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The Bridal Industry: Body Image and Sizing Charts

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Knapp, N. (2023). The Bridal Industry: Body Image and Sizing Charts. *Apparel Merchandising and Product Development Undergraduate Honors Theses* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/ampduht/29>

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The Bridal Industry: Body Image and Sizing Charts

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Project Summary

The apparel industry in the United States of America lacks a unified size chart. This inconsistency allows vanity sizing and individual retailers to preside over the systematic regulations of sizing. The bridal industry is the singular industry that is not affected by vanity sizing in the United States, which causes a plethora of issues when coupled with the media's thin ideal and push of certain body standards.

The project utilized four sections of literature review: regarding sizing inconsistency, mass media and size dysphoria, United States standard of sizing, and brides and weight loss. Additionally, four different size charts from four different areas of the apparel industry were evaluated (American Eagle Outfitters for streetwear, Lululemon for athleisure, Walmart for big box, and Bella Boutique for bridal), as well as two charts from the Washington Post that showed how sizing has changed in the United States since the 1950s.

Upon review of the literature and analysis of the size charts and graphs, a new sizing chart was created. This modernized chart averages the four previously mentioned ones, to give a more standardized scale for brides. The chart was then evaluated, weaknesses were discussed, and ideas to expand upon it were given to be considered for future research and projects.

The need for the project was established in an attempt to better regulate sizing in the bridal industry in the United States of America, to help brides in their preparatory stage of the wedding. The intent of giving them a standardized size chart hopes to also help with their mental health in regard to body positivity, and to better the gown try on process and avoid the startling statistics seen in the literature review about brides and desired weight loss.

To complete the project, a first-hand knowledge of the bridal industry, apparel industry, apparel production, pattern production, and computer aided design was utilized, as well as skill in Microsoft Excel, research and analysis, and basic mathematics. Overall, the project's primary objectives of understanding the lack of universal sizing in the United States and attempting to solve the issue by creating an averages Misses sizing chart for brides were completed, with visions of expanding on the project in the future outlined.

Introduction

Background and Need

As long as people are getting married, the bridal industry will continue to exist. As a whole, the industry tends to be expensive, with profits made on all aspects of the event, but the centerpiece is the bride's dress. Bridal wear is a staple of the fashion and apparel industry, with name designers such as Christian Siriano and Vera Wang, among others, having entirely separate collections just for bridal wear. No such designers seem to exist for the groom, leaving the bride to truly be the spectacle of the show. However, when the emphasis on the wedding gown is added to the societal pressures of maintaining a certain body type or weight, and the vast differences in bridal sizing compared to general retailer sizing, the stresses and pressures can make the days leading up to a bride's wedding some of the most stressful, instead of some of the happiest.

With no national standard in the United States, women's clothing sizing varies greatly. A "small" from store A could be a "medium" in store B, and a "12" in store C could be an "8" in store D. This is due to a phenomenon called size inflation, or vanity sizing, where companies change their sizing scale to allow for women to fit into smaller sizes than they might normally wear (Bishop et al., 2018). The one area of women's wear that does not follow this new way of sizing, however, is the bridal industry (Bishop et al., 2018). Due to size inflation and the bridal industry not being affected by it, women tend to have to size up when trying on and purchasing wedding gowns. The knowledge of being in a dress that is potentially several sizes larger than what a bride is used to wearing can take away from the empowerment and femininity the bride feels in the moment, replacing it with dejection. Walker (2000) discussed how not being fully

represented, whether it's through size, race, or gender and sexual identity, all add to the feeling of rejection while trying to be the picture-perfect bride.

Christian Siriano, eveningwear and bridal designer, vies to make every woman feel like a bride, putting effort into all his gowns to make them all awe-inspiring, beautiful, and size inclusive (Mercer, 2021). No matter how size inclusive a designer is, though, if a woman puts on a dress sized larger than one she normally wears, it can lead to her beating herself down, turning to the one thing that she knows will make her fit into a smaller dress: excessive dieting and exercise, for entirely the wrong reasons and in the wrong ways.

