

# **Consuming Underwear: Fashioning Female Identity**

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## ABSTRACT

In academic literature underwear is a largely neglected part of women's clothing which, this thesis argues, is nonetheless as important as 'outward' dress itself. Indeed in some ways underwear is more interesting in the sense that it is hidden from view but still appears to have considerable social/discursive importance. The thesis suggests that underwear functions as a source for (re)constructing female identity and that women 'learn' through their embodied experience of choosing the 'right' underwear for the right occasion to *fashion* elements of their identity accordingly. Using a conceptual combination of work by Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and selected feminists, alongside theories of consumption, the thesis argues that underwear can be seen as a technology of the self and as embodied cultural capital. It functions both as a support for outerwear and the body, and as a tool for self-fashioning and self-improvement due to the intense sensations it can produce for the wearer.

Using a series of focus groups and interviews, based on the concept of identity *opseis* which reflects the different sides of identity a woman arguably plays out in her everyday life, the thesis aims to contribute to the field of the sociology of consumption by exploring the role of socio-cultural imperatives and of taste in the consumption of women's underwear. The empirical data indicate that underwear is used for the construction and reconstruction of various feminine identities, including worker, mother, sports player and sexual partner. It analyses the importance respondents attribute to underwear according to whether it is hidden or visible; the physical/psychological sensations it induces for the respondents; the varying mobilisations of underwear to support aspects of the female identity project; the role of taste when choosing underwear; and the experiences the respondents report regarding shopping for underwear. Thus this thesis contributes to the limited scholarly literature on underwear and establishes an understanding of how such mundane forms of body work can be elements of constructing women's ongoing and complex identity projects.

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*I dedicate this thesis to my late grandfather Kostas Pantzaris*

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Reading *The Times*...

GREY saggy knickers? Holey vests and fraying bra straps? Sound familiar? If your knicker drawer is more Bridget Jones than Eva Herzigova, it seems that you're not alone. According to a survey ..., only a third of women bother to push the boat out and match their knickers to their bra, and more than half venture no further than Marks & Spencer for their undies, with a third admitting to being seduced by the power of the practical but unimaginative multipack. (Addison, 2008: 2, capitals in original)

While reading Harriet Addison's survey<sup>1</sup> in *The Times*, I could not help thinking that in a few lines she perhaps manages to outline some of the main issues that seem to trouble British women today regarding their underwear. But I could not also help wondering: why is it that women who wear mismatched bras and knickers spend less than £10 a month on underwear, buy underwear only when it needs replacing, buy their underwear in Marks & Spencer or buy multipacks of knickers, need to be discussed in *The Times*? As the title of Addison's article is 'British women are pants at buying underwear', it seems that there is some kind of public problematizing of such women and that they have 'lost the plot' regarding what they wear underneath their clothes. Or, on the other hand, there is a clear social expectation that women should match their underwear, buy underwear not only when it needs replacing and buy imaginative (sexy or special) underwear? Moreover, since the article ends: "All in all, the nation's knicker drawer has

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<sup>1</sup> The source of the survey was Mintel, as presented in *The Times*, and it includes these results: 66% "Wear mismatched bras and knickers", 63% "Spend less than £10 a month on underwear", 60% "Only buy underwear when it needs replacing", 51% "Buy all their undies in Marks & Spencer", 36% "Buy multipacks of knickers" and 10% "Buy underwear only in the sales". (Addison, 2008: 2)

never looked unlovelier. Not so much *hello boys<sup>2</sup>, as not tonight darling*” (Addison, 2008: 2, emphasis added). Thus it is clearly implying that underwear has erotic connotations, and that women who do not buy ‘imaginative’ underwear are committing some kind of injustice against the sex lives of the British nation - and perhaps British men especially.

But these were not the only questions that came into my mind when reading this piece. It also made me think about my own knicker drawer and feel rather ashamed of my very practical, black and white underwear. I even had regrets about a beautiful, purple lace set I saw in the window of a specialist underwear shop the last time I went shopping, but which I did not purchase. Of course it is a common phenomenon that mass culture presents some kind of ‘unwritten law’ about what women should wear; thus adding to the imperatives around what it takes to ‘be’ female. I also began to wonder whether other women are actually influenced by reading this type of survey and to feel inadequate about what they are doing ‘wrong’. Especially if one looks at the increasing number of specialist underwear shops in the British high street, for example La Senza, Ann Summers, Triumph and others, and the many different types of underwear that are advertised nowadays, have women come to ‘know’ that plain, black and white undies from Marks & Spencer ‘should not’ be the only underwear in their drawers?

