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ARTICLE

Becoming a ‘Woman to the Backbone’

Lingerie consumption and the experience of feminine identity

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Abstract. The connection between consumption and identity construction is a well-known topic in consumer research. Identity has two sides: a social side directed towards an external world of shared values and symbols, and an intra-psychological side directed towards an internal world of longings and bodily sensations. In this study we investigate how women’s consumption of lingerie may enhance their experience of inter- and intra-psychological identity. This process of identity formation is analysed with reference to Foucault’s concept of ‘technologies of the self’ which emphasizes the role of practices and instruments in generating a sense of ‘self’. Lingerie is treated as such an instrument, and the categorizations that consumers use are treated as a form of practical knowledge of how to determine the ‘right’ underwear for the ‘right’ occasion. Consuming lingerie with the purpose of experiencing feminine identity is a matter of controlling your bodily performance in social life. This working on identity by purchasing and wearing lingerie may furthermore fulfil or generate longings, thus potentially leading to intensified experiences, feelings and sensations of ‘who I really am’. The article highlights some of the paradoxes in this attempt to manage identity. The analysis is based on interviews with 22 women about their underwear and lingerie consumption.

Key words

femininity ● technologies of the self ● underwear
GENDER TROUBLES

During our interviews with consumers of lingerie, one of our respondents, a woman aged 24, stated that underwear has the magical power of transforming a woman from being housewife into a ‘real’ woman – a ‘woman to the backbone’, as she called it. Lingerie can make you shift identity from a boring type to a daring and attractive one: a woman who is more vivid and satisfied, a flamboyant and festive type. This makes us wonder why such transformations have become desirable, how women actually view their consumption of this product and what effects the purchase and use of underwear may have on female consumers’ ways of experiencing identity.

Lingerie has been part of the female wardrobe for more than a century. As emphasized by feminist authors (e.g. Bordo, 1993; Steele, 2003; Wilson, 1985), garments and not least lingerie have been instruments to constrain and control the female body by moulding it to fit the aesthetic ideals and practical concerns of a male-dominated society. Hence reformists for decades argued against lingerie, first as an instrument of torture (especially the corset) and later as an unnatural device that stood in the way of liberation and emancipation of the sexes. The revival of interest in lingerie since the 1980s therefore at first seems something of a paradox. On closer inspection, this renaissance could be interpreted as an attempt to define a special feminine realm in a society where gender distinctions apparently become more and more obsolete, impractical or simply irrelevant in many fields (at work, at home, in leisure). In modern sociology, this trend has been labelled de-differentiation (Lash, 1990) and is seen as a token of a ‘post-traditional society’, characterized by ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck et al., 1994).

That such an interpretation might not be totally beside the point is confirmed by one of our informants working as a sales assistant in a lingerie shop. She explains the motives of some of her customers in this manner:

Tania: We have customers who wear different types of overalls, coats or ‘uniforms’ at work, right. This kind of women has the experience that she is dressed in masculine or dull clothes at work. She therefore would like to wear something very feminine, otherwise she’s afraid, that she might lose all her femininity. It’s that kind of customer . . . they can’t get enough lace underwear.

In a way, this echoes an early observation by the psychoanalyst Riviere (1929) who claimed that women working in ‘masculine’ jobs tend to compensate by cultivating a few exclusively feminine reserves. As some authors have argued, most jobs today are ‘masculine’ in character (e.g. Firat,
1994) because they favour qualities and competences traditionally described as ‘non-feminine’: stability, goal-directed rationality, exertion of power in public life, competitiveness and a focus on decision making. In this vein, wearing lingerie could be understood as a consumerist female tactic to define a ‘room of one’s own’ (Woolf, 1989[1929]), in which a distinct identity that otherwise might become blurred or even vanish can be preserved.

If this argument is pushed just a tiny bit further, it becomes self-defeating: why should modern women want to adhere to the very symbol of male dominance? Why should emancipated individuals want to reinstate oppression and throw away control over their own lives? But the fascinating aspect about the consumption of lingerie is precisely that it is full of such contradictions. If we take our sales assistant’s statement at face value, customers buy lingerie precisely because that is the one part of their clothing they might be able to control at work. But in order to wear it in a tasteful manner, they need to control their own bodies (weight and shape) – which means practising norms of ‘good taste’ that were initially defined by others. To become ‘a woman to the backbone’ thus implies not escaping but entering a field of power and dominance where innocence is inevitably lost and where the proper qualities of ‘true femininity’ are highly uncertain – if not totally absent.

This oscillation between seizing control and being controlled is perhaps the overarching theme in why modern women spend time and money on lingerie. It boosts their confidence and makes them doubt their appearance, and the intervals between these contradictory emotions may be very short indeed. Lingerie is gratifying and a cause of despair: underwear beautifies the body and exposes its ‘weak spots’, a new bra may intensify bodily sensations, but it can also be a straitjacket. Thus, consumption of lingerie constantly puts identity at stake by affirming, and at the same time challenging, the mental and physical integrity of the consumer. What characterizes ‘a woman to the backbone’ is that she enters this field of contradictions in order to control it and thereby preserve her self-image, but often she does this well aware of the fact that this image may end up controlling her.

Among many things, consuming underwear might hence be interpreted as a way of defining a feminine identity by managing bodily presentation in social life. This working on identity by purchasing and wearing lingerie may fulfil or generate longings, thus potentially leading to intensified experiences, feelings and sensations of ‘who I really am’.

