolong the glamourous effects. Yet, I would argue this would decrease them.

This very specific use means it was worn less often than other foundation garments. This rarity amplifies the specialness of the corselet. As with other cultural practices like cookies only baked at Christmas, the waiting and intentionality of this dressing practice increases the enjoyment of wearing the corselet. The corselet becomes a crucial part of no only fashioning a woman's appearance for these events but, as Field's puts it, of "construct[ing] the unique pleasure" she experiences at these celebrations (p. 267). As a result, the somewhat restrictive foundation garment takes on very positive connotation. This meaning would certainly have encouraged adoption, shedding further light on why the corselet was worn.

Explaining glamour: fantasy and magic. Glamour is admittedly a very abstract concept that can be difficult to explain in relation to a concrete object. By its very definition, glamour involves intangible qualities that are hard to grasp. For this reason, the corselet's ability to confer glamour is often explained in external sources through references to fantasy and magic. Fields (2007) notes these concepts frequently appears in intimate apparel advertisements and were increasingly popular following WWII (p. 188-190). She places magic within the "overarching category" of *glamour*, which instills qualities of "style, grace and sexual attractiveness" (pp. 190-191). In this study, the Hollywood-Maxwell Wizard is a prime example of what Fields describes. The magical wizard waves his wand to *instantly transform* the wearer's figure into a more glamorous one.

In line with Field's observation about the post-WWII era, fantasy and magic appear in advertising copy for the corselets throughout the period examined. Some advertisements focus on the effects and abilities of the corselet on the wearer. For example, one promises the corselet will "do figure-magic for you" (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955, p. 4). Another notes the backless design "stays up in front, down in back" - as if defying gravity - and describes the fit as "magic" ("Hollywood-Maxwell Backless Strapless," 1957). Such language help to change the corselet from a utilitarian object to a means of magical transformation.

The effects of the corseleted body on others are also described in terms of magic. For example, the swelling bosom created by the “Temptress” design is described as “bewitching” (“Hollywood Vassarette Temptress,” 1959). The name, itself, also conjures up images of mythical beauties like Circe. Although, such connotations have an undeniable dark side, as their beauty often lured men into danger. The fashion spread “The Vamp's New Guide to Back Magic” makes similar claims about foundations’ abilities to attract the attention of others and has a similar tone.

Thus, there is more to glamour than a physically beautiful appearance. There is also an intangible, elusiveness that creates the desire for glamour. Utilizing the themes discussed, such as High art or magic, helps to convey and explain the corselet’s ability to embody and transfer glamour onto the wearer. They too become glamorous.

Conferring other qualities. In addition to glamour, the corselet was also promoted as conferring other abstract qualities - mainly grace and confidence. Such attributes could be part of a glamorous ideal. However, these other qualities would have also been desirable on their own.

Confidence is discussed in multiple ways, sometimes at the same time (e.g. “Hollywood Vassarette Bare Flair,” 1963; “Hollywood-Maxwell Party Dressing,” 1954) Advertisements promise wearer confidence in her strapless foundation. She can rest assured her figures will be supported and the foundation garment will remain unseen. However, advertisements also imply that the wearer herself will become more confident by wearing a corselet.

Promises of grace also taken on multiple meanings. The Dayton’s advertisement featuring a ballerina directly describes the corselet’s physical effects on the body. It reads, “your figure, enchantingly graceful and willowy.” The body is shaped to look like that of the slender ballerina dancing in the background. The corselet’s gentle interaction with the body is also described, claiming to “mold you with cool grace of a ballet dancer” (“Hollywood-Maxwell Gay Whirl,” 1955). The advertisement also implies the wearer herself will take on the graceful comportment of a ballerina. This is not openly stated, but the visual juxtaposition of the corseleted women with the dancer - all of whom have heads held aloft and delicate, long arms - conveys such promises.

As with glamour, there is a physical change accompanied by a transformation to the wearer’s whole being. These marketing claims should be approached with skepticism. Putting on a corselet does not instantly guarantee the wearer will become confident or graceful. However, it is worth noting that the typical corselet design is such that it affects posture. Speaking from personal experience - slouching in a corselet is difficult. This encourages the wearer to sit or stand up straight. So, I would argue that the corselet, by the nature of its physical design, does have the ability to make the wearer project what might be viewed as confidence. Grace is also

often associated with a lifted, upright posture - like that of a ballerina. So, in a sense, advertisements somewhat made good on these promises.

Why: Attracting Others

In additions to the wearer, qualities like glamour, confidence, and grace could appeal to the other people around her. Or, perhaps more accurately, make the wearer appealing to others. This is crucial to acknowledge, given that past research has often centered on women's use of foundation garments to make themselves attractive to men and to find a husband. As it has been discussed at great length, I will only briefly discuss this reason in relation to the corselet.

By and large, the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette sources I analyzed focus on the female consumer and rarely mention men. However, in a few instances this reason for wearing the corselet is implied. The previously discussed advertisement featuring a model in a white corselet and holding a bouquet both visually signifies marriage and directly references it in the copy ("Hollywood-Maxwell for Beauty's Sake," 1956). Advertisements are often intended to help consumers visualize themselves "in" the product. So, this example arguably positions the corselet as an aspirational object, suggesting that purchasing and wearing a corselet will help the wearer to have a similar (bridal) experience as the model shown.

A *Harper's Bazaar* fashion spread analyzed also speaks to the corselet's ability to help women attract men. It talks about the modern Vamp's use of foundation garments as "snares" and notes she "creates her following by turning her back" ("The New Vamp," 1962). Yet, interesting, it does not reference a monogamous relationship or marriage. It hints at attracting *men* not *a man*. The fashion spread also has a very different tone than the earlier bridal-themed advertisement, giving such actions illicit connotations. This suggests a tension between new and traditional mores, a conflict between growing acknowledgement of women's own sexuality in the wake of the sexual revolution and persisting feminine ideals that idolize women's virginity before marriage and then role as dutiful wife.

Based on my analysis, other brands of corselets more directly acknowledged attracting men as reason for wearing the corselet, mainly Warner's. The use of the "Merry Widow" to attract men is suggested in a number of advertisements. One promises the corselet will be "A magnet for all eyes—and especially for men's!" ("The Beauty of Your Own 'Creation,'" 1953). An advertising spread titled "The way you look when you're loved" is also a very clear instance ("The Way You Look," 1955). Not only does it proclaim that, "this is the look that finds love faster than anything in the world" (p. 37), it also shows the model in the "Merry Widow" holding a tulle petticoat over her head, alluding to a wedding veil. Women may also have worn corselets to keep their husbands. Another multi-page advertising spread from Warner's begins with the line

"…the men I might have married." It features a wife looking troubled across the table at her husband and noting he "just grunted" at her ("Warner's Merry Widows," 1956, p. 55). She wonders if he is still attracted to her. The following pages suggest the corselet to assuage these fears and maintain her husband's devotion. Such examples reflect efforts to imply that wearing corselets could not only attract the opposite sex but keep them attracted.

It is also worth reiterating, the corselet was intended to be worn for formal, public events like New Year's Eve parties. Such special occasion settings would have been ideal places to meet men. Additionally, a key function of the corselet was to mold the body to current beauty standards and to make it sexually attractive. One could argue the corselet molded women's figures in accordance with men's desires. This is based on the generally accepted view of post-WWII American culture as patriarchal and the premise that (at least mainstream) cultural ideals are determined by those in power - in this case white men. However, this is a simplified view of the object, its use, and the culture.

A word of caution. Denying the impact of men on the design of the corselet and its resulting modification of women's bodies runs the risk of denying, or at least downplaying, very real instances of objectification and gender inequality. On the other hand, there is also a danger in solely viewing foundation garments like the corselet as something created by men or based on male fantasy, and worn by women to please these men. This positions women as largely passive beings who submitted to male-imposed sartorial constraints.

As I hope this analysis has shown, objects like the corselet served a variety of functions and could have held multiple, seemingly-opposed meanings. A woman might have donned a corselet because she wanted or felt she needed to be attractive to the opposite sex. This would make sense in a culture that idealized marriage for women (although I would argue this is by no means specific to postwar culture). However, women may have consciously chosen to get married or desired to attract men – exercising agency within postwar culture.

Moreover, a woman might *also* have chosen to wear a corselet because *she* felt good in it. She may have liked how her body looked in the foundation garment and felt confident while wearing it. Granted, she may feel this way because the male-dominated culture has taught her the corseleted-look is what is beautiful and is what she should aspire to look like. Yet, such an analysis positions traditionally feminine dress as oppressive, the less powerful foil to whatever is considered masculine, and only serves to maintain the patriarchy. This brief back and forth is intended to illustrate how big, complicated, and circular this discussion can become - making it ideal for future, more in-depth analysis on its own.

All this is to say, attracting men appears to have been *one* reason why the corselet was worn. Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette advertisements hint at this reason and advertising campaigns for other corselets acknowledge it more explicitly. The setting where the corselet was intended to be worn, as well *some* of its function, also support this claim. However, previous research often fixates on attracting men as foundation garments' primary function and the sole reason for their use. While this is a part of it, at least for the corselet, it is more complex.

Summary

Analysis of corselets made by Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette, as well as the external sources depicting the objects, identifies a number of characteristics that define a typical corselet. This design can then be used to deduce the various functions of the object. For example, measurements of all the corselets analyzed indicate repeated efforts to cover the breasts but expose the rest of upper torso. This is closely related to one of the corselet's main functions: supporting and molding the breasts, *while* exposing the upper body. Comparison of these measurements also suggests the amount of the body exposed increased over time.

The corselet also modified the torso, narrowing waist and shaping the hips *while* creating a smooth line from bust to hips. However, unlike the corset, it controls the whole torso *while also* allowing for considerable freedom of movement. This is the result of the careful balance between the rigid and flexible components of the design, like vertical stays and horizontal elastic bands. The combination of woven and elasticized panels that make up the body of the corselet also reflect the tension that is essential to the typical design.

Elements of the objects, such as the placement of embellishments or reflective materials, are used to frequently draw attentions to the breasts. This careful leading of the viewer's eyes is used to sexualize the wearer's body. Molding the body into an hourglass figure, as well revealing parts of the body or suggesting the nakedness beneath, also contribute to this slightly more abstract function of corselet.

These various functions begin to explain how and why the corselet was worn. Analysis of the external sources reveals additional insight into its use. The body-modifying foundation garment was worn to "fix" perceived flaws. It was also expected to be worn beneath certain fashions - revealing evening dresses - reflecting the strong relationship between under and outer garments. Corselet use was also reserved for very special contexts, worn primarily in the evening for public, formal special occasions.

This limited use was one of several ways in which the corselet was imbued with glamour, which was conferred from the object to the wearer. The corselet's ability to not just physically modify the wearer's body but to transform her into a glamourous, confident woman was touted by

external sources and may have been a key reason why women's chose to adopt the corselet. These qualities would have also made the wearer attractive to men, given that the corseleted body signified compliance with both beauty ideals and broader feminine ideals. Yet, I am cautious to put too much emphasis on this reason for use, as had been done in the past. This narrow focus fails to consider the complexities of the corselet, which are explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Interpretation

Introduction

Often researchers' interpretations focus on how foundation garments have acted as literal and symbolic means of oppression - forcing women into the mold of traditional femininity. While such claims are not unfounded, they present a partial view of the objects *and* women's experiences within them. As my analysis indicates, foundation garments like the corselet are incredibly complex objects in terms of their design, functions, and use. This complexity extends to the postwar corselet's meanings within the culture that surrounded it.

The corselet embodies a number of dualities. As a result of these conflicting qualities, the corselet is able to take on seemingly mutually-exclusive meanings. While it can have negative connotations, like the sexual objectification discussed by other researchers, wearing a corselet could also be a positive experience for the wearer.

I believe this study helps to challenge the narrative that women were forced back into corsets, corselets, or other restrictive foundation garments following WWII, which they then abandoned in the 1960s. The corselet and the broader fashions that accompanied it were not aberrations along women's journeys towards sartorial and cultural freedom. Rather, the corselet is one instance of body modification with dress. This practice was situated within a larger cultural context and continues today.

Dual Meanings of the Corselet within the Post-WWII Culture

Many aspects of dress are capable of holding multiple meanings. This is particularly true of foundation garments. As discussed in Chapter 2, previous research on foundation garments highlights a number of conflicting themes. Some scholars have taken an *either-or* approach, discussing the subject in terms of either control of or freedom for the body (e.g. Summers, 2003). Others, mainly dress historians, address the complex natures of the foundation garments, interpreting them with a *both-and* approach. They discuss how the foundations can result in experiences or embody meanings of both freedom and control simultaneously (e.g. Steele, 2001).

My analysis of the corselet has led to an interpretation that is in line with the latter approach. In the section that follows I discuss the tensions reflected in the corselet: freedom and control, modesty and sexuality, natural and unnatural, seen and unseen. It is not a question of being or meaning one or the other. Rather, the postwar corselet embodies both binary concept at the same time.

Freedom and Control

Through my analysis, it became clear that a combination of freedom and control is central to the corselet design, as well as its meaning. Formed using flexible elastics and rigid materials like steel, the corselet literally embodies a tension between freedom for *and* control of the body.

The elasticized panels that make up the body of the corselet allow considerable freedom of movement, particularly in comparison to earlier foundation garments with panels made of tightly woven materials. Yet, because of the material's resilient nature, the panels also pull the body back in and shape it. The spiral steel stays that vertically line the panels are comparatively unyielding, keeping the foundation garment flush against the body. Yet, as the signs of wear on several extant examples indicate, the corselet also adjusts to the body.

These literal instances signify the more abstract tensions between freedom and control related to the corselet. The sources examined indicate the increased freedom to consume offered by the lifting of wartime restrictions and the post-WWII economic boom. However, while women had numerous foundation garments to choose from, they made their choices within limitations; the restrictions placed on women's dress suggest efforts to maintain established gender definitions and dynamics. The noted consumer freedom also led to demands for democratic beauty, which can be read as controlling and oppressive. Yet, the relationship between meanings of freedom, choice, and power signified by the corselet are also crucial to explore, as they can have very positive connotations.

With all this mind, exploring the duality between freedom and control is essential to understanding the postwar corselet and the culture surrounding it. These various aspects of the noted duality are each explored below.

Freedom (and control) of consumption. The concepts of choice and freedom emerged from my analysis. This was apparent in the designs, themselves. Corselets came in different lengths, were made of different materials, and offered features like varying degrees of padding. The word "choice" is often literally used or implied when promoting the corselet. Sources like advertisements emphasize the variety of foundation garments available and the range of figures they catered to. As a result of all these options, the wearer could *choose* the foundation that was right for her.

The choice between foundation garments is indicative of the larger consumer freedom experienced during the post-WWII era. Americans were no longer bound by restrictions like the L-85 regulations. They not only had access to and the ability to purchase goods, but a choice between the variety of products as a result of the postwar economic boom. If the external sources

examined during this study are any indication, there were hundreds (if not thousands) of foundation garments available for women to pick from.

Yet, while women had considerable consumer freedom in the postwar era, they were (in reality) making a *choice within limitations*. While they could pick from a variety of foundation garments, all were used to achieve a singular fashionable silhouette. This was confining, forcing women's different bodies into one form. Granted, this is by no means specific to the period examined. All ready-to-wear foundations, while offered in different sizes, are generally based on the prevailing physical ideal and require women's bodies to conform to certain shapes and proportions.

External sources also reveal a number of rules that constricted the use of the corselet, as well as other foundation garments. Concepts like foundation garment wardrobes suggest a level of choice and consumer freedom, highlighting the range of products available. Yet, they also indicate predetermined expectations regarding what went with what. Dress advice in magazines and books also dictated how and where garments were worn, such as reserving shoulder- and arms-bearing evening ensembles for rare, special occasions (Vanderbilt, 1958, p. 196).

These sartorial rules can be read as an effort to create order within the culture at large. This is in line with Dione's (2009) view of postwar foundation garments as a means of containing the female body and femininity in order to contain communism. By the mid-1950s, Americans had just lived through WWII and then the Korean War. They were also living amidst Cold War, where they were not necessarily at war - engaged in literal combat - but they certainly were not at peace. The culture was also undergoing social changes through the civil rights movement and other movements that would grow during the 1960s.

There would have been a strong desire to maintain traditional gender roles in reaction to these tensions and uncertainty. It is not surprising that objects like the corselet reflect efforts to maintain traditional definitions of femininity and, in turn, a broader sense of control. It is, however, very important to clarify that this is not limited to the postwar era.