Since the statistics in this survey seemed interesting I then looked for other data that perhaps could say more about how the UK underwear market functions. Indeed the 2009 Underwear Retailing Mintel Report (Mintel Marketing Intelligence, 2009)<sup>3</sup> indicates that the UK underwear market grew by 9.7% between 2003 and 2008, and that

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<sup>2</sup> The famous slogan from the advertising campaign launched in 1994 by Playtex Wonderbra, featuring the model Eva Herzigova looking down at her bra-encased cleavage.

<sup>3</sup> Section: Size and shape of market

women's underwear in particular have grown by 14.3% in that period. The report suggests that "underwear is an emotional as well as an essential purchase, and the feel good factor is certainly something that retailers and manufacturers need to focus on" (2009, Market in Brief: section 4.)<sup>4</sup>. It also notes that specialist stores like La Senza or Figleaves have been growing stronger, offering a greater 'breadth of choice' and investing in niche sectors of the underwear market such as the development of maternity underwear or larger sizes (2009, Market in Brief: section 5)<sup>5</sup>. It seems that British retailers are responding to a demand for different designs and types of underwear and offering a wider range of choices, for example sports underwear, since, as the report further suggests, "more people look to get fit" (2009, Market in Brief: section 4.)<sup>6</sup>. It is thus evident that the UK market for women's underwear is extremely buoyant, at least up until the current financial crisis, and a wide range of underwear is apparently available, targeting different groups/segments of women consumers, according to their activities, age, body size and body 'status' (e.g. pregnancy, breast cancer sufferers). Underwear comes in different shapes, colours, materials and brands. Moreover when one considers what the market has to offer, it is then perhaps reasonable to wonder why a large proportion of British women, as the title of Addison' article implies, does not pay that much attention to underwear.

Indeed if women do not pay attention, as the Mintel survey suggests, then what does underwear mean for them? Is it just about the mundane task of putting underwear on? Then again, when a woman buys a multipack of knickers, does that mean she does not pay attention to her underwear? And on the other hand if a woman does wear matching underwear, or buys it from a specialist, or if her underwear is expensive, does that mean

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<sup>4</sup> Section: What the market needs - New opportunities

<sup>5</sup> Section: Strongest and weakest

<sup>6</sup> Section: What the market needs: New opportunities

that she pays more attention to how she looks and feels than someone who does not? After all, underwear is ostensibly hidden from view. And why is it that, when women say that they do not pay attention to underwear, my respondents at least always end this sentence with “as long as it serves its purpose”? My feeling is that, if underwear has a purpose, it must have some importance. If underwear is not a matching set, or if it is not expensive, does it not still have some importance, especially if we consider its proximity to the body?

The intention of this thesis is to explore some of the issues identified above, by seeking out women’s experiences with their underwear. Underwear in this thesis is treated as part of dress, as an erotic artefact, as a mundane task and as a consumption practice (buying for self and for others). It takes all of these aspects together to treat underwear as an aspect of ‘making sense of who I am’, or ‘what it feels like being female’; as a means, that is, of identity construction. I have chosen to privilege gender as a key element in identity construction, whereby we define ourselves as male or female, masculine or feminine in particular and dynamic ways. This I would defend on the basis that gender is a pervasive filter (Bristor and Fischer, 1993) or a primary mechanism (Brewis, 2005, following Gherardi, 1994) through which individuals classify others, at least in the West. ‘Gendering’ others is the principal act we engage with when encountering others (*ibid.*) and indeed Gherardi (1993) notes the ambiguity of a situation where we cannot ascribe a gender identity to an individual – perhaps because of the way they are dressed. Thus gender is an important element of classifying individuals, not undermining, though, the importance of other classifications like race, class and other. Gender is a social process and we *do* gender everyday with the way we

walk, dress and interact with others. On this Gherardi cites West and Zimmerman who argue that

doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'. (1993: 595)

Thus *doing* gender is a fundamental foundation in the identity project as it encompasses these activities. The consumption of underwear as part of dress can be seen as a way of *doing* gender, especially taking into consideration the discursive connections between women, fashion and clothing which will be discussed in this chapter.

