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From the corset to Spanx: shapewear as a marketplace icon

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ABSTRACT
This article presents the marketplace icon of shapewear—clothing that changes the shape of the human body by compressing or enhancing it. The trajectory of shapewear from the highly structured corset of the sixteenth century to the elastic Spanx of the 2000s evidences how this marketplace icon has come into being. Shapewear has materialized many evolving forms of beauty standards and gender roles as it participates in body-centered market assemblages. Market actors, such as manufacturers, designers, media, celebrities, activists, physicians, and consumers, translate shapewear to materialize intentions in the female body, shaping it accordingly. Whether promoting female autonomy or oppression, shapewear stands as a marketplace icon because it has maintained stable market appeal across time and body-centered market assemblages: it shapes the female body while symbolically articulating women's roles.

KEYWORDS
Shapewear; corset; Spanx; feminism; market assemblage; body

Female body ideals and fashion have for centuries influenced each other and jointly contributed to define womanhood—the qualities considered to be natural to or characteristic of a woman. One marketplace apparel category in particular has materialized this complex historical relationship: shapewear. As a type of garment whose function is to alter the shape of the human body by compressing or enhancing it, shapewear historically has translated tensions between different symbolic and material forces at play in body-centered market assemblages.

Body-centered market assemblages consist of sets of objects and discourses that simultaneously determine and reflect the social positioning of the body in a consumption environment. As various market actors, including regulators, physicians, activists, celebrities, designers, media, companies, and consumers, enroll in body-centered assemblages to advance their own goals, they set standards for how ideal and normal bodies should look, feel, and behave. Body-centered market assemblages determine the contexts in which bodies should be either shown or hidden, the amount of coverage or display bodies should exhibit, and relational norms between the body and the mind, as well as possibilities for body agency. Body-centered market assemblages, therefore, reflect the entanglement of heterogeneous components (Canniford and Bajde 2016) that originate positions for bodies in the evolving symbolic and material networks that constitute the market. The fitness, fashion, dieting, and health industries and related movements are examples of intersecting body-centered market assemblages.

Considering that markets have the property of plasticity, that is, the ability to take and retain forms as they interact with different assemblages (Nenonen et al. 2014), we posit that the iconicity of shapewear derives from its capacity to materialize translations across body-centered assemblages. Translations refer to negotiations that provide grounds for different meanings and arguments

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(Latour 2007). These negotiations can happen politically through persuasion and power; geometrically as material and bodily components evolve; and semiotically as materials embody, reflect, and enact different meanings (Waeraas and Nielsen 2016, 5). Shapewear has figured in all such negotiations and arguments as it has evolved from the highly structured corset of the sixteenth century to the elastic Spanx, the most popular shapewear brand of the 2000s. Although repeatedly translated, shapewear has preserved its main function over time: to shape the female body while symbolically articulating women's roles. The product's ability to preserve its functionality has allowed for the creation and maintenance of a plastic, through enduring, shapewear market. In other words, shapewear's strong capacity to take on multiple forms and meanings while retaining its function is what has turned this product into a marketplace icon.

As such, shapewear has endured a journey during which it has been acted upon by market actors and discourses and has acted upon them, modifying networks of materials and meaning. Aligned with cultural, social, and historical critiques of female fashion developed in multiple disciplines (e.g. Burns-Ardolino 2007; Crane 1999; Gurrieri, Previte, and Brace-Govan 2013; Steele 2001), this paper focuses on the articulations of the tensions between female oppression and empowerment materialized in shapewear's materials and symbolic meanings through time. In doing so, we demonstrate how shapewear, as a consumption object whose function in multiple body-centered market assemblages has been preserved over the past six centuries, has become a true marketplace icon.

Shapewear: form and function

Shapewear is a product category defined by its function: garments that shape the bodies that wear them. Shapewear is meant to be worn on various body parts, the neck, torso, breasts, hips, buttocks, thighs, and genitals. Shapewear acts on the body by compressing or enhancing these body parts, squeezing flesh, fat, and muscles to conform or defy ideal body shapes promoted by beauty, fashion, and gender discourses. Examples of shapewear includes girdles, corsets, crinolines, brassieres, bustles, bodysuits, and other forms of constructed undergarments. Over time, they have been made with linen, cotton, wool, silk, satin, velvet, Nylon, and Lycra—all soft and flexible fabrics—but shapewear has also incorporated whalebone, wood, metal, ivory, and rigid plastics for structure. Materials, forms, and designs have varied throughout time, but as our work spanning almost seven centuries of shapewear history suggests, the body-shaping function of these apparel items has remained much the same throughout the centuries.

As the materials in shapewear have changed, so have the symbols and meanings attached to it. These symbols and meanings have been advocated, embodied, and sustained by a plethora of market actors, including celebrities and health authorities. Consumers themselves have employed shapewear as a tool in the tug-of-war between individual agency and cultural forces. Although men have also worn shapewear throughout history, our focus is on the effect of shapewear on female bodies and subjectivities.

We restrict our analysis to Western contexts, primarily France, England, and the United States. This choice is justified because these were early industrial societies where fashion products were prevalent. Moreover, France has been a central locus of fashion history (Crane 1999, 2012), and England introduced the highly influential Victorian era of fashion and has seen many shapewear controversies (Steele 2001). Finally, the United States is the center of contemporary celebrity culture (Turner 2004), with the largest compression wear and shapewear market, an industry expected to reach US$5.576 billion globally by 2022 (Allied Market Research 2015). These contexts allow us to highlight the multiple contexts in which shapewear has existed and which have elevated it to marketplace-icon status.

