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AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S DRESS EXPENDITURE

by

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— *M* —

The statistics in this note relate to the expenditure on dress of a sample of women living in the United Kingdom. It will hardly be necessary to lay stress upon the defects in the data, except for the purpose of recording the doubts of the compilers themselves. The figures are seven years old, and generalisations based upon them concerning the present-day behaviour of women must be made and used with caution. The sample is not random; and therefore, unless the figures themselves provide internal evidence of reliability, generalisations may be quite unwarranted. It is because of some remarkably consistent features displayed by the statistics, and of the peculiar circumstances in which they originated, that the computations have been preserved and are now made more generally available.

1. Source of the data

In November, 1931, my attention was called to the fact that the editor of the women's page of the *Daily Mail* was inviting women to submit details of their own expenditure on dress over a period of one year, and offering small prizes for "the best individual dress budgets." At my suggestion the accounts submitted were passed to me for analysis, after the removal of the names and addresses of the entrants. No regional analysis was possible.

The newspaper fortunately gave no indication to readers as to what would be regarded as good features in any accounts submitted, and those people who might otherwise have been tempted to fake their returns had nothing to guide them from the path of truth. Scrutiny of the accounts certainly left a general impression that they were genuine human records of a year's expenditure, revealing some sad details which were regretted, and feebly excused, and others which looked peculiar and were supported by earnest justification, even to the point of sketches and patterns of material. That impression of genuineness was confirmed by the remarkable steadiness of trends which systematic classification revealed.

2. Nature and scope of the sample

After the elimination of about 200 returns on account of the inadequacy of the details given, there were left 1,340 accounts relating to the expenditure

of 981 women. Accounts for two successive years were submitted in many cases by women who found that not all the main items of expenditure were covered by the figures relating to a single year. These two-year budgets were supplied mainly by the women with the smaller dress allowances.

The accounts were classified in eight groups according to the total amount spent in one year. The distribution is shown in the following table.

TABLE 1.

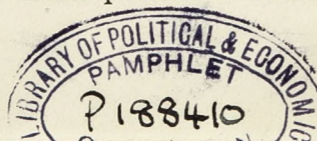
Women spending per year	Women		Budgets		Proportion of women having 2 year budgets	Cumulative Table		
	No.	%	No.	%		Under	Women	Budgets
£	No.	%	No.	%	%	£	No.	No.
0—10	36	3.7	52	3.8	44.4	10	36	52
10—20	204	20.8	291	21.7	42.6	20	240	343
20—30	364	37.1	502	37.5	37.9	30	604	845
30—40	193	19.7	260	19.5	34.7	40	797	1,105
40—50	100	10.2	132	9.9	32.0	50	897	1,237
50—60	49	5.0	63	4.7	28.6	60	946	1,300
60—70	22	2.2	27	2.0	22.7	70	968	1,327
70—100	13	1.3	13	.9	0	100	981	1,340
Total	981	100.0	1,340	100.0	36.6	—	—	—

910 Women (92.7%) spend between £10 and £60 per annum.

As might be anticipated in view of the source of the data, the sample refers predominantly to middle-class women, mainly at the lower end of the scale, and is least representative firstly of the very poorest (because more illiterate) and secondly of the more well-to-do sections. It was clear from the details given in the returns that single working women, of the City office and semi-professional type, had contributed most largely to the sample. There was not sufficient information to permit a separation of single and married women, whose dress expenditures might be presumed to bear different relations to the total income of the household concerned, or to be differently allocated; but once again the steadiness of the trend suggests that any resultant differences in the allocation of equal dress allowances were not sufficiently great to destroy the value of the sample.