Problem Statement

Women, more so than men, tend to find value in their clothing size, with it potentially affecting their social status and, thus, physical practices (Bishop et al., 2018). This sense of value or self-worth comes from the pressures the media places on an ideal body type (Bishop et al., 2018). While women seem to be taking back their power more and more, being told one is a larger size than one is used to brings deeply engrained doubts to the forefront. The sizing in the bridal industry, being so vastly different from the sizing of ready to wear apparel throughout the United States, has the potential to affect more brides in this way on a daily basis more than any other apparel line.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this thesis was to research the history of standard apparel sizing in the United States and compare it to a bridal chain's sizing chart. From there, the thesis aimed to create a new standard sizing chart for the bridal industry, utilizing the United States average size, big box sizing charts, and the bridal standard so as to make the wedding dress shopping experience more enjoyable and less stressful.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this project:

1. How has the United States standard sizing chart changed over the years?
2. How can the average American female body and four United States sizing charts spanning different areas of the industry be combined to create a more accurate sizing chart for brides in 2023?

Literature Review

It is no secret that over the years, sizing has changed drastically. To fully understand the effects of these disparities, mental health in relation to body size must be researched, in addition to the changing sizing standards. Apparel sizing inconsistencies as well as mass promotion of a culturally thin ideal in the media have led to the desire for women to be smaller. Based upon personal experience in the bridal industry, research discussed in the literature review, the sizing inconsistencies, along with the pressures of looking perfect in a wedding gown, brides could benefit from a more universal size chart than the current lack thereof.

Inconsistency in Apparel Sizing

The apparel industry is inconsistent, from production to methods to sizing. Differing body shapes and sizes make it harder for there to be any singular sizing chart. Sizing and grading, or the practice of basing different sizes off of one basic pattern, protocols have been changing in the industry, evolving to be able to better fit more people (Gribbin, 2014). Often, apparel companies create their own sizing chart based on a predetermined fit set by the company itself (Vinue et al., 2014). Two examples of this are classic American brand American Eagle and the athleisure powerhouse Lululemon. According to the American Eagle sizing chart, which is attached in the appendix as Figure 1, a bust measurement of a 31 equates to a size zero, whereas

according to the Lululemon chart, Figures 2.1 and 2.2, a bust measurement of 31 is a size four. With so many brands, companies, and retailers, it can be frustrating for the consumer to know so many different size charts (Ketron & Spears, 2017). Ketron and Spears (2017) conducted a set of three studies focused on sizing discrepancies between department stores and general or off-price retailers. It was discovered that discrepancies “lead to a significant decline in consumer responses [purchases or sales] at three sizes smaller” than the size the customer typically expected to purchase (Ketron & Spears, 2017, p. 190). According to Bishop et al. (2018), the fit of apparel as well as sizing inconsistency has led to body dissatisfaction and body dysmorphic disorders. It can then be inferred that those issues can lead to toxic eating patterns or habits.

Mass Media and Size Dysphoria

Mass media has long been a promoter of the latest beauty trends and styles, thus also promoting unhealthy habits and leading to a mental health crisis as a result. Media has marketed and portrayed the thin body ideal in such a way that “eating disorders and disorderly eating are culturally induced diseases promoted partly by economic and social institutions that profit from the ‘cult of thinness’ promoted by mass media” (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006, p. 208). Maphis et al. (2013) found that over half of individuals wanted to be multiple sizes smaller than their current size, and that such desires made them so uncomfortable in their own bodies that they would avoid necessary day to day activities such as doctors’ appointments. In particular, “women reported more social avoidance and body display avoidance compared to men, and that the relationship between relative clothing size and both types of avoidance was stronger for women than men” (Maphis et al., 2013, p. 366). These types of body image issues, disordered eating, and eating disorders are affecting women particularly at a younger age than before (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). The more the media promotes a culturally thin ideal the worse the issue gets.