In this article, we try to analyse how the consumption of lingerie contributes to affirming a ‘real’ feminine identity and how this work
produces pitfalls and pleasures in the way a particular group of women experiences their ‘selves’. The group we investigated consists of white middle-class women aged 21 to 41 (the majority being in the range of 23 to 32 years), brought up and living in Denmark. Our analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with a total of 22 women. Two of these served as informants. They work in lingerie shops and were interviewed in order to acquire knowledge about actual buyer behaviour from the salesperson’s point of view. Fifteen interviews were conducted with female students to learn about their purchasing behaviour. These interviews had a length of approximately 50 minutes and were conducted with the purpose of investigating differences between shopping in real and virtual shops (e-commerce). Another five respondents were subsequently interviewed in depth in order to learn in detail how the purchase and use of lingerie fit into their everyday life. These interviews were on average 2 hours long and produced the most useful data for our topic. None of these respondents were students; all women were employed, predominantly in private enterprises. All interviews were conducted by female graduate research-assistants with prior experience of doing interviews on this topic. The research assistants were given extensive instruction and supervision by the authors.

In this article, we use the term underwear as an elaborated concept. Underclothing is too broad a term, since it can refer to all kinds of garment worn under the clothes. Underwear is here understood as the clothes you wear in close proximity to the skin. Lingerie signifies more delicate underwear, but a precise definition of what constitutes ‘lingerie’ depends on the particular woman. As a consequence, underwear that a particular woman considers to be her finest and only uses on special occasions may very well be conceived as ordinary everyday underwear by other women. Underwear is thus the generic term used in this article and lingerie is used when a precise term is needed for the goods that our respondents consider to be delicate underwear.

PRODUCING IDENTITY, SENSING THE SELF, FEELING FEMININE

In recent years, much research has been devoted to the relationship between consumption practices and the formation of identity (e.g. Belk, 1988; Livingstone and Lunt, 1992; Slater, 1997; Tomlinson, 1990; Warde, 1994; Wheaton 2004). In this connection, identity is understood as a consistent conception of the self, characterized by:

- **Continuity**, which despite changes gives a sense of sameness (hence identity) to the self over time.
• **Distinctiveness**, which gives the self a feeling of uniqueness and particularity in relation to others.
• **Self-efficacy**, which gives the self a sense of agency, competence and control in interactions and situations.
• **Self-esteem**, which gives the self a sense of value and worth.

Following Breakwell (1986), we take these characteristics to be basic aspects in the process of constructing an identity that fits the social environment of the individual. The term ‘construction of identity’ underlines that the establishment, maintenance and adjustment of a continuous sense of self is an ongoing process. This work of construction is of a social character:

1. Because distinctiveness and self-esteem rely on social comparison (Tajfel, 1981) producing inter-group and in-group relationships.
2. Because self-efficacy depends on performing certain routines, rituals and other significant practices in the social world.
3. Because the means and goals of this process are defined in social interactions and are subject to evaluations in socially recognizable terms. This third aspect is labelled ‘self-reflexivity’ in social theory (e.g. Giddens, 1991) and ‘self-monitoring’ in social psychology (Snyder, 1974).

We subscribe to the seminal insight from symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) that the self is intersubjective and is constituted as a ‘me’ through social interactions in which people assume the role of the other in order to gain a sense of themselves. The self is thus dependent on an emerging and continuously developing understanding of this ‘me’ in relation to others, which also guides the self towards a distinctive set of personal experiences, achievements and aspirations. This also means that the construction and experience of identity takes place on two different levels: a social level directed towards an external world of shared values and symbols and an intra-psychological level directed towards an internal world of longings, feelings and bodily (re)presentations. Where social identity is a question of being acknowledged by others for what one is, personal identity is about feeling comfortable and personally gratified with whom one is (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). In line with this interactionist position, we view the construction of a personal identity as a social event, requiring self-monitoring skills and contributing to self-esteem, self-efficacy, distinctiveness and continuity of a ‘me’ – e.g. by competences in regard to the staging of a performance in everyday life (cf. Goffman, 1959). This furthermore implies that the self is not a core entity but a flexible concept.
depending on processes of interpretation and evaluation, on situated practices and on a basic relatedness to others (Gergen, 1991).

Where most studies of consumption and identity focus on the social and symbolic effects of product use, this article explores how inter- and intra-psychological identity can be experienced and managed by buying and using products generally not visible in public. Although the use of underwear is hidden from social life, most of the time, many efforts and a considerable amount of money are spent by a significant group of consumers on buying, selecting, putting on and wearing the ‘right’ stuff for the ‘right’ occasion. Our research is guided by the basic assumption that consuming this product category often creates intense meanings, intimate feelings and private sensations for the individual consumer. It is our contention, although experienced in privacy, that these meanings and sensations are shared by a considerable number of female consumers.

This research is thus part of an ongoing interest in experiential qualities of consumption (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Thompson et al., 1989). What characterizes these qualities is precisely a combination of privately produced meanings and sensations and the fact that this private production of experiences first is a widespread social phenomenon, and second is closely connected to the consumer’s social identity. ‘How I feel’ has bearings on my position within a particular group, and vice versa. A fruitful concept for exploring these relations between consumption practices and strategies on the one hand and the interconnectedness of social and personal identity on the other hand is the ‘technology of the self’, which emerged from Foucault’s (1988) late writings. By introducing this concept, Foucault wanted to emphasize the productive and pleasurable sides of the power/knowledge-complex.

It is seminal in Foucault’s writings that power should be seen as a network of practices, exercised by all elements in this web. This concept of power was introduced to overcome the traditional dichotomy of ruler and ruled, oppressors and oppressed, strong and weak persons or groups. Instead of viewing power solely as a constraining force, it should also be looked on, according to Foucault, in the light of its productive sides: it produces knowledge, pleasure and an image of the self. Practices of domination thus go hand in hand with practices of self-production or of taking care of the self. Identity is the effect of these sets of practices, and precisely the fact that practices are ongoing turns work on identity into a continuous process. Practices make up technologies, i.e. more or less formalized rules for the use of techniques, some of them materialized in machines, architecture, or other devices, others embodied in
standardized forms of behavior that do not so much coerce and suppress the individuals as guide them towards more productive use of their bodies’ (Feenberg, 1991: 71).