3. Allocation between various classes of apparel

The information given in the accounts was in most cases so detailed that an analysis was made of the allocation of the total allowance between fifteen classes of apparel. It was found possible to make this analysis in the case of



1,038 accounts, submitted by 766 women. The distribution of this sample was as follows:—

TABLE 2

Women spending per year	Women		Budgets		Total amount spent in each group	
	No.	%	No.	%	£	%
0—10	30	3.9	42	4.1	284	1.0
10—20	158	20.6	226	21.8	3,203	11.3
20—30	289	37.7	394	38.0	9,545	33.7
30—40	156	20.4	208	20.0	6,913	24.4
40—50	69	9.0	92	8.9	4,011	14.1
50—60	37	4.8	45	4.3	2,313	8.2
60—70	18	2.3	22	2.1	1,354	4.8
70—100	9	1.4	9	.9	731	2.6
Total	766	100.0	1,038	100.0	£28,354	100.0

709 Women (92.6%) spent between £10 and £60 per year.

Average Annual Budget: £27 6s. od.

The fifteen classes of apparel which were distinguished are:—

1-5. Outdoor Wear.

- (1) Coats.
- (2) Weather Coats and Leather Coats.
- (3) Costumes (Coats and Skirts) and all Skirts.
- (4) Furs.
- (5) Materials to be made up as outdoor garments.

6-9. Indoor Wear.

- (6) Dresses (Day Dresses, Tea Gowns, etc.).
- (7) Evening Gowns and Dresses.
- (8) Knitted Suits, Jumpers, Cardigans, Blouses.
- (9) Materials to be made up as indoor garments.

10. Millinery (Hats only).

11. Hose (Stockings only).

12. Sports Wear (excluding Shoes).

13. Shoes (Day, Sport, Evening and Slippers).

14. Underclothing (including Corsets, Nightwear and Dressing Gowns).

15. Rest. (Gloves, Handbags, Umbrellas, Handkerchiefs, Sewing Materials, Toilet and other Sundries, Cleaning, Renovation, etc.).

In the table which follows, the percentage of the total dress expenditure on each of these fifteen classes of apparel is shown separately for the eight groups of women classified according to the amount of their dress allowances, and in the last column for the sample of 1,038 accounts taken as a whole.

TABLE 3
Percentage of Total Dress Allowance Spent on Fifteen
Classes of Apparel

Class of Apparel	WOMEN SPENDING PER YEAR								Average for 766 Women
	£ 0-10	£ 10-20	£ 20-30	£ 30-40	£ 40-50	£ 50-60	£ 60-70	£ 70-100	
1. Coats... ..	19.8	18.1	17.4	18.5	15.6	17.1	16.9	20.5	17.5
2. Macintoshes, etc.	3.9	2.9	3.2	2.7	2.4	1.9	1.3	1.0	2.7
3. Costumes and Skirts... ..	4.2	5.7	7.2	7.2	7.5	8.0	8.1	7.1	7.1
4. Furs8	1.1	.7	.5	1.6	.6	.8	.4	.8
5. Outdoor Materials	3.1	1.9	1.2	.6	.3	.0	.9	.5	.9
<i>1-5 Total Outdoor Wear</i>	<i>31.8</i>	<i>29.7</i>	<i>29.6</i>	<i>29.5</i>	<i>27.3</i>	<i>27.6</i>	<i>27.9</i>	<i>29.6</i>	<i>29.1</i>
6. Dresses	9.8	10.0	10.8	14.5	15.1	15.8	13.6	18.2	12.9
7. Evening Dresses	.7	3.1	6.5	8.5	9.9	12.8	12.7	14.0	8.0
8. Knitwear and Blouses	4.5	4.7	4.7	4.3	4.8	5.8	3.3	2.2	4.6
9. Indoor Materials	6.5	7.0	5.6	3.5	2.8	1.1	3.8	1.4	4.3
<i>6-9 Total Indoor Wear</i>	<i>21.5</i>	<i>24.9</i>	<i>27.7</i>	<i>30.7</i>	<i>32.5</i>	<i>35.5</i>	<i>33.3</i>	<i>35.8</i>	<i>29.8</i>
10. Millinery	7.0	6.4	5.8	5.2	5.7	5.4	5.5	6.9	5.7
11. Hose	7.1	6.4	6.2	5.7	5.3	4.4	4.9	3.8	5.7
12. Sports Wear... ..	1.5	1.1	1.6	1.8	2.1	1.5	2.2	2.2	1.7
13. Shoes... ..	14.2	12.5	11.4	10.0	9.0	8.8	8.6	7.6	10.3
14. Underclothing	12.3	11.3	10.4	9.2	9.5	9.6	8.9	8.2	9.9
15. Rest	4.6	7.7	7.3	7.9	8.6	7.2	8.7	5.9	7.8