However, a recent study found that increasing media literacy can increase critical thinking abilities and the credibility of promoted images, potentially helping save others from heading down the path of body and eating disorders (McLean et al., 2016). Media literacy is defined as the ability to thoroughly understand, analyze, and access media (McLean et al., 2016). Though media literacy can be improved, the fact remains that the media is promoting a cultural ideal body type, which is harmful to all who consume that media, especially those who do not fit the ideal, and when focused on weddings it can add an additional pressure to the bride's special day. While this issue is not exclusive to women, it is far more common for women to be the object of criticism or have their bodies used for entertainments, which can be seen in a contrast of two 2020 Sports Illustrated covers: one with a male quarterback and one with three female swimsuit models (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). This pressure, coupled with the issue of vanity sizing, many conflicting emotions can be brought forth into the bride's mind while trying on dresses for what is meant to be one of their happiest days .

United States Standard of Sizing

While sizing differences and social media can promote an unhealthy expectation, it is important to note that the lack of size standard in the United States can also cause an issue. The United States has not had a standard sizing chart since 1970, and, as a result, retailers often then come up with their own size charts for their own stores, hence the inconsistencies (Billingsley, 2022). Sizing charts taken from Bella Bridal Boutique and Walmart are compared in the appendix, Figures 3 and 4, to show an example of the dramatic differences that occur when sizing charts are left up to the retailer's discretion. In addition to these charts, additional graphics from the Washington Post show how different waist sizes have been classified throughout the years, showing how drastically things have changed. While the lack of a standard size can make

sense, as there is no one standard body, there are ways to make a sizing chart more relatable than the lack of one. To do this, it is important to reevaluate the “standard” or “typical” size female body in the United States. According to Kim, Song, and Ashdown (2016), 54% of women in the United States aged 18-35 are considered “petite,” which is defined here as having a height of 5 feet 4 inches or less. Additionally, humans in the United States have been getting larger over the years, with phrases being thrown around such as “the average woman is a size 16,” but with no universal way to size, that phrase means little to nothing (Shendruk, 2018). For example, as discussed in a previous section, according to a study reported on by Shendruk (2018), a woman with a 31-inch waist could wear jeans anywhere from a size 8 to a size 16, depending on the brand. To attempt at a universal size chart in the United States, it is most accurate to use models such as the five-point measurement system, using measurements from the bust, waist, high hip, abdomen, and hip to classify body shape and size, and thus develop a more universal standard (Kim et al., 2016).

Studying Brides and Weight Loss

These size discrepancies have been shown to cause a desire to change one’s body, but most especially when it comes to an event as big as a wedding. The wedding is expected to be the perfect day, and with so much focus on the bride, the pressures of looking their best cause a focus on their body. Attitudes toward the “wedding body” have been reported to change as people get older, with college students saying they likely would not feel the need to change their body weight or shape for their future nuptials (Neighbors and Sobal, 2008 A). Neighbors and Sobal (2008 B) conducted a study on brides to be and found that on average, brides wanted to lose an average of 16.4 pounds before the wedding day. A similar study was done in Australia, in which “approximately half (46%) of brides had an ideal wedding weight, and of these, 45%

stated that they would be unhappy if they did not reach their goal” (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2008, p. 397). The Australian brides desired to be approximately 20 pounds lighter than their weight at the time of the survey, just under four pounds more than the American brides (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2008). Despite the desire to lose weight, many brides fell short of their goal and instead either had no significant weight change or they lost a small amount of weight but gained it back post-wedding (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2014). Prichard and Tiggemann (2014) also examined the reasons behind the desire to lose weight pre-wedding and found that over ten percent of brides had been told to lose weight by someone they knew while the others wanted to lose weight for themselves. Regardless of why, most brides feel a desire to lose weight before their wedding day.