Technologies of the self are thus intermingled with technologies of domination as a series of practices that allow agents to put forward and police their selves by regulating and managing their bodies, their thoughts and their conduct. These technologies guide the way in which the agents will perceive ‘others’ as ‘selves’, how they will be perceived by ‘others’ as ‘selves’ and how they will perceive ‘themselves’. 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.).

Two points are especially worth stressing. In the first place, technologies establish and rely on knowledge: not only on a ‘body of knowledge’ of the world (content) but also – and more specifically – on a knowing ‘how to proceed’ (procedural knowledge). Technology implies the application of a set of rules within a specific domain of the world, thereby imposing clear-cut categories on this domain and leading to standardized forms of behaviour. In the second place, technology in Foucault’s sense is not a neutral set of artefacts and practices for exercising power over things and ‘others’. It is a rule based on a set of actions by means of instruments that also effect and transform the agent in the process of exercising power. The experiential aspects of technology are precisely due to the fact that the very instruments of technology constrain and guide its agents into the ‘proper’ use of their bodies, thereby enhancing specific feelings and sensations.

Analysing the consumption of lingerie from the perspective of ‘technologies of the self’ thus implies examination of how this instrument contributes to the categorization (procedural knowledge) of the domain of underwear and what this categorization means to the social identity of the consumers of this product, i.e. how it enables them to define ‘others’ and ‘themselves’ in terms of ‘femininity’. Moreover, the purchase and use of particular kinds of lingerie – a concrete practice – may generate specific experiences (feelings, sensations, arousals) of ‘femininity’ with consequences for the consumer’s personal identity. In this regard, it is our thesis that these specific experiences are the effect of the consumers’ work on the scheme of categorization by breaking, violating or challenging existing rules intentionally or not. The implication of this perspective is, that ‘femininity’ is not a stable kernel of these women’s identity. Rather the consumption of underwear establishes specific feelings of ‘femininity’ which may prove
productive for their becoming a ‘woman to the backbone’. In other words, ‘femininity’ is a way of performing certain practices (e.g. consuming lingerie) in ways others – non-female – wouldn’t perform. ‘Real’ femininity is in this respect a contested field of doing the exactly ‘right’ practices, e.g. wearing the ‘right’ underwear for the ‘right’ occasions. But performing as a ‘woman to the backbone’ is not only a matter of following rules and managing the ‘right’ impressions. It is also an issue of elaborating, bending or altering these rules in order to induce sensations on and for one’s ‘self’.

Our analysis therefore starts with an examination of how our respondents categorize uses and users of different kinds of underwear according to certain more or less formal rules.

HARLOTS AND HOUSEWIVES

When exposed to an advertisement for white cotton briefs by the international brand ‘Sloggi’, which is particularly suited for everyday use, one of our respondents, Helena, a 24-year-old respondent, reacts by saying:

Helena: It’s a housewife, a cleaner or a charwoman, with that scarf in her hair she reminds me of a typical housewife.

Interviewer: A typical housewife?

Helena: And her underwear looks that way too.

Interviewer: In what way?

Helena: Underwear for housewives.

Interviewer: What is underwear for housewives?

Helena: Navel-warmers and a boring undershirt with some lace at the top.

Interviewer: Why do housewives wear that sort of underwear?

Helena: That’s something I’ve been asking myself many times . . . I don’t know. Perhaps, because it’s practical, you keep your belly warm, that kind of thing.

Greta, a young engineer (25 years old) typifies the briefs in this advertisement as ‘grandma’s gigantic underwear’, and Nina, a 23-year-old secretary, gives them the nickname ‘Eros killers’. Jane, a nurse aged 37, responds in a similar vein to this advertisement, by characterizing ‘Sloggi’ as ‘matronly’. But at the same time, she rejects underwear that is too explicitly sexualized:
Interviewer: Here’s a kind of Wonderbra, one that gives a little push up.

Jane: The ad itself is OK, but I still think, I don’t know – perhaps I’m prejudiced – that black underwear is vamp like. I clearly remember the first time I wore black lingerie. I felt so cheap. I really don’t know why, because I don’t have any problems with red lingerie or . . . neither black, nor blue . . . but I think that ivory one is cute. Black is simply cheap. Her posture is cheap too, the way she’s standing, the way she lifts her hair and exposes herself. It’s not something I would like to buy.

Interviewer: When you were wearing your black lingerie, was it the colour you couldn’t stand or was it anything else?

Jane: The lingerie itself was really nice. It had a perfect shape and was made of nice fabrics. But I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror in that black outfit. I felt, I thought that I looked like those girls who wear such clothing in order to earn some money. I didn’t feel comfortable at all, and I’ve never been comfortable wearing black lingerie.

Other respondents have similar ways of reacting to specific kinds of underwear. Helena calls a black-greenish set ‘brothel-like’. Garters are ‘too naught’ and pink and purple are ‘bordello colours’. Nina dislikes red lingerie, saying that it makes her feel like a street prostitute: ‘I could as well have my own little corner down at the harbour.’ A 24-year-old student, Marie, says that a red g-string she bought makes her feel like a tart. And one of our informants, the sales assistant Tania, tells us that transparent black underwear predominantly is bought by men as Christmas presents. Women typically swap these gifts for more ‘decent garments’ after the festive season.