There are many examples of efforts to control women's appearances in response to cultural changes or uncertainties. The feminine silhouette of the 1930s has been interpreted as a reaction to the Great Depression. Field's (2007) suggests the era's idealization of full breasts was a way of "assuaging [the] gender concerns" that arose from most men losing their jobs (and in turn power) but women often keeping theirs (p. 105). Like the postwar era, the foundation garments used to obtain these feminine curves were aimed at emphasizing gender difference in order to uphold existing power dynamics between men and women.

Even fashions that are traditionally interpreted in terms of freedom suggest efforts to control gender definitions and dynamics. Women's dress during the 1960s - which is often viewed as a visible sign of their sexual liberation - could have served as a means of objectifying them and counter any power gained from the second-wave feminist movement. Haskell (1987) makes this argument in relation to depictions of women in film (p. 363). I believe it can be extended to women's dress outside of film. Much like Field's interpretation of the seemingly freer fashions of the 1920s (p. 90), the loose, revealing fashions of the 1960s also eroticized the female body and could have sexually objectified them.

Efforts to control definitions of femininity by controlling women's appearances are perhaps more overt in post-WWII culture. I came across many contemporary sources that tried to regulate which foundation garments women purchased and how they wore them. However, it is important to remember that this is a recurring trend in the history of women's dress.

Democratic beauty and other cultural constraints. Consumer freedom and access to products also relate to democratic beauty, a concept discussed by scholars like Banner (2006, pp. 295–298). In addition to the freedom to purchase the corselet, women were also free to experience its effects. A key function of the corselet was to mold the body into the current beauty ideal. External sources also suggest it conferred illusory qualities like glamour. Being beautiful or glamourous was not limited to those who possessed these qualities naturally. However, if anyone *could* be beautiful or glamourous, the imperative becomes that everyone *should* be. Such expectations can be incredibly restrictive.

The power of these expectations should not be underestimated. While perhaps required by dress codes, there were not necessarily widespread laws demanding women wear foundation garments. However, there were very heavy social pressures to do so. Foundation garment use was compulsory not only to be fashionable or beautiful but to merely be appropriately dressed. Failure to comply could result in considerable social stigma because it suggested a disregard for not only fashion but for broader cultural conventions.

Anthropologists like Wobst (1977) suggest the "style" of our dress is a key way we indicate "conformity and compliance" with cultural norms, including those related to gender (p. 327). Field's (2007) reiterates Wobst's claim, noting that following WWII "wearing foundation garments and undergarments not only constructed gender differences but also displayed compliance to their conventions and boundaries" (p. 263). It would be naive to argue that the corselet does not reflect social and cultural constraints. The external sources examined frequently indicate how it was used to construct a feminine appearance. With the previous comments in

mind, corselet use could signify compliance with established cultural definition of what it meant to be a woman during the postwar era.

Fields adds that adhering feminine dress and other "conventions" is "a long-standing means of attracting a husband" (p. 264). This was given considerable importance in post-WWII culture, which idealized marriage. Compliance would have been particularly important in the formal, public settings where the corselet was worn. Such settings were ideal places to attract a potential suitor. As Burns-Ardolino (2007) notes, ideal femininity is more celebrated at special occasions and, as result, there is greater adherence to dress and gender norms (p. 26). There would be considerable pressure for every woman to wear foundation garments and mold her body to fit the feminine ideal, whether she was looking for a husband or not.

The fact that the products used to construct this feminine appearance were readily available at a variety of price points meant there was little excuse not to comply. Again, if any woman *could* mold her body into the idealized feminine form - whether with a lace covered corselet like the "Temptress" or a cheaper version from the mail order catalog - then every woman *should* engage in this practice.

The post-WWII era is a clear instance of the relationship between feminine dress and the broader constraints of feminine ideals. It is also an example of how the freedom to do something can become an expectation to do it. This is particularly true when the practice, such as adopting feminine dress, can be used to maintain existing power structures. However, as noted, it is crucial to point out there is a long history of controlling women's bodies in order to control them, more generally.

Freedom, choice, and power. The concepts of freedom and choice are closely related to power. Having the freedom to make your own choices requires some degree of power. Additionally, those in positions of power generally have the most freedoms and choices.

The corselet may have signified power, allowing a woman to actively modify her own body and exercise agency over it. Personally, I find modifying my appearance empowering and it is a key way I explore and construct my identity. This sometimes involves more subversive types of body modification like tattoos. However, I also employ elements of current fashions within my culture and longstanding symbols of gendered dress. The choice to adopt the latter is equally important to my own autonomy.

While this type of power might seem trivial to some, it would have been especially significant in the era studied. Women lacked of control over other aspects of their bodies; they did not have easy access to effective contraceptives until the end of the period examined. While the pill was increasingly used, this does not mean it was widely-accepted within the culture. Plus,

access to legal abortions was not granted until the next decade in 1973. Thus, in a culture where women had minimal control or power over their reproductive systems, power over other aspects of their bodies, like their appearances, may have been even more important.

Feminine Sexuality and Modesty

The corselet has undeniable sexual meanings. This is, in part, due its close proximity to and relationship with the female body. It not only lays against the body but molds and hugs it like an embrace. The ambiguous status of the body in foundation garments - neither dressed nor undressed - also increases the erotic connotations of the corselet (Fields, 2007, p. 3; Steele, 2001, p. 114).

The above observations could be made of many foundation garments. However, the corselet *further* emphasizes the wearer's sexuality. The designs examined deliberately draw attention to breasts and allude to the naked body. The hourglass form created - with full breasts, a narrow waist, and rounded hips - is associated with feminine beauty and sexual attractiveness. Elements of the typical design, like repeated vertical stays and its overall form, visually align and imbue the corselet with the same "erotic allure" reflected in the corset (Steele, 2001, p. 1). Thus, erotic and sexual meanings seem to permeate corselet and the body within it.

Yet, the corselet also signifies the culture's demands for modesty, as well as the moral constraints placed on feminine sexuality. The corselet was used to support the body and at the same time reveal parts of it. This exposure could be read as erotic and subversive. However, external sources suggest the body-revealing corselet was intended primarily for special occasions during the evening. This was a setting when it was deemed acceptable to show-off the shoulder, back, and upper chest. In other settings this degree of exposure would be socially inappropriate and immodest. Despite its role in exposing parts of the female body, the corselet and its prescribed use actually convey the rules controlling women's appearances and cultural demands for modesty.

This duality is apparent within the corselets examined. The designs suggest a tension between efforts to both emphasize and temper the noted erotic connotations. The nude-colored center panels in designs like the "Temptress" allude to the nakedness within and create the illusion of the corselet coming open in the front, implying the act of opening undressing. Yet, the design does not actually reveal the body. Similarly, the nude fabric behind the black lace on this corselet's cups draws attention to the breasts *but* they remain safely and appropriately covered.

The tension between feminine sexuality and modesty extended to the wearer of the corselet. While she may have been allowed (or perhaps even required) to be sexy, this was

regulated by the culture. Only certain parts of the body could be exposed to a certain degree in certain contexts.

In addition to sartorial modesty, the corselet signifies other cultural expectations that sought to control feminine sexuality. The noted duality was central to the culture's 'naughty and nice' ideal, which demanded a rather precarious balancing act. However, the dual meanings of the corselet may have provided women with a socially acceptable way to experience their own sexuality, much like the corset during the previous century. The corselet also hints at the sexual revolution, which allowed women to express their sexuality more freely. These various aspects of this duality are also explored, shortly.

Controlling feminine sexuality. The fashion theorist Tseëlon (1995) contends that "cultural expectations of the woman have been translated into specific appearance expectations" (p. 7). For women, there is a direct, long standing relationship between looking and being. This relationship is very significant, given that these expectations influence how a "woman perceives her own look" and selfhood (p. 7). With this in mind, the corselet not only indicates how women were expected to look, but also how they were expected to behave and the qualities they were expected to embody. Dictates related to feminine dress, including the corselet, have very real consequences in a woman's life. They impact her sense of self and how she experiences aspects of her identity, such as her sexuality.

Fields (2007) reiterates Tseëlon's observation, noting the relationship between adopting feminine dress and complying with gender norms during the postwar era (p. 263). Molding the body into a feminine form with a corselet signified compliance with other cultural expectations, such as the "boundaries" (as Fields puts it) placed on feminine sexuality. For example, women have long been expected to remain virgins until marriage but this was a moral imperative during the postwar era. By narrowing and smoothing the torso, the corselet visually signified a virginal body and adherence to this moral restriction. The corseleted figure's youthful connotation also suggests the purity and innocence idealized in and expected of women by post-WWII culture (Banner, 2006, pp. 417–418). As noted, complying with cultural norms and feminine ideals was essential to attracting a husband (Fields, 2007, p. 264). This went beyond merely being physically attractive. The noted abstract qualities - virginity, purity, and innocence - were essential to finding a husband and wearing a corselet was one way to signify them.

The corselet's role in charming the opposite sex was occasionally promoted in external sources. Advertisements directly aligning the corselet with bridal wear and weddings are particularly interesting examples. They suggest that wearing a corselet is not about attracting *men*; rather, it is about attracting *one man*. These advertisements speak to another way the

culture sought to control feminine sexuality: through expectations that women aspire to the roles of bride and then faithful wife. The emphasis is on a marriage, a monogamous relationship.

The corselet conveys the moral standards that shaped women's lives during the post-WWII era; virginity and then monogamy demanded. In reality, some women undoubtedly engaged in premarital sex or had extramarital affairs. However, the relationship between the corselet, virginity, and monogamy signifies the expectations and cultural constraints placed on feminine sexuality. The same constraints *have not* traditionally been placed on *male* sexuality. This too is important to note. Having different standards for men and women maintains gender difference and having clearly defined gender roles was crucial to the culture surrounding the corselet.

The 'naughty and nice' ideal. The post-WWII feminine ideal is often described as "naughty and nice" (e.g. Fields, 2007, p. 269). Women were expected to embody the opposing qualities. They were required to maintain the perfect balance of feminine modesty and sexuality to avoid being seen as unattractively prudish or too promiscuous. The corselet seems to have played a role in both constructing and conveying this ideal. It visually signified feminine modesty and sexual morality. At the same time, the corselet had erotic connotations and sexualized the wearer. However, the latter meaning and function were not always openly acknowledged.

The sources examined hint at the foundation garment's sexualizing effects and its connotations sexual pleasure. Advertisements used of more subtle references, such as models posed to imply sexual arousal with heaving bosoms and arched backs. This reticence suggests that blatantly expressing feminine sexuality was not socially acceptable. This is not surprising, given the morals and values of the culture, which required virginity and monogamy. Yet, while it was not openly expressed, feminine sexuality was still demanded, resulting in the noted 'naughty and nice' feminine ideal.

The subtlety and hints of sexuality within the corselet advertisements were essentially teaching tools. They demonstrated how women were expected to demurely embody the sexual ideal. They needed to be sexy but not *too* sexy, since they were also expected to uphold the noted sexual mores (Dione, 2009, p. 65). It was not a question of being naughty *or* nice; both were equally required.

Some interpret this ideal and by extension the foundation garments used to attain it as oppressive (e.g. Banner, 2006; Dione, 2009). I partially agree; the postwar ideal is *one example* of the *longstanding* demands that women be both modest and sexually alluring. However, as Tseëlon (1995) points out, the "virgin-whore" dichotomy has been repeatedly used throughout history to control women's sexuality and often influences women's dress (p. 32). We should not

fixate on this singular negative interpretation, which has been a focus in previous research. Within the postwar context, the corselet relationships to both feminine propriety and sexuality could also have resulted in positive experiences - discussed next.

Socially acceptable sexuality. I believe the corselet functioned similarly to Steele's (2001) interpretation of the Victorian corset. She asserts that, "By simultaneously constructing an image of irreproachable propriety and one of blatant sexual allure, the corset allowed women to articulate sexual subjectivity in a socially acceptable way" (p. 35). The corselet embodies a similar duality. It was used to construct an appropriate feminine appearance and signified adherence to other more abstract "[gender] conventions and boundaries" (Fields, 2007, p. 263). However, it was also a symbol of feminine sexuality and eroticism. This duality of feminine modesty and sexuality provided an avenue for women to experience the latter, while also still embodying the former. Much like the Victorian corset, the corselet allowed women to express their sexuality in a "socially acceptable way." This is crucial to acknowledge, as it challenges the narrative surrounding the post-WWII era.

Our cultural memories of the 1950's are based on images like TV couple sleeping in separate beds. The baby boom and era's idealization of motherhood suggest that sex was for procreation not pleasure. Within academia, women's dress from period is interpreted in terms of "social repression and sexual exploitation" (Banner, 2006, p. 419). Postwar women are described as "passive", including in their adoption of foundation garments and the "role of...sex object" (Kunzle, 2006, p. 221). In general, the culture is positioned opposite the 1960s, with its open expressions of sexual freedom - captured by phrases like *free love*.

However, analysis of objects like the corselet indicates women's own sexual desires did not burst into existence during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Women may not have acted on these desires because of the lack of effective contraception; the fear of pregnancy made it difficult for women to fully enjoy sex (Gazit & Steward, 2003). Yet, their sexual desires were very much present during the decade before.

The nascent sexual revolution. It is tempting to solely situate dramatic shifts to dress or culture in their immediate contexts. However, there is often a building or leading up to a revolutionary change. The corselet reflects how the sexual revolution of the 1960s was in nascent form during the period preceding it. Based on my analysis, the designs from the mid-1950s on revealed more of the wearer's back over time. Advertisements also increasingly focused on this function, as well as the corselet's ability to emphasize the wearer's décolletage. These examples indicate changes, albeit slow changes, to what is considered socially acceptable and perhaps a slight relaxing of cultural morals.

Previous research illustrates how foundation garment designs were revised to meet women's demands during other periods (e.g. Fields, 2007, p. 75). The corselet also provides clues about what women wanted and how their desires changed. The shift to front-only embellishment on corselets during latter half of the 1950s reflects an increased focus on the front of the body. This view is more easily experienced by the wearer, herself; she can take more pleasure in her own appearance. Shifting the closures to the front of the body also gives the wearer more literal power over who sees her body. Control over the physical body is essential for a woman control her own sexuality. It is notable that these changes within the object take place just prior to the released of the "The Pill," which gave women unprecedented control over their bodies.

Advertisements also reveal women's desires, or at least what manufacturer perceive as their desires (Steele, 2001, p. 133). The corselet advertisements analyzed convey an increasingly active sexuality, seen in visual elements like the models' forward-facing poses and direct gazes. Bridal allusions are replaced by references to roles like vamp and temptress ("Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959; "The New Vamp," 1962). These depictions not only lack the earlier monogamous connotation but suggests women are initiating their sexual encounters, choosing which men they want to seduce. This shift is at a time when women are increasingly using the pill. By 1962, "1.2 million Americans women are on the pill; after three years, the number almost doubles, to 2.3 million" (Nikolchev, 2010). While women's sexual desires were present throughout the era examined, they became increasingly important and apparent during the late-1950s and early-1960s - once women had the means to more fully enjoy their sexualities.

The corselet may have been used to sexually attract men. However, during the latter half of the period researched, the nature of the relationship between men and women began to change. The noted shifts within the objects and the external sources suggests women's own sexual desires and autonomy became increasingly important. Thus, the corselet serves as early evidence of the sexual revolution to come.

Natural and Unnatural (or Real and Fake)

A tension between natural and unnatural meanings (also related to concepts of being real or fake) became apparent during my analysis of the corselet. As noted, during the mid-1950s there was as an idealization of the "natural" feminine form - that of a *real* woman. This was contrasted with the early-1950s ideal, which was positioned as an extreme exaggeration. This may have been a way to differentiate the current and previous silhouettes in order to encourage the purchase of new foundation garments.

However, the importance of appearing “natural” also reflects post-WWII culture’s continuing, if not increased, desires for the appearance of normality, discussed below. Positioning the ideal as naturally feminine supports and upholds the gender divide. Claiming something is natural also makes it less likely and more difficult to challenge - *it is what it is*. This helps to explain why the corselet, a highly-engineered, artificial means of modifying the body, was frequently described as natural. This is also explored, shortly.

Natural femininity and normality. *Natural* and *normal* are not necessarily the same things. What occurs in nature is often quite different from something that is "typical or expected" and "conform[s] to a standard" (“Normal,” 2019). However, in this context, women assuming what were viewed as innately or naturally feminine qualities was equated to being normal. To further illustrate this point, homosexuality was viewed as *unnatural* and *abnormal* during this era because these individuals did not fit within the gender dichotomy. The corselet served as ways to convey conformity to the culture and its ideals. Its corresponding natural feminine silhouette was a way to look normal.

