

The Playtex Girdle: The Shape and Influence of Feminine Construction in the 1950s

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For centuries, undergarments have served as the unseen resource in providing wearers with the most ‘ideal’ outward appearance. In her lecture “Revealing Garments: A Brief History of Women’s Underwear”, H. Kristina Haugland, the Associate Costume and Textile Curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, discusses the perception of natural beauty in the 18th century, stating that “nature unrefined was not [regarded as] true nature. Nature needed to be ‘refined’ in order to be the best.” This explanation of nature and beauty was accompanied with the analogy of a diamond, and how until a diamond is polished, it has “no use or brilliance”. This ideology was how people perceived their own physical beauty in the 18th century, and believed in order to reach their maximum potential and most beautiful selves, they required the assistance and manipulation of undergarments. This research essay focuses on a number of factors in relation to the Playtex Fabiricon Girdle advertisement of 1956, including history, cultural and political events of the time period, as well as the significance of the focused piece and its influence on society. By taking these factors into consideration, I also intend to answer “what makes the girdle a significant component of the 20th and 21st centuries?”

The girdle, according to Reverend Wharton B. Marriot’s “Vestiarium Christianum: The Origin and Gradual Development of the Dress of Holy Ministry in the Church”, came into existence in approximately 800 A.D. as a religious piece that promoted chastity. However in the early 20th century, the girdle eventually emerged as a fashionable and sexualized undergarment in response to the less comfortable corset. In 1917, as a result of the first World War, the United States government established the War Industries Board, which was responsible for coordinating the purchase of war supplies, and due to shortages, the board initiated cutbacks of certain

materials that citizens were allowed to purchase. As explained in Paul Baldwin's article "How the Trenches of World War I Led to the Rise of the Boob-Boosting Uplift Bra", the country was in need of as much metal material as possible for the production of ammunition and other war supplies. The metal shortage led to the War Industries Board placing a ban on the consumption of corsets, as corset frames were made primarily of metal.

In addition to metal shortages, the war also saw females taking on active roles in the workforce and the military. While women were needed in the factories to manufacture war supplies, additional women were needed to fill in for the positions that had become vacant due to men leaving to serve in the war. As described in Robert Wilde's article "Women and Work in World War 1", the kinds of jobs women were taking on included "clerical jobs...transport, in hospitals...in industry and engineering." Women were also involved in "the vital munitions factories, building ships, and doing work such as loading and unloading coal." The intense changes and physical demands of women's roles during the war encouraged women to invest in the relatively new brassiere, which, according to Melissa Pandika's article "Bra History: How A War Shortage Reshaped Modern Shapewear", was first patented by Caresse Crosby three years prior in 1914.

By the end of the first World War, followed by another supply shortage with the second World War, corsets were becoming obsolete for the generation of women who were taking on more active roles in society, while the older generations were still primarily relying on corsets. Although younger women had given up their corsets for the war effort, there was still a desire for an undergarment that assisted in shape-altering without restricting the wearer's movements and without violating any War Industries Board supply requirements. In her article entitled "The Story Behind Shapewear: From Girdles to Spanx", Logan Sowa states that "girdles were

considered essential garments by many women from the 1920s to the 1960s.” The girdle was similar to the corset in both form and application, “made partly or entirely of elastic” as per “The Fashion Dictionary” by Mary Brooks Picken. In order to emphasize the replacement of the corsets, girdles were generally marketed alongside brassieres, as the bra served to support the bust and the girdle served to compliment and re-shape. In a war-time advertisement for the girdle in *Vogue* magazine from 1942, women were advised on having “the support of a good pantie-girdle... when you’re practicing first-aid, running up and down ladders, or going through fire-fighting drills.”

In the 1950s, the International Laytex Company, which was eventually renamed Playtex, “pioneered the development of latex”, according to the company’s profile in “The International Directory of Company Histories”. Playtex applied the technology of latex to their production of girdles and other women’s undergarments, which allowed women the most flexibility out of any previous shape-altering undergarment. Playtex further revolutionized the latex girdle through a blended material that was marketed as “Fabricon”, which was a combination of cotton and latex, as seen in the 1956 ad placement which marketed the girdle as the “magic controller”. The combination of cotton and latex allowed the same level of stretch and flexibility as previous girdles, however the cotton added extended softness which made the undergarment more comfortable to wear, thus easier to move in. Words like ‘magic’, ‘miracle’, and ‘wonder’ were common marketing tools in the Playtex girdle ads. The Playtex ad distinguished the Fabricon girdle’s differences from its outdated predecessors, stating “not a seam, stitch or bone in it!” Playtex marketed themselves as a trailblazer in girdle production, making statements such as “no other girdles whittle away so many inches, yet feel so comfortable” (*Life* magazine ad placement

from October 1954) and “new Fabiricon gives Playtex Girdles ‘hold-in’ power no other girdle can match” (*Period Paper* advertising archives).