Stereotyping seems to be a general strategy for describing underwear that our respondents find distasteful. Such clothing is used by groups of women that they would hate to be identified with. Interestingly, this stereotyping draws on a traditional male-dominated way of classifying women as either a Madonna-like creature or its counterpart, an overtly sexualized harlot. ‘Our’ women seem to have internalized this scheme of categorization for defining ‘other’ women’s identities. And these identities are clearly undesirable. The ‘wrong’ underwear, like the black underwear in Jane’s case, gives the woman a bodily representation that does not fit the image she has of herself. Not necessarily because such lingerie is ‘naughty’, but because its naughtiness is stereotypical: it is a cliché that does not fit these women’s conception of their own sensuality. But what about underwear that is valued in a positive way?
WEEKDAYS AND FEASTS

Our respondents also make clear distinctions between types of underwear that they prefer on specific occasions. They all appear to fit into an observation that our informant Tania has made:

Tania: Underwear for the weekdays is for most women just an ordinary bra. Quite simple, not expensive, maybe a little lace and then cotton briefs. It doesn’t have to match, but when they buy underwear for special occasions it is something completely different. It is for delicate use and it has to be a matching set. Nobody will pay a lot for their weekday underwear, but for special occasions they will enter the shop and say: ‘I will have to be dressed in this and that for a special night. Do you have underwear which will match that?’ They don’t ask about the price. They are really involved. They know exactly what kind of underwear they want. They don’t compromise. They don’t behave that way when they buy underwear for weekday use. They would not even dream about using their delicate underwear at the job on a weekday. It’s very obvious that the use of underwear is very segregated.

Some of the underwear is exquisite, and most respondents only use it on special occasions. Greta, for example, would never consider using her most exclusive lingerie at work:

Interviewer: Would you use some of your delicate underwear on a day where you are at your job?

Greta: No, I will only use it on special occasions. I would never put on full make-up and go to work.

Interviewer: Are these two things connected?

Greta: Yeah! If I do not wear a smart dress for a party then I would not wear the delicate underwear. It would be completely wrong to wear the delicate lingerie without some fancy clothes.

Even though exquisite lingerie is invisible to strangers, it has to fit the visible clothing in order to match the respondent’s image of herself. Furthermore, Tania states that her customers almost always are on their own when they buy expensive lingerie. This buying behaviour is apparently an intimate act. Intimacy and self-identity is also a prime concern when it comes to sharing delicate underwear with friends. Some of the respondents would never dream of lending their most expensive lingerie to even their best friends. One of them is Nina:
Interviewer: Would you allow one of your female friends to borrow your underwear?

Nina: Never! Well, I have lent Lisa a pair of my briefs. She is one of my best friends, but I would never share my silk underwear with her. She can borrow my cotton briefs – that’s all.

Interviewer: Why may she borrow your cotton, but not your silk?

Nina: I don’t know. It sounds weird, but I think you have a more personal relationship with your silk underwear. It is something you will only use for special occasions and it has a lot of meaning to you.

Interviewer: What could it be compared to?

Nina: I cannot compare it to anything. You may even borrow my toothbrush or perfume or something like that, but not my silk underwear.

Interviewer: Why does your silk underwear mean so much to you?

Nina: Maybe it’s because there are so many memories connected to it. That is why it means so much to me. It means something special because I wore it in very special situations.

Nina’s refusal to lend her silk lingerie to even her best friend is not caused by the fact that underwear covers the body’s private parts. Lisa may after all use Nina’s cotton briefs. It’s more likely caused by the fact that this delicate underwear is conceived as an extension of Nina’s personality (cf. Belk, 1988). It is part of her personal history and serves as a material symbol of what she has experienced in the past – and thus it signifies who she really is. Nobody wants other people to borrow their personal memories. In this way, delicate underwear helps define and preserve its owner’s identity. It distinguishes her from other women and expresses the continuity between past and present states.

By being intimate, special lingerie also touches supernatural realms, as in the case of Greta, who states that her most delicate lingerie should only be shown to her partner:

Greta: There has to be some . . . some limits, where you say: ‘this is something only your partner is allowed to see because it is too intimate’, and if you by chance show it to somebody else it will in some way ruin your relationship.

Special lingerie has the ability to function as an intimate token of identity. It is bought in private and selected with great care for special occasions in
order to match the rest of the outfit. It’s not something to share with even the closest of friends, and in some cases it is kept out of sight so only the partner may see it. Underwear for everyday use, on the other hand, has to be practical. But this does not mean that this type of underwear is bought and consumed without much consideration. As we show in the following section, this type of underwear must not be too ordinary either.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Our respondents do not agree totally on which kinds of underwear are acceptable for weekdays. For some of them a ‘nice’ set of cotton briefs and a bra is sufficient, e.g. Greta who uses cotton underwear, made by the mother of one of her friends. Others, like Helena, dislike the very idea of cotton underwear. But all respondents agree that even weekday underwear has to fulfil some minimal requirements. As Jane says, all her underwear should be in an impeccable condition:

Interviewer: Why is this so important to you?

Jane: I don’t know, it’s just the way it is. You may be that kind of woman who looks beautiful on the outside and then, if you get hit by a car or something like that and end up in hospital, your underwear is a total catastrophe: washed-out, worn-out, with elastic bands sticking out everywhere. I can’t stand the idea. Then I would rather go to work wearing some old pants with a stain somewhere. The things next to the skin ought to be perfect.

This extract reproduces the ancient divide between the inner and outer side, between kernel and shell. It is not the classical dichotomy between soul and body that is being evoked, however. Underwear is the inner side that enables other people to judge your character when you are unable to control your public performance. Management of the body is a token of inner qualities.