It is also necessary to distinguish between *being* and *looking*. The corselet molded the wearer’s natural body into an hourglass figure. However, the corselet did not actually make the wearer’s waist thinner. It temporarily redistributes the torso’s flesh to make her appear to fit the beauty ideal. Similarly, the corselet allowed the wearer to visually signify virginity but certainly did not make her a virgin. In fact, being able to visually comply with norms could allow someone to subvert them in real life with less fear of stigma. The corselet was ultimately a means to look a certain way and to appear to embody certain qualities.

The corselet is one instance of how consumerism and material culture were used to signify abstract qualities and appear normal during the postwar era. A new car was meant to show financial success and stability. A clean, white picket fence signified the orderly, happy nuclear family, along with the expected *Leave-it-to-Beaver*-wholesomeness. Whether these objects reflected real life may be debatable. But what does seem clear is there was considerable importance placed on how something looked, on an outward appearance of normality.

Artificially creating a natural silhouette. In reality, the corselet was an artificial means to achieve the purported natural feminine silhouette. This is not the first instance; the corsetless fashion of the early-20th century was also seen as natural but still required most women to wear foundations (Steele, 2001, p. 148). The repeated use of this adjective to describe different silhouettes illustrates the fact that the natural feminine figure is a cultural construct. There are some physical differences as the result of women’s physiology, like the relationship between a narrow waist and estrogen (Etcoff, 1999, p. 191). However, the more defined hourglass form

idealized during periods like the mid-20th century is an extreme possessed by few (often iconic) women. Such rarity is arguably what makes it an ideal.

The importance of the silhouette being viewed as natural is undoubtedly a reason the theme of secrecy is repeatedly used in external sources. Open acknowledgement that the corselet and other foundation garments were widely used would reveal that the silhouette women were seeking to achieve was not a natural silhouette. Women were told to keep their artifice secret. Otherwise, they would be revealed as different from other women, which carried considerable social risk. Appearing normal was of the utmost importance.

The importance of being viewed as natural provides insight into aspects of the typical design, like the frequent use of floral lace. This recurring imagery may have been an attempt to subscribe the objects with a meaning of "naturalness." Covering the corselet with delicate floral materials downplays and distracts from the hard, structured components like the metal stays and underwires. The latter particularly indicate the highly-engineered quality of the corselet, which could not only be read as unnatural but potentially had masculine connotations. Within external sources, aspects of the designs (e.g. colors) were also repeatedly given floral names. Much like the use of floral imagery, these names emphasize the feminine "nature" side of the gender dichotomy (Nead, 2002, p. 7) and counter masculine meanings from being conferred onto the highly-engineered corselet.

Themes like magic were also utilized to downplay the artificial or engineered quality of the corselet. External sources rarely explain how the complex design molds the body. Instead, they promote the corselet by saying it simply bestows the desired figure, as if by magic. Advertisers may have thought women were not intelligent enough to understand the design. So, they relied on more whimsical devices to describe its effects. However, I believe it was more likely that describing the corselet as the engineering-feat that it is would have given it masculine connotations of logic and strength. A man's suit could be structured and strong, a woman's clothes could not. Separating the corselet from traditionally masculine meanings indicates efforts within the culture to maintain the gender divide.

It is also worth noting that the magical abilities of foundation garments are later described as dark with references to figures like a "Temptress." This is distinctly different than the happy-go-lucky wizard of the mid-1950s. In the earlier examples, a man magically bestows the figure. Later, women use the magical power of their figures, generally on men. This suggests a fear of feminine sexuality. The dynamic goes against what was viewed as the "natural" order, where men held the power.

Seen and Unseen

Efforts to downplay the *unnatural* nature of the corselet reveal another duality: the corselets ability to be both seen and unseen. Also closely related, the corselet occupies an ambiguous position between the public (seen) and private (unseen) realms. The corseleted body is neither dressed nor undressed, neither respectably covered nor revealed and naked.

When worn in public, the corselet is completely hidden beneath the garments worn over it. It was meant to go unnoticed, something often stressed in external sources. Yet, I would argue that while the corselet was technically unseen, its presence could be inferred. Its effects on the body are highly viewable - uplifting the breasts, narrowing the waist, smoothing the torso. Additionally, the repeated use of visual techniques like showing a model in a foundation garment and the corresponding fashion worn over it brought the private practice of dressing into the public realm. This created public knowledge of what was hidden beneath outer fashions.

On the other hand, while the presence of the foundation garments could be inferred, I doubt a wearer would loudly proclaim she was wearing a corselet. Nor would a viewer openly comment on its use. This silent awareness suggests both collective acceptance and denial - raising the question of why?

The importance of secrecy. Being invisible was key to creating an apparently natural form. Revealing the secret means used to modifying the body risks having it viewed as false and the wearer as deceptive. While generally the case, being viewed as deceptive had particularly negative connotations amidst the decline of McCarthyism and escalation of the Cold War. Being caught using feminine artifices like the corselet would not be as serious as being caught as a communist spy. However, concerns about the latter would contribute to fears of the former.

This also helps to further explain the widespread positioning of the postwar silhouette as natural. Doing so reduced the risk of the foundation garment-clad body being read as fake or inauthentic. Instead of being a ruse, the corselet becomes a way to merely *help* women - as it is often put in advertisements - achieve the natural feminine ideal they were expected to strive for.

This feminine ideal was arguably central to the larger culture, which venerated women for roles like motherhood. As noted, the corselet molded the body into the gynoid or hourglass form, which literally signifies fertility. Women's bodies have also long stood as symbols of national identity. Terms like *the motherland* are used to convey the close affinity with where you were born. It suggests a bond, you come from your country just as you do your mother. The country itself is also personified and specifically seen as a woman. In America we praise her beauty, a feminine quality. We do not sing, *America the handsome*. Adhering to feminine beauty ideals would have been incredibly important during the Cold War, when the capitalist nation felt

continually under siege by the threat of communism. The culture's "natural" feminine ideal can be read as a way to bolster and uphold its national identity.

While use of foundation garments was certainly allowed (if not required) within the culture, women would not want to broadcast their use of foundations. Admitting you were wearing a corselet openly acknowledges a deficiency; you do not fit within the expected image of woman; you are not normal. Anyone would arguably wish to avoid this in any culture or time. However, this would have especially negative, perhaps even threatening, connotations during the Red Scare. Gossip about not *really* being so thin or having such full breasts would by no means have been as serious as being accused of being a foreign spy masquerading as an American. Still, the potential opprobrium would be a real concern. Widespread fear of communism created a climate in which deception was viewed as extremely dangerous. It was crucial to be seen as a *real, normal* American who *naturally* conformed to the nation's ideals.

Power and pleasure from secrecy. Secrecy can have negative connotations, especially within the culture examined by this study. Yet, it also has potentially positive meanings. In public, the wearer was aware of the corselet beneath her clothes. Its close proximity to and constant interaction with her body served as reminders of what was hidden.

The use of language in external sources often places the wearer in an active position in relation to this hiding. As the name of one corselet suggests, it is "*Her* secret." Having most likely dressed in the privacy of her own home, she is aware of the beautiful corselet hidden beneath her evening dress. While the rest of the public might be able to infer the presence of foundation garments, they are ultimately unaware of what exactly is worn. They have not been treated to the arousing, private view of the corseleted figure. This secret knowledge is a kind of power. It could also be source of pleasure and increase the allure of the corselet.

As a researcher, I myself have experienced the joy of wearing beautiful underwear, and I would venture to guess many others have, as well. Carefully constructed bits of lace or satin can impart considerable pleasure, even when worn beneath an otherwise mundane outfit. To some extent, the pleasure may come from the garments' physical interactions with the figure. But I think it is largely due to an awareness of what is hidden beneath. While I avoid catching a glimpse of my naked body, I cannot help but look in the mirror after putting on a lovely coordinated brassiere and pair of panties. After I dress, I have that image to carry with me throughout the day.

Pleasure can also come from the anticipations of someone else seeing what is hidden beneath. This certainly could have been the case for the corselet, which was worn for special occasions like parties or "exciting dress-up dates" (*Janie Got a Bra Today*, 1960, p. 3). The cultural practice of wearing your best underthings for a date is still depicted in films and other

cultural media. Unlike lingerie donned for a bedroom encounter, beautiful foundation garments like the corselet signify the *potential* of a sensual encounter, heightening the eroticism of the public experience.

These are speculation based on my own experiences in different historical and cultural contexts. What wearers actually experienced within the postwar corselet remains to be seen. The object's hidden nature and meanings of secrecy could have led to excitement or anxiety. Additional study is needed. However, I think this conjecture is still important as it highlights the complex meanings of the corselet, which are influenced by the cultural and historical contexts.

Summary of the Dualities within the Corselet

The themes explored so far have both positive and negative connotations. They are also highly interrelated. While foundation garments are often discussed in terms of oppression, the corselet also suggests various types of freedom. In a literal sense, the body is allowed to move due to the elasticized panels. The corselet also signified freedom from wartime restrictions and reflected the choices offered to consumers by the postwar economic boom. However, the corselet is more accurately characterized by a tension between these freedoms and instances of control. While the body can move, the elasticized panels also pulled it back and molded in line with the culture's feminine ideals. While there was access to a wide range of foundation garments, such access continued the democratization of beauty, which demands that all women strive to achieve beauty ideals.

The noted ideal is viewed within the culture as "natural," and yet required most women to wear foundation garments like the corselet in order to obtain it - indicating that it is in fact not naturally occurring. Rather, as with all beauty ideals, this notion of what constitutes a feminine body is culturally constructed. This also illustrates the difference between sex and gender; a female must modify her body to become a woman. In the case of the corselet, this modification was hidden but the foundation's effects could be seen and its presence arguably inferred. The choice to still view the corseleted body as natural suggests such meanings played an important role in the cultural.

The corselet has erotic meanings and a sexualizing effect. It molded the wearer's body into a sexually attractive hourglass figure, which was possessed by the era's sex symbols, like Marilyn Monroe. Yet, the corseleted-figure also signified idealized qualities like virginity and fertility; both were incredibly important during an era that chastised women for sexual promiscuity and venerated them for maternity.

These ideals were central to constructing postwar American culture, helping to firmly establish gender divisions and arguably helping in the Cold War "fight" against communism. This

"natural," normal femininity was seen as essential to the American way of life. The noted sexualizing functions of the corselet also had the potential to objectify women, maintaining the culture's patriarchal power structure by taking away women's subjectivity.

Thus, the corselet can have very negative connotation (i.e. control and restriction) and is potentially oppressive. Yet, its functions also may have offered women a socially acceptable way to experience and express their sexuality. The corselet also suggests that women became increasingly active in their pursuit of their sexual desires in the wake of major cultural shifts like the release of the pill and the sexual revolution that followed. Acknowledging these complexity counters reductive interpretations of postwar women as dupes that passively assumed feminine dress and feminine roles (e.g. Kunzle, 2006, p. 221).

Exploring the corselet though its multiple dualities illustrates the tensions that characterized the corselet, women's experiences within it, and the culture that surrounded them. It is not a question of moving from one pole or the other. The post-WWII era was not a single instance of women being forced back into the corset (or corselet) bookended by literal and abstract freedoms.

There is great danger in viewing the world around us as black and white. Interpreting traditionally feminine objects or practices as wholly oppressive and their masculine equivalents as symbols of power and freedom only serves to maintain the gender dichotomy; it continues to position the feminine as lesser. While the corselet may have had negative functions or meanings, it also may have had positive connotations. It is a complex object that is part of a much larger, equally complex culture.

Connections between the Postwar Corselet and the 21st Century

Corselet use widely declined by the end of the 1960s. Yet, there are still connections between the object, its functions, and its uses during the mid-20th century and our culture today. In order to tease out these connections, I begin by discussing modern practices and objects that seem similar but, upon further reflection, are not comparable. Considering these examples helped me to contemplate the relationship between postwar culture and today. I hope this brief section will help readers to do the same.

The noted decline was true of most foundation garments, which were replaced by lighter options like pantyhose and more minimalist brassiere designs. Yet, previous research indicates that foundation garments like the corset and corselet have "not so much disappear[ed] as become internalized" (Steele, 2001, p. 143). They have merely been replaced by other means of modifying the body like exercise or plastic surgery.

However, these other means of modifying the body's form differ from the corselet. Both exercise and plastic surgery result in modifications that are relatively permanent, and the former process involves a much slower change. By comparison, the corselet is a temporary modification. It can be donned and discarded, quickly changing the body.

Foundation garments also made their way into outerwear during the second half of the 20th century and frequently appear in today's fashions. Some versions, particularly high-end designs, can notably modify the body. However, others merely resemble the boned structure of the corset but do little to change the body's shape. Furthermore, this *outward* use differs from other body modifications. Objects like the corselet or practices like exercise are intended to shape the body *beneath* the clothes.

Corselet-*like* designs are still produced today. Elasticized foundation garments that resemble the corselet are readily available from companies like Victoria's Secret, though they are now called "corsets" and "bustiers" ("Sexy Corsets & Bustiers," 2019). This choice of name suggests efforts to conjure up a nostalgia for the past, much like Hollywood Vassarette's "Gay 90's Look" corselet. Interestingly, these designs are listed under "lingerie", suggesting their functions have more to do with private, sexual foreplay than supporting the body beneath the clothes worn in public. This is a notably different use than the postwar corselet. I have worn several of these designs. They somewhat smooth the body and can augment the breasts. However, they do not offer the same degree of body modification as a mid-20th century corselet. Despite visual similarities, this current example is not terribly comparable to the corselet.

Today, some women (as well as some men) still wear body-altering corsets to engage in practices like waist trainings and tightlacing. This instance of modern corsetry is a very complex. These practices require repeated, if not continual, use of foundation garments. This example also crosses over into the arena of fetishism. While it is a fascinating topic (and worth comparing in relation to body modification with the corselet) I will not be exploring these connections here.

There are, however, other instances of body modification today that have interesting parallels to the postwar corselet. I will focus on foundation garment use in three specific contexts: weddings, wearing vintage fashions, and the performances of burlesque and drag. While I have not studied any of them at great length and my interpretations are based largely on casual observations, the connections between the corselet and these practices are worth reflecting on.

Weddings and Other Formal Occasions

The mid-20th century corselet was primarily worn for formal, public events. Similar foundation garments are still occasionally worn for special occasions like a wedding, or perhaps prom. I purchased a strapless, low-back longline bra when I got married. The strapless bodice of

my dress came to a low-v in back, so most strapless brassieres sold today did not work. The design I eventually found extended slightly over the hips. It did not have garters like the mid-20th century designs but did angle down in back, hiding just below the cut of my dress.

There were certainly practical reasons for this use. The brassiere I purchased slightly smoothed my torso and, perhaps more importantly, supported and shaped my breasts while exposing my shoulders. However, I ultimately abandoned the foundation garment in favor or sew-in foam cups, which were a much more comfortable option for a ridiculously-hot summer wedding in an un-air-conditioned barn in Oklahoma.

I realize now that I did not give wearing a corselet-like brassiere a second thought. In hindsight, the foam cups were a cheaper, more efficient choice - no need to worry about them accidentally being seen if my dress slid down. Yet, I felt I *should* wear a special brassiere in order to be properly attired. I saw it as an important part of not only my wedding ensemble but my experience as a bride. The act of purchasing a new brassiere just for my wedding signified the importance of the event. While I ultimately did not use it, I had an almost involuntary desire to wear a very specific foundation garment beneath my wedding dress. I would not be surprised if other women had similar experiences.

Glamour and transformation. Field's (2007) writes that postwar foundations that cinched the waist helped "to construct the unique pleasure of proms, weddings, and New Year's Eve parties" (p. 267). This also seems to be the case in our culture today. It goes beyond practical reasons. These objects provide women with tangible means to separate from their everyday selves. These objects may even take on increasingly "special" meanings in an era where most women rarely wear body-modifying foundations like the corselet. Additionally, some argue we have become a much more informal culture (e.g. Przybyszewski, 2014). This increases the significance of those few times when we dress-up.

As noted in my analysis, the rare use of the corselet was one of the means used to imbue it with meanings of glamour. This was then extended to the wearer when she wore it. The corselet also imparted things like confidence and grace. These qualities have positive connotations and could contribute significantly to why someone wears a corselet. The desire to feel glamorous or confident, especially at a special occasion, is by no means specific to the postwar era. I would argue that corselets and other foundation garments that dramatically modify the body *still* have these transformative powers.

Gender and tradition. During the mid-20th century, the corselet was worn in settings when a wearer was expected to closely align with feminine ideals. It molded the body into a physically attractive feminine form, which would help to attract the opposite sex. Adherence to

gendered dress also conveyed adherence gender norms, which would appeal to a potential suitor. Beyond attracting men, compliance with cultural norms helped to avoid social stigma.

