A Survey of the Effect of Socioeconomics on the Evolution of Millinery Styles: A Case Study of the U.S. From 1900 Through the 1960s

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This study explores the relationship between socioeconomics and millinery style through an analysis of statistical data from the United States Bureau of Statistics. It was very common for women to wear hats in the early 20th century. Most studies regarding millinery are limited to a discussion of style, while some focus on extended functions of millinery styles such as how they aid in social communication. In this study, we discuss the relationship between a woman's socioeconomic status and her hat-wearing behavior. This study covers the period from 1900 through the 1960s, when there was a sudden decline in hat-wearing behavior. We analyzed the changes in the number of people listed in various occupational categories in the U.S. Bureau of Statistics data for each decade. Careful observation of labor distribution statistics for the job market can yield valuable insights about women's hat-wearing behaviors. Fluctuations in the population of the lower class were significantly correlated with changes in millinery. We also identified time-sensitive periods in millinery style that coincided with the two World Wars.

Keywords: millinery, hats, popular culture, socioeconomic, dress style, labor

Introduction

The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between socioeconomics and popular culture. Socioeconomics (also known as socio-economics or social economics) is a study of how economic activity is shaped by the social processes (Wikipedia, 2015b).

Social process is the pattern of growth and change in society over time. Social process is wide-ranging and covers many aspects of everyday life from clothing and accessories to language, gestures, and lifestyle habits. Apparel is one of the most prominent of these elements and hats are particularly conspicuous. The evolution of hats can be traced from ancient murals and paintings to modern advertisements. Hats have a long life in human society because unlike clothing, hats are not human necessities but original pieces that can be worn in any season, says Dolly Jones, editor in chief of the online version of British Vogue (Young, 2011). Women's hats have gone

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through more extreme transformations than men's and most advertisements target female consumers by featuring female models. Therefore, we studied the evolution of millinery styles as a representation of popular culture and how these styles have been influenced by the distribution of socioeconomic status.

Millinery can be studied from two different angles: functionality and social significance. Most research on functional form discusses how millinery has developed and changed over time. These references show that the purpose and requirements of millinery changed frequently throughout history. In the 18th century, women wore mob caps to protect their hair from dust and dirt while they were working. Women in the 19th century wore poke bonnets to signify their unmarried status or wore extravagant, glamorous hats to highlight their social status. The veils worn today have their roots in the 19th century. Since the 20th century, millinery has made unprecedented progress in design and material (McDowell, 1997). Preferences for millinery styles have also changed over time. Wide-brimmed hats were popular in the 1990s as the preference was for a visual S-shape. In the 1910s, however, slender styles came into fashion and women began wearing cloche hats, which are close-fitting and have narrow brims that partly cover the cheeks (Guild, 2012).

In addition to fulfilling basic functional requirements, millinery has also always been socially meaningful. Hats and clothing can provide us with a snapshot of the social structure of labor. Most people take clothing and accessories for granted, therefore little research has been devoted to the appearance of clothing (Dant, 1999). This study uses socioeconomic status (SES) as a measure of social position. Socioeconomic status is the "economic and sociological combined total measure of … an individual's or a family's economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education, and occupation" (Wikipedia, 2015b). We chose to assess SES distribution based on occupation statistics, as education in the first half of the 20th century was not as accessible as today and records of individual income were also limited. We then evaluated the stratification of the socioeconomic state of a particular period based on the results and compared it to millinery styles in order to explore potential correlations.