Greta also stresses the importance of underwear for social identity. Not only does she distinguish between intimate clothing worn in the privacy of her relationship and ordinary underwear, but she also emphasizes that underwear worn in public should address certain demands:

Interviewer: You would never wear the exquisite red set when you go swimming or to fitness?

Greta: No, but that’s really something else. In a cubicle there are a lot of girls and it is important to show that you – you know. There’s something
going on, a kind of competition between girls – you have to look smart when you go to fitness or go swimming.

Interviewer: You don’t wear the worn-out cotton sets when you go to fitness?

Greta: Absolutely not (laughing).

Interviewer: Do you wear your most delicate lingerie when you go swimming?

Greta: No, you don’t do that either. You wear one of your nicer sets.

To Greta, her most delicate lingerie should remain invisible and hidden to others. But underwear that might be visible to others has to be presentable – it should demonstrate that the owner is a valid member of this particular social group. It even may be a bit provocative or ‘naughty’, in order to strengthen the owner’s position in the role-playing taking place in the cubicle. This is a public place where the women compete in wearing the ‘appropriate’ underwear. Those women who are either under- or overdressed face the risk of being labelled as ‘housewives’ or ‘harlots’. In line with Goffman (1963), it is crucial not to discredit your role as an ordinary member of the group. The constant changing of fashion increases the women’s awareness of their own underwear. The chance of deviating from the norms is therefore always latent.

Jane’s and Greta’s statements show how everyday underwear must be able to stand the test of social control. Underwear thus marks women’s social identity in public life. But in some cases underwear may be exempt from social control: illness, having your period and even some forms of sport allow the use of old cotton briefs. For these practical reasons, most of the respondents have some sets of what one respondent, a 23-year-old student Victoria, calls ‘amateur briefs’: clothing that the ‘real lingerie professionals’ know is only acceptable under very specific or unfortunate circumstances.

How then do these ‘pros’ categorize underwear? The scheme of classification shown in Figure 1 emerges from our data analysis. Specific kinds of underwear are evaluated in either a negative or a positive way according to traditional stereotypes. Women wearing the less favoured kinds are subsequently judged as belonging to socially undesirable ‘outgroups’ (Hogg and Abrams, 1988: 18) with other, less sophisticated preferences. This follows the logic outlined by Douglas (1996): in public life, consumers are first and foremost guided by firm prejudices about
those people that they don’t want to be identified with. The clothes those ‘others’ wear are garments consumers do not ‘want to be seen dead in’. Negatively valorized underwear is in the first place compared too much to ‘the right stuff’: it is either excessively practical (boring) or blatantly sensual (vulgar). For example, Helena characterizes ‘brothel like’ underwear as ‘too wild’ and ‘too intense’. In the second place, consumers of the categories of distaste are characterized by always using these kinds. The ‘housewife’ wears practical clothing on all occasions. The ‘tart’ looks ‘cheap’ in every situation. In this respect, ‘housewife’ and ‘harlot’ are caricatures or parodies of the social norm. They are either under- or over-sexualized, and their use of underwear is a symptom of a ‘restricted code’ (Bernstein, 1972) compared to the ‘elaborated code’ that more ‘competent’ members of society possess.

What characterizes a ‘competent’ woman (a ‘pro’) is, according to our respondents, her ability to dress in a suitable manner for different occasions by never appearing either too practical or too ‘cheap’. A ‘competent’ woman’s underwear is always either strictly presentable or otherwise practical or sensual in a presentable way. Being presentable is thus the cornerstone in the way this group classifies the consumption of lingerie. This can be illustrated in the model shown in Table 1.

‘Non-presentable’ dressing characterizes certain (stereo)types of women, who are always seen in public as either ‘housewife’ or ‘harlot’ and thus as non-respectable. On the other hand, ‘presentable’ conduct implies knowing how to adjust dress to occasions. This ‘knowing how to proceed’
is part of a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault, 1988) and derives the definition of ‘presentability’ from interactions with others (Mead, 1934). A desirable social identity is based on public recognition, in which ‘non-presentable’ dressing is lacking. The kinds of underwear worn on private or festive occasions are practical or sensual intonations of what is presentable on ordinary public occasions. To manage such elementary forms of categorization – an ‘elaborated code’ of formalized rules – is for these ‘competent’ women the be-all and end-all in the construction and maintenance of (their concept of) modern femininity.

Apart from women with a ‘restricted code’, three other groups are excluded from belonging to this sisterhood of respectability. First, as stated by Tania above, men remain excluded as utterly incompetent. Presents bought by men (sometimes ‘too practical’, but most often ‘too sensual’) are swapped for more appropriate lingerie afterwards, and when women shop for exquisite lingerie they tend to avoid the company of their partners. Second, ‘amateurs’ or novices are characterized by only rudimentary knowledge of the ‘elaborated code’. Helena describes them as ‘fabric abusers’ when commenting on a particular advertisement (in Danish stof means both drugs and fabric):

Helena: I find it boring. I don’t know . . . It’s something for quite young teenagers, small girls – they want to be seen in stuff like that.

Interviewer: Why is it that it’s for the very young only?

Helena: It’s . . . the size, the design and shape. It’s nice – a bit naughty, no not naughty. It’s nice, doesn’t show too much. It’s something for novices – fabric abusers.

This indicates that a learning process is implied in the shaping of a modern feminine identity. Third, there is a group deemed unfit to wear delicate underwear because their body (shape and weight) ruins the overall impression. All our respondents find the use of expensive lingerie by overweight women distasteful, which points to the fact that using lingerie is a

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way not only of asserting a modern identity, but also of reproducing and reaffirming earlier male instigated ideals of feminine beauty.