Before elaborating on these issues, though, the research questions underpinning this present thesis are considered below:

What are the socio-cultural factors that influence women's consumption of underwear?

- i. What is the role of underwear as part of dress in the construction of female identity?
- ii. What kind of feelings and experiences do women report regarding the consumption of underwear? (e.g. how important is underwear to them?; do they wear different underwear for different occasions,?; for whom do they buy underwear?)
- iii. What is the role of taste when it comes to what underwear women choose?

To answer these questions, I took on the task of gathering together different women and talking to them about underwear. For some this topic felt odd or amusing, or they thought they had little to say. But it was only when I actually started asking these questions about their underwear that they realised the respondents had more to add. Suddenly they seemed to feel underwear was part of a wider discourse about 'being a

woman'. And that for me, as a researcher and as a woman, is where the importance of this research lies. It also enabled me to capture these women's different experiences and to gain some understanding about the role of underwear in supporting their bodies throughout their everyday life.

In this introductory chapter my focus will be mainly to justify underwear's discursive importance to women's lives, bodies and identity construction. My intention with this chapter is to show how women have been discursively linked with the 'trivialities' of fashion and how their bodies have historically been under much more scrutiny than those of men. Thus underwear as part of women's dress and overall appearance has a major role in how femininities have been constructed throughout history, at least in the west. I trace some key moments in the history of women's underwear that can demonstrate these connections, but also I locate underwear more specifically in wider academic treatments of dress and fashion.

## **1.2 So what about underwear?**

Considering underwear's proximity to the body and its role as an aspect of dress, it seems reasonable to assume it has some importance in the way that the body 'works' and is presented in the social world, especially when thinking about its connection with identity. The body is a subject of various discourses: it marks gender distinctions, it is controlled and regulated, it is the 'vessel' of identity and we are now being more reflexive towards it and are expected to take care of it. However any literature regarding underwear has more or less neglected the importance that it could have regarding its attachment to the body in particular and thus perhaps its connection with identity. Indeed much of this literature comes from costume studies or cultural studies and

mostly deals with the history of underwear in the West, starting from the medieval period in Europe until the twentieth century (e.g. Ewing, 1978; Saint-Laurent, 1986; Willett and Cunnington, 1992). Surprisingly, given the attention paid to these issues in broader analysis of dress and fashion *per se*, only limited attempts to connect underwear with issues around femininity, the body and female identity have been made (eg, Juffer, 1996; Hart and Dewsnap, 2001; Storr, 2002; 2003; Amy-Chinn, 2006; Amy-Chinn *et al.*, 2006; Jantzen *et al.*, 2006; Fields, 2007).

Nevertheless the literature around the history of underwear helps us to understand the connections that it has with the presentation of the dressed body in the social world, as well as to understand the social forces acting on or through the body throughout time. It can also provide a framework to understand the complexities of the representation of the female body and shifting ideals of femininity across time and space. Moreover, as part of dress in general, it can provide evidence of significant social changes in women's lives, for example the increasing involvement of women in paid employment across the twentieth century.

But underwear's connections with identity should not be understated, since, in the west at least, we are now experiencing a mass culture that speaks strongly of self-regulated practices of management of the body and identity through artefacts such as underwear. While mass culture talks about the association of underwear with the erotic aspect of women's lives, it also shows how underwear can be used to manage the body 'better', along with other self-regulating techniques like dieting or exercising. This clearly situates underwear as an aspect of the management of the self, within the realm of identity projects. On the other hand underwear most of the time is hidden from view. So

what is it about underwear that makes it an arguably important part of the female identity project?

### *1.2.1 Fashionable sinners*

Recalling the Mintel statistics regarding the UK underwear market, the fact that the market for women's underwear is more complex and more profitable than the market for men is no surprise, if we think about underwear as part of dress and fashion and the latter's discursive association with women. The production of different types of women's underwear and the continual changes of fashion in women's underwear can be traced in the history of dress and fashion. Women's underwear has, it seems, been variously used to support the outer dress, and as a marker of social status and of gender inter alia. As fashion changed, underwear changed to continue shaping the female body and to support the outer garments of women.

Overall, fashion historically "has functioned as a technology of social control, legitimising social distinctions" (Tseëlon, 1995: 14). As Fields (2007: 2) further suggests,

both as a set of regulatory practices and as a system of signification, [it] has been an arena of social struggle not only about what can be worn but also about what that attire means.