Shapewear's origins: the corset as an intimate yet public garment

In Titanic*, the movie that recounts how the ship notoriously sank in 1912, director James Cameron shows the young protagonist Rose having her corset laces tightened by her mother. In the iconic* *scene, Rose and her mother argue about whether Rose needs to marry to save the family from financial ruin. Rose seems to be feeling pain and holds on to the bedpost while her mother pulls the cords on her corset. While being laced by her mother, Rose is forced to fit into not only a garment but also a despicable arrangement: trading her beauty and sexuality for her family's financial stability. The lacing, performed in the ladies' bedchambers, is viewed as a requirement for Rose to impress her fiancée despite the pain she feels. It is part of the sacrifice she must make. Responding to Rose's complaint that the whole arrangement is unfair, her mother states, "Of course, it is unfair. We are women. Our choices are never easy," as she continues to vigorously pull on the corset ties.*

How does the corset become the burden that Rose has to carry, the painful undergarment acting as a powerful tool of seduction that could save her family from ruin through marriage? The hourglass female silhouette, consisting of a small waist, raised breasts, and rounded hips, was "invented" in the fourteenth century when the natural[1] body started to be shaped with rigid structures called *stays*. Stays consist of supportive undergarments made of hard materials, such as whale-cartilage structures (baleens), embodying a preoccupation not only with figure but also with posture and carriage (Moulinier and Vesin 2015). The prevalence of stays, along with other rigid elements that shaped human bodies, continued in the following centuries. During the sixteenth century, especially in France, Renaissance ideals and aesthetics tended to frame the head as the most noble, essential body part, and grace as more important than beauty (Kelso 1956). The body merely supported a noble face; thus, the body was hidden. An upper body elongated by stays and a lower body hidden by farthingales (rounded supports for skirts) were the norms (Moulinier and Vesin 2015).

During the seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth century, however, the status of these constrictive fashion items changed as they emerged from under dresses and become visible parts of outfits. Particularly in France, the *ancien régime* elite lived a carefree life, and fashion followed the rhythms of their lifestyles, progressively embracing elements of subtle seduction (Koda and Bolton 2006). As libertine literature flew from the pen of the Marquis de Sade, and Pierre Choderlos de Laclos depicted perfidious relations among the French elite, *stays* made way for more flexible and erotic *corsets*, which became the new focus of attention in the female form and social life. Illustrations representative of that era show friends, fiancés, and even admirers inside women's chambers, watching them being laced tightly (Bernier 1981). Thus, the manually and carefully crafted corset (Sorge 1998) was translated to offer a space for negotiation between prudery and seduction. By keeping one's posture and restraint, it represented good morals and class status (Moheng 2015), and by allowing one to dress seductively in public, it created opportunities to subvert the moral code of that time.

A great part of the corset's sexual symbolism came from the effect it had on the female body (Kunzle 2004), including the erect posture required of high-class women, elevation of the breasts, accentuation of hips in contrast to a narrow waist, and changed breathing patterns emulating breathing enacted during the sexual act. Thus, for both French and British women, the corset provided an opportunity to maneuver their constricted bodies as erotic weapons and assets in feminine domestic life. As corsets became more ambiguous and iconic, resistance to them also started to appear. For example, illuminist philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, preoccupied with the "natural man," states the following about the corset:

> The Greek women were wholly unacquainted with those frames of whalebone in which our women distort, rather than display, their figures. It seems to me that this abuse, which is carried to an incredible degree of folly in England, must sooner or later lead to the production of a degenerate race. Moreover, I maintain that the charm which these corsets are supposed to produce is in the worst possible taste; it is not a pleasant thing to see a woman cut in two like a wasp—it offends both the eye and the imagination. A slender waist has its limits, like everything else, in proportion and suitability, and beyond these limits, it becomes a defect. This defect would be a glaring one in the nude; why should it be beautiful under the costume? (Rousseau 1762/1921, 293)

[1]We use the term *natural* to refer to bodies not modified by shapewear, understanding that, as Orbach (2009, 165) clearly puts it, "there has never been a 'natural' body … untainted by cultural practices."

For Rousseau, the rigidity of corsets disfigured the female body, catered to "the worst possible taste," and was capable of producing a "degenerate race." Unsurprisingly, after the French Revolution, fashion promoted a more natural look, the so-called empire silhouette, which had a waistline positioned just under the bust. The empire silhouette differentiated itself from the fashion excesses of the *ancien régime* and was fully embraced by Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's first wife, Joséphine de Beauharnais, a fashion icon of that era (Borrelli-Persson 2016). However, these efforts did not result in the corset's demise.

To the contrary, despite changes in fashion, the corset retained its erotic symbolism, replacing nudity in art as a way to depict sexuality (Kunzle 2004). Exemplifying this is Manet's famous painting, *Nana* (Figure 1), completed in 1877. It was considered so erotic that the *Salon de Paris*, an annual art exposition in which classical-type paintings displaying naked bodies were considered moral and respectful, refused to exhibit it. In the painting, Nana wears a colorful corset, a controversial object at a time when decent, moral women wore white corsets (Steele 2001).