Overall, the large discrepancies in sizing from one company to the next, the societal norms pushed by mass media, the lack of any sort of sizing standard, and the pressure a bride can feel leading up to their big day call for a better understanding of sizing in the bridal industry. The inconsistencies and differences, especially in regard to big box retailers versus bridal boutiques can push a bride to a negative headspace when they should be preparing for what is often dubbed the “happiest day of their life.” With all of these factors in mind, a new sizing chart for brides could benefit them and help to ease their minds leading up to the big day, and smooth out the wedding dress shopping experience for all parties involved.

Development Plan

Upon reviewing the aforementioned literature and determining the objectives of this study, a development plan was established to address the objectives. The following section covers how the project was conducted and the steps to ensure the best results.

Design Process

The design process and development plan had relatively few steps but required much analysis and math. The steps are as follows:

1. The first step in the design process was to take four sizing charts, all mentioned earlier in the document, and compare them side by side. The four sizing charts came from the following retailers: American Eagle Outfitters, Lululemon, Walmart, and Bella Bridal.
 - a. The four charts were chosen in the following ways:
 - i. American Eagle Outfitters was chosen due to the nature of the clothes they carry. Classified as streetwear, American Eagle Outfitters offers a size chart that applies to many pieces that are commonplace in wardrobes, such as jeans, tee shirts, tank tops, hoodies, sweatshirts, blouses, cardigans, sweaters, bodysuits, and more. Additionally, American Eagle Outfitters branches out to Aerie, which sells bras, underwear, and swimsuits catered to women.
 - ii. Lululemon was next chosen to represent athleisure. Lululemon has become the top athleisure brand in terms of popularity in recent years, despite being founded over 20 years ago (Prokopets, 2022). Originally created for yoga, Lululemon apparel has become a staple not just for running, yoga, and other exercise clothes but also as daily wear, and provided the necessary data as an athleisure brand for the project.
 - iii. The third size chart chosen was Walmart. The well-known Walmart motto is “save money, live better,” and thus Walmart provides an insight on a more affordable branch of apparel as a big box retailer. Walmart offers a wide variety of clothing, including seasonal and sleepwear, all for a lower

price point than boutiques or specialty clothing stores. While Walmart is not the only large-scale retailer to offer clothing, it is the largest, and thus was chosen for the project (Johnston, 2023).

- iv. Finally, a bridal boutique size chart was chosen for the fourth size chart of the project. Originally David's Bridal was going to be the selected retailer, however with the company going out of business, a different path was taken, and Bella Boutique was chosen. Specifically, the Allure Bridal line was selected. Bella Bridal is a boutique based out of St. Paul, Minnesota, however they were selected due to the availability of the Allure Bridal line sizing chart. Originally, Tesori Bridal in Fayetteville, Arkansas was desired, however Tesori, like many other bridal boutiques, does not share their size charts online, so an extensive search was done. One of the Tesori brands was chosen, and that brand was searched for until a boutique was found that posted that brand's size chart. While Bella Boutique was the store selected, Allure Bridal was the brand, which is carried in at least one boutique in Northwest Arkansas.
- b. Additionally, two charts also aforementioned were taken from the Washington Post and used to compare the standard from 1958 to the average sizing in 2011, and how different measurements would be classified (Ingraham, 2021). The graphs were strictly for informational purposes and did not serve an additional purpose in the development of a new sizing chart. The four sizing charts and two graphs can all be found in the appendix of the document, Figures 6.1 and 6.2.

2. After data was analyzed and charts were compared, the development started on a new bridal sizing chart. The four size charts were averaged to develop a new number for each size, using a basic mean, or averaging, formula (sum of the four measurements divided by four).
 - a. The math was done on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, with all formulas present and inputted. The formulas used and spreadsheet containing all information are copied in Figure 7.1.
3. After math and comparison was complete, a size chart was created using a separate Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, putting the new measurements in place. Flowers were used rather than numbers to distinguish sizes, so that a bride has no idea the numeric size of dress they are wearing. The new chart can be found as Figure 7.2.

