

Critical Studies in Men's Fashion

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EDITORIAL

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New perspectives on men's underwear

ABSTRACT

This editorial considers the position of men's underwear in scholarship and popular culture, starting with a reflection on the enduring question aimed at men over the choice of boxers or briefs. It addresses the changes in attitudes and approaches to men's underwear moving from functional to sensual and luxurious and ponders on future directions in the sustainability and design of men's undergarments and the academic study of this topic. The editorial then speculates on new questions that could be considered in relation to men's underwear and the ways in which the authors in this Special Issue address the consumption, representation, materiality and immateriality of men's underwear.

KEYWORDS

men's underwear
boxers
briefs
masculinity
consumption
representation

In 1994, while taking part in *Enough Is Enough* hosted by MTV, American President Bill Clinton was asked 'Boxers or Briefs?' to which he replied 'usually briefs'. Presumably, the rest of the time, he wears boxers, but perhaps nothing at all. The question posed to President Clinton frames underwear as an either/or choice for men. Incidentally, British Prime Minister David Cameron wears

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boxers, and Barack Obama refused to answer the question. One can hardly imagine a similar question posed to women given the enormous industry and marketplace, where brands are household names, and cuts, colours, textiles, fabrics, styles are plentiful. Indeed, in a recent interview, Shaun Cole explains that ‘women’s underwear is more structural historically [...]. Men were not really encouraged to think about that because it fitted with the rhetoric that men shouldn’t have an overt interest in fashion or their appearance and those who did were peculiar in some way’, consequently, men ‘wear them till they’re falling apart’, and rarely, it seems, move beyond a boxer or a brief. That is, the expectation is that men stick with *one* type of underwear (George 2022). What, then, happens to the *sexiness* of the undergarment? Over the past 40 years, we have increasingly seen men’s underwear move from functional necessities to luxurious and sexy objects of desire, beginning with Calvin Klein’s ground breaking advertisements featuring ex-Olympian Tom Hintnaus. The emergence of the internet and e-commerce has freed up underwear designers and manufacturers to produce for more niche markets and men to indulge themselves in greater choices in available styles.

Meanwhile, Jerry Seinfeld quips that, ‘[m]en want the same thing for their underwear that they want from women: a little bit of support, and a little bit of freedom’ (Brandreth 2013: 205). Seinfeld’s remark is illustrative of what this Special Issue seeks to understand, what do men want from their underwear? But also, what do men’s underwear mean? The question posed to President Clinton and others does a kind of armchair psychological work, as Cole notes, ‘[i]f you wore briefs, you were perhaps more uptight and constrained, whereas if you wore boxers, you were more relaxed and free’ (George 2022: n.pag.). Certainly, another level of this diagnostic work is the ways in which underwear becomes a statement of orientation, for instance, what might a man wearing a thong or a jock mean symbolically? And how might the fabrics affect our ideas about his masculinity, what can be said of the man wearing silk boxers versus the man wearing cotton, tighty-whities or even the man who chooses to ‘go commando’ and wear no underwear at all?

Thus, the simplest and most mundane of questions – boxers or briefs? – actually does a lot of work. It tells us that in the world, there are two options for men, that the majority of men will stick with one of these two options, and that the underwear is above all functional. But what of the shifting market, where the boxer brief has become normative? Where new more adventurous styles are available from an increasing array of specialist online retailers? As editors, we began to wonder if we might reframe the debate, move beyond boxers or briefs and ask if underwear is merely functional or if there is something aesthetic, luxurious, erotic, sexual about underwear. We were interested in how in many discussions of men’s underwear it was confined to, what might be broadly termed ‘underpants’ and what other garments might fit within a broader definition – of garments worn under items of clothing. Similarly, we were interested in not just the physical garment but what in which it had been represented visually and textually, moving from the realms of the private and personal to the public.

As editors then, we invited contributors to think about men, masculinities and underwear – not just as wearers of underwear, but also as consumers of underwear, models of underwear. Simply, we hoped we might take men’s underwear seriously. A focus on underwear may seem trivial and unnecessary, but Alan Greenspan, for instance, has long used underwear, and most especially men’s underwear, as a barometer for the status and health of the

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economy; others have used hemlines, for instance (see Reilly 2014: 6–7). Companies have expanded their interest in men's underwear, for instance, as we were finishing this issue, Hanes introduced, 'the New X-Temp® Total Support Pouch® with Cooling Fabric and Breathable Mesh Panels for Perfect Separation and Support', thus putting the 'pouch' in mainstream and relatively cost-effective underwear, a pouch previously found in brands like SAXX, Shinessy, Andrew Christian and Tommy John.

Meanwhile, Rhianna's lingerie brand, Savage x Fenty, introduced lingerie for men, including, satin boxers, satin pants, a smoking jacket, but also thongs and mesh briefs. Savage x Fenty and SAXX have celebrated diverse masculinity in their advertisements with representations of bodies that are big and thin, short and tall, young and old, non-disabled and disabled, racially diverse.