The quite definite trends of these average figures, when the eight groups of women are compared, have significance for the women's dress trade as well as for students of social behaviour. A business firm which professes to do a comprehensive trade in women's outfitting will find here a measure by which it may be able to gauge the success with which its various departments

persuade customers to do all their shopping within its walls. If the accounts of particular customers, whose total dress expenditure can be guessed approximately, are analysed and compared with the allocation in the appropriate vertical column, a clue may be forthcoming as to which sections of the business are failing, relatively speaking, to attract their full "potential" of custom. Business firms which cater in the main for a limited range of customers—say, for instance, any four adjacent vertical columns in the table—but endeavour to supply the complete dress requirements of those particular classes, might derive some satisfaction from the discovery that the relative importance of the sales of its various departments approximates to the average of the relevant columns; they might equally find food for thought in the marked failure of any departments to stand the test.

The trend of several of the averages in this analysis throws light on social habits. It will be convenient to set out some of them for consideration :—

- (1) The proportion of the total allowances which is spent on Outdoor Wear (Classes 1-5) does not vary appreciably with the amount of the total allowance. The lowest percentage in any group is 27.3 and the highest 31.8. The expenditure on millinery (Class 10) similarly shows no appreciable variation, the extreme range of the percentage being 5.2 to 7.0.
- (2) Macintoshes and similar coats (Class 2) absorb a larger proportion of the smaller allowances.
- (3) Costumes figure more prominently in the accounts of the women with more money to spend on dress.
- (4) The proportion of the total allowances spent on Indoor Wear (Classes 6-9) increases steadily and sharply with the amount of the total expenditure. The lowest percentage is 21.5 for women with the smallest allowances, and the highest 35.8 for the group with the largest allowances.
- (5) The increase in the expenditure on indoor garments is entirely accounted for by day dresses (Class 6), rising from 9.8 per cent. to 18.2 per cent., and evening dresses (Class 7), rising from 0.7 per cent. to 14.0 per cent.
- (6) The purchase of materials to be made up for both outdoor and indoor garments (Classes 5 and 9) declines steadily in importance, relatively to other dress expenditure, as we pass from the smallest to the largest allowances.
- (7) Three classes of dress—hose, shoes and underclothing—absorb a steadily declining share of the expenditure as the total amount rises.

In the case of hose (Class 11) the percentage falls from 7.1 to 3.8; for shoes (Class 13) from 14.2 to 7.6, and for underclothing (Class 14) from 12.3 to 8.2.

The explanation of these differences will probably be found in the social habits of the classes of women concerned. Those with the smallest dress allowances must get to and from their work, and will naturally pay attention to their outdoor appearance. It is not surprising, therefore, that outdoor dress claims a large share of their expenditure. Shoes, stockings and underclothing are clearly necessities of the same kind, and they absorb a fifth of the total. Moreover these women tend to spend more of their leisure time in their outdoor clothes than do the more wealthy women. Their homes are generally too small and unattractive for social contacts; they meet their friends in the open air, or in tea-shops and in cinemas, and hats and coats count more for them than dresses, in keeping up appearances. On the other hand, women who have more to spend on dress generally have also more pleasant and spacious homes and more money for entertainment. Their friends see them in day dresses, tea gowns and evening dresses, at afternoon at-homes, cocktail parties, bridge parties, dinners, theatres and dances; all of which call for dresses in variety. With steadily increasing claims for dresses and gowns on their dress allowances, as their general standard of expenditure increases, it is inevitable that the proportion spent on some other items of apparel must give way, and the sample shows that it is the absolute amount of expenditure on shoes and stockings which expands most slowly, rather than that on outdoor garments. External appearance comes first, and even underclothing is relatively forgotten. Again, as we should expect, it is the women with least money to spend who economise by buying materials to be made up into indoor and outdoor apparel.