Moreover, according to Entwistle (2000b) historically fashion has been strongly associated with women in both literal and metaphorical ways. In a literal way, women in the west and particularly in Europe have for centuries been involved with sewing and the making of clothes at home, and in the eleventh century with development of textiles.

Metaphorically the same is true. Breward (1995: 29) notes that, as early as the medieval period, there was a “strong relationship between perceptions of fashion and social expectations of femininity, as though the two were complementary components of the same model”.

Tseëlon (1995) explains that, during medieval times, there were two ‘vices against fashion’: one was the transgression of gender lines, i.e. adoption of the other gender’s fashion and the second was immodesty of dress in terms of temptation. Regarding the first vice against fashion, female fashion was criticised and controlled in a different manner than male fashion; male fashion warned “against effeminisation” (Tseëlon, 1995: 15). In medieval times the effeminisation of male fashion was seen as sartorial transgression, because of women’s discursive association with fashion: it was thought that “the woman [had] been made to embody the essence of fashion [and that] the qualities of fashion [had] become one with her flesh” (*ibid.*). However, as Tseëlon continues, “if effeminate clothes in men produced ridicule, female appropriation of male attire produced near hysterical reactions” (*ibid.*). Medieval female fashion was deemed to reflect women’s inferior, weak, fragile and vulnerable ‘nature’, thus the adoption of male attire was seen as defiance of her nature and moral values. Tseëlon’s (1995: 16) argument here is that a woman in fact “could never get it right. Whatever she wore became synonymous with some negative characteristic”. This brings us to the second vice against fashion.

Tseëlon (1995) argues that any fashion style that exposed too much flesh was under scrutiny and usually condemnation at this time in history. Religion also had a great influence here, as well as in associating women with dress and fashion in general.

Within the earliest Judaeo-Christian teachings, according to Tseëlon (1995), the woman was the descendant of Eve and her body was the location of seduction and sin. Going forward to medieval Christianity, the female body, either naked or ‘decorated’, continued to be constructed as the location of desire, and the ‘ensnaring’ of men. Thus “the links between sin, the body, woman and clothes are easily forged” (Tseëlon, 1995: 14). Medieval Christianity’s attempts to control the ‘sinful’ female body targeted women’s dress by introducing imperatives around modesty and prudency, since clothing’s proximity to the body signalled sexual explicitness. It seems thus that women’s dress has for some considerable time been seen to speak in various ways of their sexualised bodies.

So as dress has been historically seen as a marker of gender differences, it can also be used as a lens for exploring how identities take shape. This has, as established earlier, been the subject of much interdisciplinary academic discussion (see for example: Finkelstein, 1991; Brydon and Niessen, 1998; Entwistle, 2000a; Entwistle and Wilson, 2001; Guy *et al.*, 2001; Keenan, 2001; Bolich, 2006). The dressed body and its interactions with the social world are regarded here as expressive of identity. As Entwistle (2001: 47) suggests,

dress [forms] the key link between individual identity and the body, providing the means, or the ‘raw material’ for performing identity [and it is also] fundamentally an inter-subjective and social phenomenon, an important link between individual identity and social belonging.

In that respect underwear, as part of dress, can likewise serve as a link between identity and the social. In underwear’s case, since it is hidden from view most of the time, it is

even more interesting to explore these connections. Indeed while this section has attempted to outline the discursive connections between women, fashion and dress, the next section offers some contextual flavour regarding the history of underwear in order to show how its changes and transformations through time have marked significant changes in women's lives. It thus emphasises the implications of underwear as part of dress in women's identity projects.

### *1.2.2 A brief history of women's underwear*

This section does not intend to give a precise and in depth historical account of underwear. This has already been done (see for example: Saint-Laurent, 1968; Ewing, 1971; 1978; Shelley, 2000). This section instead aims to explore some of the most significant developments of women's underwear in the West and how underwear since medieval times has emphasised gender and class distinction; necessary observations for the research objectives of this thesis. It is thus a partial history and, unavoidably, gaps will be evident.