Evaluation and Discussion

The new sizing chart utilized four charts from different areas of the apparel industry: streetwear, athleisure, big box retail, and bridal, and combined them to make an average chart. While more uniform, the new sizing chart will not be a standard for all areas of clothing. Only the Misses department was analyzed, leaving room for the same to be done with Petite and Plus sized charts. Additionally, the project could be more accurate if more charts were averaged, rather than just four, however taking from those four specific areas of the industry was crucial, as many people own clothes from those types of stores. The goal with the new sizing chart is to implement a bridal standard, and eventually an overarching standard, to help make clothing shopping a more enjoyable experience all around, where a size 0 in one store is a size 0 in another. Another improvement with the new chart, is that traditional numbered sizes were replaced by names of flowers (see Figure 7.2). Further modifications of the shopping experience

could have size tags color coded to match each flower for shopping ease. The chart is just the beginning of potential future research and developments and has a long way to go before it becomes an actual standard.

Conclusion

After examining the literature, creating the project, and reflecting on the results, conclusions were drawn to answer the original research questions. To reiterate, the research questions that guided this project were as follows:

1. How has the United States standard sizing chart changed over the years?
2. How can the average American female body and four United States sizing charts be combined to create a more accurate sizing chart for brides in 2023?

To answer the first question the literature review must again be looked at. Research found that the last time the United States of America had a standardized size chart for apparel was in 1970 (Billingsley, 2022). The way that bodies have changed over the years has been dramatic, with Americans getting larger both in a weight and in a height sense, with the average height increasing despite the majority of American women falling in the Petite category (Kim et al., 2016). Simply put, the American body has changed, and the standard has disappeared, which is how and why each store has its own individual way to size today.

The second question required a longer and more applied process to answer. Utilizing skills learned from basic knowledge of flat pattern creation, computer aided design techniques, apparel production, and clothing fit, as well as information from sizing charts from four different areas of the apparel industry, a sizing chart was developed in the Misses department to help standardize the industry. Specifically, the chart was developed for bridal wear, but as a standard could be applied to the rest of the apparel industry as well. The goal with the averaged chart was to help

with the wedding dress try on experience, so that brides do not have to wear gowns multiple sizes larger than what they are used to, and thus aims to help ease stress and body dissatisfaction issues discussed in the literature review. No bride should have to feel they need to lose weight to walk down the aisle, but, according to Neighbors and Sobal (2008 B), that is not the case, especially when it comes to dress size. With an averaged or more standardized way to size in the United States, brides can benefit in a multitude of ways and focus more on their big day, rather than the stress of looking or being thinner.

Limitations and Future Research

As mentioned in the evaluation and discussion, this project can be expanded. It solely focused on sizing within the Misses department, or as seen in the charts, up to a size 14. The same project can be done with the Petite department and the Plus size department. The chart from Bella Bridal also shows that it was used for dresses before 2018, however that one was chosen over the newer one because the newer one started on a size 2 rather than a size 0. Additionally, the project can be expanded upon further by considering more sizing charts, rather than limiting it to just four. Ultimately, this project could be expanded upon greatly, with a team of researchers in the apparel and bridal industry, as would have to happen if a new clothing standard is to be implemented once again in the United States. This project is the baby step of a much larger project, which could someday help solve the frustrations of shopping and sizing around the country, especially in the bridal industry.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Size	Numeric	Bust	Waist	Hip
XXS	00	31	23.5	33
XS	0	32	24.5	34
XS	2	33	25.5	35
S	4	34	26.5	36
S	6	35	27.5	37
M	8	36	28.5	38
M	10	37.5	30	39.5
L	12	39	31.5	41
L	14	40.5	33	42.5

American Eagle Outfitters size chart, taken from <https://www.ae.com/us/en/content/help/women-size-chart>.