Today, many women have abandoned, if not rejected, foundation garments that incase and dramatically modify the body for a number of reasons, such as comfort. Current fashions are also noticeably less structured than those from the post-WWII era. For many, a corselet would feel very restrictive compared to the elasticized or loose-fitting garments frequently worn today.

While I have not studied contemporary undergarments, I think this rejection is also due to the gendered meanings attached to the objects. This is certainly reflected in some of the recent scholarship reviewed in Chapter 2. In general, there is an increasing awareness of the relationship between our clothes and our definitions of gender, as well as more active attempts to challenge the latter in our daily lives. However, my sense is that we as a culture tend to adhere more closely to traditional gender norms at formal, social events.

We are highly visible at events like weddings. They are witnessed not only by those present there, but traditionally captured in photographs, which are now widely shared with social media. There is undoubtedly more pressure to conform to cultural norms than in other situations. These are also very ritualized events - with the various steps or components conveyed through cultural media like movies or magazines, as well as through more personal media like family photographs. There is considerable pressure created by the notion of tradition.

Despite advances within our culture, these milestones are times when women are encouraged, if not expected, to conform to a traditional image of womanhood. This seems to be the case even if they do not conform to these expectations in real life. Sexually emancipated women wear a white dress, signifying the purity and virginity idealized in women. Brides are *given away* by their fathers despite their independence in real life.

The pressure of cultural traditions is incredibly powerful. I myself experienced it. Some seemed outdated and counter to my personal belief, but I feared I would regret it if I did not include them in my wedding. There was also the pressure of meeting others' expectations, mainly family, and not wanting to disappoint them. Granted, if social media is any indication, some women are diverging from these traditions. Wedding dresses are increasingly worn in colors like grey or pale pink. Yet, these soft colors are not far from the traditional white.

Connections between postwar era and today. Many researchers note the importance placed on marriage following WWII. It was something women were expected to strive for and to then devote themselves to. This still persists today. Feminist scholar Adichie (2017) notes, "we condition girls to aspire to marriage" (p. 30). We also teach them what the wedding at the beginning of this marriage should look like. It is easy to see ourselves and our culture as different

from or more advanced than eras like the 1950s. Certainly a lot has changed but I'm struck by the similarities between the reasons why women wore corselet's in the mid-20th century and the possible reasons we wear them today.

The setting around us still influences the way we dress, not only the place or activity, but the wider culture. There are practical reasons for this choice of foundation garment, demonstrating the continued relationship between under- and outer-garments. I also suspect corselets still have transformative functions, as well. They can confer positive qualities like confidence and aid in the transformation into certain roles, like *bride*.

Yet, such roles reflect the persisting connections between expectations regarding how women should *look* and how they should *be*. While we have made some strides in terms of gender equality, demands that women adhere to traditional femininity persist. Pressures to conform increase in situations steeped in traditions, which both pass down and maintain a culture. This current use speaks to the continued presence of traditional gender norms and the ways they shape our lives.

Wearing Vintage

Today, wearing vintage clothing has a continued (if not an increasing) popularity. The vast array of blogs from around the world reflects the growing community. In the section that follows, I focus on wearing vintage fashions from the era examined in this study. While I have not specifically studied this topic, I have personally engaged in the practice of wearing vintage clothing. Based on my personal experiences, I think there are connections to the mid-20th century corselet and other foundation garments.

Wearing vintage is not a singular practice. While many women wear fashions from or inspired by the mid-20th century, the actual garments and the practice of wearing them vary. There are variety of reasons for wearing vintage, from aesthetic to ethical (DeLong, Heinemann, & Reiley, 2005; Reiley & DeLong, 2011). The extent of use also differs. Some may exclusively wear vintage garments. Others may continually wear it, but only in certain settings. On the other hand, some may only don vintage clothing for special occasions, like the "Mad Men" parties discussed by Reiley and Janigo (2014). Additionally, some may choose to wear vintage fashions exclusively from one era, while others create ensembles that intentionally mix vintage with new or combine garments from different decades. Thus, there is a continuum of use from *24/7* to *rare* and from *pure vintage* to *bricolage*.

Vintage "outer" fashions. In addition to the practice, there is also arguably variation in terms of the garments that fall beneath the umbrella of vintage fashion. As noted, some wearers have a more purist approach. By that I mean only wearing garments originally produced and worn

during a specific era. Others may mix these vintage pieces with modern day fashions. In either case, pieces could be found at garage sales or brick and mortar vintage stores, as well as online from websites like Etsy and eBay.

These wearers may be driven by purely aesthetic reasons, but I would venture to guess they are drawn to these types of garments because of their connections to the past. DeLong, Heinemann, & Reiley (2005) note that, “In clothing, vintage usually involves the recognition of a special type or model and knowing and appreciating such specifics as year or period when produced or worn” (p. 23). This *appreciation* is key. In the cited case study, all of the women “discussed the importance of their vintage clothing as having a connection to time or place” (p. 36). Wearing vintage garments is not only about the pieces themselves (design, quality, and look) but their meaning - the stories tied to them and the literal connections to the past.

Vintage-inspired fashions. Other wearers with a passion for vintage fashion may choose stylized-reproductions. New garments that resemble typical vintage fashions can be purchased from companies like Bettie Page Clothing - named after the iconic pinup model (“Bettie Page,” 2019). In addition to companies with a more exclusive focus, mainstream fashions from high-end couture to low-end ready-to-wear also draw inspiration from bygone eras.

Such garments often notably differ from the original versions they mimic. For example, 1950s-esc dresses from the noted company are often made of elasticized fabrics, allowing them to hug the body while being less restrictive than the unyielding woven materials generally used during the era. Additionally, key details from vintage fashions are often used but then exaggerated. A neckline is made wider. A slit is cut higher.

These garments may appeal to those who like the postwar aesthetic but do not feel the need to strictly adhere to it. This vintage fashion option is also more accessible, with garments often coming in a wide range of sizes. By comparison, vintage garments are typically one offs and tend to be quite small, which makes them quite limiting.

Some undoubtedly will argue these reinterpretations are not technically vintage and, in a literal sense, I suppose they are correct. However, such garments draw from the iconography of past fashions and attempt to imbue the garments with similar meanings, or, perhaps more accurately, meanings based on our current cultural memories of past eras and fashions. I would argue that while such objects are not vintage garments, meaning they are a not certain number of years old, they do fall within the realm of vintage fashion.

Anecdotally, these garments often seem to be worn by women who are part of different subcultures, such as Rockabilly. They are also worn by some alternative models, especially those who continue the pin-up tradition. I am by no means an expert on Rockabilly fashion but I have

noticed that, while true vintage garments may also be worn, the current aesthetic is highly-stylized. Rockabilly fashions draw inspiration from mid-20th century fashion, when the music genre began, but amps-it-up and reimagines it by combining different eras or adding modern twists. Hairstyles like the 1940s victory rolls or 1960s beehive are often adopted but styled bigger or dyed a vibrant color. Aspects of vintage fashion are also juxtaposed with traditional aspects of subcultural dress, like facial piercing and tattoos. The goal is not historical accuracy; it is its own distinct look.

Vintage sewing patterns. Another group heavily involved in vintage fashion is women who sew their own clothes. The internet has exponentially increased access to surviving vintage patterns, offering greater choice in terms of design and size. Big name pattern companies like Butterick and Simplicity have re-released past patterns. They, as well as independent pattern makers, have also created vintage-inspired patterns. These various pattern options, as well as the opportunities offered by sewing, allow these women to engage in vintage fashion but to also create something that personally fits them. Patterns can be adjusted to fit the body. Fabrics or colors can be chosen for a personal style.

I have found that this approach, especially when using vintage patterns, has a similar appeal to wearing vintage garments. There is still very much a tangible connection to the past. The finished garments can be higher quality, incorporating features like bound buttonholes. There is also the added satisfaction of having created something with your own hands that reflects your personal style.

This area of vintage is particularly fascinating. It has a vibrant and active online community that is driven by equal passions for vintage fashion and sewing. The latter is a skill that is increasingly disappearing from our society. There are various reasons for this decline. Making your own clothes is no longer a necessity for many people. The rise of fast fashion has made clothes more affordable and accessible. However, these cheap, fast fashion garments have also reduced appreciation for things like fine finishing details. The noted online community seems to have formed in reaction to this shift. Those involved are motivated by desires to preserve and revitalize technical sewing skills, in addition to being driven by a love of vintage fashions.

Another reason sewing has become less common is that, perhaps like certain vintage fashions, the practice is viewed as heavily gendered. Both in the mid-20th century and today, more women are sewers than men. Clothing the family is traditionally a woman's role and making these clothes is also considered a feminine act. So, the act of sewing is seen by some as giving in to the domestic feminine ideal. Just as some have abandoned symbols of feminine dress, some have rejected certain practices because of their cultural meanings.

Those who sew their own vintage clothes seem keenly aware of the potential meanings of both the garments they make and the very act of making them. One highly successful blog is Gretchen “Gertie” Hirsch’s “Blog for Better Sewing.” The New York Sewist often posts about specific sewing techniques or vintage fashion trends. However, she also posts about feminism and tries to reconcile it with traditionally feminine dress and practices like sewing in posts like “Sewing and Feminism 101” (Hirsch, 2010). Topics like this are often followed by lengthy comments from readers providing various opinions.

Many of the readers of the cited blog post note the personal pleasure they get from sewing. However, the oppressive effects of past demands that women sew is also acknowledged. One reader discusses her grandmother, noting, “When [ready to wear] clothing got cheaper and provided more choices, she stopped sewing because she HATED it.” Another acknowledges the somewhat necessary rejection, but argues we need to revalue “traditional women's work” (Hirsch, 2010).

As with several of the ideas put forward in this interpretation, the relationship between traditionally feminine practices like home sewing and 21st century feminism is incredibly complex. I’ve briefly mentioned it because it illustrates how traditionally feminine acts like sewing can have both positive and negative meanings. As with the corselet, it is important to note the latter and to acknowledge the experiences of many women in the past. However, just because something is viewed as feminine does not make it inherently oppressive. Practices like sewing can have positive connotations, as well as take on new meanings in different contexts. This is also true of wearing foundation garments, which is explored in the next section.

Vintage “Under” Fashions. There is considerable variation in vintage fashion, extending beyond the examples discussed. These differences are important to acknowledge because they help to better understand the differences in what is worn beneath. As with the garments worn over them, there are various options for foundation garments, which have different uses and meanings.

In the sections below, I discuss three types of foundation garments worn beneath vintage fashions: surviving vintage versions, modern shapewear, and vintage-inspired designs. I then go on to further explore several factors that influence the wearer’s decision to wear one of these options, or to not wear any of them. Like the corselet, there is a strong relationship between the under- and outer-garments. There are also personal and cultural influences on the decision.

These influences segue into a discussion of the relationship between wearing foundation garments and practicing feminism. Based on my observations, those who wear vintage fashions often engage in both and have very insightful perspectives. Since many of these individuals wear

foundation garments, their comments are generally based on personal experiences over cultural perceptions of the objects.

Extant vintage foundation garments. One option is surviving vintage foundation garments, like those examined as part of this study. As with vintage outer garments, they can be purchased from a number of places. They can also be found in a range of conditions from heavily worn to unused 'deadstock' pieces still in their original packaging.

These objects also have a very tangible tie to the past. I would argue this is a considerable part of their appeal. As noted in my analysis of the corselet, the idealized silhouette changed over time. This has continued to be true. As a result, modern foundation garments can look ill-fitting underneath vintage clothes, especially more structured, fitted garments. With a bit of research to determine an object's age, wearers can attain an authentic shape beneath their vintage garments. Whether worn in 1955 or today, these foundation garments also shape the physical experiences of the wearer. This could further strengthen the connection to the past.

Personally, I also find that these objects have a very strong aesthetic appeal. Companies like Hollywood Vassarette put considerable thought into not only the functions but the looks of their designs. They invested heavily in creating beautiful, high-quality lace to adorn their products (*The Lace Story*, n.d.). Amidst the rise of fast fashion, this kind of attention to detail seems to be lacking from most 21st century foundation garments and lingerie. Like vintage outer garments, these foundation garments are often high-quality in terms of construction and materials used.

Wearing vintage foundation garments is also a more sustainable option than purchasing new products. However, this choice can present some challenges. As noted in my analysis, some foundation garments like the corselet were offered in a fairly limited size range. Most of the vintage foundation garments I have seen on websites like Etsy generally have a band size of 36" or smaller. Other options like modern shapewear and vintage-inspired foundation (both discussed shortly) come in a much wider range of sizes. So, this option may be limited to wearers with smaller figures.

The age of a foundation garment and the way it has been cared for can also negatively impact its quality. As noted, corselets both *shaped* and *were shaped* by the wearer's body - which affects the fit for a 21st century wearer. Finding a foundation garments that have survived over the decades, are in the desired design, and are in the correct size can be a difficult task. So, while vintage foundations may have an aesthetic appeal and valuable connections to the past, they are not always the most functional choice.

Modern shapewear. Modern shapewear is another option for molding the body beneath vintage fashions. While foundation garments have declined in use and been replaced by other

means of body modification, they are still created and sold. They are easy to purchase, offered online and in stores, and come in a wide range of sizes.

Companies like SPANX sell many different elasticized foundation garments or what they call “shapewear” (“SPANX,” 2019). Their original design took inspiration from a pair pantyhose (“About SPANX,” 2019). All of their current shapewear designs are aimed at creating the appearance of a sleek, smooth body. Companies like Rago sell what could be viewed as more traditional foundation garments (“Rago,” 2019). The bodies of their designs are made from similar materials to those from SPANX. However, they often include features seen in earlier designs like stays, garters for stocking, and added bands of elastic for additional shaping to areas like the natural waist.

Given their new condition and decades of advances in textile technology, these foundation garments may be more resilient with continued wear. However, foundation garment designs are intimately related to an era’s beauty ideals. Today, the imperative seems to be on an overall thinness, rather than qualities like a cinched waist, which sometimes require pushing excess flesh down to the lower abdomen. Thus, the resulting shape from smoothing foundation garments like SPANX may not be in line with fashions from periods like the post-WWII era.

These foundation garments also emphasize function over form. While they have elements like lace panels, the designs are relatively subdued. Most designs come in white, tan, or black. They rarely use high shine materials or contrasting colors, which could add visual interest or draw emphasis to different areas of the body. Much like foundations from the mid-20th century, these body-modifying-means are meant to remain a secret. They remain hidden and help to create the illusion of fitting a beauty ideal.

A number of vintage fashion bloggers use and review Rago’s designs as underpinnings for both vintage and vintage-inspired garments (e.g. Elinor, 2015; “Rago Longline Bra - 3 Ways!”, 2016). The vintage lingerie blog “The Nylon Swish” is a big proponent of the brand, writing, “I’m a big fan of Rago Shapewear. In my opinion, their foundations hold me in and smooth out my lumps and bumps beautifully” (Elinor, 2017).

Others have mixed reviews of the foundation garments. Gertie, whose vintage sewing blog I previously discussed, notes having tried a girdle and a longline bra from Rago. However, she found the former to be incredibly ineffective and only occasionally wears the latter. She is, however, “a big fan of high-waisted Spanx...wear[ing] them with my pencil skirts for a smoothing effect” (Hirsch, 2009).

I am not surprised by these differing experiences with 21st century foundation garments. I suspect that, as with earlier corselets, the choice of foundation and the wearer’s subsequent

experience in it is influenced by her own body. Factors like how defined your waist is or how much flesh you have around your torso impacts how strong (as in tensile strength) of a foundation garment is required to modify your body into the desired silhouette. Women like Gertie, who appears to naturally have an hourglass form, may be able to emulate the beauty ideal reflected in mid-20th century fashions with moderate foundation garments like “high-waisted Spanx” - merely smoothing out her natural form. As Gertie’s comment also points out, the garments worn over also influence this choice.

Vintage-inspired foundation garments. A final option worth discussing is 21st century foundation garments based on vintage designs. “What Katie Did” is a particularly successful example, named after a 1951 romantic comedy film (“What Katie Did,” 2019). The London-based company offers “Vintage Lingerie, Corsets and '50s Glamour” (“What Katie Did Instagram,” 2019). These are not exact reproductions of 1950s foundation garments. In fact, I would argue their designs are actually based on foundations from the 1940s through early-1960s.

The designs have visual ties to the past, especially sex-icons like Marilyn Monroe and pin-up culture. This is evidenced in things like their sling style brassiere, which is based on a brassiere worn by Monroe (Thomas, 2018). The models featured on their website and in their catalogs also generally assume pin-up poses similar to those observed in Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette advertisements. Naming designs like their bullet bra “Harlow” (after 1930s sex-symbol Jean Harlow) also reflects the company's efforts to imbue their designs with as much sex-appeal and nostalgia as possible.