As underwear, as part of dress, has been historically used to shape the 'appropriate' female silhouette, it carries marks of gender differentiation. Indeed underwear's proximity to the body has historically made it an important marker of social and cultural distinctions, whether those were about class and status or gender distinctions. On some occasions these distinctions intersect and they are often treated as inextricable by commentators. Looking back at the history of underwear in the west and more specifically in Britain and France where the most significant developments in dress and thus underwear seem to have taken place, these two distinctions/functions characterise underwear's role together with its ostensible or explicit functions of protecting the

genitals and sensitive parts of the body. Women's underwear has changed in design and function parallel to changes in outerwear and fashion in overall; and these changes indicate "larger social changes taking place in women's lives" (Fields, 2007: 3) and shifts in ideals of femininity. So looking at the history of underwear and its complex functionality since medieval times can help us understand the struggles of women to 'exist' across history. Equally alterations in underwear 'regimes' can help us trace the continuously shifting 'essentials' of being female.

Starting from as early as the medieval period, the expression of class distinction was seemingly not explicitly about underwear *per se*, but rather in the way it supported the outer costume. Willett and Cunnington (1992: 34-35) observe that in this era.

the undergarment was no longer an obscure drudge, but was promoted to serve in the general mode of expressing what the whole costume so extravagantly announced.

During medieval times class distinction was denoted by decorations on clothes and other ornaments attached to the outerwear. When it comes to gender distinction on the other hand, it had begun to be more clearly evident by the fourteenth century. Techniques for shaping clothes in a certain way had developed, with the narrowing of the waist and cutting the outer bodices of women's dresses into two pieces – creating thus a skirt – with a decorative belt for the waist (Ewing, 1971; 1978). The attention to a small waist marked a preference for a specific type of female body, something that can be traced back to Ancient Greek civilisation and its *zonē*<sup>7</sup>, "worn to cinch the waist" (Ewing, 1978: 21). According to Ewing (1978: 20), the waist has in fact been the "pivot on which fashion has revolved". Emphasis was also given to long and narrow bodies in

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<sup>7</sup> The Greek word for belt.

medieval times and around the fourteenth century an undergarment similar to a corset was introduced in order to shape the female body as such. This was known as a cotte, similar to the French word *côte* for ribs. This is the earliest form of corset used in western Europe and thus a significant development in underwear fashion in that context (Ewing, 1971; Willett and Cunnington, 1992). This indicates that fashion even six centuries or more ago was characterised by a manipulation of the female body, narrowing the waist and making the upper body seem longer.

Towards the end of the medieval period, class distinction began to be expressed by the size of women's skirts. Huge skirts apparently denoted a higher class and the petticoat<sup>8</sup> was used to support them. In fact the number of petticoats worn indicated the rank of the woman, her wealth or fashion awareness. The fashion developments of that era were usually introduced by the courts of the monarchs in Britain and France, such as the famous farthingale, a petticoat reinforced with hoops of cane, whalebone or wire in order to create a huge curve in the skirt. The farthingale was worn with the 'body', an undergarment later known as 'stays', which was similar to the cotte but fortified with whalebones. This undergarment firmly controlled the body by making it look slimmer and longer. Taken together, the farthingale and the 'body' exemplified the preference for an 'unnatural' or at least obviously manipulated female body. Nevertheless, since these undergarments were initially worn by the ladies of the royal courts, they were also markers of class distinction.

As also established earlier, because the history of underwear is usually found in costume studies, not enough emphasis has been given to the actual experiences of

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<sup>8</sup> The petticoat was a garment that hung from the waist. Evidence exists to suggest that petticoats were also worn as outer garments, as a skirt; but usually - especially for lower class women whose petticoats were not ornamented - they were under-petticoats (Willett and Cunnington, 1992).

women in those times. There are almost no examples of how women experienced or understood the social and cultural meanings of underwear before the twentieth century. One rare instance that seems to be revealing of women's feelings regarding their underwear can be found in Willett and Cunnington (1992), who stress how uncomfortable underclothes were in the medieval period in particular. The authors note a lot of examples of women expressing discomfort. The farthingale not only made movement difficult, especially when walking upstairs, but, with whalebones inserted into it, made it extremely difficult to sit. The authors quote, from Vanbrugh's *The Provok's Wife*, a woman who says that "if there were no men, adieu fine petticoats, we should be weary of wearing 'em" (Willett and Cunnington, 1992: 67). This is illustrative of how women had to present themselves, in the presence of men in particular. The presentation of their bodies, with either unnaturally wide skirts, narrow waists or an artificially boosted bosom, was indicative of a woman's rank but also health, especially important when attracting a husband, another example of the interrelation of gender/class distinctions. Broad hips, shoulders and bosoms apparently denoted a healthy woman in terms of her reproductive abilities.