The Manet controversy is an iconic event that also represents how during the nineteenth century, the corset became the essential protagonist of modern femininity in France. As the center of the geopolitical world shifted from France to England, the corset effectively became a leading apparel item in Victorian social life. During the reign of Queen Victoria, the corset reached its zenith of popularity (Bayle-Loudet 2015). In Victorian society, the roles of women and men were clearly laid out (Hughes 2014), requiring women to be chaste and lead a domestic life. At the same time, a parallel subculture of sexual fetishism emerged (Kunzle 2004). Thus, on one hand, the corset was the key element in a body-centered assemblage that promoted chastity and virtue. On the other hand, it became a seductive object women used to exercise agency and take control of their own bodies and sexuality. Corsetry became a fetish due to the ways it shaped the female body and its historically ambiguous mediations between eroticism and chastity (Kunzle 2004). As such, the corset embodied the tensions surrounding female roles, freedom, domestic life, and expression. The practice of tight-lacing (Kunzle 1977)—defying the natural body by molding it, squeezing the flesh and bones to assumes the shape of a corset even when not wearing one—became its own controversy. After all, in a chaste world where women were supposed to be constricted, pushing this constriction to its limits at one's own will was a radical exercise of agency by Victorian women. These ambiguities regarding female bodies and women's roles were reinforced by medical controversies surrounding the corset.

Healthy or not? The corset from a medical perspective

The corset was an icon of the Victorian era in places as different as the United States, France, and, of course, England. During the Industrial Revolution, bourgeoise values spread throughout different social classes, and the corset became more accessible to women of lower socio-economic status. While growing in popularity, the corset also became more controversial. Doctors, feminist activists, public figures, and women who engaged in the practice of tight-lacing all lined up to argue for or against the continuous use of the corset, frequently referring to science for support.

A series of correspondence published in *The Lancet* medical journal, which we share as follows, illustrates this discourse. For example, in 1909, a certain Henry Heather Bigg wrote in defense of the corset:

> Why is it that all the women of the world, as well as the men of tropical races, should find such artificial support needed? The answer is that the human abdomen has certain structural disabilities and for obvious reasons. Man, as every morphologist knows, is built on the quadruped pattern. … But as man has chosen to become biped and erect, this abdominal hammock is no longer available, and the organs, having to depend only on their peritoneal slings, which very easily stretch, tend to gravitate downwards and to unduly huddle against the lower front wall of the abdomen. … Up to the present, this effort of nature in the roll of centuries is incomplete, and hence, it is that the women of all races and the men of certain races have found for themselves the advantages of girding their loins and thereby artificially supporting the lower abdomen. (Bigg 1909, 1630)

Figure 1. Manet's Nana. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Bigg's defense of the corset generated other manifestations of support that also attributed the need for shapewear to "evolutionary" reasons, as in the following quote from *The Lancet*:

> Let me first say, by way of finding some ground of agreement with Mr. Bigg, that I believe many women do need the support of a suitable corset. … I also admit that a number of women need some form of abdominal support for conditions which are structural rather than pathological. I believe, though I cannot give absolute proof of it, that evolution, through the wearing of corsets for many centuries, has produced by adaptation a type of woman that cannot easily do without them. The fact that some women seem quite unable to give them up supports this contention, though I believe strongly that most women would. (Fish and Cantab 1910, 1774)

However, recalling Rousseau's ideas of a healthy, natural body, other doctors advised *against* wearing corsets, rejecting evolutionary claims and pointing to several health risks caused by wearing corsets. One of the most influential books of the time, published by French physician O'Followell

(1908), analyzed X-ray images of corseted women and listed 42 health conditions related to usage of corset, including osteology, blood, and reproductive issues. A more recent study (Gibson 2015) comparing the skeletons of women who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries found that they presented thoracic deformations and rib damage, which can be attributed to corsetry. However, other symptoms typically attributed to corset usage in the early 1900s, such as indigestion and menstruation problems, have been deemed to be unrelated to corsetry in the modern medical literature.

Oppressive! (but empowering): translating the corset into a feminist issue

By mid-nineteenth century, the corset had been translated into several body-centered assemblages aimed at defining womanhood. It became the material icon of public controversies about gender. Along with doctors, emerging feminist activists, especially suffragists, enthusiastically railed against the use of corsets. Feminists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean claimed that female shapewear was the product of male patriarchal efforts to restrain female activity (Riegel 1963), connecting the compressive nature of the object with the impossibility of women's participation in outdoor activities and public life. The dress reform movement, gathering various activists who designed, wore, and promoted clothing considered more practical and comfortable than the fashions of the time, brought many feminists to oppose the corset, including writer and North American women's rights advocate Amelia Bloomer. She developed an alternative undergarment for women: comfortable, loose-fitting full trousers, gathered at the waist and ankles—the bloomer costume (Kriebl 1998).

Suffragists' and dress reformists' claims, however, ignored the possibility for women to use the corset as a tool to take control of their own bodies or for the corset to translate female power by means of seduction, mediating body-centered discourses that fell between chastity and fetishism. Despite the claims of dress reformists and their allies, many women who wore corsets considered themselves to be more than mere victims of fashion and patriarchal oppression. Like the female members of the French elite in the eighteenth century, Victorian women employed the corset within their gender performances, as the iconography of the times suggests (Steele 2001).