Based on personal experiences and images of other women in the foundation garments, these designs can dramatically modify the body. Like those from Rago, these foundation garments benefit from advances in textile technology. However, aesthetics is particularly important for brands like “What Katie Did.” They utilize a variety of materials, construction techniques, and iconography. The company also releases new lines each season. In this sense, they are much more akin to companies of the past like Hollywood-Maxwell or Hollywood Vassarette, rather than Rago, whose designs are fairly static.

Like Hollywood Vassarette design by the early-1960s, most of the foundation garments are part of coordinated collections that share colors, fabrics, and embellishments. The company also recently started offering colored seamed stocking to match the foundation garments, allowing a wearer to create a cohesive ensemble throughout all the layers placed on the body. “What Katie Did’s” approach to foundation garments suggests an equal investment in what is worn beneath - similar to the wardrobe trend during the second half of 1950s.

Their foundation garments offer varying amounts of body-modification. Their elasticized waspies are “designed to add definition to your waist comfortably for a retro hourglass look” (“Waspie,” 2019). Others are more restrictive. While they claim their corsets can be used for “daily wear,” some wearers may prefer to reserve the dramatic cinching of the “extreme” boned corsets for special occasions (“What Katie Did,” 2019). This is speculative is at this point. It could be valuable to compare women’s use of and experiences with foundation garments during the mid-20th century and today. There seem to be connections; however, the contexts in which the objects were created and worn are quite different.

These vintage-inspired foundations are notably more expensive than modern shapewear. A girdle from “What Katie Did” costs between $60 and $90, whereas Rago girdles can be purchased for $30 to $40 from online retailers like Amazon - half the price. However, I think wearers may be willing to invest more because of the additional meanings that “What Katie Did” seems to actively instill into their designs.

There is a notable difference in the visual presentation of their designs. The images used to sell Rago’s foundation garments are fairly simple and staid; cropped shots of the body with white background are used to keep the focus on the foundations. Conversely, the images on the “What Katie Did” website are elaborately staged. Models are shown in vintage-inspired hair and makeup and are shot at a distance to show an entire ensemble. The images seem to be aimed at evoking an emotional response, rather than just providing information about a product.

“What Katie Did” designs have much more erotic connotations than modern shapewear. Images of their designs utilize similar techniques to the mid-20th century advertisements analyzed, such as a heavy use of models in pin-up poses: arched backs, arms raised, and heads coyly turned. Some models are posed in from of backgrounds that suggest private settings. Props like vintage dressers help to convey the often-hidden act of dressing and undressing. Others are shown in public settings like a bar, suggesting the fantasy of public exhibitionism. Both examples play with the seen-unseen duality that is inherent to foundation garments. They not only convey the objects’ erotic connotations but also suggest the sexual pleasure that can be experienced by wearing them.

Decision Factors. When it comes to foundation garments, there are several options for the 21st century vintage wearer. The choice of what to wear may be based on a number of factors, like access. Depending on the wearer’s body, the vintage foundation garments available can be very limited. On the other hand, modern shapewear and vintage-inspired foundation garments come in a wide range of sizes. The wearer’s desire for an authentic appearance, as well as how they define authenticity, may also influence their decision.

Under-outer relationship. What is worn over the foundation garments would also be a factor. Use varies between the different types of vintage fashion previously discussed. This is not surprising, given the noted relationship between under- and outer-garments during the era examined in this study and noted in research on other eras.

Many surviving vintage garments and those made using vintage patterns require foundation garments in order to fit and lay on the body properly. The blog "Couture Allure" is a staunch advocate for wearing foundation garments beneath vintage garments. They note, "vintage garments were designed and constructed with the understanding that the woman who wore them would be wearing the correct bra, girdle, and slip" ("Foundation garments to make your vintage dresses fit correctly," 2009). Incidentally, they discusses how a merry widow is the "the proper foundation garments to wear... [for a] low back dress" ("What to Wear Under a Low Back Dress - 1957", 2009). This is in line with my analysis of the corselet and its relation to a specific outer-garment fashion.

Use would depend on the style of the garment, as well as the wearer's body shape. For example, loose fitting fashions like late-1950's trapeze or chemise dresses could be worn without foundation garments. However, more structured ensembles with elements like a fitted waist or a sheath skirt would generally require some kind of foundation garment to fit correctly.

On the other hand, the reproduction vintage fashions discussed do not necessarily require additional support. Vintage-inspired garments, like those from Bettie Page, strive to create the *va-va-voom* hourglass many associate with the 1950s, even though they are highly elasticized. The outer garments, themselves, (at least somewhat) do the work of a foundation garments. I've also noticed that these companies' dresses are often paired with belts along the natural waist, which helps to cinch this area.

So, these garments can be worn without foundation garments. However, the noted fabrics are less rigid than those used in foundation garments. They may cling to the wearer's unwanted "lumps and bumps" - as "The Nylon Swish" puts it. Much like the mid-20th century, our culture still associates a sleek, smooth form with beauty. Some wearers may *need* body-smoothing foundations beneath these form-fitting garments to achieve the desired silhouette.

As noted, you can also create your own vintage fashions using reproductions of vintage patterns. These designs look like their earlier counterparts and can be constructed using similar woven materials, perhaps even vintage fabrics for an additional connection to the past. However, the proportions of these patterns generally have been modified. Based on my own observations, the waist to bust ratio is often decreased, resulting in finished garments that have less dramatically defined waists. I suspect this has been done so they can be worn without foundation

garments, which 21st century wearers may find restrictive and uncomfortable. Similar alterations can be made to vintage patterns. Bloggers like Gertie suggest “adapt[ing] retro designs to a modern silhouette” (Hirsch, 2009).

Personal and cultural influences. Of the vintage fashions discussed, I personally prefer original vintage garments or those made using vintage sewing patterns. I also particularly dislike garments made from reproduced vintage sewing patterns that have been modified for modern figures. These designs feel less authentic; they feel a bit like cheating. This speaks to my own definition of authenticity and view of vintage fashion.

For me, a key part of the appeal of the postwar era fashions are their frequent manipulation of the female form. Granted, I am also privileged in that my natural waist is narrower than my hips, aligning with the postwar hourglass ideal. I can often wear the era’s fashions without dramatically modifying my waist. Although I do generally, need a padded brassiere to attain the buxom-bosom associated with the era.

So, the wearer is a major factor shaping what is worn beneath vintage fashions. As my comments indicate, personal view of what constitutes authentic vintage fashions influence their choice of foundation garments. The wearer’s own body also continues to influence the choice. However, sometimes the choice is to abandon foundation garments altogether.

The latter choice is a crucial difference between 21st and mid-20th century wearers. Foundation garments were (by and large) required beneath these vintage fashions when they were worn in their original context. Women who fit the physical ideal might have worn lighter foundation garments or perhaps abandoned them in some settings. However, in general, women needed to wear a girdle and brassiere to be considered properly dressed. Going girdle-less was not just a fashion *faux-pas*. Somewhat like the “loose women” of the 18th century (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002, p. 9), not wearing foundation garments signified a woman’s questionable moral character (Dione, 2009, p. 100).

Today, sartorial restrictions have relaxed, though we still judge women’s morality and sexuality based on their appearances. Rape victims being blamed because their supposedly promiscuous dress was a sign of *asking for it* is a particularly disheartening example. However, not wearing foundation garments carries considerably less social stigma than it once did. In fact, in our current culture, wearing them to noticeably modify the body may result in stigma. As previously discussed, some view foundation garments and other traditionally feminine elements of dress as a means of feminine oppression. Assumptions may be made about the wearer’s character, interpreting the choice as subscribing, or at least giving in, to traditional gender ideals.

Foundations and Feminism. There is considerable debate about the relationship between wearing foundation garments and practicing feminist values. There are certainly those who view the two as mutually exclusive. The designs are often the work of male designers and engineers, and as a result are viewed by some as literal embodiments of male fantasies. While these concerns are valid, I hope that my interpretation of the corselet has made it clear that this is a very reductive view of foundation garments. Within the vintage fashion community there seems to be a more nuanced discussion of the topic. There is more emphasis on the wearer's own experiences within foundation garments but also an acknowledgement of the cultural meanings of the objects.

Vintage sewing blogger Gertie argues it should be "strictly personal preference" and notes that she selectively uses foundation garments. Somewhat in line with Field (2007) observations about post-WWII, Gertie opts for more intense body-modifying foundation garments only "for special occasions" but would not wear them on "a daily basis." I fall into this only-for-special-occasions groups, as well.

Gertie adds that "Personally, adopting retro foundation garments also becomes a bit problematic body image-wise" (Hirsch, 2009). I find this comment particularly interesting. She is associating the act of modifying the body using foundation garments with having poor body image. I'm curious if she would feel the same way about other forms of body modification like tattoos or dying your hair (both of which she has done). I suspect that this association speaks to the current culture's negative associations with traditional symbols of femininity.

Readers' comments on the blog post quote above indicated a range of views. One notes, "I love the clothes of the past, and I love the lines they created, but I am not willing to suffer...it's possible to pay homage to the styles of the past without having to cut yourself in half with a restrictive undergarment." Similarly, another reader proclaims, "I have no desire to torture myself into wearing what they wore back then". The use of words like "suffer" or "torture" and comments like "cut yourself in half" indicate continued associations of foundation garments with extreme body modification and physical pain. I am curious about the extent and nature of these readers' experiences with foundation garments. It is entirely possible they have worn them, and the experiences were very negative. However, their comments may also be the result of general perceptions of foundation garments as instruments of feminine oppression.

Another reader shares her various experiences wearing vintage fashions and various foundation garments in her daily life. She expresses that "wearing 40s and 50s lingerie actually makes me feel confident, empowered and really really good." She also acknowledges that she chooses to do this freely, not because is it a "prescribed norm" (Hirsch, 2009). As noted, this is a

key difference from previous eras. This “choice” and “freedom” undoubtedly shape the experiences of 21st century wearers and change the meanings of the objects.

Corsetiere Emma Capponi makes similar observations in an interview with the blog “The Nylon Swish.” She holds very pro-corset views (which she acknowledges). However, her deep involvement with the practice means she is well versed in women’s actual experiences with this type of body modification. She speaks of the positive experiences she has witnessed firsthand, saying:

> When I see women put corsets on it can be a transformation. Especially older or larger women, who have become used to the false idea that they are not considered attractive. They put on a corset and suddenly they are no longer mother, worker, carer, they are powerful, sexual beings (Elinor, 2010).

Capponi’s comment indicate the continued ability of foundation garments to not only transform a wearer’s body but to also change their perception of themselves. Her observations also suggest foundation garments continued role in helping women experience and express their sexuality.

Challenging beauty ideals. We have begun to move away from the dangerously-skinny, waif ideal and many are working to encourage body positivity. Yet, our culture still has a fairly restrictive definition of feminine beauty that centers on thin, youthful bodies. I would argue that wearing foundation garments can be a way of challenging cultural beauty ideals, at least within some of the subcultures around vintage fashions. The practice of wearing foundation garments becomes a way to redefine qualities like *sexy*.

This is evidenced in the comments above. Modifying the body with foundation garments helps those who do not fit our culture’s feminine ideals - like “older or larger women” to combat “false idea that they are not considered attractive” (Elinor, 2010). Companies like “What Katie Did” also seem to intentionally challenge mainstream definitions of beauty. They not only sell products in a wide range of sizes but also features models or different ages and with different body shapes - offering an alternative beauty ideal. As noted, company uses images to promote their designs by imbuing them with meanings of feminine sexuality and eroticism. Including women who do not align with mainstream beauty ideals in these depictions expands the definition of who is attractive. It suggests they are also sexy.

Drag and Burlesque

Boned foundation garments similar to the corselet, as well as the corset, are also still worn as parts of costumes in various types performances. Their use in drag and burlesque have particularly interesting connections to my analysis and interpretation of the postwar corselet. Documentaries like *Burlesque: Heart of the Glitter Tribe* (Manning, 2017) and *Pageant* (Davis &

Halpern, 2008) capture instances of this use on stage. I cannot comment on the exact extent of this use. However, these documentaries provide some interesting insights into additional examples of foundation garment use in the 21st century.

Use of foundation garments. Both drag and burlesque involve developing distinct personas. A variety of means are used to construct the performances on stage, including wigs, makeup, and costumes. The latter often includes foundation garments; however, there seems to be slightly different uses between the two performance arts.

In drag, foundation garments are primarily used to physically change the form of the body. The foundations are unseen on stage; only their effects are visible. There is a very strong relationship between the under and outer garments. The former is chosen based on the latter to ensure they remain hidden. This is seen in the 2008 documentary cited above, which follows several men entered in the Miss Gay USA pageant. One contestant is shown putting on a corselet beneath a strapless evening gown - a rather similar use to decades earlier. On the other hand, another contestant comments, “No I can’t wear a bra” as he tapes chest to create cleavage beneath his revealing evening gown.

Keeping the means of body-modification hidden is crucial. As a judge for the pageant notes, drag is about “impersonation” and “illusion.” The foundations play a key role in the performer's larger transformation into their stage persona and, somewhat like the mid-20th century corselet, must remain secret to maintain the illusion.

In burlesque, on the other hand, foundation garments are worn as part of the costume, not a hidden underpinning. They are prominently featured on stage. The foundation garments used for drag and burlesque are fundamentally the same, such as padded push-up brassieres or strapless corselets. However, for burlesque the foundation garments are then amped up, heavily embellished with things like rhinestones, ribbons, and fringe. This speaks to their very visible role in the performance.

There is great variety within burlesque, but a traditional and recurring feature is the intentional removing of select pieces of clothing one by one. Because of this reveal, there is a strategic layering of costumes. Thus, there is also a very strong relationship throughout all these layers, between the main costumes, the undergarments, and the body underneath. Unlike drag, the use of foundation garments seems to have less to do with physically modifying the body. For the sake of the smoothness of an act, all pieces need to be easy to cast off, sometimes with Velcro, ribbons, or other closures. Making foundation garments easily removable can reduce the horizontal tension that holds the body in and shapes it, negating their body modifying function.

With this in mind, I would argue foundation garments are primarily used in burlesque because of the objects' symbolic functions. Many, if not all, of the performers in *Glitter Tribe* (2017) note the desire to communicate something to the audience through their burlesque acts. The use of objects like corsets and other foundation garments on stage reiterate, if not amplify, the erotic connotations of the dances. Additionally, showing the traditionally hidden foundation garments and the traditionally private act of undressing on stage adds to the subversive meanings of the performances.

Burlesque dancer "Zora Von Pavonine" notes being inspired by designers like Jean Paul Gaultier and Alexander McQueen. As she is shown constructing her own corset for the stage, she adds that she is especially drawn to their "radical" pieces. Both McQueen and Gaultier have played with the corset as outerwear. McQueen is particularly known for using his designs to challenge society by making people uncomfortable. Burlesque, arguably, can have a similar effect; it subverts cultural norms in various ways. Women openly wearing garments with sexually-charged meanings and actively expressing their own sexuality goes against cultural ideals of feminine modesty and morality - which still pervade in our society.

Exaggeration of gender symbols and ideals in drag. Both drag and burlesque use gender symbols and ideals to construct the performances. With drag, this involves traditional symbols of feminine beauty, such as full breasts, a narrow waist, long-lashed big eyes, and full lips. However, these symbols are often hyper-exaggerated. This is perhaps, *in part*, out of necessity. In many art forms on the stage, the bright lights and the distance between the performer and the audiences necessitates an exaggeration of the former's features. Yet, it seems to be taken a step further. Eyebrows are not just darkened, as they would be for other theatre or dance performance. They are drawn on higher, made larger, given a more intense arch, or sometime all three.

It is important to stress that drag, in the context I am discussing, is about *impersonating* a woman, *not becoming* one. As drag queen "Victoria DePaula" explains, "Just because you do female impersonation they think you want to be a woman, and that isn't the case at all." In fact, their personas (while perhaps central to their identities) seem to be distinct from their everyday selves. As one performer puts it, "Gay Male and Gay Female Impersonator." Dress is used to navigate between the distinct parts of their identities. Adopting foundation garments and physically transforming the body provides a way to assume the female impersonator identity.