Previous research has discussed the social implications of millinery from the angles of gender, power, and communication. A number of studies have explored the rise and evolution of social consciousness among women through the lens of changes in millinery styles. Moehling (2005) pointed out that the two world wars brought significant change to millinery styles. As men were dispatched to the frontlines, women entered the workforce to fill the labor gap, gradually cultivating economic power. The social status and awareness of women improved as their authority was extended from the family to society. Studies have explored the influence of positional power on the evolution of clothing and accessories. Some researchers have indicated that fashion trends are set by those in the upper socioeconomic strata and imitated by those of lower socioeconomic background (Crane, 2000a; Simmel, 1904; Veblen, 1899). People may also use appearance as a means of characterizing themselves; for example, wearing heels or a hat to appear taller than others (Bell, 1947; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Researchers studying these issues from the angle of communications have coded clothing and accessories, and then used this coding system to explore the messages that apparel conveys (Crane, 2000). For example, people often use uniforms or hats to symbolize belonging; likewise, we may be able to judge the occupation of a person based on the cleanliness, color, or labels of his or her clothing and accessories (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Sociologists Barthes and Baudrillard have employed coding systems to study the social value of apparel and accessories to consumers (Barthes, 1967; Baudrillard, 1970).

Method

Our objective was to discuss socioeconomic influences on millinery. Women's hats were most popular from the 1900s to the 1960s, after which they were eclipsed by novel hairstyles (Wyatt & Hecker, 2006). Therefore, we defined our research period as the 1900s-1960s and employed content analysis to discuss the correlation between millinery and the distribution of SES.

Our data source on millinery was The Vogue online archive, from which we collected all Vogue covers with images of hatted females from the 1900 to 1960. We documented and compared the width, height, and depth of hats and faces. For example, Figure 1 shows that the maximum hat width is three times the width of the model's face; therefore, the width ratio is 1:3. Figure 2 shows that the height of the hat is nearly equal to the length of the face; therefore, the height ratio is 1:1. Depth was recorded as 50% because the face in Figure 3 is half obscured by the hat rim.
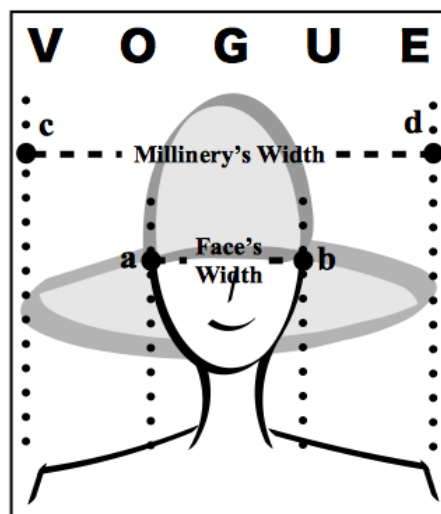
Figure 1. Calculation of millinery-face width ratio. Face width: a to b millinery width: c to d ratio: $\overline{cd}/\overline{ab}$.
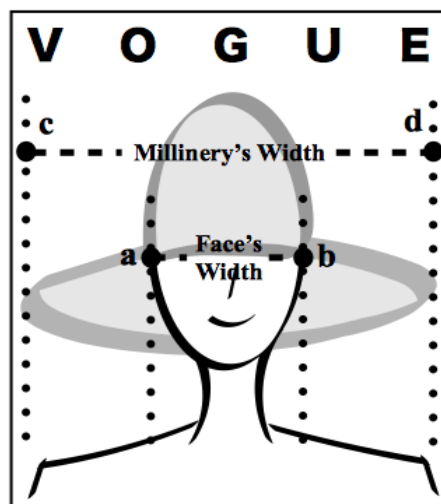
Figure 2. Calculation of millinery-face height ratio. Face height: a to b millinery height: c to d ratio: $\overline{cd}/\overline{ab}$.
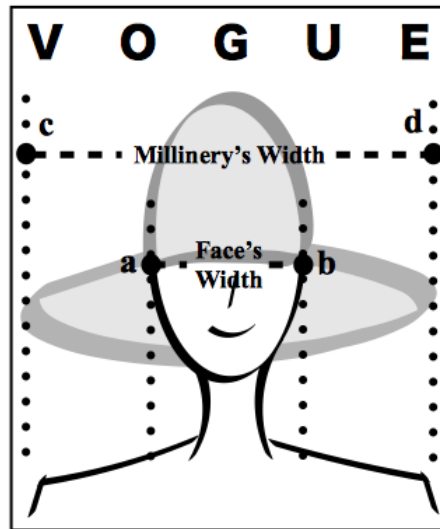
Figure 3. Calculation of millinery-face depth ratio. Face depth: a to b millinery depth: c to d ratio: $\overline{cd}/ab$.