Symbolically, the corset represented control of women's bodies by not only men but also women themselves. Women who voluntarily laced tightly shaped their bodies, retaining control over them, even against medical advice and the growing consensus, evident in medical journals, on the harm caused by corset usage. Engaging in the practice of tight-lacing, women not only defied body reformers and medical discourse but also reclaimed ownership of their own bodies and sexuality during times it was considered immoral for a woman to feel pleasure (Kunzle 2004). In that sense, the corset once again translated tensions centering on agency, sexuality, and the public image of the respectable women, a type of gender problematizing that would again emerge in the contemporary feminist discussions on the usage of seductive fashion objects as empowerment symbols.

Overall, the trajectory of the corset from the 18th through the early twentieth century highlights the female body as a locus of power and corsets as an essential component of this power, exerted by several types of market actors who used the corset to advance their own goals. Despite these challenges, the female body also offered the possibility of (albeit limited) choice: women could choose the level of compression on their bodies, decide to express their sexuality through corsets, and control the male gazes invited into their private lives. Adopting (or not) the corset, therefore, provided women with some flexibility to navigate cultural discourses, even when they could not actively shape them.

The corset gives way to the girdle

When men went to war in early industrialized societies, women took over jobs in industry. Among other substantial changes in the female universe in response to these new roles, women's fashion became more practical to allow for a broader range of body motions. The shapewear characteristic of the first decades of the twentieth century had to be adapted to allow for this flexibility required to reconcile the opposing goals of allowing for flexibility and rigidity. This shapewear shows the need for the market to develop new materials and designs and for body-centered market assemblages to evolve. Women's bodies should have freedom of movement but remain in place.

Amid the need for movement and the different social roles women embraced, DuPont's introduction of new fabrics, nylon in 1938 and Lycra in 1958, meant that shapewear could be built as elastic pieces that had an effect similar to their rigid corset counterparts. This, in turn, allowed a woman to dress herself (i.e. without help to lace the corset) and contributed to the end of boning—the use of very rigid materials that held up corsets. These technological advancements were in line with the fashion trends of those decades. Moreover, these new materials and technologies served to popularize shapewear. Without rigid structures, shapewear became cheaper, and without the need for an assistant to lace the garment, more women were able to wear the new elastic shapewear. All these techno-societal changes catalyzed different translations of shapewear throughout the decades of the twentieth century.

For example, the fashion silhouette in the 1920s was the *flapper*. At that time, the ideal body shape was almost two-dimensional (Martin and Koda 1994), with a plain, boyish look. The required flexibility and understating of curves could be achieved by constricting the body's natural shape—a function served by shapewear. Consequently, in the 1920s, the brassiere (bra) gained in popularity, and women started to wear girdles in addition to bras. The flapper silhouette required shapewear that suppressed the hips, while the brassiere was responsible for making the breasts look smaller (Carl 2011).

Societal changes took place between World War I and II: the popularization of mass media, increased industrialization, declining rural populations, and rich artistic movements whose works veered from the pictorial and toward political discourses (Hobsbawn 1994). All these changes occurred during the emergence of Nazism and fascism, which culminated in World War II, a dark period when again women had prominent and physically active roles in public life as most men were fighting in the war. After World War II, intense economic recovery took place in the Western world, ushering in a new golden age (Hobsbawn 1994).

In search of a renewed femininity that would bring back the glamor of the pre-war past, a fashion-design icon who would inject new life into the emphasis on female curves emerged. Christian Dior's first fashion collection promoted a completely new silhouette for women. Finding the then-prevalent body shape unyielding to his visionary ideas, the designer sculpted a mannequin that he dressed in his new collection. "With big, nervous blows of the hammer, he gave the mannequin the same form of the ideal woman for the fashion that he was to launch," (La Maison Dior 2018, np) the story is told on the company's website. Dior was precise in his vision for the female shape: "I accentuated the waist, the volume of the hips. I emphasized the bust" (La Maison Dior 2018, np). Launched in 1947, just two years after the end of the war, the collection included the "Chérie" dinner dress, which became an icon of the new fashion:

> Chérie exemplifies "The New Look" in all its salient elements: sloped shoulder, raised bustline, narrowed waist, and a monumental volume of skirt falling away from a padded hipline to below the calf. The New Look arrived uncompromised and complete, not as a tentative suggestion or stage in evolution. Here, the skirt is made of the full width of the fabric, selvage to selvage, disposed horizontally. Consequently, … the substantial bulk pads the hips. (Martin and Koda 1996, 14)

Dior's New Look revived the hourglass silhouette in contrast to the practical garments working women had worn. In the 1950s, new types of shapewear emerged to accompany this new fashion. Hollywood costume designers and stars disseminated Dior's extravagant New Look and turned it into the most desirable fashion style of that period.