Figure 2.1

Size	Band	Waist	Hip
XXS/2	28"	24 1/2"	34 1/2"
XS/4	30"	26"	36"
S/6	32"	27 1/2"	37 1/2"
M/8	34"	29"	39"
L/10	36"	31"	41"
XL/12	38"	33"	43"
XXL/14	40"	35"	45"

Lululemon size chart, showing band, waist, and hip, taken from <https://shop.lululemon.com/help/size-guide/womens>.

Figure 2.2

0	28 1/2"
2	30"
4	32"
6	34"
8	36"
10	38"
12	40"
14	42"
16	45"

Lululemon size chart, showing bust, taken from <https://shop.lululemon.com/help/size-guide/womens>.

Figure 3

Size	USA	Bust/Chest	Waist	Hip
XS	2	33½	26½	36½
S	4	34½	27½	37½
S	6	35½	28½	38½
M	8	36½	29½	39½
M	10	37½	30½	40½
L	12	39	32	42
L	14	40½	33½	43½
XL	16	42½	35½	45½
XL	18	44½	37½	47½

Walmart size chart, taken from <https://www.walmart.com>.

Figure 4

Bridal - Chart A FOR ALL ALLURE SPRING 2018 AND BEFORE			
Size	Bust	Waist	Hips
2	32	23.5	35.5
4	33	24.5	36.5
6	34	25.5	37.5
8	35	26.5	38.5
10	36.5	28	40
12	38	30	41.5
14	39.5	31.5	43
16	41	33	44.5
18	42.5	34.5	46
20	44.5	35.5	47.5
22	46.5	36.5	49.5
24	48.5	38.5	51.5

Bella Boutique Allure Bridal size chart, taken from <https://www.bellabridalboutique.com/size-charts>.

Figure 5.1



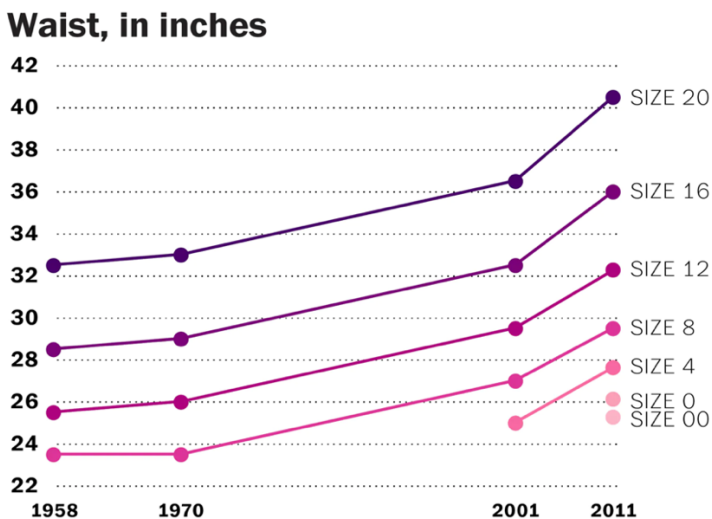
2020 *Sports Illustrated* cover, taken from <https://sicovers.com>.

Figure 5.2



2020 *Sports Illustrated* cover, taken from <https://sicovers.com>.