Socioeconomic data were obtained from the Detailed Occupation of the Economically Active Population: 1900-1970 (Series D 233-682) published by the United States Bureau of the Census. We collated labor statistics for each occupation from the 1900s-1960s. The U.S. began conducting labor force surveys in the 1930s (Webb, 1939). Data from 1900-1950 were published by Kaplan and Casey (1958) in Series D 233-682. Data for the period from 1950-1960 (Table 201) and 1960-1970 (Table 221) were extracted from the population surveys conducted in 1960 and 1970, respectively, by the U.S. Census Bureau. The occupation categories in Series D 233-682 were cross-checked against the third edition of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) from the U.S. Bureau of Employment Security, in order to clarify some ambiguous categories such as Counseling or Placement (U.S. Census Bureau, 1976).

We sampled and compiled data on millinery and socioeconomic contexts. We randomly sampled ten magazine covers per year, and found that by 1966, the number of cover models wearing hats was in decline. We sampled 667 covers from the 1900s-1960s and documented millinery features, as well as the width, height, and depth ratios between hats and faces. Using the data in Series D 233-682, we calculated the number of people in each occupation per decade, and then employed the Occupation Prestige Score developed by Davis et al. (1980) to rank the occupations. We were then able to identify the distribution of SES from occupational status (Wikipedia, 2015b). Finally, we divided the occupational hierarchy into four levels using the interquartile range approach (IQR = 20.55):

Upper class: Professional, Technical, Manager, Officials, and Proprietors, Excluding Farm workers;

Upper-middle class: Farmers, Farm Managers, Clerical, Craftsmen, Foremen;

Lower-middle class: Sale Workers, Operative, Service, Exclude Household;

Lower class: Domestic workers, Farm laborers and foremen, Laborers, Excluding Farm and Mine laborers (see Table 1).

Table 1

Socioeconomic Status Based on Occupation Prestige Score

Occupation	SES	Prestige score	Interquartile range = 20.55
Professional, Technical…etc.	Upper Class	59.12	Maximum
Manager, officials, and proprietors, exclude farm	Upper class	51.99	
Farmers and farm managers	Upper-middle class	41.08	Q1
Clerical…etc.	Upper-middle class	40.29	
Craftsmen, foremen…etc.	Upper-middle class	39.57	
Sale workers	Lower-middle class	35.88	Q2 median
Operative	Lower-middle class	28.77	
Service, exclude household	Lower-middle class	26.69	
Private household	Lower class	20.53	Q3
Farm labors and foremen	Lower class	18.64	
Labors, exclude farm and mine	Lower class	18.62	Minimum

We calculated the populations of the upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, and lower socioeconomic classes for each decade in order to explore the correlations between socioeconomic structure and millinery styles from the 1900s to the 1960s. We also used t-tests to test for any significant differences in millinery styles every two decades, in order to identify changes in millinery over time.

Results

Correlations Between Socioeconomic Status and Millinery

Results showed that millinery height and width were strongly correlated with socioeconomic factors. The absolute value of these coefficients ranged from 0.5 to 0.7, except for the coefficient for depth which was lower than 0.5 in absolute value (see Appendix A). The most positive significant correlations were between the lower SES group and millinery height/width, with correlation coefficients of 0.790 and 0.773, respectively. This means that hats became narrower and flatter as the population of the lower socioeconomic strata was reduced. We also found that the ratio of female to male workers was negatively correlated with millinery width and height, as demonstrated by coefficients of -0.536 and -0.526, respectively. This implies that hats became narrower and flatter as the proportion of female workers compared to male workers increased. However, this correlation was not found to be significant.

