Are you feeling special today? Underwear and the ‘fashioning’ of female identity

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This paper explores underwear – a neglected (at least by academic literature) aspect of clothing – and the ways it is implicated in the (re)production of women’s identities. Although underwear is ostensibly hidden from view, as part of women’s clothing, we argue that it functions as a resource for identity construction. We present data from three focus groups to discuss some of the socio-psychological reasons for choosing and wearing the ‘right’ underwear. The analysis is based on three themes: the significance respondents attribute to underwear according to whether it is hidden or visible; the sensations it induces for the wearer; and the varying mobilisations of underwear to support aspects of the female identity project. We argue that underwear can be seen as a technique of the body or a technology of the self and that a woman ‘learns’ through the embodied experience of wearing different underwear how to (re)construct various elements of her identity.

Keywords: female identity project; identity construction; identity *opseis*; techniques of the body; technologies of the self; underwear

Introduction

The first series of the British television show *Trinny and Susannah Undress the Nation* aired in late 2007 and was presented by the famous female duo Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine. Its inaugural episode was dedicated to the importance of a well-fitting bra, how crucial it is in supporting a woman’s external appearance and the psychological confidence it produces. The denouement of this episode featured 1000 women gathered in a small town in the English countryside. All had their busts measured professionally and a bra chosen accordingly. They proceeded to publicly strip off their tops, accompanied by Trinny and Susannah, to show the results. For 976 of the 1000, this was a bra of a different size – the emphasis being on how this seemingly small adjustment to their underwear turned them into ‘new women’. Christi- ana’s doctoral thesis seems to have a similar rationale to *Undress the Nation*, putting women’s underwear at the centre of their experience of their bodies. While she did not go as far as to literally squeeze breasts or ask women to undress, as Trinny and Sus- annah did in their show, her project aimed to understand something about the role this aspect of women’s clothing plays in everyday bodywork. Bodywork is defined by

Gimlin as what society expects us to do to our bodies ‘to transform them from the “natural” state to one that is explicitly “cultural”’ (2007, 355). Shilling (2005, 74 – 7) offers three different categories in this regard, including cultural bodywork which ‘is concerned with how individuals present themselves as acceptable subjects in everyday life ... [it] is necessary for humans if they are to possess symbolically meaningful phys- ical identities’. Christiana’s research therefore also aimed to understand something about women’s identity projects *per se*.

Underwear is, in addition, a largely neglected part of women’s clothing as far as academic literature is concerned, especially compared with the wealth of discussion about other more visible elements of our dress and appearance. However, we contend that underwear is as important as ‘outward’ dress: indeed, in some ways, it is more interesting in that it is usually hidden from view. The most cursory of glances at contemporary British popular culture certainly seems to testify to under- wear’s considerable importance. Makeover shows such as *Undress the Nation*, *How to Look Good Naked* and *Ten Years Younger* as well as many women’s magazines typi- cally assert that the ‘underneath’ is a vital component of a woman’s appearance because it supports the former in two interrelated ways: first by working together with outer dress to enhance appearance, bolstering our cultural capital; second by generating par- ticular physical and psychological sensations of being comfortable in one’s own skin, self-confidence, perhaps even sexual arousal. So the analysis in this paper speaks directly to the importance of culture in the ongoing performance of female identity.

We also suggest that underwear both reflects and stimulates different feelings on different occasions, articulating various aspects of a woman’s identity project and of her ongoing performance of her self (herself). So her knickers, bra, camisole and so on in part become an expression of her identity and a carrier of feelings about her body, her femininity, her sexuality, etc. This echoes a whole host of other commentaries on the dynamic, ongoing and multi-faceted character of female identity, as well as speaking to social imperatives around femininity.

Here, we define identity as the way individuals give meaning to their existence in the world; a relationship which is, however, not one of social determination. We see identity similar to Sawicki (1988, 184) who stresses that a ‘relational view of personal identity [means that] one’s interests are a function of one’s place in the social field at a particular time, not given. [Identity then is] constantly open to change and contesta- tion’. Consequently, and also in terms of how the analysis here speaks to organisation, some of the data we present illuminate the ways in which Christiana’s respondents select the underwear they choose to wear to work in order to perform a professional identity, and in particular, the emphasis placed on effectively rendering the body invis- ible in the – supposedly – rational, cerebral, unemotional context of the organisation. But our discussion also seeks ‘to go beyond analysis of the organiz*ation* as (putatively) static entity’, being grounded in the ‘idea of organiz*ing* ... a process of ordering, of making sense, of including and excluding – in short, as the various ways in which we seek to control ourselves, each other and our material environments’ (Brewis and Warren 2001, 383 – 4). Our specific assertion is that the process of identity construction is likewise a process of organising, of assembling a sense of ‘who’ one ‘is’ – and equally who one ‘is not’ – and that, as we go on to outline in the next section, the mobilisation of particular types of underwear, especially for women, is an important aspect of this complex, dynamic and ongoing set of practices. Overall our paper there- fore focuses on how underwear is implicated in the production and reproduction/con- struction and reconstruction/organising and re-organising of a woman’s identity.

In what follows, we present some of the data generated by three of Christiana’s focus groups. Our analysis will try to show how the underwear that each woman respondent wears supports her in the roles she is required to perform in her everyday life, emphasising how underwear might be used as a ‘technology of the self’ in the fem- inine identity project. The themes addressed here include the complex attributions accorded to hidden and visible underwear by the respondents, their commentary about how their underwear ‘makes them feel’ and, finally, how different types of under- wear are mobilised to articulate or distinguish between different aspects of these women’s identity performances. Thus, socio-psychological reasons for choosing and wearing the ‘right’ underwear are a key motif in our analysis.

We begin by reviewing some of the academic literature on the relationship between dress and identity to suggest how underwear, as part of clothing, can function as a ‘tool’ of identity construction, even though it is mostly invisible.

Underwear and identity

The literature on dress shows that several analytical perspectives have been employed to account for its meanings in terms of the body, identity and the wider social. Much of this commentary, however, is predicated on the assumption that we construct ourselves at least in part via how we dress: in other words, the clothes we buy and wear are expressions of our identity. At the same time, it emphasises that women in particular usually present different aspects of themselves through their dress (Finkelstein 1991; Entwistle 2001; Guy, Green, and Banim 2001; Keenan 2001; Tsee¨lon 2001, following Goffman 1990). In other words, women’s identity projects are complex, performative and processual – there is no fixed, essential female self which is expressed in a predictable or stable way via a particular, consistent mode of dress.