4. Frequency of purchase of various kinds of apparel

The larger sample from which data were abstracted provided additional information concerning the average number of garments bought in one year, the period covered by each account. Table 4 on the following page summarises the results of this analysis.

Once again the steadiness of the trend, when the figures for women in the different expenditure ranges are compared, encourages the belief that the sample is a useful one. The figures may enable firms to check the volume of their sales of these five classes of apparel to customers who have accounts, and whose approximate dress expenditure can be guessed, with what may be inferred herefrom to be the probable total number of such garments bought by each customer from all sources. The table also throws light on a striking preference for greater variety rather than improved quality of apparel on the

TABLE 4

Women spending per year	Average Number of Articles bought in One Year				
	Coats	Macintoshes, Leather Coats, etc.	Costumes	Dresses	Hats
£					
0—10	0.79	0.23	0.15	0.79	1.60
10—20	1.01	0.34	0.27	1.51	1.97
20—30	1.19	0.42	0.45	2.34	2.24
30—40	1.47	0.50	0.57	3.61	2.63
40—50	1.51	0.59	0.73	4.36	3.18
50—60	1.65	0.44	0.66	5.27	3.18
60—70	1.72	0.44	0.92	5.00	3.26
70—100	1.92	0.46	1.00	6.30	3.84

part of the women with the larger dress expenditures. It will be observed that they buy many more additional dresses and hats than coats. Coats are bought of a quality to wear well, but not so hats and dresses.

5. Popularity of certain prices and price ranges

The preference for variety rather than durability is confirmed by an analysis of the prices of garments recorded in the 1,340 accounts. It will be sufficient here to append some details of the price-spread in the case of the 1,685 coats, 3,728 dresses and 3,225 hats for which actual prices were given. The price-ranges in Tables 5, 6 and 7 have been chosen in each case so that the most popular prices are approximately midway between the two extreme prices of each range: thus in the group £3 16s. od. to £4 15s. od. most of the prices recorded are round about four guineas. Table 8 and Table 9 show the fourteen most frequently recorded prices, and the volume of purchases for which they account.

These five tables are self-explanatory, and no elaborate summary of their contents is necessary. The comparative rarity of purchase of the more expensive hats and dresses, and to a smaller extent of coats, even on the part of the women with the largest dress expenditures, is worthy of note. A study of actual prices recorded leaves two clear impressions. There is firstly an enormous diversity within a fairly small range of price difference—157 different prices of coats, 209 of dresses and 124 of hats. Secondly, in spite of this diversity, a large proportion of the total purchases are made at a quite small selection of prices. It will be seen from Table 9 that fourteen prices in each case happen to account in a curious way for almost exactly two-thirds of the total purchases. The concentration of the bulk of stock-in-

trade at a limited number of carefully selected prices—the system of “ price-lining ”—has of course for some time now been adopted as a principle of merchandise control in many trading businesses.

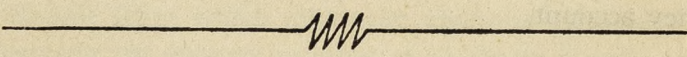
6. “ Income elasticity of demand ”

If we may make the assumption that women who increase or decrease their total annual expenditure on dress will tend to conform fairly promptly to the average behaviour of women in the expenditure class into which they move, an additional interest attaches to the statistics. They will then throw light on the important questions : on which categories of dress is additional money most likely to be spent, and on which will the greatest economies be made in the event of a curtailment in the total outlay ?

In Table 10 is set out the change in the amount spent on different categories of dress when the total annual expenditure on dress is increased from given levels by an amount in each instance of £10.

If the women of this country become more prosperous and increase their dress expenditure, the table serves to suggest the branches of the dress trade which will enjoy the greatest share of the increased outlays. A similar table can be constructed to indicate the trades which will suffer the greatest contraction of business in times of reduced spending. The same tables can be used by an individual store-manager to indicate also the changes in space which the various departments will need as the result of a policy of “ trading-up ” or “ trading-down.”

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