Time-Sensitive Periods in Millinery Style

Next we employed t-tests to compare average millinery width and height every two decades. The decades that showed significant differences in width ratio were as follows: 1900s and 1910s ($p = 0.000$); 1910s and 1920s ($p = 0.029$); 1930s and 1940s ($p = 0.023$). Significant differences in height ratio were found in: 1900s and 1910s ($p = 0.002$); 1920s and 1930s ($p = 0.024$); 1940s and 1950s ($p = 0.001$); and 1950s and 1960s ($p = 0.000$).

The results show that millinery width and height were reduced approximately every 20 years. Using the two World Wars as key time points, we can identify the four periods of change in millinery: The first period was from 1900 to 1910, during which time hats were significantly reduced in both height and width. In the second period from the 1910s to the 1930s, hats became significantly narrower in the first decade (1910s-1920s), and then flatter in the second decade as well (1920s-1930s). The third period was from the 1930s to the 1950s. Hats again became narrower during the first decade (1930s-1940s) and flatter during the latter decade (1940s-1950s). The

fourth and final period, from the 1950s to the 1960s, actually saw a significant increase in the height of hats. This is because at the time, the popularity of millinery was waning, replaced by the emergence of beauty salons and a focus on hairstyles. Milliners therefore employed bolder design and visual effects in an attempt to win back female consumers (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).
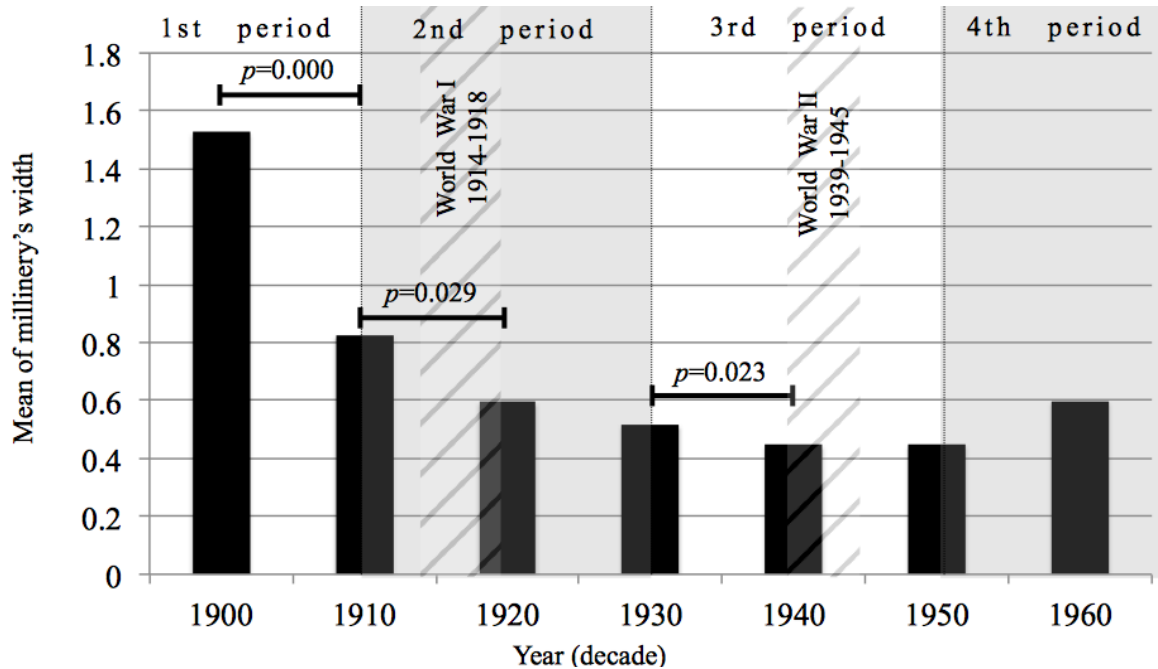