Nonetheless, and despite underwear’s close connection to the body as part of cloth- ing, the limited literature in the area largely focuses on its purpose and meaning across history, as opposed to in the contemporary context (Ewing 1978; Willett and Cunning- ton 1992; Shelley 2000). So, for example, we see considerable controversy about the appropriate interpretation of the Victorian corset. This is said to be one of the most intriguing undergarments ever, since its importance apparently lay not only in the construction of a certain type of female body and thus projection of a specific femininity, but also in its articulation of a ‘class-based identity and subjectivity’. As such, a ‘well- corseted body [.. .] gave an immediate first impression of gentility’ (Summers 2001, 9 – 10). Equally, the corset was linked to moral imperatives since uncorseted women were considered ‘loose’ and immoral (Roberts 1977). Indeed, it was typically worn by upper- and middle-class women who did not perform manual labour (Kaiser 1990), but also apparently by working-class women who hoped to obscure their origins and ‘marry up’ (Summers 2001). Feminist critics add that the corset had material consequences for the female body, causing weakening of the muscles and sometimes fatal illnesses, and that its symbolic meanings reflected Victorian under- standings of the female condition as one of submissiveness and pain (Roberts 1977). However, Steele (1985, 42) challenges such criticisms, stressing that the corset did not settle the Victorian woman into a subordinate role. In contrast, she believes that women at the time deployed this form of underwear very strategically in order to artificially improve ‘nature’s gifts’.

Steele’s claim that Victorian women were eager to accentuate or enhance their bodyshape also appears to be the basic premise of a goodly proportion of modern British

popular culture. As noted in our introduction, a range of cultural artefacts including television shows like *Undress the Nation* focus on the ‘correct’ shaping of the female body so that it is both experienced and presented as an ‘appropriately’ feminine body. Interestingly, these makeover shows in particular also seem to propose that the women they target have a ‘real’ or ‘concealed’ identity, one that is gradually ‘revealed’ by the fashion guru presenters (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). Body shapes are named ‘apples’ or ‘pears’, in order that those with ‘anomalies’ like ‘excess’ stored fat on the stomach or bottom can be ‘controlled’ by clothing that also draws attention to other parts of the body. All of ‘nature’s gifts’ must be emphasised with underwear especially: bosoms must be levered into an appropriate angle, waists must be empha- sised and hips must appear proportionate to the whole. Indeed, Trinny and Susannah have stressed in several shows that their favourite underwear is control pants that pull ‘everything’ in and quite literally create a well-proportioned body. In other words, the message of shows like these is that all bodies can be – indeed in essence ‘are’ – ‘fit to be seen’: it is all a matter of how they are dressed and, in particular, sup- ported by underwear.

The cultural pressures of a ‘fit to be seen’ body are thus very evident here, as well as the idea that the body is a crucial aspect of contemporary identity projects (Giddens 1991; Shilling 1991, 2003, 2005). Emphasis is placed on the actual experience of living in the body, the feelings that this experience induces and how this works as one symbol of a reflexive self. According to Giddens, the contemporary reflexive self is one that is regularly called to act upon itself in particular ways. This entails treating the body as a project, as requiring work, accepting that it is open to reconstruction, management and maintenance. This ‘management of the body through time and space can be seen as *the fundamental constituent* in an individual’s ability to intervene in social affairs and to “make a difference” in the flow of daily life’ (Shilling 1991, 654). As Tischner and Malson (2008, 261) suggest, then, contemporary western society assigns us ‘full responsibility’ for our bodies.

Relatedly, Sweetman (2001, 66) explains that fashion and bodily adornment of whatever sort can be categorised as what Mauss (1973, 70) calls the ‘techniques of the body’. Any ‘technique’ that a person adopts to dress, decorate, improve or reconfi- gure their body is therefore understood as central to their identity project (Budgeon 2003, 37). Moreover, Bordo (1993) suggests women are more likely to use techniques such as make-up or specific types of clothing in order to literally fashion themselves in accordance with prevailing discursive imperatives around femininity. Fine and Macpherson (1994, 229) agree arguing that women tend to be more vulnerable to censure on the basis of a visibly ‘unsuccessful’ body project. As Budgeon (2003,

1. puts it, then,

[t]he dominant relation women are posited to have with their bodies is one which is dis- cursively mediated and, it would seem, a significantly over-determined one in which women live with a constant sense of the body as being in need of improvement.

Likewise, Warren and Brewis (2004, 230, following Bordo) suggest that ‘women who engage in constant bodily surveillance are frequently and simultaneously caught up in regimes of normalizing meaning which are scarcely liberational’.

Underwear, we contend, simultaneously supports overall appearance and forms part of an individual’s expression of their identity because of the ‘foundation’ it offers to outward dress. It can therefore be considered as a technique of the body or what

Foucault (1988), in a connected move, refers to as a ‘technology of the self’. Underwear is part of an ongoing project of presentation – and possibly improvement – of the self:

The careful management of this conception of ‘others’ and ‘selves’ is the aim and goal of such technologies. It produces a degree of self-esteem and self confidence and generates bodily sensations (pain, pleasure, arousal, excitement, etc). (Jantzen, Østergaard, and Vieira 2006, 183)

Further to this, we are very persuaded by a comment from Jantzen and Østergaard in a later dialogue with Amy-Chinn, where they argue that we should understand underwear as something that we actively *do*, because

* 1. doing approach brings the issue of lingerie into a micro-social sphere of actual consumption discussing which uses consumers make of the product and what this implies for their social identity and their subjective well-being. (Amy-Chinn, Jantzen, and Østergaard 2006, 395)

Taking off from the arguments presented in these papers, two of the very few scholarly analyses we have been able to locate of the contemporary significance of underwear, we proceed to explore in more detail how underwear might work to ‘support’ the many personae that individual women perform every day. The next section outlines the methodology used to generate our primary data, which in contrast to the Danish data gathered by Jantzen et al. were collected in the UK.

Methodology

Christiana’s research design was based on the assumption of a socially constructed self, accepting that the body is the physical mediator between the ‘inner self’ and the ‘external world’. According to Elliott (2001, 46),

[t]his means having an awareness that identity is established through individual actions and choices, the patterning of thoughts, dispositions, feelings and desires, and the structuring of subjective experience in relation to the social order.