While drag is about impersonating *female* beauty, it also has an interesting relationship to the traditionally *male* performers' actual physical bodies. Qualities that might be seen as negative in mainstream society are an asset and vice versa. Drag queen "Victoria 'Porkchop' Parker" cites

the benefits of being a heavy-set man. He comments, “[Drag] is also all about what the judges perceive and I have the boobs...there is no silicone there. I tape my fatty boobs up and I have a beautiful breast line on stage.” His larger body provides him with the flesh needed to mold his natural body into a full hourglass figure. Conversely, “Chantal Reshae” - a fit dancer - calls himself a “Brick” and adds “I’ve never fit the mold.” Unlike “Porkchop”, he uses prosthetic breasts and additional padding held in place by various foundation garments to create the desired silhouette.

Within the female impersonator world there seems to be a distinct, established physical ideal. However, it notably differs from the ideal placed on real women. In drag, feminine symbols of beauty are used but amplified - the significance of this is discussed, shortly.

Experimentation with gender symbols in burlesque. Burlesque acts range from heavily erotic to comedic. The stage serves as a space for experimentation and exploration. Thus, it is not surprising the art form’s approach to gender is one of fluidity. A performer’s sexual identity does not seem to confine the performance. The noted documentary *Glitter Tribe* (2017) captures acts with gay men erotically dancing with straight women, as well as straight women seductively embracing each other. Burlesque acts are aimed at exploring all aspects of human sexuality.

This experimentation is reflected in a sort of *a la carte* use of gendered dress. Women often wear costumes made up of feminine dress like tight fitting dresses or sequined bras that would traditionally be viewed as sexy. However, dancer “Babs Jamboree” takes a more absurdist approach with her costumes. She notes, “What I find incredibly sexy is someone putting themselves out there...what’s sexy...is that person’s full commitment to challenge the traditional image of what a sexy woman is.” In one act, she dresses as a man in a grey suit and lip syncs as she is stripped by two other women on stage. Beyond merely crossdressing, having women remove the suit, a symbol of masculine power, is a powerful challenge to traditional gender roles.

At times, the male burlesque dancers adhere to masculine dress, such as stripping from suits, ties, and collared shirts. However, others use costumes that fall towards the feminine end of the spectrum, like wearing thigh-high stockings or high heels. As with drag, gender ideals are often utilized but then exaggerated. The male burlesque troupe the “Stage Door Johnnies” note that they “each pick a different aspect of masculinity...to amplify...it’s about exploring masculinity not defining it… you have to acknowledge the stereotype, you have to acknowledge the cultural norm.” The same could be said of women in burlesque. There is an exaggeration of feminine ideals. Performing the role of an extreme sexy symbol on the stage (often using foundation garments) can be read as intentionally shining a light on how such ideals, which are also present

our daily lives, are a fantasy. It is like taking an argument to the extreme in order to show its flaws.

The noted mixing of gender symbols can be read as reinterpreting gender and challenging the gender dichotomy. The latter is crucial to gender equality. Yet, some undoubtedly view burlesque as anti-feminist. The performers in the documentary are aware of this view but also challenge it. Dancer "Angelique DeVil" comments "I still consider myself a feminist because I do what I want with my body and it's my rules, it's my boundaries." The male burlesque dancer "Bazuka Joe" makes a similar comment about choice, saying "I often think of the word objectify and not necessarily as a negative thing. We are choosing to objectify ourselves on our own terms." As noted earlier, the concept of choice closely relates to power. Many of the dancers express the sense of control and subjectivity that comes from *choosing* to perform burlesque.

Real-fake duality. A key theme that emerged from my analysis of the corselet was the tension between the natural and unnatural, particularly with regards to how we define and construct femininity. A similar real-fake dichotomy is apparent in practices like drag.

As noted, in drag there is a clear division between the persona on stage and the individual in real life. For example, while "Chantal Reshae" is being interviewed out of costume someone off screen comments that he still has eyeliner on. He explains the lingering makeup is called "drag lag." He quickly wipes it off and says, "Is that better? Do I look real?" His response indicates the clear division between his makeup-wearing persona and his *real* self.

As one pageant judge notes, "Of course they have to pass as a woman." Yet, Miss Gay USA pageant is about illusion. As the narrator explains at the beginning of *Pageant* (2008), "The use of female hormones or surgical enhancements is forbidden." There is no effort to become a real woman. Rather, it is about impersonating and performing the role of "woman."

Granted, these "fake" performances could have meanings of "realness." The drag queen "Coti Collins" shares that "I present a show of illusions" impersonating different stars. He became particularly well known for impersonating Reba McEntire. The illusion was so convincing that Reba hired him to impersonate her in her own show. He also describes a solo performance where an audience member came up to him after a show crying. She said she loved Reba and he was the closest she would ever get to seeing her. For this woman, his performance was so real that she felt she had attained her dream. This example reiterates how the notions of what is real is subjective. It can also be culturally constructed. As seen with the corselet, the concept of "real" or "natural" femininity is defined by the culture.

Yet, the goal is not to look like a *real* woman. The physical ideal is notably different. "Porkchop" recounts his first time on stage, noting "A real girl did my makeup and that's a no no. I

almost got boo'd off the stage." This stresses the importance of exaggeration. There are distinct visual differences between a female impersonator and a "real girl." It is as if the big hair, dramatic makeup, and extreme hourglass figure are meant to make clear that the performance on stage is an illusion.

I am curious if this feminine hyperbole is intended to make the performance more socially acceptable. While drag is still somewhat on the outskirts of our culture, it has been increasingly accepted. It is part of mainstream culture with award-winning television shows like "RuPaul's Drag Race." At the very least, drag seems to be much more tolerated than other instances of people modifying their bodies to look like the opposite gender. Our culture often reacts very harshly to transgendered people, viewing them as a threat to established understandings of gender. A man assuming what is seen as *inherently* feminine characteristics and passing as a *real* woman clearly illustrates that how we define femininity is not natural at all.

On the other hand, the exaggerated look of drag proclaims, 'I am not trying to be a *real* woman, I am just *pretending* to be a woman.' Merely pretending or impersonating is less of a challenge to the gender dichotomy. Furthermore, the performance is not convincing. They do not look like a real woman. It is fake and merely for entertainment - making it less threatening.

Challenging gender norms and ideals. Burlesque and drag indicate how traditionally feminine dress can be used to subvert and challenge gender dynamics or ideals. Corsets, corselets, and brassieres have all, at times, been used to literally mold women in accordance with *other's desires*. However, within contexts like burlesque, these foundation garments provide performers with tangible means to actively experience their *own sexual desires* and to reclaim power over their bodies.

Dancer "Sandria Dore" describes burlesque as "sort of living my own little fantasy of being in some kind of...like just wanton, naughty lady." The erotic meanings of the objects are utilized by the performers to explore and express their own sexuality, rather than to satisfy the audiences' fantasies. "Isaiah Esquire" recounts how performing burlesque helped him to overcome years of sexual abuse and to reclaim his own sexuality. He notes, "Burlesque and performing and doing all of the sexy characters, it feels like I'm taking back ownership of [my sexuality] for me." Many others note the sexual empowerment they get from performing burlesque. The performance is certainly intended to entertain the audience, but the performer's own pleasure is equally (if not more) important.

In drag, men's use of foundation garments to mold their bodies and impersonate women shines a light on the ways we construct our gender. Granted, drag uses an exaggerated feminine ideal to make it more acceptable in mainstream culture. However, this ideal also challenges

existing views of gender. We know that "real" women do not look like drag queens, and yet they embody the qualities women are told to strive for like a narrow, delicate waist or big innocent eyes. As with burlesque, exaggerating feminine stereotypes or ideals illustrates how unrealistic they truly are.

A Poststructuralist-Semiotic "Reading" of the Corselet

A Poststructuralist-Semiotic approach shaped the whole my dissertation process, from the way I initially structured my research questions and methodology to how I conducted my analysis, as well as my interpretation of the data that emerge from both. I *read* both the objects and their depictions *against the grain*, considering what was shown or not shown and what was said or left unsaid (Johnson, 1992, p. 5). Additionally, the notion that a sign consists of both a *concrete signifier* and *abstract signified message* was always at the forefront of mind. I hope this is apparent in my back and forth discussions of the materiality of the designs and their literal uses in relation to the corselet's symbolic meanings.

It is worth revisiting several key concepts as I conclude my interpretation, as they speak to importance and wider significance of the corselet. As noted in Chapter 2, meaning is relational and created using binaries. *Hot* is understood in relation to *cold*. *Feminine* is defined in opposition to *masculine*. As a result, studying how women dress actually offers insights into how we all dress.

Meaning is also context specific. Gendered dress in one culture is different than in another. In Western culture pants and skirts have traditionally been aligned with men's and women's dress, respectively, but this is not the case in every culture (Laver, 2012, p. 7; Steele, 1989a, p. 13). Meaning also changes over time. Today the noted pants-skirt associations are not as strong. Most women wear pants. However, things like bathroom signs (with their pants- and skirt-wearing stick people) suggest the gendered meanings attached to the garments persist.

That being said, the meaning of an object in a specific historical cultural context (like the postwar era) also draws from previous established meanings. The corselet's repeated vertical stays and hourglass form have some of the same signified meanings previously ascribed to the corset, including respectable femininity and eroticness. These meanings may seem antithetical. However, material culture consists of "sign systems"; an object can be made up of multiple signs with multiple (conflicting or dual) meanings (Berger, 2009, p. 52).

As "sign systems," the corset and corselet can be read as both masculine and feminine. They are often viewed as traditional symbols of femininity. However, the boned foundation garments are rigid and structured; they can potentially have masculine connotations like strength or armor (Fields, 2007, p. 3; Kunzle, 2006, p. 22). The corselet molds the natural soft female body

into an even, symmetrical form. This form aligns with the male side of the gender divide, which is characterized by logic and culture, as opposed to emotions and nature (Nead, 2002, p. 7). Thus, the corselet can be viewed as masculinizing the female body, much like the corset before it (Steele, 2001, p. 137).

Because the Victorian corset and postwar corselet embodied dualities, the cultures tried to deliberately control their meanings. For the corselet, this was done within the designs themselves by adding elements like feminine floral iconography to counter potentially masculine signs like steel stays. Specific language was also used (e.g. “natural”), as well as not used (e.g. “padding”) to control the meanings of the objects. In both eras, controlling what was viewed as feminine dress was a way of controlling the cultural construction of gender and, in turn, maintain patriarchal power dynamics.

It is important to clarify that just because a concept or an ideal is culturally constructed does not mean that it is fake. It still has very real consequences for real people lives. This is illustrated by the concept of language as performative (Barry, 2002, p. 43). Performative language not only describes but brings something into being. Labeling someone a terrorist or freedom fighter impacts how they are viewed by other and how they view themselves; the language used influences subsequent experiences. “Performative utterances” are particularly powerful. Words like “you are guilty” when said from a position of power (judge) dramatically impact a person’s life going forwards.

While dress is not a literal language, it can function in a similar way. Ascribing an aspect of dress with meanings like feminine, or qualities related to feminine ideals, does more than just describe how someone looks when they wear it. This influences how they and others perceive themselves. As seen with the corselet, these meanings shape how and where something is worn. The meanings also influence things like whether someone is viewed as attractive or experiences social stigma.

As Butler (2011) notes, gender is “performative.” It is created through a repeated and ritualized “gendered stylization of the body” (p. 6). A person is born a female by virtue of having a vagina but they are transformed into a woman by adopting feminine dress, roles, or traits - as defined by those in positions of power within the culture.

The corselet was noted for having a very transformative (or performative) qualities; it was worn not only to become glamorous or confident but to become feminine. It was by no means an inconsequential piece of women’s fashion. It reflected how women were expected to *look* and (in turn) expected to *be*.

While they are not necessarily connected, cultures like postwar America expected sex and gender align. The rhetoric used to describe the corselet indicates how gender was positioned as natural and inherently tied to sex. Anything that contradicted this was very dangerous, hence the stigma of things like padding your breasts. While the practice was allowed it could not be acknowledged, since it could read as a dangerous artifice. This is because, while dress is crucial to the performative construction of normative gender, it can also be used in "subversive performances [of gender]" (Butler, 2011, p. 17).

As Eco (1976) points out, signs are used to tell the truth, or more accurately what is believed to be the truth. However, by extension, signs can also be used to lie. A female or male can narrow their waist and pad their breasts to embody the traditional feminine ideal and to visually assume the role of women. This illustrates how the seemingly natural ideal is, in fact, not. As Butler notes, "Drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be" (p. 13). The concept of a real woman is not fixed.

Burlesque also subverts and challenges our conceptions of gender by literally stripping away layers of gendered dress on stage. As female performers remove their dresses and foundation garments they are literally taking apart a sartorial construction of femininity. Deliberate performances like burlesque and drag have the potential to shine a light on the ways we all modify our bodies with dress as we construct our identities.

Summary

Some scholars interpret women's foundation garments as having solely negative, singular meanings. Yet, like a number of dress researchers before me, I found that objects like the corselet are in fact much more complex. The corselet has multiple dual meanings: freedom and control, feminine modesty and sexuality, natural and unnatural, seen and unseen. Examining the corselet in terms of these dualities helps to position it within its historical and cultural contexts, as well as within the ongoing practice of body modification with dress.

While foundation garments like the corselet have been abandoned by most women, they still appear in parts of our culture: dressing for your wedding, wearing vintage, or performing drag or burlesque. These practices have several parallel to women's use of the corselet during the mid-20th century. Some similarities suggest the persistence of gender ideals and gender inequality, today. Yet, these practices also indicate how the objects and their meanings can be used to intentionally challenge and change our culture.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research sought to *explore and better articulate the functions and meanings of the corselet during the post-World War II era*. My arrival at this topic began with personal interests in the postwar era and women's foundation garments. I was trouble by interpretations of women's experiences and dress following WWII, which primarily discussed each in terms of literal and abstract constraints. This era was also frequently positioned opposite apparent instances of freedom, like the active, manual jobs women held during WWII or the looser, body-revealing fashions of the 1960s. I felt (and still feel) that this is a simplistic view of not only the postwar era but of the entire trajectory of women's history.

My study of the postwar corselet was also motivated by my interests in broader topics like gender and body modifications. I desired to challenge views of body modification as a feminine practice and feminine dress as oppressive or holding solely negative meanings. I was also very inspired by previous researchers who have moved beyond these singular interpretations to consider the complexities of dress, especially foundation garments (Farrell-Beck & Gau, 2002; Steele, 2001). It is my sincerest hope that this study adds to their work on the contextual and evolving meanings of the various ways we modify our bodies with dress.

This research was guided by several questions, which were structured to move from the material aspects of the corselet to its symbolic meanings within postwar culture. They were:

1. How did the corselet physically change during this period? Which aspects of the design, if any, remained the same?
2. How was the corselet (intended to be) specifically or uniquely used? How was this different from other foundation garments?
3. What insights does the corselet offer into post-WWII culture? What were the corselet's symbolic functions or meanings within that culture, particularly beyond those ascribed to foundation garments by previous research?

This concrete-abstract structure aligned with the material culture methodology and the poststructuralist-semiotic approach that guided this research.

My topic, methodology, and approach were all chosen to illustrate the value of object-based research and of studying women's history. Both have historically been denigrated within academia, seen as less important or worthy of research than printed sources of data and dominant (masculine) historical narratives. Studying a feminine object like the corselet indicates how we all convey and construct our gender, which has very real implications for individuals and the broader culture. Keeping these objects at the forefront was also crucial to showing their value and was a primary consideration when developing the methodology discussed below.

Review of Methodology

This study was largely based on the process for studying material culture laid out by Prown (1982), which provided a way to use objects "actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations" (p. 1). My methodology involved a systematic, three stages process that moved from *descriptions* of the physical objects, *deductions* based on the data gathered, and then *speculations* based on the first two stages. It was also influenced by Zimmerman's (1981) suggestions about comparing objects. This provided a way to examine numerous foundation garments from the 1950s and early-1960s, as well as a host of other sources to situate the corselet within its cultural context.

In order to contain the scope of this study, I focused on corselet designs by Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette. This allowed me to utilize the considerable collection of objects and additional resources of the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS). However, I gathered data from a range of objects and sources from the mid-20th century. This included corselets and other foundation garments from the noted companies, corselets from other brands, documents in the MNHS archive, and other depictions of the corselet in media like advertisements or trade journals.

I used Prown's three stages to examine each group individually, while also considering any previous observations; this resulted in an iterative process. Beginning with detailed observations of the physical objects helped to counter my personal and cultural biases towards the subject. It also created a logical way of "leading out" from the physical object to consider the other sources of data (Prown, 1982, p. 7), while keeping the focus on the objects. The latter was essential, given my noted desire to demonstrate the value of object-based research.

This methodology provided a way to analyze the typical corselet design, as well as its literal functions and how it was used within the postwar context. This analysis provided the basis for my interpretation of the corselet's meanings or symbolic functions within postwar culture. Understanding the design, functions, and uses of the corselet also helped me to reflect on the ways we currently modify our bodies. I identified several connections between foundation garment use in the mid-20th and 21st centuries. My analysis and interpretation are briefly recounted below, before moving on to discussing potential ways to build on this research.