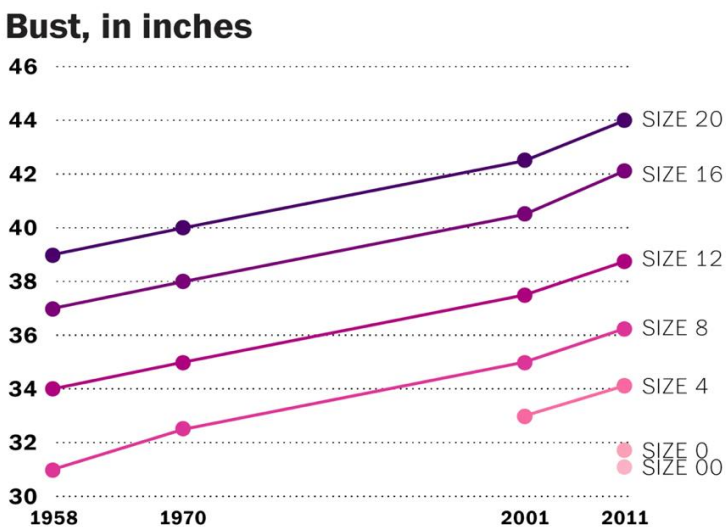
Figure 6.1



Washington Post waist measurement and size comparison, taken from

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/11/the-absurdity-of-womens-clothing-sizes-in-one-chart/>.

Figure 6.2



Washington Post bust measurement and size comparison, taken from

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/11/the-absurdity-of-womens-clothing-sizes-in-one-chart/>.

Figure 7.1

	#	AEO	LL	W	BB		Formula	New
	2	33	30	33.5	32		$(33 + 30 + 33.5 + 32) / 4 =$	32.125
	4	34	32	34.5	33		$(34 + 32 + 34.5 + 33) / 4 =$	33.375
	6	35	34	35.5	34		$(35 + 34 + 33.5 + 34) / 4 =$	34.625
B	8	36	36	36.5	35		$(36 + 36 + 36.5 + 35) / 4 =$	35.875
	10	37.5	38	37.5	36.5		$(37.5 + 38 + 37.5 + 36.5) / 4 =$	37.375
	12	39	40	39	38		$(39 + 40 + 39 + 38) / 4 =$	39
	14	40.5	43	40.5	39.5		$(40.5 + 43 + 40.5 + 39.5) / 4 =$	40.875
	#	AEO	LL	W	BB		Formula	New
	2	25.5	24.5	26.5	23.5		$(25.5 + 24.5 + 26.5 + 23.5) / 4 =$	25
	4	26.5	26	27.5	24.5		$(26.5 + 26 + 27.5 + 24.5) / 4 =$	26.125
	6	27.5	27.5	28.5	25.5		$(27.5 + 27.5 + 28.5 + 25.5) / 4 =$	27.25
W	8	28.5	29	29.5	26.5		$(28.5 + 29 + 29.5 + 26.5) / 4 =$	28.375
	10	30	31	30.5	28		$(30 + 31 + 30.5 + 28) / 4 =$	29.875
	12	31.5	33	32	30		$(31.5 + 33 + 32 + 30) / 4 =$	31.625
	14	33	35	33.5	31.5		$(33 + 35 + 33.5 + 31.5) / 4 =$	33.25
	#	AEO	LL	W	BB		Formula	New
	2	35	34.5	36.5	35.5		$(35 + 34.5 + 36.5 + 35.5) / 4 =$	35.375
	4	36	36	37.5	36.5		$(36 + 36 + 37.5 + 36.5) / 4 =$	36.5
	6	37	37.5	38.5	37.5		$(37 + 37.5 + 38.5 + 37.5) / 4 =$	37.625
H	8	38	39	39.5	38.5		$(38 + 39 + 39.5 + 38.5) / 4 =$	38.75
	10	39.5	41	40.5	40		$(39.5 + 41 + 40.5 + 40) / 4 =$	40.25
	12	41	43	42	41.5		$(41 + 43 + 42 + 41.5) / 4 =$	41.875
	14	42.5	45	43.5	43		$(42.5 + 45 + 43.5 + 43) / 4 =$	43.5

Microsoft Excel table containing math to create new size chart.

Figure 7.2

Size	Bust	Waist	Hip
Sunflower	32	25	35.5
Daisy	33	26	36.5
Lily	34.5	27	38
Gardenia	36	28.5	39
Carnation	37.5	30	40
Tulip	39	32	42
Orchid	41	33	43.5

Microsoft Excel table showing new size chart.