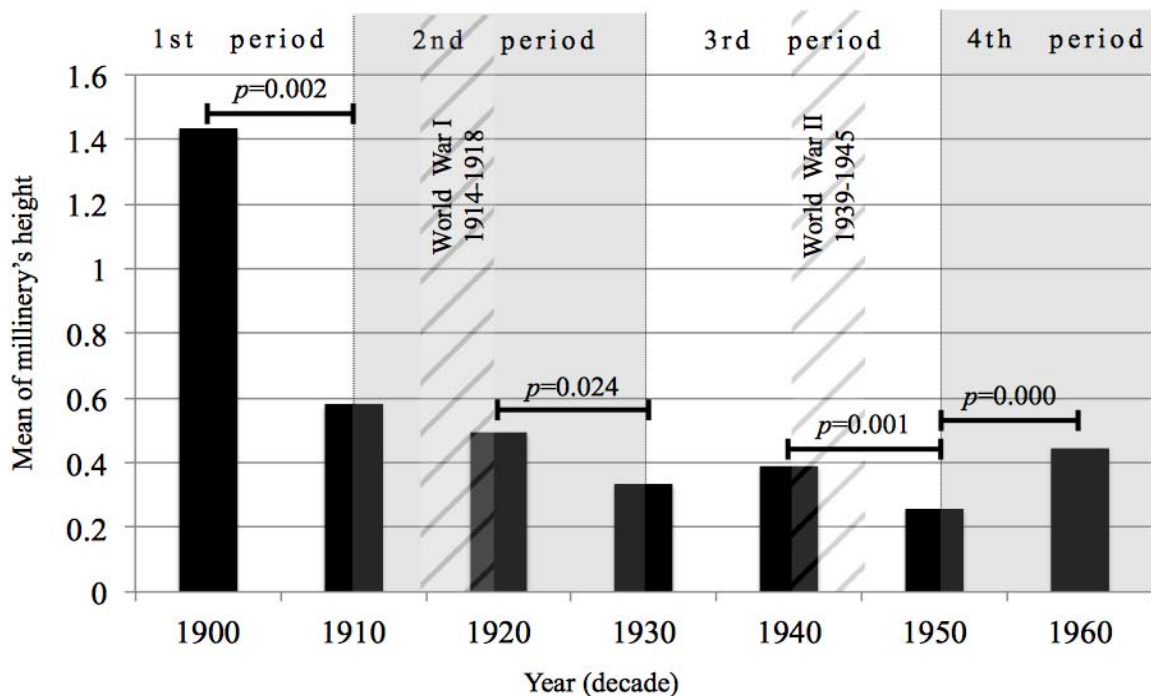*Figure 4.* Four periods of change in millinery width.

Figure 5. Four periods of change in millinery height.

Note that in the first period (1900-1910), there was a significant reduction in both width and height of popular millinery styles. In the second period, width was significantly reduced from 1910-1920 while height was significantly reduced from 1920-1930. In the third period, millinery width was reduced from 1930-1940. Height was significantly reduced from 1940-1950. In the fourth period (1950-1960), only the height of millinery was significantly increased.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study highlights the following findings: First, it is evident that the population ratio of lower to higher socioeconomic strata is significantly correlated with millinery height and width. The low SES group changed the most significantly, compared to other socioeconomic sectors (as shown in Figure 6). Consumers in this class tended to favor wider and taller hats, while other groups preferred narrower, more understated styles. This result demonstrates that consumers from low socioeconomic backgrounds have a key influence on fashion and accessories, a result which differs from previous opinions that popular fashion is led by the influence of those from higher socioeconomic strata. Our data also suggest that women joining the labor force in the 1920s did not have as significant an impact on millinery styles as expected; this is in direct conflict with the viewpoint of many researchers who believe that the female workforce is a key driver of fashion (Moehling, 2005).

Figure 6. Socioeconomic changes from 1900 through the 1960s.