Summary of Analysis

By observing and comparing multiple corselets, as well as other foundation garments, I established what a typical corselet is. The typical design has key parts: body, cups, and garters. Certain materials are laid out in specific ways. In particular, repeated steel stays run vertically around the body. They are placed along the seams of the panels that make up the corselet, which

use either elasticized or woven materials. The cups are comparatively more rigid, constructed using only woven material. They are also generally bordered with metal underwires. Overall, the corselet is characterized by a tension between horizontal flexibility and vertical rigidity. This is even apparent in small details like the stitches used within all of the designs examined.

I compared the data from these objects with that in external sources. This affirmed my definition and helped to situate corselet within the context surrounding it. For example, foam padding lined the cups all of the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette corselet examined. However, the sources describe this material is different ways depending on the design and intended wearer. These sources indicate that while augmenting the breasts with padding may have been acceptable for some women, it could not be openly acknowledged. The significance of this became clearer as I examined the relationship between the corselet and the concept of natural femininity within postwar culture.

Understanding the corselet design allowed me to determine its various functions. It modifies and supports the breasts, *while* exposing the upper body. The torso is molded into an hourglass form, *while* allowing the wearer to move. The corselet also creates a smooth line from bust to hips and holds up stockings. These functions are all simultaneously accomplished together, differentiating it from other foundation garments. The corselet also has abstract functions, mainly sexualizing the wearer's body.

The final function is mentioned less often in external sources. This suggests the values, morals, and ideals of the culture. However, while references are subtle, this function appears to have become increasingly important during the period examined. The designs and the ways they were visually depicted during the late-1950s and early-1960s suggest an increasingly active feminine sexuality. This makes sense, as both were created and worn in the wake of the sexual revolution. Examples like this illustrate the intimate connections between the corselet and its cultural context.

I moved beyond the functions to consider how the corselet was used by the wearer, or at least intended to be used. Based on my analysis, the corselet was worn by younger wearers with relatively small figures. This may have been due to the limitations of the corselet design. However, this also seems to reflect cultural beauty ideals. As noted, the corselet allowed the upper torso to be revealed. It is not surprising that its use was limited to those bodies the culture deemed worthy of being seen.

In line with previous research, one of the reasons why the corselet was worn was to address figure flaws, allowing the body to align with the culture's ideals. Corselet use was also heavily influenced by the garments worn over it. The sources analyzed indicate there was a

strong relationship between under- and outer-garments during this period. The former was intended to remain hidden. As a result, aspects of outer garments like color, cut, silhouette, and materials had to be taken into consideration when deciding which foundation garment to wear.

While there were many foundation garments available, sources indicate there was a *right* choice. Specific designs were intended to be worn not only with certain clothes but in certain settings. The corselet was primarily worn beneath evening wear at formal special occasions in public settings. This limited, rare use added to the corselet's meaning of glamour, which it conferred onto the wearer. The corselet's ability to not only transform the body but to impart abstract qualities like glamour, grace, and confidence was another key reason why the corselet was used.

The corselet also appears to have been donned to attract the opposite sex. This motivation was rarely mentioned in the sources on Hollywood-Maxwell and Vassarette but is apparent in those depicting other brands of corselets. The use of foundation garments to attract men has been heavily discussed in previous research. I have no doubt that some women wore the corselet for this reason. The noted intended setting would have been an ideal place to meet a mate. However, it is important not to focus too heavily on this singular reason. We should consider all the complexities of the corselet.

Summary of interpretation

Determining the meaning of the corselet within postwar culture is not a question of it being good or bad - a symbol of feminine oppression or liberation. Rather, the corselet is a complex object that signifies multiple dualities. It literally embodies a tension between freedom and control. The physical objects also reflect instances of these concepts within the broader culture, such as the freedom to consume but also restrictive demands for democratic beauty.

The corselet, its effects on the body, and expectations regarding it use reveal the culture's feminine ideals. While the corselet has strong erotic connotations, it also reflects demands for modesty and morality. The balance of these qualities is indicative of the era's 'naughty and nice' feminine ideal, which is tied to the longstanding virgin-whore dichotomy and can be read as oppressive. Yet, like the 19th century corset, the corselet (as a part of respectable dress) provided women with a socially-acceptable way to experience their sexuality. Additionally, changes to the designs like the shift to opening and closing in front of the body suggest women's growing sexual-autonomy during this period.

External sources on the corselet indicate it was used to attain what was described as a "naturally" feminine figure. The notion of essential femininity upholds the gender dichotomy and makes it more difficult to challenge. Sources also stressed that women's body modification with

foundation garments into this “natural” ideal should remain secret in order to uphold the illusion. This too can be read as oppressive. It positions women’s use of the corselet as deceptive, rather than one of many ways in which we all modify our bodies.

The desire for natural femininity - evidenced in objects like the corselet - should be placed in the context of general demands for normality and conformity following WWII. The highly-engineered nature of the corselet, in contrast to its ascribed meanings, helps to illuminate how the very idea of essential femininity is anything but natural. Rather, it is created by the culture. Finally, while demands for secrecy have potentially oppressive meanings, they could also add to the pleasure of wearing a corselet - creating a sense of secret knowledge and power.

Thus, a material culture study of the corselet is not about determining a singular interpretation of the object. Rather, it is about acknowledging its complex meanings, which both reflect and are shaped by the culture that surrounded it. Examining the noted duality of the corselet also helps to place it within the much larger practice of body modification. While foundation garments have largely disappeared from women’s wardrobes and been replaced by other means of modifying our bodies, they occasionally appear in our culture today.

The 21st century examples explored suggest notable parallels to the corselet from the mid-20th century. They are sometimes donned beneath a wedding gown, indicating continued special occasion use. My own experiences also reflect the persisting influence of our culture, especially its traditions, on how we construct our appearances in different contexts. The use of both vintage and vintage-inspired foundation garments beneath vintage fashions reiterates the noted under-outer relationship. Examples like Gertie’s “Blog for Better Sewing” and the company “What Katie Did” also indicate conscious efforts to revalue traditionally feminine aspects of our culture. The use of foundation garments to create drag and burlesque persons suggests the continued feminine meanings tied to the objects. Yet, these performances also demonstrate how the objects can be used to question and challenge these meanings.

These connections between the past and present are important because they demonstrate the continued relevance of studying historic dress. This study does not just gather knowledge for knowledge's sake. Rather, it offers deeper insights into our own culture. These connections are also one of several areas that could be explored further with additional research.

Future studies

During my analysis and interpretation, I noted a number of topics I was not able to discuss in detail and that could be explored further, such as the relationship between the corselet and race or class. There are several other topics that would build on this current study. I could expand my study of the postwar corselet by examining more designs from other brands using the

same methodology. I could also conduct qualitative interviews of women who wore the postwar corselet, developing questions based on this research. Either study will support and build on my finding or perhaps challenge some of them. Either outcome is valuable, as it deepens my understanding of the postwar corselet.

Other Postwar Foundation Garments

Another logical avenue is to continue my study of Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs. In my current study, corselets were chosen because they made up a very small part of the Historical Society's collection. I have only begun to scratch the surface of their collection. The same methodology could be used to examine other types of foundation garments from the same years. This would yield broader insights into women's dress from this period and into the culture as a whole.

Male Body-Modification

It would be valuable and interesting to compare female and male body modification during the postwar era. This could involve analyzing objects like suits or practices like exercise. Given the noted emphasis on the "natural" feminine body, I am curious if there were discussion of a "natural" masculine body during the postwar era and what qualities defined it. This current study is based on the belief that we all modify our bodies but it is admittedly focused women's dress and experiences. As Nicklas & Pollen (2015) point out, "men's fashion and dress history (unlike men's history) has been overlooked" (pp. 10-11). They note this is an area of dress history that should be further explored. The future study briefly outline here would help to move the field forward.

Vintage-Inspired Foundations

Through this research, I have become even more fascinated by vintage-inspired foundation garments, like those produced by the company "What Katie Did." I hope to further study these foundation garments and women's experiences wearing them. The 21st century foundation garments are based on vintage designs but are not literal reproductions. While visually similar, they differ in terms of color, print, materials, and other elements of the designs. As noted, depictions of these newer versions often emphasize the objects' erotic meanings. Many of the designs are directly connected with sex symbols, named for women like Jean Harlow or inspired by versions worn by Marilyn Monroe. This is notably different than the subtle references to feminine sexuality in the external sources from the postwar era, which could make for an interesting comparison.

I am also very curious if the visual depictions of "What Katie Did" designs that I analyzed were a conscious effort to create an alternative beauty standard and encourage body-positivity, or

if they were motivated by other factors. Based on the comments reviewed during this research, 21st century wearers' experiences with these foundation garments seem very positive, with motivations based on more personal than cultural reasons. Given previous negative interpretations of foundation garments, this is a very valuable topic to pursue.

Interviews of postwar wearers could be paired with interviews of women who wear vintage-inspired foundation garments today. Analyzing the designs and women's experiences with them during both eras would add to our knowledge of dress history. It also has the potential to provide incredibly beneficial insights into our current culture.

Other Body Modifications: Tattoos

I would also like to compare foundation garment use to other types of body-modification. There are numerous ways we engage in this practice but I think tattoos are a particularly interesting foil to foundation garments. The natures of these temporary versus permanent modifications could be explored. Tattooing has also historically been viewed as a masculine practice in Western culture. However, it has been used by some women to subvert cultural norms (Atkinson, 2002; Mifflin, 2013). Unlike foundation garments, tattooing has gained increasing acceptance within our culture, especially for women.

Additionally, despite the noted differences, both practices frequently involve internal transformations as a result of the outward change. Atkinson's study of women's tattoos indicates they can be used to construct and articulate an identity, or as a means of emotional healing (pp. 228, 230). His findings also suggest that, while tattoos are used by some to subvert gender norms, they are used by others to display compliance with them.

Both forms of body-modification could be examined during the postwar era or today, although I think it would be particularly valuable to compare both. In the postwar era, foundation garments were required to be appropriately dressed, whereas tattoos would have resulted in considerable stigma. Today, the opposite is somewhat true. As noted in my discussion of foundation and feminism, the former is viewed by many as incompatible with the latter. This does not reflect everyone's opinions, but the reality is that most women have abandoned traditional foundation garments. On the other hand, there are now more women with tattoos than men (Neilson, 2018). These two instances of body-modification seem to have flipped in terms of cultural accessibility.

Much like wearing the corselet, tattooing is a complex practice with multiple meanings that can change over time. Comparing them in both contexts has the potential to help us better understand the ways we modify our bodies within and across different contexts.

Final Thoughts

I kept a list of poignant quotes as I developed my proposal, conducted my research, and wrote the final chapters of my dissertation. Whenever I came across text that challenged or motivated me I added it to the list. These quotes helped to remind me of the big picture, of the value of studying women's dress.

I would like to conclude my discussion of the corselet using two of these quotes. Both are from feminist books - one from the second-wave and one from the current fourth-wave. My study of the corselet was not based on feminist theory. However, it was guided by my own feminist beliefs. It feels fitting to structure my final thoughts around the words of two women who have greatly influenced me.

The corselet is complicated, just as the very notion of gender is complicated. It is crucial not to view either as black or white. It is also important to acknowledge the role dress plays in our construction of our gender. As Simone de Beauvoir notes in her groundbreaking 1941 book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283). Our experiences in our culture, with objects like the corselet, shape who we are in many complex ways. While we should not forget the relationship between dress and gender, we need to move away from seeing things that have been labeled feminine as wholly negative and oppressive. This only reinforces the idea that the masculine equivalent is superior.

Reexamining and revaluing what has traditionally been viewed as feminine helps to challenge the very idea of gender difference. This is essential to addressing gender inequality, which has implications for everyone (not just women). As writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie points out in her book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014):

> The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations (p. 34).

We will all be *happier* and *freer* if we acknowledge the dualities within all of us.

How can you look so naughty and feel so nice? Warner's Merry Widow

You'll be gayer than the Merry Widow in Warner's exciting new cinch bra—the answer to fashion's dictates for diminutive waists and revealing decolletage.

Audacious the way the Warner's Merry Widow belittles your waist, makes the most of your charms. All at once you're inches smaller!

And the thrice-blessed sorcery of the bra top! The magic of marquisette folds transforms it from a bewitching half-bra . . . to a bodice line . . . to a three-quarter bra.

Whether it's a waltz or a samba, you'll *look* your naughtiest and *feel* your nicest in Warner's Merry Widow.

Black or white embroidered nylon marquisette with detachable garters. Sizes 32, 34, 36, 38, B cup. At the nicest stores $12.50

Inspired by the forthcoming MGM film "The Merry Widow" starring Lana Turner.

WARNER'S*

Bras · Girdles · Corselettes

*Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

The Warner Bros. Co., New York 16, Chicago 6, San Francisco 8

128

VOGUE incorporating Vanity Fair

Figure 1. Advertisement for "Merry Widow" corselet. The corselet (Style #3111) was created by Warner's and shown here in an advertisement in *Vogue* ("Warner's Merry Widow," 1952).

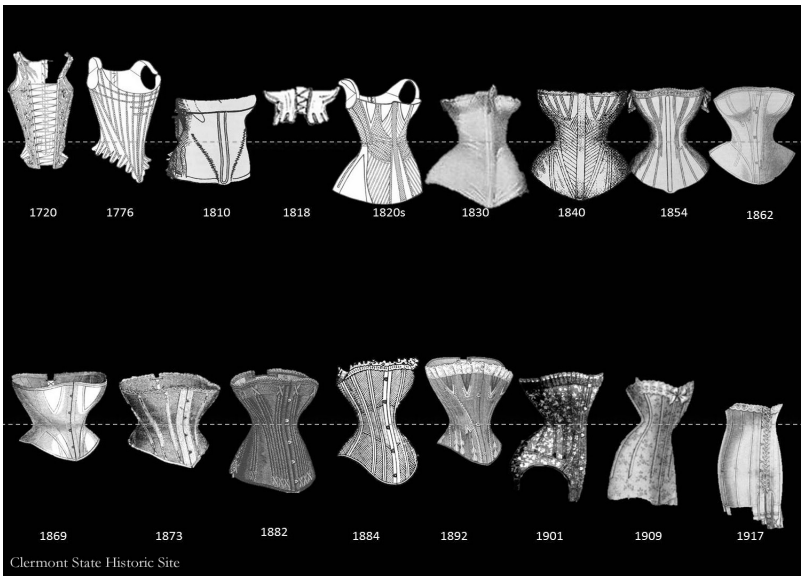

Figure 2. Timeline of 17th through 20th century corsets ("Clermont State Historic Site," 2015).

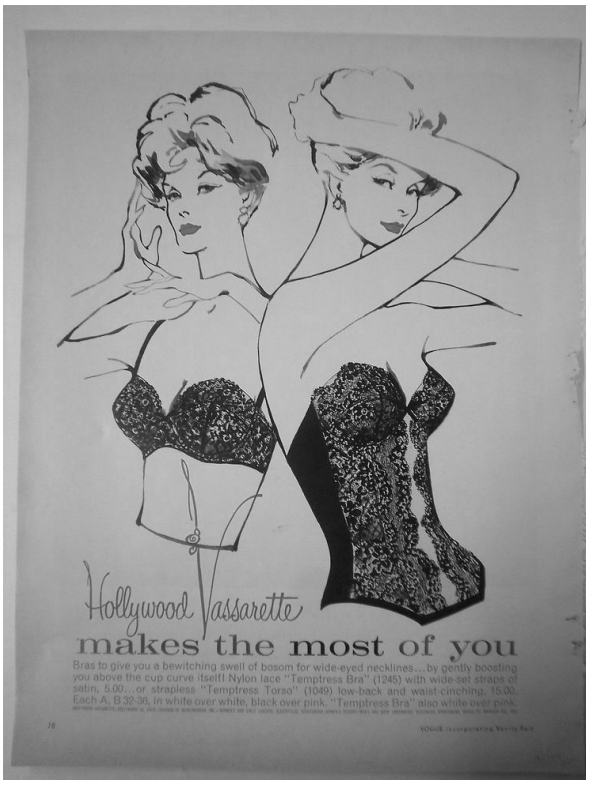

Figure 3. Advertisement for brassiere and corselet from the "Temptress Line." The foundations were created by Hollywood Vassarette and shown here in an advertisement in *Vogue* ("Hollywood Vassarette Temptress," 1959).

Figure 4. Exterior of a “Temptress” corselet. The 1959 design was created by Hollywood Vassarette. This example is in my personal collection.