The body-centered market assemblages of the time, however, were caught between female consumers' acquired need for freedom of movement and their desire to adopt fashionable garments that were once again constrictive, requiring body-shaping undergarments. Comfort had become a requirement of female consumers, and elasticity became a crucial element in the reformulation of

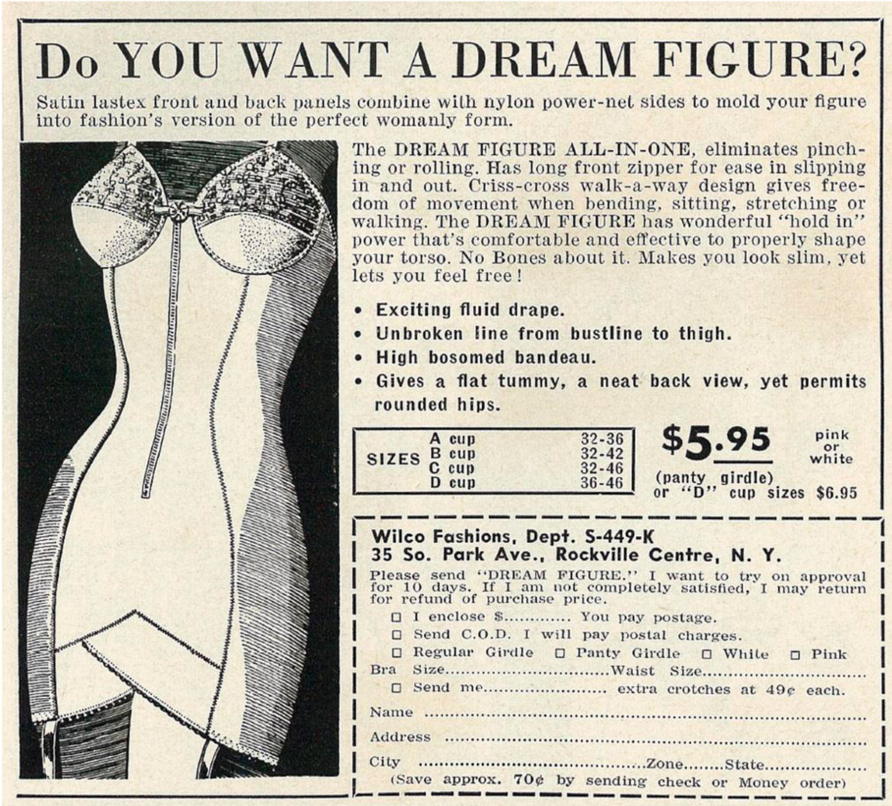

Figure 2. 1957 Advertisement for Dream Figure Girdle. Published in Vogue magazine, September 1, 1957, Vol. 130, No. 4.

shapewear, which mediated the practical role of workers and mothers in an industrial society while keeping their curves in a desirable shape. Garments launched during this time included Nylon and Lycra girdles and "control-top" pantyhose. Figure 2, for example, depicts an ad that promises "the dream figure" hand-in-hand with comfort.

Overall, the first half of the twentieth century saw rapid modifications of undergarments and shapewear. From the pre-WWI era when corsets still mediated luxury, modesty, and controversy, right through the years when the hourglass figure was virtually abolished to the comeback of curves with the creation of a new fashion look after WWII, shapewear evolved accordingly.

Shapewear is dead! long live shapewear!

The 1960s were a time of change in culture and fashion and saw the popularization of panties (Delory 2015) and the abolition of girdles from women's wardrobes. In fact, shapewear and all forms of control garments went out of fashion as emerging social movements advocated freedom of thought, spirit, and body. Amid these changes, many shapewear companies went out of business as ideals of beauty once again coincided with natural looks.

The 1960s witnessed the beginnings of second-wave feminism began (Maclaran 2012), as Friedan (1963) published her influential book *The Feminine Mystique*, and the birth-control pill made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1967. The common trend was to free women's bodies from constraints. Hence, shapewear, which imposed moral and sexual rituals, was again enrolled as a key target. If the body were to be free, morally and sexually, it could not be constrained by any objects. A cultural flashpoint involving this trend occurred in 1968, when a feminist group protested the Miss America pageant by throwing what they deemed symbols of oppression into a trash bin: girdles, high-heel shoes, bras, and copies of *Playboy* magazine—the event that originated the bra-burning-feminist myth (Napikoski 2017). Constraining bodies for beauty or for fashion was taken to signify domination, and the absence of shapewear became a symbol of empowerment and new female roles.

However, this resistance to wearing undergarments soon ended. In the late 1970s, Roy Raymond, tired of being embarrassed when buying lingerie for his wife in the foundation garment section of retail stores, created a new brand of lingerie sold by catalog under a sexy-chic storytelling gimmick referring to Britain's famous Queen Victoria: *Victoria's Secret* (Barr 2013). Acquired by Leslie Wexner, the brand further invested in the eroticism and sophistication connected to myths from the Victorian era—the contradictions of chastity and fetishism materialized by the iconic symbol of the corset. The brand promoted fashion shows with models in sexy lingerie, bringing the intimate to the public. Victoria's Secret storytelling brought a magical aura back to lingerie (Juffer 1996) and rescued shapewear from the product category of mere foundation garments. As eighteenth century elite women frequently laced their corsets in front of admirers, and Victorian women defied dress reformers to evoke and embody sexuality through their corsets, modern women could bring some of that tenuous, lost sexuality back to their bodies by displaying lingerie. Nevertheless, as apparel that adorned the body without constricting it, lingerie became a separate product category from shapewear (even though some lingerie acted as shapewear, and vice versa).

While Victoria's Secret brought a male-designed tool of seduction to North American women, new social movements and subcultures embraced sexuality a new form of protest. Once again, shapewear was enrolled in a body-centered assemblage championed by a new generation of women willing to take charge of their bodies. A prominent market actor who took part in this assemblage was Vivienne Westwood, the creator of the punk look. She subverted Victorian fashion norms to inspire a new aesthetic subculture by incorporating the ambiguous corset in a fashion aesthetics whose main goal was to undermine moralistic social norms through explicit violence and sexuality (Hix 2012). Pop icons who followed, such as Madonna and Cyndi Lauper, adopted this fashion trend as a tool of empowerment. Exposed in the public sphere, the corset was translated by the fashion market into a transgressive object.