From the findings described above, we can infer that changes in the populations within various socioeconomic groups led to changes in millinery style. In the early 1900s, most of the population belonged to the lower class and had limited consumer power. It is easy to infer that Vogue magazine was not a publication commonly read by the working class. However, the target audience of the magazine was the top socioeconomic level, because this was where consumers of that magazine were concentrated. As only these individuals could afford accessories like hats, millinery came to be a symbol of status and power. Therefore, hats in this era were broad and tall, and intended to be conspicuousness. In the 1910s, however, the lower class began to be replaced by the burgeoning middle class. Hats became an accessory that many women could afford, and were no longer symbols of exclusivity, status, or power. Hats were therefore designed to be narrower and flatter, with more focus on practicality. As indicated, shifts in the population of the lower class significantly influenced millinery style. An influx of people into the lower classes generally means there has been a downturn in the economy. In such

times, only the upper class could be flamboyant in their clothing, the women wearing large and flashy accessories to flaunt their privileged status. However, as economic prosperity increased and more of the lower class progressed to the middle class, millinery style became narrower and more understated, with a greater emphasis on practicality. Another notable point is that following the rise of the middle class, the tastes and preferences of the upper class tended to be anti-mainstream. This explains why we found a low correlation between the upper class and popular fashion. As those at higher socioeconomic levels became marginalized, they tended to seek out unique styles to express themselves within their social circles. As seen today, there are a small number of luxury, non-mainstream brands that target only the upper echelon of society.

A popular conception among previous studies is that the entry of women into the workforce led to key developments in fashion, with clothing design becoming cleaner and simpler (Guild, 2012). Although we did find that as the ratio of female to male workers increased, millinery style became simpler and more practical, this correlation was not statistically significant. The relationship between a higher number of females in the workforce and changes in millinery style was not as marked as expected. This shows that changes in fashion were more attributable to wider changes in the overall socioeconomic structure. Gender change in the workforce was a part of these changes, but its influence was not as strong as expected.

From our study of millinery style, we draw the following conclusions: Fluctuations in the population of the lower class were significantly correlated with changes in fashion. When the lower class was the predominant socioeconomic group and economic inequality was more pronounced, the main consumers of millinery were upper class females. Therefore, hats were bolder and designed to be more conspicuous. As the burgeoning middle class became the primary consumer group, economic inequality gradually declined and greater emphasis was placed on fashion being practical. The preferences of the upper class became distinctly non-mainstream, reducing the correlation between their sensitivities and popular fashion. Our findings regarding alterations in millinery style as they associate with demographic changes are compiled in Table 2, in accordance with two different objectives for wearing hats: conspicuousness and practicality.

Table 2

Correlation Between Low Socioeconomic Groups and Millinery Styles

Economic strata	Target consumers	Millinery style	Objective
Growth in lower class	Upper class	Wide and high	Conspicuousness > Practicality
Reduction in lower class	Middle class	Narrow and flat	Conspicuousness < Practicality

Also, women entering the workforce was clearly not the only factor influencing millinery style. We did find that fashion changed after women joined the labor force; however, the influence of this factor was not as significant as socioeconomic developments. Women in the workforce were only a part of the general social changes that affected fashion. Third, we found that after World War I, millinery height and width were reduced approximately once every twenty years. Using the two World Wars as key time points, we identified four periods of change in millinery style (1900-1910, 1911-1930, 1931-1950, and 1951-1960), during which hats became progressively smaller. We reason that major events, such as war, quickly transform preferences for clothing and accessories, possibly due to psychological changes or the material shortages caused by conflict. Future research can make a more in-depth study of these issues.

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Appendix A

Millinery Height

	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	Correlation
Female and male ratio	0.22	0.24	0.26	0.28	0.33	0.38	0.47	-0.536
Upper class and upper-middle class ratio	0.3	0.34	0.33	0.42	0.46	0.51	0.6	-0.606
Upper class and lower-middle class ratio	0.48	0.47	0.48	0.51	0.46	0.5	0.54	-0.179
Upper class and lower class ratio	0.28	0.36	0.45	0.6	0.7	1.29	1.78	-0.476
Upper-middle class and lower-middle ratio	1.6	1.4	1.45	1.23	1	0.97	0.9	0.740
Upper-middle class and lower class ratio	0.94	1.07	1.36	1.43	1.52	2.52	2.99	-0.518
Lower-middle class and lower class ratio	0.59	0.76	0.94	1.16	1.52	2.6	3.31	-0.509
Middle class and other class ratio	1.19	1.34	1.58	1.62	1.79	2.23	2.26	-0.693
Middle class and upper class ratio	5.38	5.06	5.08	4.35	4.34	3.96	3.53	0.674
Middle class and lower class ratio	1.53	1.83	2.29	2.59	3.04	5.12	6.29	-0.514
Upper class and other class ratio	0.11	0.13	0.14	0.17	0.17	0.21	0.24	-0.620
Upper-middle class and other class ratio	0.5	0.5	0.57	0.52	0.47	0.51	0.49	-0.061
Lower-middle class and other class ratio	0.26	0.31	0.33	0.38	0.47	0.54	0.57	-0.679
Lower class and other class ratio	0.55	0.46	0.36	0.31	0.27	0.16	0.12	0.790