If we understand the ‘social order’ as constituted of a multiplicity of different discursive versions of what it means to be a woman, for example, then this necessarily entails, as we have already implied above, that the female identity project is variegated, perhaps even fragmented. Moreover, the different encounters of our daily lives as women call upon us to perform different aspects of our selves – such as colleague, mother, friend or lover (Elliott 2001; Gillen 2001) – at times simultaneously. Christiana has coined the term identity *opseis* – from the Greek *o´ψη* which means ‘an aspect of’ or ‘a side of’ – to represent the ways in which women perform or are required to focus on specific parts of their identity as they navigate the everyday. Her intention with this notion of *opseis* was to deliberately ‘hail’ these various aspects of a woman’s identity project in her data gathering so as to understand how underwear might be mobilised differently depending on the *opsy*1 at stake (Alvesson and Deetz 2000).

The data presented here were gathered from three focus groups. An underlying assumption of focus groups as a research method is that reality is coconstructed through interaction between people in the group, just as it is in ‘normal’ social life, and that meanings are negotiated and assigned to practices and experiences within this group context (Wilkinson 2004). So it is the interaction between the participants in focus groups which is important. As Tonkiss puts it, ‘focus groups capture the inherently interactive and communicative nature of social action and social meanings, in ways that are inaccessible to research methods that take the individual as their basic unit of analysis’ (2004, 198). This interactivity also facilitates a ‘synergistic effect’ (Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook 2007, 43 – also see Morgan 1988; Wilkinson 1998, 2004) because participants respond to and build on other participants’ views and ideas. Equally the discussion can stray into topics that the researcher has not thought about and which can provide very useful data. This is also true for less structured interviews, but it might be more likely to happen in focus groups, especially with larger numbers.

Christiana’s focus groups have one common characteristic: the members of each were selected because of a particular identity *opsy* they could be regarded as exemplifying. Focus group (1) comprised women who work as university English tutors. The participants in focus group (2) were also university staff, this time working in administration. Focus group (3) comprised new mothers. Motherhood is a particular stage in a woman’s life where specific elements of (one version of) femininity are discursively emphasised like nurturing, care and sensitivity. A new mother’s identity is therefore arguably primarily constituted around the reproductive parts of her body and all the feelings and experiences this entails. This female body is a reproductive body, and as such Christiana was interested to see how underwear is mobilised in both pregnancy and ‘becoming’ a mother.

The university staff, however, were selected with a view to the discussions focusing on their professional selves – the more so because a university is a specific kind of workplace. In a discursive sense at least, it is an ‘intellectual’ setting and so we can suggest that university staff’s identity as workers is constituted around the mind: their body is not the strongest signifier of their professional status. Nonetheless, their dressed body is still on display at work – especially for the English tutors who stand in front of classes for most of their professional lives. Christiana’s intention was there- fore to understand how these women’s underwear is affected by or affects this particular context/identity *opsy*. Table 1 gives biographical details for each of the respondents.

In later focus groups, other *opseis* were ‘hailed’, including a focus group comprising women aged 60 and over, all of whom were either widowed or divorced, and one in which the participants were female rugby players. In the former the emphasis was on the ageing female body, and in the latter, on this body as active and sporty. The choice of *opseis* as reflected in all five groups was also to some extent constrained by the exigencies of access negotiation and the usual ‘conflict between the desirable and the possible’ (Buchanan et al., cited in Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2009, 71). Although as we suggest above there are explicit methodological reasons why these groups were approached (on the basis of their occupation, age, bodily ‘status’ and/or leisure activities; thus reflecting a range of different identity *opseis*), it is also true to say that Christiana had existing links with, or entre´es into, each of the groups which made the access process much easier.

We should add that each potential participant was offered the opportunity to participate in an individual interview should she not feel comfortable discussing the relatively sensitive issue of underwear in a group and also where focus groups were difficult to set up. Three women – two gym clients and one gym instructor (here where the emphasis was on the active female body at work and at play) – accepted these invitations. However, here we use data from focus groups (1)–(3) only due to space limitations.

Table 1. Respondents’ biographical details.

Pseudonym

Age range

Marital

status Occupation Ethnicity

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Focus group (1)* | | | | |
| Abby | 36 – 45 | Married | English tutor | White British |
| Kate | 46 – 55 | Divorced | English tutor | White British |
| Paulette | 26 – 35 | Single | English tutor | White British |
| Wendy | 36 – 45 | Married | Part-time English tutor and secretary | Asian |
| *Focus group (2)* | | | | |
| Caitlyn | 26 – 35 | Married | International officer | White British |
| Julie | 26 – 35 | Co-habiting | International officer | White British |
| Karen | 26 – 35 | Single | International officer | White British |
| Samantha | 26 – 35 | Married | Part-time study abroad adviser | White British |
| *Focus group (3)* | | | | |
| Jen | 26 – 35 | Married | Events manager | White British |
| Kayla | 26 – 35 | Married | Sports manager | White British |
| Kelly | 26 – 35 | Married | Charity marketing officer | White British |
| Kerry | 26 – 35 | Married | Laboratory manager | White British |
| Laney | 26 – 35 | Married | Sales development manager | White British |
| Liz | 26 – 35 | Married | Campaign coordinator | White German |
| Tara | 26 – 35 | Married | Chartered accountant | White British |

The focus group schedules each contained some common questions and others specific to the particular identity *opsy* ‘at stake’. During the focus groups, photographs of underwear from various retailers’ websites were also used to illustrate a variety of different underwear styles, fabrics, colours and combinations and to facilitate what Walker and Weidel call the ‘can opener’ effect (cited in Warren 2002, 239), such that respondents had something concrete to react to, to stimulate the conversations and as a point of reference regarding various types of underwear. Three retailers were chosen: Marks and Spencer is one of the favourite outlets for underwear shopping in the UK (Mintel Marketing Intelligence 2009), Ann Summers on the other hand specialises in a more sensual type of underwear and online store and TheSpecialCollection.com offers underwear for mature female bodies, for women with bigger breasts or women who have undergone surgery for breast cancer, as well as maternity underwear. Thus, these three outlets provide a reasonably broad coverage of the UK underwear market.

The photographs were initially used fairly early on in each group session, to accompany the question ‘What do you think about these types of underwear? Which types do you wear or perhaps used to wear?,’ but the participants often returned to this material in order to illustrate later observations. The stereotypes associated with Marks and Spencer and Ann Summers will also of course have played a part here in terms of pre-existing perceptions of these retailers (reliable if unexciting versus erotic and sexual) and indeed several participants were able to identify some of the stimulus material as being Ann Summers underwear.

All three focus groups were recorded with the consent of the participants and recordings were transcribed into text. The extracts presented in this paper are taken from the original transcripts and the names of the participants are all replaced with fake names to preserve their anonymity. The analysis is, as aforementioned, based on three main themes arising from the analysis of these data. These are what underwear is considered to signify depending on whether it is hidden or visible; the sensations that underwear is reported to induce, and whether these are physical or psychological; and, finally, how the respondents ‘use’ underwear in different aspects of their identity pro- jects – and why.