"Shiny and new": shapewear in the twentieth century

The year is 1990. Superstar Madonna is 32 years old and has launched her "Blond Ambition" tour. She wears outfits created by French designer Jean Paul Gaultier that include corsets and coned brassieres (Figure 3). The tour sparks several controversies due to its highly erotic content intermingled with references to Catholicism but is also one of the most profitable and celebrated music events of the decade (Ciccone and Leigh 2009). During the tour, Madonna dominates massive audiences, the media, and especially her own body, which she uses as an instrument of power and pleasure. For Madonna, the corset is instrumental in revealing her body in all its power.

This particular corset materialized a combination of seduction and power, drawing on the fetishism references from the Victorian era and on the controversies enacted by the object itself. As Rollins (1995, 67) writes:

> Gaultier's black cage-like body wraps arguably exemplify superiority to vulgar morality, since what were once normalizing body shapers—the bones and straps of "patriarchy's hourglass"—now brazenly emphasize musculature that defies gender and reveals, literally, the constructedness of the physical ideal.

Gaultier sought to strip the corset of its submissive context, which he compared to torture, and he wanted women to use their femininity as a tool of power. He gave his corset wearer a ready-to-wear statement: "I assume my femininity, but I am a woman who assumes so, so I decide" (Gaultier 2013, np). Such statement expressed in a sentence what third-wave feminism literature conceptualized as empowerment: an individual expression of agency using objects provided by the market (Budgeon 2011). As such, the corset designed by Gaultier became an icon for choice feminism (Budgeon 2015), a

Figure 3. Madonna during the Blond Ambition Tour. Photo by a fan. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

strand of feminism praising self-determination and individuation. Choice feminism dismissed the idea that women were mere victims of an oppressive patriarchy and situated the possibility of female agency in the simultaneous engagement with feminism and typically feminine performances. Choice feminisms defends that women could achieve an empowered status through their choices. Ultimately, providing companies are the ones benefiting from womens' choices, no matter what women choose.

Madonna's actions and iconography while wearing Gaultier's outfit creation were consistent with this post-modern notion of empowerment. She both defied and created norms and values. Her body wore the corset but was not shaped or modified by it. Her body had already been shaped before she put her corset on, sculpted by her discipline, willpower, and exercise routine in a clear manifestation of her power as an individual (Budgeon 2011). She established the rules of how she would use this corset and turned it into shapewear *revealing* the body, rather than constricting it.

Madonna's wearing of the corset became an iconic event of the late twentieth century as it encapsulated a moment when shapewear was translated in a highly visible, body-centered market assemblage conformed by media, celebrities, feminism, and fashion. At that time, these market actors converged to promote the possibility for women to control their bodies and sexuality. The seduction enacted by the corset was no longer a weapon to charm a rich husband but a symbol that women could have it all. The material girl, who sang "experience has made me rich, and now they [men] are after me," exposed her body for her own pleasure.

The invisible corset

As the corset transformed into different objects, with its erotic function loosely reproduced in commercial lingerie or used as an object to defy centuries-old fashion norms treating it as *underwear*, physical and self-discipline replaced its function of constricting bodies. Body-shaping started to regain cultural relevance in the 1980s, the decade when Madonna emerged as a mega-pop star. Rather than wearing control garments, women were urged to exercise and diet, thus subjecting their bodies to an invisible corset (Delory 2015).

The ideal of a slender body (Bordo 2003) was closely associated with self-control. The corset was no longer necessary because control over body shapes was internalized. Women worked out and controlled their food intake to attain the right body shape, one that could be shown, not hidden, under a corset. Feminist Wolf (2013, 67) described this shift as the countering of fashion constraints by a "new and sinister relationship" women developed with their bodies. Being fit became synonymous with being sexy, and this sensual ideal required the disclosure of the toned body to the male gaze. Madonna embodied this ideal by displaying her fit body, which a corset embellished rather than constrained and hid.

Under this set of body, fashion, and gender ideals in the 1990s and early 2000s, a new female silhouette emerged: that of the supermodels (Parmentier and Fischer 2011) celebrating the curvaceous, yet thin woman (Harrison 2003). The omnipresence of supermodels posing shapewear-free in fashion media and ads reinforced the understanding that shapewear had given way to other forms of body discipline (Foucault 1995). Self-control, dieting, physical exercise, and plastic surgery became common discourses and practices. Body parts that could not be shaped through dieting and exercise (e.g. the breasts) could easily be shaped by wearing a new class of undergarments designed to enhance curves. For example, the Wonderbra, a padded, pushed-up bra, which was created in 1994. At the end of the twentieth century, the corset was replaced by several consumption objects or practices: domesticated sexuality in lingerie (e.g. prude lingerie in pastel colors), hidden eroticism in public outrage pieces (e.g. lingerie worn as outwear), and constraint through exercise and dieting.