Millinery Width

	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	Correlation
Female and male ratio	0.22	0.24	0.26	0.28	0.33	0.38	0.47	-0.526
Upper class and upper-middle class ratio	0.3	0.34	0.33	0.42	0.46	0.51	0.6	-0.597
Upper class and lower-middle class ratio	0.48	0.47	0.48	0.51	0.46	0.5	0.54	-0.223
Upper class and lower class ratio	0.28	0.36	0.45	0.6	0.7	1.29	1.78	-0.481
Upper-middle class and lower-middle ratio	1.6	1.4	1.45	1.23	1	0.97	0.9	0.721
Upper-middle class and lower class ratio	0.94	1.07	1.36	1.43	1.52	2.52	2.99	-0.523
Lower-middle class and lower class ratio	0.59	0.76	0.94	1.16	1.52	2.6	3.31	-0.510
Middle class and other class ratio	1.19	1.34	1.58	1.62	1.79	2.23	2.26	-0.681
Middle class and upper class ratio	5.38	5.06	5.08	4.35	4.34	3.96	3.53	0.673
Middle class and lower class ratio	1.53	1.83	2.29	2.59	3.04	5.12	6.29	-0.516
Upper class and other class ratio	0.11	0.13	0.14	0.17	0.17	0.21	0.24	-0.617
Upper-middle class and other class ratio	0.5	0.5	0.57	0.52	0.47	0.51	0.49	-0.071
Lower-middle class and other class ratio	0.26	0.31	0.33	0.38	0.47	0.54	0.57	-0.660
Lower class and other class ratio	0.55	0.46	0.36	0.31	0.27	0.16	0.12	0.773

Millinery Depth

	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	Correlation
Female and male ratio	0.22	0.24	0.26	0.28	0.33	0.38	0.47	-0.073
Upper class and upper-middle class ratio	0.3	0.34	0.33	0.42	0.46	0.51	0.6	-0.168
Upper class and lower-middle class ratio	0.48	0.47	0.48	0.51	0.46	0.5	0.54	-0.103
Upper class and lower class ratio	0.28	0.36	0.45	0.6	0.7	1.29	1.78	-0.088
Upper-middle class and lower-middle ratio	1.6	1.4	1.45	1.23	1	0.97	0.9	0.156
Upper-middle class and lower class ratio	0.94	1.07	1.36	1.43	1.52	2.52	2.99	-0.057
Lower-middle class and lower class ratio	0.59	0.76	0.94	1.16	1.52	2.6	3.31	-0.101
Middle class and other class ratio	1.19	1.34	1.58	1.62	1.79	2.23	2.26	-0.054
Middle class and upper class ratio	5.38	5.06	5.08	4.35	4.34	3.96	3.53	0.174
Middle class and lower class ratio	1.53	1.83	2.29	2.59	3.04	5.12	6.29	-0.082
Upper class and other class ratio	0.11	0.13	0.14	0.17	0.17	0.21	0.24	-0.116
Upper-middle class and other class ratio	0.5	0.5	0.57	0.52	0.47	0.51	0.49	0.524
Lower-middle class and other class ratio	0.26	0.31	0.33	0.38	0.47	0.54	0.57	-0.133
Lower class and other class ratio	0.55	0.46	0.36	0.31	0.27	0.16	0.12	0.011