Additionally, brands are now increasingly interested in environmental sustainability and responding to climate change, recognizing here that the fashion industry is one of the biggest contributors to pollution (Gwilt 2020; Marcketti and Karpova 2020). Thus, the brand Duluth Trading Company introduced 'Eco-Cheeks', which provides consumers access to relatively cost-effective sustainable underwear. Other brands have also capitalized on this sustainable desire wherein choosing which underwear to purchase becomes a proof of social responsibility. Or, perhaps, the sustainable underwear proves something about the consumer's desirability.

Men's underwear, simply, is no longer just a matter of functionality, it is a statement, a part of one's identity, a way to think about masculinity, a commitment to responsibility and sustainability, and it is a world full of options.

THE ARTICLES

We begin with two articles that flirt with one another as they study 'exchange communities'. 'Gussied up tighty-whities: On decoration, stains and exchange' by Théo Bignon is a visually rich and dense appreciation of 'tighty-whities' that calls attention to the materiality of the objects themselves. How might underwear move from stained and soiled garments to embellished works of art? How might underwear become objects of possession, eroticism and desire? A question that is also taken up by Steven L. Dashiell in his article "[Selling]": Gender capital in the commerce of men's underwear on Reddit', in which he considers how men sell their used underwear – stains and all (that Bignon enhances in his art/craft practices) – to other men. Dashiell investigates notions of masculinity/ies that are embedded in the descriptive terms used by sellers on Reddit to enhance a perception of toughness that acts as an active form of gender capital.

Johnathan Clancy and Ben Barry continue to explore underwear's relationship with masculinity and turn our attention to how men think about their own underwear in their article, 'Undressing masculinity: An exploratory study on men's embodied engagement with underwear'. Employing ethnographic approaches of interviews and wardrobe studies Clancy and Barry touch on the boxers or briefs or other styles questions to understand the feelings of confidence and sexiness that are produced through particular underwear choices. Andrew Groves, then, considers the place of socks in men's fashion in his article, 'A casual obsession: Inside the British Sock Fetish Council'. Approaching his investigation from the perspective of a member of a British group interested in football and socks, Groves examines the British casual subculture, investigating the ways in which online engagement demonstrated

common interests around style, football, politics and presentations of masculinity. Something both articles aptly demonstrate is that men's relationship to undergarments is hardly casual at all, but that in many cases, there is a great deal of thought.

In the final set of articles, attention is turned to literary texts. In his article, "Impossibly erotic things": On men's underwear in *Brief Encounters* by Suzanne Forster', Jonathan A. Allan considers the ways in which men's underwear construct ideas of masculinity in a Harlequin romance novel. In a thorough examination of a novel that centres around the endeavours of a female underwear designer, Allan examines notions of desire, both for underwear garments and the bodies that wear them. Finally, Jessica Floyd's "'Serafina's got no drawers'" and nor does anyone else: The absence of undergarments in the Legman/Hugill chanteys', considers the absence of underwear in otherwise erotic and sexual chanteys. In linking the absence of underwear to reading of constraint and castration, Floyd examines the sailors chanteys as indicative of change in the Victorian era, taking us away from the contemporary literal materiality of garments with which this Special Issue opened to a more symbolic historic understanding of how men's underwear (or lack of) may be understood.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study of underwear broadly understood speaks to a host of concerns ranging from gender and sexuality, to issues of class and access, to sustainability and development. We are hopeful that this Special Issue, thus, leaves readers with new questions and that they may seek out new or different answers. This Special Issue is designed, intentionally so, to be an invitation to dialogue and discussion. As the market continues to expand options for men, how might these options affect our ideas about masculinity? Conversely, as masculinity continues to undergo its own re-evaluation, how might this affect fashion, clothing, style? How might innovations affect access to underwear, for instance, with new design and technology, new costs arise? Though, it should be noted, that these designs often do trickle down, for instance, the 'ballpark pouch' of SAXX and other brands now is available from Hanes. What other sorts of shifts and changes might we see in the underwear market that will affect how we think critically about men's fashion? What might the relationship between health and underwear be? Think here of *Snowballs*, which are designed to help with scrotal pain; or think of *The Family Jewels* collection presented by Shinestry, which brings attention to testicular cancer awareness: 'Stay weird & protect your family jewels' declares the pamphlet that comes with the underwear, along with a QR code 'to learn how to do a self exam with Nad & Tad (your testes)'.

Men's underwear is a barometer of the shifting dynamics of masculinity and it presents an interesting and provocative microcosm to consider how we might make sense of those changes and shifts. Importantly, there is also a rewriting of eroticism and the gaze. As underwear has moved from functional necessity to a luxurious item, so too has its meanings and representation. Increasingly, advertisers are facing pressure to represent their models to reflect the diversity of the world around them: non-disabled and disabled bodies, racial diversities, sexual diversities and bodily diversities, showcasing thinness and fatness, bodies with tattoos. Sexy underwear is for sexy people everywhere, not just those that fit some seemingly arbitrary definition of who is sexy.

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As editors, we wish to thank the contributors for their articles, which thoughtfully and critically responded to the original Call for Papers, while also pushing the special collection in new directions. We are also thankful to include a photograph from Théo Bignon's paper as part of the cover image of this Special Issue.

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