Now you see it, now you do not: hidden versus visible underwear

The contrast between hidden and visible underwear came up fairly often during the focus groups, in a number of different ways. One dimension of these exchanges was the unintentional ‘flashing’ of underwear, which was usually considered to be embarrassing – like a gaping blouse or undone trousers. The respondents suggest this embarrassment derives from the sense that underwear *should* be hidden and that underwear which is inadvertently on display might attract ridicule. For example:

Abby-1: I remember Amy’s shirt had come open [.. .] and I said ‘ooh, that’s a pretty bra’ and she was really embarrassed because .. . well I thought it was meant to be like that [laughter].

Paulette-1: Oh no!

Abby-1: It was in here wasn’t it or was it in the middle of the coffee shop or something ... ? Paulette-1: Oh she must have felt awful.

Abby-1: Yeah she was totally embarrassed because she didn’t know how long her shirt had been open [.. .] It [the bra] was pretty though, it had strawberries on it.2

In cases such as this one, despite Abby’s initial assumption that her colleague intended to have her bra on display, in the event it turned out that Amy’s blouse had come undone without her realising. What is also hinted at is that Abby would not have commented on the bra quite so explicitly had she known this was the case. Further, we identify hints in the extract that Amy’s embarrassment was heightened by the fact that her bra was on display *at work.* There is something here of what Trethewey (1999, 438) argues when she points out that ‘The excessively sexual or undisciplined body draws attention to the otherness of the female, private body in the masculine, public sphere of work.’ Having one’s bra inadvertently on display may lead to one being coded as having an ‘excessively sexual or undisciplined body’, because underwear of course is also the part of clothing which is closest to the skin and moreover closest to physical markers of biological sex – here the breasts. Since the biological female body is in the western imaginary regarded as especially ‘unreliable’ given that it menstruates, falls pregnant and lactates, effective discipline of this body can be seen as equally important for a ‘successful’ feminine identity project – in the public sphere in particular (see, *inter alia*, Bordo 1993; Shil- drick 2002; Warren and Brewis 2004; Gimlin 2007).

Indeed, the members of focus group (1) insisted that they chose their underwear for work in order, effectively, to ‘disguise’ their female bodies. They emphasised that how they dress and the underwear they choose changes if they have a working day ahead. And we might have expected this group to concentrate on this issue given (a) the professional *opsy* which Christiana used to ‘hail’ these women and (b) the fact that, in

contrast to the university administrators’ group, these women spend most of the working day in front of students and therefore under their direct scrutiny. Gimlin’s (2007, 363) reference to the ‘ways in which the work environment is literally “written on” the body’ seems pertinent here, as does Shilling’s job-related bodywork category, which he defines as ‘those *unofficial* tasks involved in maintaining the embodied self as viable within the environment of waged labour’ (2005, 73). He continues by asserting that, from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards, the aspects of such bodywork which relate to ‘looking the part’ at work have ‘increased ... making the cultural monitoring and reproductive care of one’s body a key ingredient of success and even survival in many workplaces’ (Shilling 200*5*, 87). Of course, this issue has been discussed extensively with regard to how women choose their *outer*wear at work to explicitly speak to ideals of the worker as ‘disembodied brain-power’, the ‘rational decision-maker who thinks and then acts’ (McDowell, cited in Gimlin 2007, 365). In Christiana’s data, however, Abby, for instance, explains that she needs to be focused on her job, thus it is important for her not to be aware of her under- wear. She chooses plain cotton underwear for work because she needs to feel that her body is as ‘invisible’ as possible when she teaches.

Another possibility raised by these data though is that women might show their

underwear deliberately. Focus group (1) in fact made three different distinctions about visible underwear: first, it is unintentional; second, it is intentional and signifies an attempt to be sexual (as we implied above); third, it is a conscious fashion statement. Abby certainly suggested that showing off underwear is something a woman might do if she wanted to seduce a man:

Paulette-1: I have a friend who thinks that ... who thinks not only is it fine but you *should* show off your bra when you are wearing, erm, like a top. She’s always like undoing my buttons .. . errmm like ‘show it!’ and I’m like ‘ooh no you can’t show your bra’ [in a funny voice]. What do you think? [she asks the others]

Abby-1: Hmm, it depends if you are advertising or not. [laughter]. Paulette-1: What?

Abby-1: If you are advertising yourself, if you want to collect [*sic*] a partner.

But this group also discussed the third category of visible underwear at length, as follows:

Wendy-1: Is it OK culturally in Britain showing the kind of bra top?3 Paulette-1: You mean the strap?

Kate-1: I think it’s become so. It didn’t used to be.

Abby-1: Hmmmm. It used to be a no no, in fact you would wear a vest without a bra, rather than show the bra strap.

Wendy-1: Or like a strapless kind of bra. Abby-1: Yeah!

Wendy-1: Well always showing three or four kind of straps everywhere, it’s really weird. Paulette-1: Actually now, when it’s a fashion statement, when someone has designed an outfit that it ... you know what I mean, that it reveals the bra strap and the contrast, then it’s OK. But still if it’s just flying over your shoulder it’s not so great. Maybe that’s the way I think of it! If it looks like part of the whole outfit, then I think it’s normal, but there are those clear ones [bra straps] that you can wear.

Kate-1: It would have to look good. Because for some it looks good.

Abby-1: Yeah but wearing a blue top and having a, a, a purple bra! [laughter and talking]

Int: What about [g-]strings showing off?

Abby-1: I used to do that, but... Paulette-1: It’s horrible, isn’t it?

Int: You used to do it?

Abby-1: Yeah, it was like the fashion to wear very low jeans and have your g-string showing. It seemed like a good idea at the time [.. .]

Paulette-1: I think if it’s an accident, like if it just happened, it could be kind of ... I guess

... I don’t know .. . like an unexpected sexy view maybe for someone, but I think if it’s intended, I don’t like it.

A key motif in this exchange appears to be that the intentional display of g- strings over the waistband of trousers or bras that visibly clash with the colour of a woman’s top are not acceptable – not necessarily because these are attempts to attract sexual attention but because they are somehow vulgar. This suggests some- thing about how underwear might function as an element of our cultural/embodied capital, of our overall physical presentation and the ways in which others judge and react to us on this basis. Certainly, Abby and Paulette seem fairly adamant that underwear displays of this kind are tasteless, or at least declasse´, which for us also bears out Bourdieu’s (1984, 6) famous claim that ‘Taste classifies, and it clas- sifies the classifier.’ Indeed, as we ‘distinguish’ between the ‘beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar’ (Bourdieu 1984), and treat others accordingly, we simultaneously reveal something about our own socialisation in a particular socio- economic milieu.