ANOMALIES: BACK STAGE AND FRONT STAGE

Categories serve to produce clear distinctions but also to make the mixing of spheres possible. A blending of categories creates anomalies, and such anomalies generate specific feelings and experiences because they spoil a special mood or, quite opposite, turn an ordinary weekday into an extra-ordinary and special occasion.

Nina remembers a situation where a special mood was spoiled. She had gone out and had by chance managed to pick up a guy in a bar:

Nina: I didn’t intend to, and when you’re not prepared for it, it often happens accidentally, right? At that time we hated men, right? But I got hooked on this guy anyway. Returning home with him, I discovered that I was wearing ordinary cotton briefs (laughing). So depressing . . .

Interviewer: Did the guy respond differently?

Nina: Well, I don’t think he did. But I did, because he saw me in something else than I would have liked him to see me in, right? I have cotton briefs in a small and in a large shape, right? Of course it was the large ones I was wearing.

Obviously, the problem was not the guy’s response, but what the briefs meant to Nina’s self-image. She perceived herself as awkward and not in control of the situation. Interacting with a stranger and wanting to perform sensually or at least in a presentable way, she revealed a non-public side of herself. Her front stage performance was thus threatened by an unfitting element from back stage (Goffman, 1959), which may lead to a decline in self-respect and self-confidence. Being practically dressed is rarely very sensual and in some situations it is, apparently, not even presentable. In Nina’s case, her briefs were not practical but ‘too practical’.

That the female self-image relies on (conceptions of) the other’s gaze is evident. That modern women have internalized this gaze or have rooted it in an intersubjectively based understanding of the ‘me’ (Mead, 1934) is demonstrated in a statement by Lena, a student aged 23. One day she went to school in non-matching underwear:

Lena: You see I came to classes in black briefs and a white bra. I couldn’t concentrate during the first two lectures. The only thing on my mind was the non-matching underwear and the day was just a mess because of this
mismatch. During lunch I drove home and changed. You know, I immediately felt much better (laughing) . . .

Lena’s reaction might be caused by the fact that she is still a young and perhaps insecure woman. But Mette, a married woman of 35, recounts a similar experience:

Mette: If I somehow put on the wrong briefs, then everything turns into a mess. I have to go upstairs and change to another set. I may as well do it right away, because it simply does not function. You know, I think it means a lot that your underwear makes you feel good, right?

In Mette’s case, problems arise when there is a misfit between her underwear and her other clothing. It ruins her own image of the impression she wants to make in the public sphere. In Lena’s case, the mismatch in her underwear is equally damaging to her ability to act confidently in public life. In both cases, the ‘wrong’ underwear makes the woman doubt whether she is able to manage an acceptable front stage performance or not. Even though their underwear is hidden from sight, the practical in Mette’s and Lena’s cases becomes ‘non-presentable’ to an imagined ‘other’.

A different case of mood spoilage takes place when the intended effect of buying new lingerie does not materialize. A situation, very similar to the one reported by Marie (see above), is recalled by Lisa, a student aged 26. She too bought red silk underwear with a G-string:

Lisa: It was bought in impulse. I thought it would be really sexy. It was bought with the intention that I should look sexy, but I felt really miserable every time I put it on. Actually I never succeeded in leaving home before I had switched back into something else. This underwear was definitely not my style. It was as if I knew I had it on and I did not like that feeling.

Lisa bought the garment with the expectation that it would have given her a thrill by foregrounding other sides of her personality than those played out in ‘ordinary’ everyday life. It should have contributed to an experience of whom she ideally should or could be. But the respondent does not like to wear this underwear because she does not think it signifies who she ‘really’ is, even though she is the only one who knows that she is wearing it. Later in the interview, the same respondent says that she has owned this set for a couple of years and when she sorts out her underwear, with the intention of disposing of her old sets, the red one stays in the back of her drawer.
Interviewer: Maybe you have a wish to use this set somehow in the future?

Lisa: Well, I don’t know. Maybe if I was married and had a husband, I would use it during our honeymoon or something like that. Well, in a way I think it is wrong to put on this kind of underwear just to indicate that you are sexy, if your inner self is not.

In Lisa’s case it is not a matter of not quite daring to be ‘sexy’, but about being ‘sexy’ the ‘right’ way: that is, in accordance with the woman’s own conception of self. She wanted to experience herself as sensual, not as vulgar or raunchy. What should have been sensual became ‘too sensual’.

To summarize, a mood may be spoiled if the lingerie does not present its user in a manner that is reconcilable with her self-image. It makes her feel ‘not presentable enough’: either over-sexed, as in Lisa’s case, or ‘house-wife-like’ (i.e. boring or sloppy) as in the cases of Nina, Lena and Mette. In all these cases, their underwear did not fit into the appropriate place in the scheme of classification. It is an anomaly creating negative effects on their self-esteem.

But Lisa’s case also points to the fact that lingerie may allow women to explore, experiment and play with their identity. Her infamous set was bought on impulse with the expectation that it might give her a thrill. Lingerie can pep up an ordinary weekday. One of our respondents, Jane, sometimes puts on her most exquisite lingerie to complete the experience after having groomed her body – varnished her nails, shaved her legs, conditioned her hair etc. Another respondent, Helena, occasionally puts on her favourite lingerie to give herself a treat:

Interviewer: You never consider putting on your favourite ones on weekdays?

Helena: I certainly do . . .

Interviewer: When do you do it?

Helena: When I’m in the mood for it, when I want to give myself a treat, then I put it on. When . . . I want to spoil myself or on a day when I’m perhaps . . . simply happy.