The twenty-first century and entrepreneurial shapewear

It is 2015, and comedian Tina Fey is being interviewed by David Letterman as the U.S. nighttime talk-show host is about to retire. Fey wears a fitted, blue-and-black dress and high-heel pumps (Caldwell 2015)*. In the middle of the interview, she strips off her dress, saying that if she were the one to retire, she would never wear a fancy dress again. As she strips, we see Fey's body fully dressed in shapewear: a beige bra, control shorts, and a black leotard that reads "Bye, Dave" on the front and "Last Dress Ever" on the back* (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Tina Fey showcases her shapewear in interview with David Letterman. Source: YouTube.

Fey's stripping stunt, mocking her own wearing of Spanx, seems to imply that she does not comply with the beauty norms and values urging women to have a perfect body. However, to do so effectively, the actress needed to *not* wear shapewear. As noted by Entwistle (2000, p. 326) in her analysis of the relationship between fashion and the body, naked bodies are "unruly and disruptive."

Unlike Madonna, who wore a golden corset on stage to manifest her empowerment, Fey and other celebrities who admit to wearing Spanx normalize—not reclaim—shapewear as a tool of body control. Celebrities and public figures, from plus-size Queen Latifah ("There are two things I wear. One is a Curvation undergarment over my whole body, and then maybe I'll also put on some Spanx. They're so great. They have a way of smoothing everything out, and then you can just put on whatever you want. It accents you and makes you feel pretty") and Oprah ("I love Spanx. I love Spanx. I wear Spanx every single day. I've given up panties. I wear Spanx!") to slender Amanda Bynes ("I wear Spanx to smooth things out. I read that Jessica Alba wears them, and if she wears them, then so should I"), Isla Fischer ("Anytime anyone compliments me on my figure, I'm wearing my Spanx undies"), and former model Tyra Banks ("Every celebrity walking down the red carpet, you think she's all just naturally like 'shoop'? A lot of them have Spanx on. They're these tight, little tights. You put 'em on; it sucks you up, baby. No matter what red carpet, I got 'em on. I look like a granny before I put the dress on, but I put on the dress, and it's, like, 'Palow!'") frequently make public statements that contribute to the normalization of shapewear.

In another telling example of the normalization of contemporary shapewear, fashion model Chrissy Teigen reveals in a YouTube interview how seeing reality TV celebrity Kim Kardashian's shapewear made her realize that Kardashian was "normal":

> I was so nervous to meet you. … I remember that we went to the bathroom, and you had me zip you up. And I was, "Oh my God, she has Spanx on; she is cool; she is normal". … We were just, like, cinching you in (Norton 2016).

By publicly displaying and discussing their controlled bodies, celebrities and consumers who engage in the same practice do not denounce or oppose the imposition of an ideal body shape difficult to achieve without shapewear. Rather, they celebrate their use of shapewear as a tool of body modification, making it seem like a natural choice.

With shapewear, women are never naked—not even when undressed, as Fey's example shows. Shapewear pre-dresses the body, covers imperfections, and keeps bodies hidden from the male gaze yet remains a woman's dirty little secret. Consequently, contemporary celebrities, fashion designers, stylists, media, and consumers embrace shapewear to mediate a different network of meanings and materials—one that accepts the immaterial constraints of the invisible corset as a given and uses elastic Spanx to cheat in the daunting task of achieving and keeping a slender body.

Spanx!

As well as a tool for compressing, smoothing, and hiding undesirable body features, Spanx plays a symbolic role that has made the brand synonymous with contemporary shapewear—a role championed by product developer and company chief executive Sara Blakely. As the story goes, in the late 1990s, 27-year-old Blakely (Figure 5) cut the feet off pantyhose, aiming to have no-show underwear she could wear with white pants. She was already a successful salesperson (O'Connor 2012) and moved on to patent and manufacture the product and skillfully develop a business from her invention. Her breakthrough came in 2000, when Winfrey included Spanx on her annual list of favorite products. The endorsement from one of America's most beloved personalities generated a surge in sales, and the Spanx brand soon skyrocketed to fame. Blakely became the youngest, self-made female billionaire in the United States (O'Connor 2012).

Along with her business, Blakely has created a persona that embodies female empowerment through discourses of entrepreneurship (Goddard 2017). She is a billionaire who has worked her

Figure 5. Sarah Blakely (right) at the Fortune Most Powerful Women event. Source: Fortune Live Media. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic.

way to the top.[2] Moreover, she is the mother of four children younger than seven years old and a mentor to young female entrepreneurs (Drew 2016). In that sense, Blakely embodies the "you can have it all" notion of third-wave feminist female empowerment: she occupies the domestic and public spheres, and she does this through, literally, shapewear. She is the desirable, sexy woman, the career woman, the model, the mentor, and the activist. Blakely's public figure indicates that shapewear is no longer constrictive. Rather, it is a tool for empowerment available in the market and, therefore, accessible to many women.

Shapewear empowers women by allowing them to assume control over their bodies, redesigning them as they wish. In doing so, women seem to create an armor that protects their emotional insecurities and makes them feel more powerful and confident amid imposed beauty, fashion, and gender norms. With shapewear, women confidently display their productive capacity, body strength, ambition, potential, and resilience in assuming multiple roles. In fact, several celebrities who talk about wearing Spanx mention how the brand helps them, for example, look "great on the outside," when feeling "a bit soft" after having children (Maloney 2017). Further stressing the empowering aspect attributed to the product, Spanx shapewear has names such as Spanx Power Conceal-Her™ Open-Bust Mid-Thigh Bodysuit and High Power Capri. Spanx "Look at Me Now" Seamless Leggings are a bestseller.