If we return briefly to our analysis above, moreover, and recalling Gimlin’s helpful review of the bodywork literature, we can point to her observation that ‘gendered bodies and personal appearance, and the backstage work required to maintain them to acceptable standards’ are now frequently regarded as an element of cultural capital as it pertains to success at work (2007, 357, following McDowell, also see Shilling 2005). For our university tutors, guarding against accidents such as Amy’s gaping blouse and ensuring that underwear does not show under office dress seems to be an element of this ‘backstage work’.

So another important aspect of the hidden/visible distinction in these data was that, when underwear becomes visible, it is then part of scrutiny and monitoring by others, exactly as women’s outerwear and bodies are more generally (Fine and Macpherson 1994; Budgeon 2003; Warren and Brewis 2004). At this point, underwear stops being ‘personal’ or ‘private’ and enters the social. The assumption that others judge us just as we judge them – here on the basis of more or less ‘socially appropriate’ underwear – was evident in other commentary from focus group (1) about instances when others not only see but might also handle our underwear:

Wendy-1: I always care about what others think, but it’s not really underwear. It’s a private kingdom anyway, not really showing to everyone, so when I’m going to my mother-in-law’s house because she’s normally doing [the] wash[ing], then I have to buy new conventional bras.

Paulette-1: Really?

Wendy-1: It’s not really controversial, [it’s] just to be conventional, because that’s what she wants to see. So that’s kind of changing personality I think.

Abby-1: Yeah I did that when I went to my parents-in-law. I did buy new underwear when I went there. I didn’t take any weekend underwear there. Also at my mum’s house.

Wendy-1: Yeah, because that’s what they want to see. Paulette-1: Really?

Wendy-1: Well she would be very surprised if she [was doing the] washing and she found that kind of thing [laughs].4

For Wendy, putting on more ‘conventional’ underwear for the sake of her mother- in-law is not a mere change of style: it is a literal change of persona or *opsy*. Here she describes performing the discursively mandated role of the dutiful, asexual, respectful and respectable daughter-in-law, routinely using ‘conventional’ underwear as a technology of this particular version of herself. Abby, the only other married woman in the group, echoed Wendy’s comments and extended them to suggest that for her per- forming her identity as daughter likewise demanded the mobilisation of this kind of underwear.

Shopping for underwear, while perhaps less potentially charged than the situations described above, was also described as challenging by focus group (1) for similar reasons. They recount a sense of being watched by fellow shoppers to see which under- wear they choose and, once again, of being ‘classified’ in a Bourdieusian sense on this basis – especially perhaps if they are deemed to have chosen an inappropriate size or colour of underwear. Focus group (1)’s comments also somewhat belie the convenience of the ‘one stop shop’ of the large supermarket in this regard:

Wendy-1: But can you buy your underwear from Tesco, Asda? I always feel very uncomfortable because you put it in your shopping basket and someone might say ‘oooh, see what that lady bought’. [laughter all round]

Paulette-1: Yeah, I agree.

Abby-1: Like toilet rolls. I used to feel really weird about buying toilet rolls because I think people would know that I go to [the] toilet ... [more laughter]

Abby-1: And then I think .. ‘everybody uses toilet roll’ and then it was OK. Just like pants. I used to feel embarrassed to go into a shop to buy underwear and people seeing what underwear I wear! [more laughter]

Int: Is it because you think of what might that person think about you?

Paulette-1: Yeah it’s like ‘maybe you shouldn’t wear this one but that one!’ [more laugh- ter]

Wendy-1: Well it’s kind of embarrassing to stand in the queue and stand in front of the pants!

[more laughter]

Wendy-1: Toilet roll doesn’t have size [laughs] Paulette-1: Yeah, size or colour! [The others laugh]

But the most evident element of the hidden/visible contrast in these data was the extent to which underwear is inevitably and unavoidably seen by others in certain situations. Here it looms as large as outerwear in clearly signalling one’s identity; and especial effort is seemingly then made to ensure it is ‘socially acceptable’. Paulette, for example, says said that everything is quite random in her underwear drawer but when she goes to the gym she tries to find a set that matches so she does not look ‘weird’ to others. Thus, when underwear is publicly visible women may lose the advantage of ‘getting away with it’, that is, not wearing matching or even particularly attractive underwear. Kerry from focus group (3), in an even more evocative instance, tells a story about one of her friends. This woman knew that an evening out would end with her taking her clothes off in front of her new boyfriend, so her underwear had to suit the occasion:

Kerry-3: One of my friends at university, she had .. she was wearing this formal outfit

.. you know like a ball dress, so she had really tiny skimpy knickers and an awful strapless

bra that held her in the right way. And I know .. she was starting to go out with this guy and she took her fancy underwear in her handbag with her, went to the bathroom [later], put her fancy underwear on and came out with her fancy underwear on [laughter].

Here Kerry’s friend actually changes underwear during the course of an evening to perform a different *opsy*, illustrating the complex, performative, processual character of an individual woman’s identity project (Entwistle 2001; Guy, Green, and Banim 2001; Keenan 2001; Tsee¨lon 2001, following Goffman 1990)*.* She starts out wearing under- wear which provides a suitable ‘foundation’ for her evening at a black tie ball because it cannot be seen underneath her dress. However, when her identity as new sexual partner comes to the fore later on, she replaces this ‘awful’ set with a ‘fancy’ set, which presumably is intended less as a hidden support for her dress and more as a visible technology to enhance her naked body.

Indeed one specific place where these women felt they might not be able to just ‘get away with it’ is the bedroom. The women in the administrators’ group, for example, shared the view that, when a woman was likely to take her clothes off in front of her partner after a night out, what she wore underneath might matter:

Samantha-2: Yeah if you are going to do that [wear special underwear when going out], then you would ... well you envisage that at some point you would be showing off your underwear, if it’s going to be that special, and I would never do that, I wouldn’t make a point in doing that, no way.

Julie-2: You wouldn’t show it to anybody? [They laugh]

Samantha-2: No, your husband maybe, your husband if it’s your anniversary, or some- thing you might fancy getting your best stuff out because at the end of the evening you might be taking your clothes off.