Using lingerie to feel really good seems to be a widespread phenomenon. Some respondents confess that they buy and wear expensive underwear more for their own sake than to please their partner. For example:

Jane: When it comes to lingerie, then it’s only for myself, not for my husband. He doesn’t care. I could wear old pink pantalets and he wouldn’t notice it, you know. He just doesn’t care.
Gitte, aged 34, and also married to a husband who takes no interest in lingerie, bought a very delicate ivory set for their wedding:

Gitte: He couldn’t understand why that should be necessary. He thought I had enough lingerie in my drawers. I just wanted that lingerie for my own pleasure. It had to be new and it had to be very delicate. You see, I don’t do it for him at all. I do it for myself. Wearing very exquisite lingerie makes me feel really good.

Exquisite lingerie is thus more than just an object to be looked at. It is also a tool used deliberately by a woman to produce sensual experiences for themselves. It not only represents a woman’s feminine identity according to a social norm. It is also used strategically to give a bodily sensation of being feminine. A prerequisite for this effect seems to be a feeling of well-being, comfort and ‘happiness’, which is furthered even more by the very use of lingerie. This is confirmed by Tania’s observation, that customers who buy the most expensive products seem happy and satisfied while they do their shopping.

As Helena states, lingerie may be used to pep herself up:

Interviewer: What do you mean by ‘pepping yourself up’?

Helena: Feeling a bit more fancy than ordinarily. I put on a bit more delicate clothes, more delicate underwear, do my hair in a slightly different way, put a little bit more make-up on.

Interviewer: But why is it necessary to change underwear? Nobody sees it.

Helena: Nobody sees it, that’s right. But you can feel it, sense it.

Interviewer: How do you feel after changing?

Helena: You perhaps identify more with the type that the lingerie indicates you are [. . .] It’s a mood.

This statement shows how the respondent acts as a clever manipulator of her own moods. By carefully cultivating her body and selecting the right clothing, she increases her own sense of femininity. According to Gergen’s theory of ‘multiple selves’ (1991), lingerie gives women an opportunity to discover new and other sides of their personalities. In line with Goffman’s theory of the presentation of self in everyday life (1959), lingerie may furthermore be used to transform back stage into front stage. Underwear evokes role-playing and explorations into other sides of the self. These experiments belong to the more ‘festive’ aspects of everyday life.
This effect very much depends on the ‘right’ dose: if the same lingerie is used too often, its impact will most likely vanish. As Jane puts it, you risk the chance ‘to get weary of your lingerie’. That is probably why some women frequently buy new expensive lingerie. The former lingerie for special occasions can then be recycled as publicly presentable weekday underwear.

COMFORT AND CONTROL
In summary, there are two basic types of anomalies. The first one concerns situations where the consumer is not dressed ‘right’ for the proper occasion. This anomaly is due to a lack of control on the part of the agent, which threatens to turn her into an undesirable ‘other’. The second anomaly results from dressing ‘out of order’ to create an extraordinary occasion. In this case, the consumer controls her self-presentation in order to transform her ‘self’ into someone ‘other’. The first type produces discomfort, the second one induces pleasure for the ‘intimate self’ (intra-psychological identity). Both types stress control and agency as basic themes in the consumption of underwear.

To our respondents buying and using underwear obviously has to do with sex and sexuality. It is, among other things, a matter of being attractive and adorable and of being self-confident enough to be able to hunt down ‘prey’. But it is not only an issue of becoming an object of desire. For Greta, who frankly states that her more intimate lingerie is meant to please her partner, underwear is a symbol of their special relationship and a tool to keep this bond alive. By dressing attractively, she makes her contribution to their reciprocal attraction. In that respect, she should be considered as much a subject as an object of desire.

But consuming underwear is about many things other than sex. The respondents take interest in their underwear, spend money and time on it for the sake of their own pleasure. In the first place, underwear pinpoints social identity: it touches the issue of not being labelled ‘harlot’ or ‘housewife’, not being judged as vulgar, boring or sloppy in situations where underwear is or might become visible to others – especially to other women. To be seen by others as a competent modern (middle-class) woman requires knowing how to handle a differentiated scheme of classification. This knowledge guides the ‘competent’ woman through the numerous possibilities that everyday life’s many situations put at her disposal.

In the second place, though, underwear is more than the expression of social identity. It is a tool that can be used to explore other sides of your personality and to question quotidian roles. Underwear may pep up
everyday life and give access to new experiences. It is also an instrument for expanding the rules and for demonstrating that the agent is more than just competent, i.e. that she masters the ability to improvise and to experiment.

Underwear is thus, and in the third place, a means to manipulate intra-psychological moods and generate sensations for the intimate self. It gives thrills and imparts arousals by ‘pepping you up’. But it also produces comfort, as Helena says:

Interviewer: Is it important which underwear you wear?

Helena: Of course it is. It means a lot. It decides whether you feel at ease or not. It’s really decisive. It’s about being comfortable.

Also in this respect, underwear is a technology: an instrument that furthers the production of emotions and feelings thereby giving its users the opportunity to experience a particular version of ‘modern femininity’. That is exactly what comfort is about, not only comfort in a physical sense, but also in the meaning of feeling socially comfortable. It is a feeling of being in control of the situation and managing your body and your femininity in the different roles modern life demands of women – or in Nina’s words:

Nina: I’m actually wearing silk lingerie right now (laughing)

Interviewer: (laughing) Is that because I’ve come to interview you?

Nina: Yes (laughing), but also because . . . because when somebody visits me . . . then I want to be OK, and what the visitor sees should also be OK. I feel good, when I feel everything is OK.

Lingerie gives Nina a sense of security in unknown or unusual situations. This is ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959), which becomes manifest when Greta describes today’s ‘ideal woman’:

Greta: She has self-discipline, is in control of things. You can do that by showing how you look, how you succeed, how your body looks [. . .] how you decorate your home – that’s a way of demonstrating that you are able to manage your life.