The participation of shapewear in assemblages related to body agency, empowered body control, and positive female roles does not mean it has stable cultural status. A new wave of feminism gaining strength (Maclaran 2015) considers issues of intersectionality (Gopaldas 2013; Gopaldas and DeRoy 2015), especially regarding race (Hooks 1989) and body acceptance. Aiming to promote body diversity, plus-size fashion bloggers and fat-acceptance advocates claim that fashion should adjust itself to all body sizes, rather than the opposite (Gurrieri and Cherrier 2013; Harju and Huovinen 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Most consumer activists criticize shapewear for its association with corsetry, as MSLindsayM, a blogger on Femme Fatshionista, notes:

[2]We do not ignore that Blakely built her fortune selling shapewear to women who might not be as empowered as she.

> You need to know the misogynistic roots of much of fashion for women. My main reason for wearing [shapewear] is that I like the way [it] feels under a dress. Like a slip, they keep my outfit from riding up or folding in places as I move around. For me, they make me feel as though I can do more physical activity in a sexy outfit. I feel that I am less limited by my femme-ness because I know my undergarments are secure, and I won't be accidentally flashing anyone. But I also know that's not why shapewear and other undergarments like corsets were designed. They were designed to reinforce the beauty standard of the smooth hourglass shape, one unattainable to most women and one I am already privileged to sort of have. I acknowledge the unpleasant and sexist history behind shapewear and all of its fashion cousins like the corset. (Lindsay 2017)

Understanding that consumers face such ideological challenges, market actors have once again intervened to realign shapewear with preferred womanhood ideals. For example, a new line from Spanx aims to disassociate the brand from the negative perceptions attributed to corsets:

> Instead of gut-squeezing agony, a new line of Spanx pants and bodysuits offers an easier, less-constricting fit, something the brand says has more to do with smoothing the body's bumps and curves and less to do with sculpting or shrinking waistlines or thighs. (Tabuchi 2015, np)

As Blakely and devoted consumers of her brand have it, shapewear is not a tool for constriction, submission, and restraint but an instrument enabling empowerment, confidence, and self-improvement. Similar functions have recently been attributed to fashion in general (Mikkonen, Vicdan, and Markkula 2014) as fashion is used as a form of cultural mediation between different ideologies connected with individual responsibility.

However, the paradox of shapewear remains: How can a constraining object be related to female empowerment? Why do women still need to rely on their sexuality to have agency in the public space? From the suffragists engaged in dress reform through the social movements redefining shapewear fashion in the 1960s to the post-feminism of the 1990s and early 2000s (Maclaran 2015), feminism has concerned itself with matters of fashion. Women want to dress however they wish and to free themselves from the constraints and glass ceilings imposed by patriarchal societies. Over time, shapewear has manifested the contradictions at the intersection of feminism and fashion. These contradictions are evident in Spanx, which made a woman a billionaire by selling products that squeeze the fat, organs, and tissues of the female body into smaller shapes, constrain bodily movement, and cause pain and suffering (Adams 2014)—while promoting themselves as means to enable women to showcase their appearance and sexuality, claiming this is how one should dress for success.

Conclusion

Alexander McQueen, one of the most famous designers of the first decade of the twenty-first century, once said: "I want to empower women. I want people to be afraid of the women I dress" (Alexander 2011). McQueen himself was an enthusiast of corsets in his collections, and this quote encapsulates the close relationship of shapewear with female oppression and empowerment. Shapewear has always aroused fear, using McQueen's words, as it is repurposed by the body who wears it and as bodies act on the object that acts on them, articulating discourses and negotiating agency. From whalebone stays that hid menacing bodies to the invisible corset requiring self-discipline yet allowing demonstrations of extraordinary willpower to the entrepreneurial shapewear that elevated Blakely to the "Power Women to Watch" list (Casserly 2012), shapewear has offered women the material means to tame, demonstrate, and reclaim their power.

Given this winding historical trajectory, shapewear deserves its place as a marketplace icon. Evolving from the stays of the Renaissance to the multi-million-dollar brand of elastic shapewear of contemporary celebrities, shapewear has consistently been embedded in many tensions in several (post)feminist eras. Shapewear marketers face the challenge of integrating contradictions into a plethora of objects, which, conversely, further materialize the inherent ambiguity of the female form. Should the female body be public or private? Who has the right to determine its normative shape? These questions haunt body-centered market assemblages and their actors.

As such, shapewear both literally and metaphorically *takes form* as body-centered market assemblages evolve, influencing the different shapes and uses of these objects, that its, their plasticity. In that sense, shapewear will continue to reinvent itself as an articulator of tensions amid changes in technology and society. As gender issues take center stage in pop and business culture, shapewear can continue to mediate tensions between oppression and empowerment, construction and choice, posture and seduction. The body-centered market assemblages that influence and are influenced by shapewear will yet interact with the object in maintaining the high levels of plasticity of this market. Shapewear will reshape itself to accommodate, sustain, and translate contemporary articulations of gender blurring traditional gender roles while confused and conflicting masculinities (Holt and Thompson 2004) and femininities (Thompson and Üstüner 2015) are performed and legitimized in the marketplace. Considering shapewear's trajectory and the omnipresence of the complex discourses it has mediated through time, we believe that shapewear will continue to partake in gender issues and human bodies, as Blakely aptly states, "one butt at a time" (Business Chief 2012).

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