Here Samantha hints that underwear is – or perhaps more accurately should be – only visible to others in the bedroom. Many of the other respondents likewise reported that they would wear special underwear for their partners. On such occasions, as with the anecdote about Kerry’s friend, underwear becomes a key resource in presenting an eroticised version of the female body/self.

**The way you make me feel: underwear and physical and psychological sensations**

However, even though underwear remains hidden from view most of the time, it is still an important part of women’s clothing in these data because of how it seemingly ‘makes them feel’. Christiana’s respondents reported both physical sensations and psychological sensations in this regard. For most of the women in all three groups, comfort was of primary importance in choosing what underwear to buy, and this was defined in many ways. The simplest definition was the physical comfort or discomfort that the material of the underwear produced for the body:

Int: What about lace? [ ]

Kate-1: If it wasn’t itchy. You know when you have a bra that is so uncomfortable, one that the lace is quite stiff, I wouldn’t wear it […]

Abby-1: Sometimes they do something like a nylon stitching, which I find it’s the

end of it, if it has an end on it and it feels like fishing twine or something.

Also underwear’s functionality matters – especially in cases where these women perform particular activities. Abby, for example, explained that, when she plays theviolin, she likes wearing sports bras because she can cross the straps over and they don’t fall off her shoulders. Functionality and comfort were likewise emphasised by the members of focus group (3), due to their experience of both the pregnant and – in the extract that follows – the post-natal body:

Liz-3: I really had problems when .. [be]cause I had a Caesarean so I had problems with pants because they were all ending exactly where the scar was, so it was really uncomfortable. So I had to go for something either very high...

Kelly-3: Or low.

Liz-3: No, low doesn’t actually work at all, because it’s always just ... [she indicates a position very low on the waist]

Kelly-3: Something like this?5

Liz-3: Yeah, something like this.

In the case of the mothers, it was also especially evident how the physical inter- sected with the psychological. Motherhood is one aspect, as already argued, of the female identity project, an *opsy* where perhaps feelings such as prettiness or sexiness come second. This is something that focus group (3) respondents were very aware of, emphasising that there is an unwritten rule that forbids pregnant women or new mothers to put their own needs first:

Jen-3: And they tell you not to wear an underwired bra because it can damage ... well if you are going to breast feed you shouldn’t really wear an underwired bra. So I went from an underwired bra to just a boring no-wired bra.

Kerry-3: Yeah I did as well [others agree]. I went from an uplifting bra to a bra with no uplift at all. [laughter]

Kelly-3: No style!

Kerry-3: *No style*. I found .. I found that ... [be]cause I didn’t feel very sexy anyway... Kelly-3 and Kayla-3: No! [Agreeing]

Kerry-3: And underwear becomes incredibly practical... Kelly-3: Yeah ..

Kerry-3: And you do .. well I turned into my mum and found that cotton underwear was the only underwear that I wanted to wear. I didn’t wear anything fancy at all ... and it became very boring and you feel even more unsexy .. because you are wearing cotton, big knickers and a really boring bra! And that’s all there is to offer!

This ‘unwritten rule’ is something Hays describes as

the model of intensive mothering [which] tells us that children are innocent and price- less, their needs should take precedence over all other considerations, and they should be reared with methods that are informed by experts, laborintensive, and costly. (1996, 21)

It is also, as Murphy (2010, 5 – 6) emphasises, reinforced by the ‘“health as duty” dis- course’ which in the case of infant feeding translates into ‘the mantra “breast is best”’. Commentaries on pregnancy make much the same sort of point, especially those which note what Roberts describes as

an index of deep discomfort with the notion of women as self-directed social beings, for whom parenthood is only one aspect of life, as it has always been for men .. . it portrays a woman as having only contingent value. Her work, her health, *her choices and needs and beliefs*, can all be set aside in an instant because, next to maternity, they are all perceived as trivial. (1998, 286 – 7 – our emphasis)

Apparently as a result, the discursive boundaries between the *opseis* of motherhood and ‘sexy femininity’ were quite distinct for the women in focus group (3). They insisted that practical, comfortable underwear could not be sexy and this had a definite impact on how they felt during their pregnancies and after the birth of their babies. However, they saw pregnancy as a very feminine period in itself – as also evident in other qualitative data (e.g. Warren and Brewis 2004, 224 – 5, where respondents described ‘blossoming’ and ‘having an aura’ during their pregnancies). Kelly in par- ticular felt strongly about this issue, because she did not perceive the underwear market as offering any maternity underwear that is simultaneously comfortable and sexy – or at the very least stylish:

Int: Do you all agree about that, that pregnancy underwear cannot be sexy?

Kelly-3: I do! Though I think it’s a time when you sort of feel quite womanly, so it’s almost ironic that you end up having .. ending up wearing all fuddy-duddy rubbish. [Be]cause you *do* ... I found it a really nice time and I felt, although I was changing I did feel .. I felt, you know, nice, womanly, when I was pregnant [.. .]

Int: Would you want to wear something that you felt more ... erm, sexy [.. .] during your pregnancy?

Kelly-3: If it’d been comfortable, [be]cause comfort was a priority, but it would have been nice to have something that’d been more stylish, as well as being comfortable. And that didn’t seem to be available.

But the relationship between physical comfort and psychological comfort was also evident in focus group (1) data. When discussing what type of underwear the respondents usually wear in relation to the stimulus pictures, Paulette thought that an example where the model is wearing an underwired camisole, bikini garter knickers, stockings and suspenders was neither sexy nor comfortable. Abby agreed, emphasising that a woman cannot feel sexy if she is uncomfortable. This contrasts with what she describes later as her sexy ‘weekend’ underwear. However, it also indicates that the market does not necessarily offer what some women want to buy in order to feel sexy *and* comfortable. For Karen from focus group (2), on the other hand, comfort was a feeling associated entirely with her size. She continually mentioned that this is a significant factor in the underwear she buys, because she wants to feel physically comfortable. But Karen admitted that, if she were slimmer, then comfort would not be her priority regarding underwear. For her, physical comfort was associated with her overweight body and

sexiness was associated with periods when she is slimmer:

Karen-2: I think that I don’t wear the underwear that I would like to wear because I’d rather

... I’d rather lose some weight. So I wouldn’t wear the underwear *now* that I like, but I ... when I was slimmer I wore underwear that was more what I liked .. . that was me maybe .. I don’t know.

Int: What was that?

Karen-2: Well just more, like prettier stuff, erm, sexier stuff. [I would] make more of an effort to wear matching underwear and stuff, rather than just comfortable stuff now, comfortable, you know. Now it’s just about comfort, but at the times when I’m slimmer it would be more about ... I would feel better if I was wearing it, because I would feel more attractive. It would be more about feeling sexy than feeling comfortable.