The new-and-improved girdle, which promoted female liberation and new societal roles, came at a significant time both politically and economically in United States history. In 1951, five years prior to the placement of the Playtex ‘Magic Controller’ ad of 1956, J.D. Salinger exposed Americans to the newfound crude and rebellious lifestyle of teenage life in the United States in his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. In 1954, the Dow Jones Industrial Average closed at the highest level since the Wall Street Crash of 1929, reinforcing the country’s position as the global capitalist leader and the “only economic superpower”, as stated in “American Capitalism and Global Convergence: After the Bubble” by Marina Whitman. In 1955, Rosa Parks ignited the Montgomery bus boycott, fighting repression both racially and as a female. In 1956, the same year Fabiricon makes its commercial debut, President Eisenhower secures the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which saw to the construction of “transcontinental superhighways” that made the separated components of the country a legitimate group of united states. According to the “The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating The Interstate System”, the act was intended to provide highways “designed to meet the requirements of the national defense” in the event of an attack, and “as a way of providing more jobs for people out of work”. This same year also marked the career peaks of two of the most iconic and sexual figures in American pop-culture: Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe.

The significance of the Playtex Fabiricon girdle goes hand-in-hand with the accompanying decade, which signified a time period of revolt, sexualization, and diligence – even Elvis, the King of Rock and Roll, served his time in the war. Due to an all-time high in the influence of media and celebrity, “popular culture and media outlets of the 1950s... raised young

women to be sexually charged and hyperaware of their public appearances,” according to Bridget O’Keefe’s “Happiness, Womanhood, and Sexualized Media: An Analysis of 1950s and 1960s Popular Culture”. In contrast to the sexual exposure of female celebrities and pin-up girls and their influence on young women, there was also an opposing influx of virtuous messages that encouraged women to “channel their sexuality into marriage and procreation” (O’Keefe), by telling stories of pure-hearted characters through animated films like *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), as well as by demonstrating the perfect housewife taking care of the perfect family like Donna Stone in *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966). The divergence and conflictual messages constantly faced between the liberation and suppression of the female role and her sexual identity would inevitably play a role in starting the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s.

While the girdle was regarded as the more practical and comfortable alternative to the restrictive corset, the girdle still came with just as many health concerns as the corset, although those concerns either were not addressed or were unknown during the time period of the height of its success. While many advertisements for girdles made claims that the product assisted with weight-loss, the fact of the matter is girdles themselves did not possess the ability to make fat disappear. Instead, nutritionist Franci Cohen explains in the *Fox News* article “Wear a Corset to Lose Baby Weight: Experts Weigh In” that girdles cause “the stomach [to press] into a temporarily smaller size, meaning women eat less and feel full faster.” Self-care consultant Dr. Nina Cheri Franklin, PhD says that “girdles and other shapewear provide a false appearance of firm, youthful muscles” while “the core and lower body muscle groups are most at risk for atrophy.”

The girdle's influence on society, particularly during the 1950s due to Playtex's innovative advancements and mystical-like marketing techniques, was progressive in more ways than one. The undergarment promoted and considered the woman of the nuclear age: the kind of woman who took on physical challenges and prioritized comfort over tradition; the girdle also played a major role in the mass-sexualization of feminine undergarments and imagery due to advancements in photography and marketing, incorporating beautiful and healthy-looking models wearing girdles into ad campaigns for women to aspire to be like and for men to covet. Due to the girdle's progressive role, as older and more traditional generations continued to wear corsets, the girdle was also regarded as somewhat controversial and would contribute to the opposition of groups who wished to maintain the more traditional and moral familial roles of women, which included advocating the more submissive role of females and their need to preserve their sexuality for marriage through various media outlets and storytelling.

Although the girdle was once used primarily for shape-altering and providing women with a more accommodating undergarment for motor abilities, the girdle can now be bought in some of the most popular and high-end stores as a sexy lingerie piece. While the girdle in its most materialistic regard has been seen to serve women strictly in a uniform manner, the significance of the undergarment lies in how it served women both physically and psychologically during some of the most crucial moments in our country's history up until present day. Regardless of the primary purpose of the girdle and how its role has been regarded or utilized over the last 70 years, the one fact that can be said with certainty is whether the year was 1942 or 2002, the girdle has always been intended to serve women in a manner that made her feel not only beautiful, but equally capable.

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