The ‘ideal woman’ controls her public appearance and performs her role(s) with self-confidence. Being an engineer and a career woman, Greta continues her argument in this way:

Interviewer: Is it important to be self-confident?
Greta: Yes, and it’s paramount that others observe that you are self-confident. Make sure nobody knows if you fall asleep crying.

Here Mead’s (1934) interactionism with its emphasis on the role of inter-subjectivity for the constitution of the ‘self’ seems to be writ large, but ironically so, as lingerie is used to get a grip on the demands that life poses on women’s performance in professional (at work), social (feasts) and private situations. Underwear is a feminine element in everyday life where gender distinctions seem to be blurred or ‘de-differentiated’ (Lash, 1990). This clothing makes it possible to appropriate a distinct femininity and derive sensuous pleasure in ordinary life, where talents are or should be measured equally between men and women. The very result created by using lingerie – namely self-confidence, security and a feeling of being competent – is, however, just like the act of appropriation itself, a set of classical masculine values.

Underwear is thus a technology that in a masculine way enables women to define and experience a distinct femininity in a society marked by increasingly equal career opportunities for men and women, thereby tending to erase or underplay the role of gender distinctions in public life.

CONCLUSIONS

In our analysis, we have tried to show how underwear helps our respondents to define what an interesting and relevant way of becoming a modern woman – ‘a woman to the backbone’ – might be. Being a modern woman in a relevant way implies the ability to handle an ‘elaborated code’ (Bernstein, 1972) founded in a scheme of classification. Relevance is a matter of ‘competence’: of knowing what different occasions require of the members of a certain ‘in-group’ (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). Incompetence, the failure to know or to practise these distinctions, is a sign of belonging to an ‘outgroup’. Such outcasts are – not surprisingly – described from a middle-class perspective and in stereotypical wordings.

But being a modern woman in an interesting manner also implies the ability and willingness to challenge existing preconceptions of ‘who I really am’ and ‘how “real” women should behave’. This is no doubt a challenge with moderate social stakes: only in very rare cases does an unlucky move ruin one’s public reputation for good, and even a series of lucky moves does not alter one’s social position significantly. Nonetheless, this challenge is an important aspect of the consumption of lingerie. Underwear is also bought and used for the thrill of sensing one’s body in a slightly different way or for defying one’s existing self-image. This,
however, is not so much a matter of social identity, but more an issue of self-actualization, e.g. of transforming an ordinary weekday into an extraordinary sensation.

The importance of lingerie to most of our respondents is due to the fact that this kind of garment enables them to demonstrate that they can manage a modern femininity. By adhering to a certain scheme of classification, they show how they master their performance in different situations. This confirms their social self. By working on this scheme, i.e. by exploring other options, they moreover generate arousals and feelings for their more intimate self. Hence lingerie is consumed in order to express women’s social, inter-psychological identity as well as to impress the body – to thrill and arouse it – thereby enhancing an intra-psychological identity.

In our analysis, the scheme of classification is seminal. First, it illuminates how our respondents perceive their own social identity and subsequently judge the unwanted identities of others. The importance of always appearing presentable on front stage – in some respect or another – is pivotal in this scheme. Second, the scheme also explains embarrassing or arousing behaviour. They are deviations from those presentable performances that are proper to the situation, e.g. when back stage noise interferes with or even threatens front stage appearance, or when what ought to have been ordinary back stage suddenly becomes thrilling front stage.

Lingerie is thus both a symbol and a tool of identity. It expresses who its user is or how she wants to be seen in public (social identity), but it also generates feelings of satisfaction, pleasure and comfort (inner psychic identity). In both respects, lingerie serves as a technology in Foucault’s sense. It 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 its 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.

This technology serves various identity functions. It has a social function by helping women to demonstrate publicly that they are knowledgeable of the code: it creates a field of ‘competence’. It also has a personality constructing function by strengthening its users’ self-esteem. Its controlling function stems from its power to generate a balanced impression in private and public life. It serves a sensual function too in giving the user access to private bodily sensations. And, last, it has an experiential function because it creates an opportunity for staging other kinds of self-performance and exploring other roles than those that dominate everyday life.
The overall effect of this technology is to contribute to women’s ongoing work on preserving a consistent conception of the self. It materializes longings of ‘who I want to be’, maintains memories of ‘how I once was’, guides ‘how I want to be seen by others’, expresses ‘how I differ from others’, facilitates a sense of ‘what I’m worth’, instigates impulsive explorations into ‘who I also could have been or could become’, and marks the agent’s ability to distinguish subtly between different occasions, thus expressing ‘how I’m competent’. Consuming lingerie foregrounds continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem by bringing together past and future in a socially and privately meaningful present.

Our analysis is based on only a small sample of interviews with a relatively homogeneous group of female respondents (white, middle-class, aged 21 to 41). We have stressed the similarities in their way of classifying types of underwear, thus underemphasizing the internal differences within this very broad group. More research is needed in order to investigate intergenerational and occupational distinctions within this group. It seems very plausible, for instance, that younger members of the middle class view appropriate lingerie differently from their older sisters. Members from other classes or with another cultural background living in Denmark might most likely hold very different schemes of classification than the one we have uncovered. Moreover, our synchronic analyses of ‘the lingerie system’ should be supplemented by diachronic research on how particular types and brands of lingerie become fashionable or outdated. Such research could trace changes in the system and more specifically explain the dissemination and popularization of garments that were initially deemed provocative or ‘(too) naughty’ (e.g. G-strings). Furthermore, this kind of research could be related in a very interesting way to public debates on advertising and market-driven innovation, not least regarding the spread of specific types of lingerie to children under the age of 10.

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