What stands out for us here is not only the discursive connection Karen draws between ‘sexy femininity’ and slenderness but also the clear sense in this extract of her careful and attentive self-monitoring. Such ‘internalized notions of what a fat person can do’ are identified by Tischner and Malson’s (2008, 264) respondent Charlotte and echoed by her fellow interviewee Emily when she says ‘I *know* people go into, wear swimming costumes on the beach when they are my size, but [laughing] they shouldn’t’ (2008, 263, some emphasis removed). Karen, similarly, seems to feel it is literally impossible for her to wear sexy underwear at her current weight, so thoroughly has she absorbed western cultural imperatives around what constitutes a sexually appealing (i.e. slender) female body.

Importantly, and in closing this section, the boundaries in most of these accounts between the physical and the psychological sensations which underwear is said to produce are not clear. Instead they appear to be substantially interconnected and to strongly influence the buying choices of these women. Expanding on this, the last substantive section of our paper shows how underwear can be understood as an aspect of identity construction, and in particular as a technique to feel ‘special’ – or, more accurately, sexy.

Are you feeling special today? Underwear and the articulation of different identity *opseis*

According to Jantzen, Østergaard, and Vieira (2006, 199), the sensations that under- wear produces for its wearer become a technology of the self because they serve as part of the woman’s identity construction by reinforcing her self-confidence and self- esteem:

[Lingerie] gives women a knowledge of ‘how to proceed’ with expressing their social position. At the same time, it can be employed as an instrument to generate experiences that may transform its users’ self image. Lingerie enables the consumers to manage and control their conception of ‘femininity’. By guiding the consumers towards pleasure and comfort, lingerie in addition induces bodily sensations of what this concept ‘really’ means.

Jantzen et al*.*’s ethnography explores how consumers relate their lingerie to sexuality and sensuality. The category of lingerie, of course, usually entails the kind of underwear which is reserved for special occasions, and sexual encounters perhaps especially. It was a name originally given to more luxurious undergarments during the nineteenth century and the Edwardian period (Willett and Cunnington 1992). Obviously Christiana’s research, since it is premised on a broader conceptualisation of underwear, including what could be considered as mundane or not ‘special’, allows for a wider understanding of the role underwear plays in the everyday lives of women participants. However, many of these women also suggested that the type of underwear which makes them feel special would be categorised as lingerie. For example, and as we have seen, Abby confesses that she wears this type of underwear at the weekends, when she spends quality time with her husband. Such underwear she says is pretty, although sometimes uncomfortable:

Abby-1: [.. .] the prettiest things are for weekends cause that’s the spending time with my husband and for feeling special and feminine without worrying that it’s sticking in a bit inside which it’s all right cause I’m not running around [.. .]

In contrast, Abby’s work underwear has, she said, to be as asexual as possible – as we saw earlier. This speaks directly to two of her identity *opseis*, Abby as professional,disembodied worker and Abby as sexual partner, and the role that underwear plays in articulating each of these.

In the same focus group, an assumption emerged that wearing specific underwear ‘creates’ a more sexually aggressive woman. Wendy recalls the case of her sister for whom she bought sexy underwear, since her sister could not buy such items in Japan where she lives. At the time Wendy’s sister was ‘man-hunting’, as Wendy called it. The motif of this narrative was that a woman’s sexual arousal and thus sexual aggressiveness is enhanced when she is wearing sexy underwear. The other women were shocked when Wendy actually said that it worked because her sister met her boyfriend as a result. In fact, the conception that underwear can boost confidence and produce feelings of sexiness was evident across all three groups. Nonetheless, many of the women also remarked it is hidden from view and so wearing such underwear is just a case of feeling good about themselves:

Int: Why do you have the need to wear matching underwear for special occasions? Kerry-3: Because ... I think because it makes you feel a bit more special ... definitely, and obviously nobody knows you are wearing matching underwear. Your husband might do, if he notices.

In a way, these sorts of comments are for us the flipside of Karen’s narrative about not wearing sexy underwear because she feels she is too large. It appears that lingerie in particular is so saturated with erotic cultural connotations that simply putting it on – whether others see it or not – may produce a heightened awareness of one’s own sexuality, as certainly suggested by Jantzen, Østergaard, and Vieira (2006). Christiana’s data likewise speak of underwear being a Foucauldian technology of the self, or a Maussian technology of the body, especially when aligned with all the other practices women engage in to prepare themselves for particular occasions:

Kelly-3: And I think .. you know when you said why matching? ... I think if it is a special occasion and you’re making an effort to get dressed up and taking more time than you do normally then it makes you feel better about yourself although other people don’t see it. It’s just like when you shave your legs and you know .. . you’ve put your perfume on and got your matching underwear on.. .

Jen-3: It just finishes everything...

Kelly-3: It’s about feeling good about yourself.

As we have seen earlier, in the mothers’ group a contrast between ‘feeling sexy’ and body changes during pregnancy and the post-natal period was also evident in much of the commentary. For these women, it seemed that only some months after the birth of their babies were they able to emerge at all from the motherhood *opsy.* Kerry, for example, stressed that the maternity bra reflected her more than any bra before because the sensation of putting it on so explicitly represented the identity *opsy* on which she was focusing. For her it was all about feeding the baby, a ‘selfless’ act as she describes it, and indeed one that can according to other data be ‘unpleasant and disruptive’ (Schmied and Lupton 2001, 239) due to leaking milk, discomfort or pain, the physical effect feeding has on a woman’s breasts and the baby’s constant demands to be fed (also see, *inter alia,* Murphy 2010). Buying non-maternity underwear was gradually becoming a priority for the focus group (3) women in order that they could begin to present once again as sexually attractive as opposed to (solely) maternal. For Kerry

in particular buying new underwear would signal the end of the experience of physical motherhood, that is, the end of breastfeeding:

Kelly-3: I just think that it’s exciting to get .. you know to that stage that eventually you get into .. either .. I doubt it that I’ll fit into my old size ever again, but just to get some new stuff and feel.. .

Kerry-3: Sexy?

Kelly-3: Normal!

Kerry-3: I have to say, just thinking about it [be]cause I’m about to give up breast feeding

.. you know around Christmas .. I’m going to give myself a month and then I *am*

going to buy myself something more daring ... I will buy a *colour.* [Laughter] Tara-3: Oooooh!

Kerry-3: Yeah I’ll show you all! [Laughter]. Kyle6 is already saying to me ‘we’ll go and buy something for a treat to properly say it’s over!’.