Figure 5. Interior of a “Temptress” corselet. This example is in my personal collection.

Figure 6. Front view of the “Temptress” corselet. This example is in my personal collection.

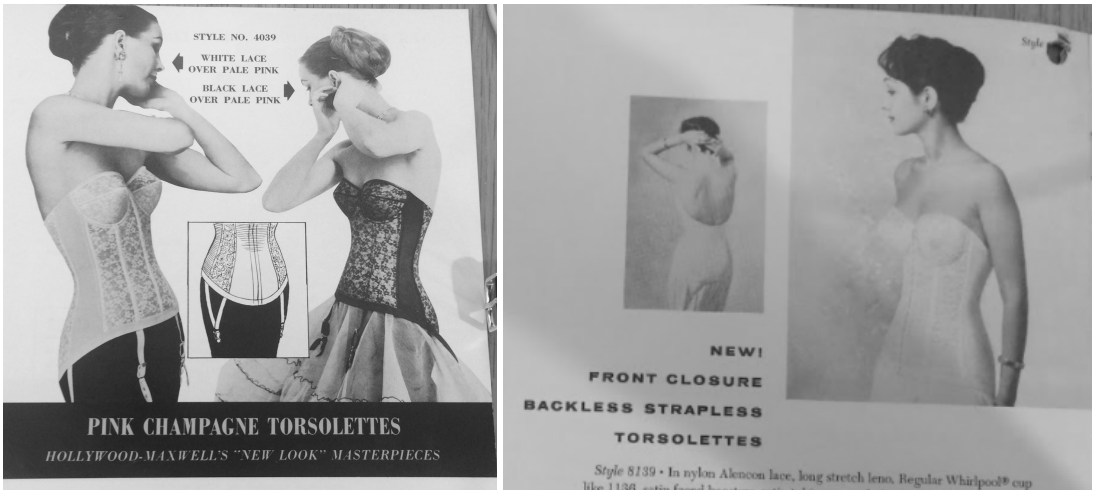

Figure 7. Images of “Pink Champagne” and “Backless Strapless” corselets. The “Pink Champagne” (left) and “Backless Strapless” (right) designs are shown in price lists the MNHS Munsingwear Archive (*Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 4; *Supplementary Price List*, 1957, p. 6).

Figure 8. Interior back section of a “Backless Strapless Torsolette.” The 1957 corselet was created by Hollywood-Maxwell. This example is in the MNHS collection (1990.203.134).

Figure 9. Style #8059 longline brassiere. This Hollywood-Maxwell strapless brassiere from my personal collection (left) is shown from the front and back in a price list in the MNHS Munsingwear Archive (*Supplementary Price List*, 1957, p. 5).

Figure 10. Close up of the interior of a “Temptress” corselet with alteration. The change was made by a former owner. This example is in my personal collection.

Figure 11. Examples of corselet cups. The designs shown were created by Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette. They are (from left to right) a “Her Secret” corselet in my personal collection, a “Pink Champagne” corselet in my personal collection, and Style # 1079 in the MNHS collection (1984.112.2391).

Figure 12. Example of “corset” embroidery. This example of one of the embroidered Hollywood Vassarette corselets (style # 1069) is in the MNHS Collection (1990.203.21).

Figure 13. Comparison of the curved-front and straight-front corselets. The 1959 curved-front “Temptress” design is from my personal collection and the later 1960s straight-front corselet design (style #1079) is in the MNHS Collection (1984.112.2391).

Figure 14. Comparisons of 1955 and 1956 "3/4 Time" corselet designs. The curved-front version of the "3/4 Time" corselet is shown in a 1955 price list (left) in the MNHS Munsingwear archive and the slightly curved-front version in a 1956 advertisement (right) in *Harper's Bazaar (Illustrated Price List*, 1955, p. 3*; "*Hollywood-Maxwell Candlelight Colors*," 1956)*.

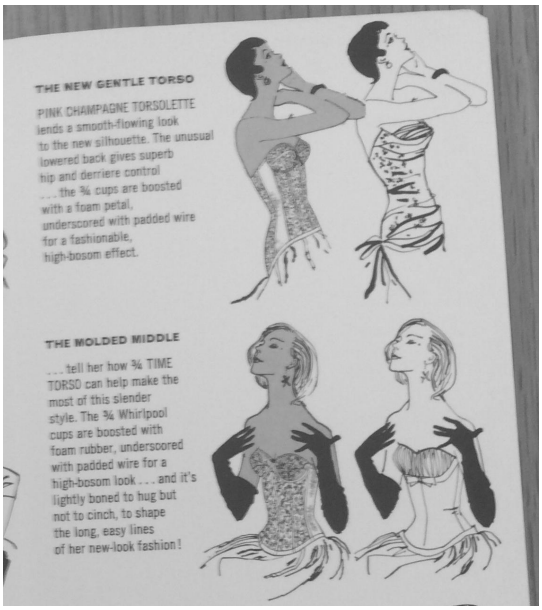

Figure 15. Corselets in the *A Bra for Every Fashion* pamphlet. The "Pink Champagne Torsolette" and "3/4 Time Torso" designs by Hollywood-Maxwell are paired with the corresponding fashions worn over them in the 1956 pamphlet in the MNHS Munsingwear Archive.

Figure 16. Models in “pin-up” poses in Hollywood-Maxwell promotions. The models assume “pin-up” poses, with arms raised above their heads. The model in the cotton version (left) arches her back as she peeks out from behind her arms. The images appear in a price list in the MNHS Munsingwear archive (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955, p. 5)

Figures 17. Cover of 1955 price list featuring the “Wizard of Bras.” Unlike earlier depictions, the cover features a live, rather than cartoon, “Wizard of Bras” behind the female model. This price list is in the MNHS Munsingwear Archive (*Supplementary Price List*, 1955).

Figure 18. Lace evening dress from 1950-1959 by Karen Stark. This lace evening dress by Stark is an example the visual similarities between postwar evening wear and corselets. The neckline mirrors corselets like the “3/4 Time” from 1955 and the zipper-front design from the 1960s. The garment is in the GMD Collection (1995.002.009a-b) and the image is courtesy of their online collection (“Evening dress,” 2019).

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Appendix A

Object Observation and Initial Analysis Guide (based on Prown, 1982)

Description (pp. 7-8)

Substantial Analysis – Physical inventory of the object

1. Measurements/physical dimensions
2. Materials
    a. What they are?
    b. How extensively they are used?
    c. Pattern of distribution throughout the object?
3. Fabrication of the object
    a. What methods were used to construct it?
    b. Weave? Stitching?

Content - Overt representations within the object

1. Any iconography?
2. Any decorative designs of motifs?

Formal Analysis - the object's form or configuration

1. Two-dimensional organization of the object lying flat (lines, shapes, etc.)?
2. Three-dimensional organization (forms)?
3. Nature, extent and patterns of color? Light? Texture?

Deduction (pp. 8-9)

Sensory Engagement – sensory experience of the object

1. Touch (e.g. texture, weight)
2. Sight (e.g. focal points, rhythm)
3. Smell
4. Sound

Intellectual Engagement – intellectual apprehension of the object

1. What does it do?
2. How does it do this?

Emotional response - viewer's emotional response to the object

1. What kinds of emotions are experiences?
2. What were their intensities?

Speculation (pp. 9-10)

Were there any notable or unexpected observations?

What questions need to be further investigated?

Additional information

Indicate if not available/applicable

1. Brand/designer
2. Style Number
3. Size
4. Source: Museum/accession number

Appendix B

Object observations and initial analysis form

This Google form was used to record observations made using Appendix A

Link: https://goo.gl/forms/PPC6SyBS1KQCccDy1

3/21/2019 Object Observation

Object Observation

* Required

1. Collection and Accession Number

Description - Substantial Analysis

Physical inventory of the object

2. Measurements *

3. Materials listed on label (if applicable) *

4. Materials - how extensively are they used? patterns of distribution? *

5. Fabrication - methods of construction? weaves? stitching? *

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1NFcYBlVFrQTvgiFwRLexY3ovG_wtxpq3uNbAnXJGQLQ/edit

3/21/2019 Object Observation

Description - Content

Overt representations within the object

6. Iconography? Decorative designs of motifs? *

Description - Formal Analysis

The object's form or configuration

7. Two-dimensional organization (lines, shapes, etc.) *

8. Three-dimensional organization (forms) *

9. Nature, extent and patterns of COLOR *

10. Nature, extent and patterns of LIGHT *

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1NFcYBlVFrQTvgiFwRLexY3ovG_wtxpq3uNbAnXJGQLQ/edit

11. Nature, extent and patterns of TEXTURE *

Deduction - Sensory Engagement

Sensory experience of the object

12. Touch (e.g. texture, weight) *

13. Sight (e.g. focal points, rhythm) *

14. Smell and/or sound

Deduction - Intellectual Engagement

Intellectual apprehension of the object

15. What does the object do? *

16. How does the object do this? *

Deduction - Emotional Response

Viewer's emotional response to the object

17. What kinds of emotions are experiences? What is their intensities?

Speculation

18. Were there any notable or unexpected observations?

19. What questions need to be further investigated?

Additional Information

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1NFcYBlVFrQTvgiFwRLexY3ovG_wtxpq3uNbAnXJGQLQ/edit

20. **Brand** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Hollywood Maxwell
- ◯ Hollywood Vassarette
- ◯ Warner's
- ◯ Other: _____

21. **Style number**

_____

22. **Size**

_____

23. **Additional text/images/information on label(s)**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

24. **Source (museum/personal collection)** *

_____

25. **Accession number (if applicable)**

_____

Appendix C

List of additional questions for corselets from other brands

These questions about the corselet emerged from analysis of the Hollywood-Maxwell and Hollywood Vassarette designs. They were used (in addition to Appendix A) during my observations of corselet designs from other brands.

1. Change in bottom hem?
2. Shape of cups?
3. Type of cup construction (e.g. # of panels, padded, sheer)?
4. Shift to all elastic back?
5. Shift away from all around embellishment/embroidered fabrics?
6. Other instances of front closures? When were they used?
7. Similar fabrication (straight and horizontal stitching)?
8. Is the use of florals equally prevalent in other brands? On lace or embroidery?
9. Are there other instances of visual/non-literal references to the corset?
10. Is there a visual or design shift from an overall hourglass to V shape?
11. Emphasis on the breasts?
12. Instances of angularity (like gussets)? If so, when?

Appendix D

External Source Analysis Guide

The guide below was used to observe and analyze the external sources (e.g. price lists, advertisements) utilized in this study.

General Information

Source:

Title:

Additional citation info (e.g. page):

Specific date (if known) or general date (e.g. early-1950s):

Text and Images within the Source

Key text from source (full quotes):

Key words:

Describe visual depiction (or indicate none):

Function

Functions mentioned:

__ Garters Modify waist __ Expose back and/or shoulders __ Support breasts
__ Modify breasts __ Draw attention to breasts __ Sexualizing of the body
__ None of the above

Additional functions mentioned:

Use

customer/who wore it?

When was it worn? (e.g. time of day, specific activity):

where was it worn? (place):

How was it worn? (e.g. under/outer relationship):

Mention of relationship to outer garments?: yes / no

Why: Reasons given for wearing the foundation?:

Additional Questions

New technology? If so, technology name and how it was described?:

Mention of being a combination?: yes / no

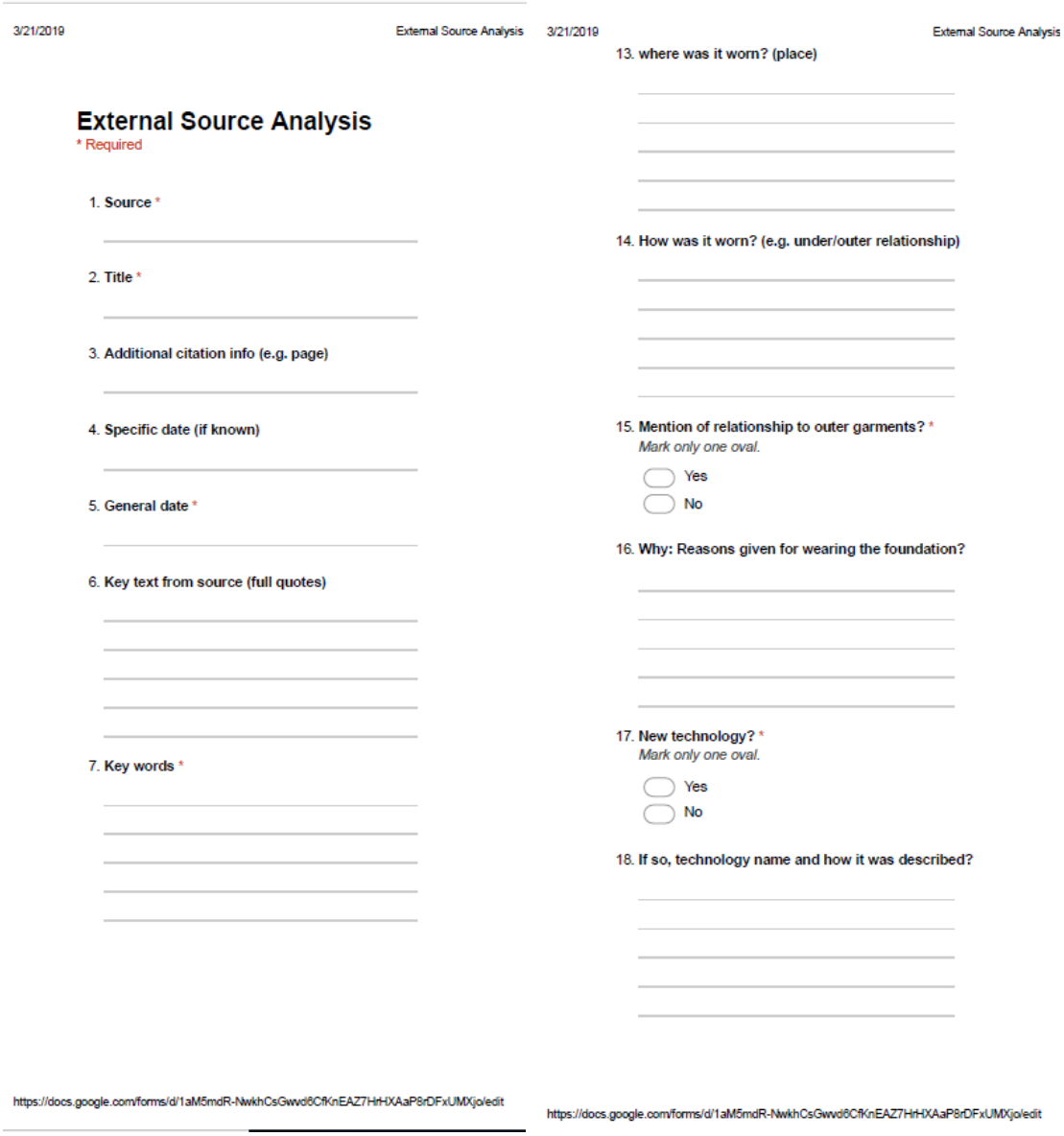
Other notes:

Appendix E

External Source Analysis Form

This Google form was used to record observations made using Appendix D.

Link: https://goo.gl/forms/sjidEXZzkkr7QBy52



3/21/2019 External Source Analysis

External Source Analysis

* Required

1. Source *
2. Title *
3. Additional citation info (e.g. page)
4. Specific date (if known)
5. General date *
6. Key text from source (full quotes)
7. Key words *

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1aM5mdR-NwkhCsGwvd6CfKnEAZ7HrHXAaP8rDFxUMXjo/edit

3/21/2019 External Source Analysis

13. where was it worn? (place)
14. How was it worn? (e.g. under/outer relationship)
15. Mention of relationship to outer garments? *
    Mark only one oval.
    - Yes
    - No
16. Why: Reasons given for wearing the foundation?
17. New technology? *
    Mark only one oval.
    - Yes
    - No
18. If so, technology name and how it was described?

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1aM5mdR-NwkhCsGwvd6CfKnEAZ7HrHXAaP8rDFxUMXjo/edit

8. **Describe visual depiction (or indicate none)** *

9. **Functions mentioned** *
Check all that apply.

- [ ] Garters
- [ ] Modify waist
- [ ] Expose back and/or shoulders
- [ ] Support breasts
- [ ] Modify breasts
- [ ] Draw attention to breasts
- [ ] sexualizing of the body
- [ ] none of the above

10. **Additional functions mentioned**

11. **customer/who wore it?**

12. **When was it worn? (e.g time of day, specific activity)**

19. **mention of being a combination?** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

20. **Other notes**