Kelly-3: That’s nice!

For Kerry buying something colourful meant emphasising a different *opsy* – Kerry as Kyle’s sexual partner as opposed to Kerry as mother. Similarly for Jen buying a well- fitted and expensive bra would mean a return to her ‘normal’ self, even though she was aware of the enduring effects of her pregnancy on her body:

Jen-3: You know I was saying yesterday that my husband has agreed to take me to London so when I finish breast feeding I can buy myself a nice, expensive, well-fitted bra, [be]cause that’s my worry .. getting something that doesn’t fit .. . cause my boobs are kind of going under [Laughter]

Kerry-3: I want underwired. Others-3: Yeah!

Kerry-3: That’s what I’m looking for ... an underwired bra again.

In these data, then, underwear emerges as a technique of self-construction and self- expression, depending on the identity *opsy* a woman plays out. It can, they suggest, be used either to arouse and bolster feelings of confidence and sexiness (e.g. Abby wearing pretty underwear at the weekend or the new mothers planning to buy non-maternity underwear) or to control those feelings, almost to ‘hold back’ the sensual elements of the female identity project (e.g. maternity bras, Abby’s work underwear).

Conclusion

This analysis is, as stated, based on the data collected from three focus groups com- prised women who for us exemplify particular identity *opseis*. We have tried to show that the meaning and importance of underwear for these women lies in how it sup- ports the various *opseis* which they play out in everyday life, drawing attention to how it is used as a technique of the body, producing different feelings and ‘fashioning’ female identity accordingly. The three themes discussed here include the meanings the respondents gave to hidden versus visible underwear, and the ways in which these spoke in part to Bourdieu’s analysis of taste; the intersection of the physical with the psychological (and indeed the sociological) in what respondents had to say about how underwear ‘makes them feel’; and the mobilisation of varying types of underwear as an element – perhaps the literal foundation – of different aspects of these women’s identity performances. Taken together, Christiana’s data imply that a woman learns ‘how to proceed with expressing [her] social position’ (Jantzen, Øster- gaard, and Vieira 2006, 199) through the embodied experience of wearing different

underwear and the sensations that it produces for her body. It seems that underwear can provisionally be categorised as a technique of the body or a technology of the self, since these data indicate how it is used to construct and reconstruct various feminine identities, including professional, mother and sexual partner.

In terms of progressing this project, we envisage several possibilities. One is our earlier argument that women may be called upon to articulate more than one *opsy* simultaneously. Another is the extent to which underwear might be used to resist pre- vailing imperatives around various identity *opseis.* As one of our reviewers pointed out, we can conceive of situations in which women might deliberately wear socially inappropriate underwear – such as a university tutor choosing sexy underwear for work to incorporate elements of her sexual partner *opsy* into her professional persona, and thus subverting or at least rendering partially unstable the latter *opsy*. This would also speak to Gimlin’s (2007, 366) critique of existing bodywork literature in that much of it ‘currently ignores the multiple levels from which individuals may reflect on their own practices in relation to the body in employment, including the points at which people opt to set limits on their compliance with workplace demands’. Indeed, there was some limited speculation on this issue from Paulette, as we can see below:

Paulette-1: ... like how would you feel .. . it would be just like an experiment.. maybe you think that something would happen to you during the day if you were wearing [sexy underwear] ‘cause you would feel different and act differently.

These are both intriguing and important issues, but the data gathered from these focus groups do not capture behaviours or performances of this kind due to the questions posed and the organically emerging direction of each discussion. This could be rectified in research projects to come. Equally, the women whom we have discussed here are all, with one exception, white. This is an artefact of the particular groups to which Christiana was easily able to gain access, but ethnicity and cognate identity *opseis* such as race and religion could also form an important basis on which to mount future research into the various mobilisations of underwear. The same is true of sexuality and, of course, class which at the very least we imagine has a significant material impact on the consumption of underwear in terms of what different groups of women can afford to spend. Moreover, although the data *in toto* do allow for an analysis of age as an identity *opsy*, given that the respondents spanned ages from the late teens through to 66 and older, we did not as already established have room to make this a specific focus of our analysis here.

Another trajectory which Christiana’s data speak to in part is what Gimlin, following Kang, identifies as ‘body labour’: ‘labor performed on behalf or directly on other peopl[e’s] bodies’ (2007, 358). As Gimlin avers, the sociology of the body has attended in recent years to ‘fitness-related labour’ (2007) in this regard. The aforementioned interview with a gym instructor points to some interesting thematics here about this woman’s mobilisation of underwear to augment her cultural/embodied capital at work. Again this is a subject worth returning to. Finally, there is evidence in the data of the ways in which the western discourse of femininity is to some extent informed by masculine, or perhaps even patriarchal, ideas of sexiness, erotic allure and women’s bodies needing to be slender and toned in order to be attractive. This is like- wise a theme worth exploring in future data gathering, to investigate in more detail issues around bodily shame or self-loathing as they relate to decisions around

underwear, as well as a more thoroughgoing engagement with the question of ‘whose sexiness?’, as another of our reviewers put it.

Overall, however, our paper represents a contribution to the limited scholarly literature on underwear and the even more limited commentary on its contemporary significance in terms of gender identity and consumption. It provides an account of some of the ways in which women mobilise the underwear they consume to perform particular identities and how they use underwear to ‘fashion’ their female identity in accordance with normative feminine ideals. In particular, the data presented here point to the every- day importance of underwear in the female identity project and thus extend commentary by Jantzen, Østergaard, and Vieira (2006) on lingerie specifically. In so doing, it also addresses Gimlin’s remark that ‘sociology has largely ignored .. . the more mundane forms of body work’ (2007, 355).

Notes

1. Singular of *opseis*.
2. To briefly clarify the protocol used in reproducing these extracts from the data, ‘Abby-1’ is an example of the pseudonyms given to each respondent. The number (here 1) refers to the focus group in which each took part. ‘Int’ refers to Author A as the interviewer/facilitator. [...] signifies either edited text or text having been removed. Two dots without parentheses signify a short pause, whereas three signify a longer pause, or an interruption by other respondents if at the end of a sentence. Finally, italics are used to indicate verbal emphasis.
3. As shown in Table 1, Wendy is not British; hence her query here.
4. Here Wendy is referring to one of the stimulus pictures where the model is wearing an underwired balcony bra and a pair of bikini garter knickers.
5. Kelly is pointing to a stimulus picture where the model is wearing a variation on boy pants.
6. Kerry’s husband.

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