But, other than underwear's medieval connotations around a women's fertility, it was not until the mid seventeenth century that underwear acquired quite an important role in the game of sexual attraction, at least in Europe. Female underclothes, denoting both gender and class distinction, were apparently used for the attraction of a husband, in contrast with the male underclothes that just denoted class distinction (Ewing, 1978; Willett and Cunnington, 1992). Women began to play on their 'feminine charm'. This is evident if we look at how their flowing skirts allowed their under-petticoat to be

glimpsed while they moved. Nevertheless, underwear and the proper presentation of the female body were simultaneously a matter of modesty and morality.

Moving on to the Victorian era, underwear continued to have great importance in the construction of femininity, and particularly middle-class femininity. As Summers (2001: 21) stresses

[d]ress operated as a vital and problematic conduit which, ideally acted, was expected to visually delineate and distinguish middle-class femininity from that of its supposedly 'coarser' incarnation in working-class women.

With regards to underwear the body was accentuated with the use of the corset and the crinoline. In line with the above argument, tight clothing, including the unnaturally tight corset, distinguished middle-class from working-class women, as it denoted their lack of ability for manual labour (Kaiser, 2001).

Notwithstanding class distinction, dress and corsetry were also instrumental in terms of the pursuit of morality and respectability (Summers, 2001). Indeed the controversies of the Victorian corset created undoubtedly one of the most interesting debates in the literature on underwear. The Victorian corset is said to be one of the most intriguing undergarments ever, since its importance lay not just in the construction of a distorted female body and thus femininity, but also in its "class-based identity and subjectivity" (Summers, 2001: 9). In terms of morality the corset was linked to such imperatives since uncorsetted women were considered as 'loose' and immoral (Roberts, 1977).

Feminist critics like Roberts argue 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 understandings of the female condition as one of submissiveness and pain (Roberts, 1977). On the other hand, Steele (1985: 42) challenges the feminist criticisms of the corset and stresses that it did not settle the Victorian woman into a subordinate role. In contrast she believes that Victorian women were aware of the connotations that the corset was producing, and sees the corset as an example of how these women had the desire to artificially improve 'nature's gifts'.

Nonetheless, the Victorian corset is certainly a key example of how underwear, during this period denoted an intense gender distinction. Another example, according to Fields (2007), was the open-crotch drawers worn in those times. These drawers had a significant role in constructing feminine sexuality. On the one hand there was the seemingly open access to the female body and on the other it served as a reference to women's biological differences from men. Fields stresses:

[T]he functions of dress, despite clothing's attachment to the body, are neither 'natural' nor removed from human intervention and social structures. Indeed, the careful consideration of social understandings *about* the functions of dress related to the body reveals the unquestioned biological explanations underlying culturally constructed gender differences, and thus how culture operates to reinforce seemingly irrefutable proof of essential, biologically based, and 'natural' gender difference. [...] Serving as a material means of constructing women's bodies as different, open drawers referenced women's biological difference on a daily basis. (2007: 22-23, emphasis in original)

Fast forwarding to the twentieth century the emergence of mass produced underwear with new materials like nylon was introduced, while different conceptions of the female body shape, for example the juvenile or boyish figure relished in the early years of the century, changed underwear once more. This is a period of new undergarments such as the suspender belt, cami-knickers, the corselette and of course pyjamas as nightclothes. Wilson–Kovacs (2001: 171) notes that,

with the decline of the corset and changes in fashion, [underwear's] architectural role was transferred to the suspender belt, which, by bridging the gap between the stockings and the mysterious recesses of the female anatomy, has changed the erotic focus of the female body from the waist emphasized by the corset, to the genitalia.

What could also be considered as important during this period is the introduction of the use of colours in underwear which in and of itself inspired the inventions of new fabrics. This is the time when a lot of attention was given back to the breasts, and fashion houses such as Dior emphasized with new collections of bras the need for a well-shaped bust (Hawthorne, 1992). Women became “bra-conscious” (Ewing, 1978: 162). At the same time the feminist movement was scrutinising underwear, objecting to confining underwear, encouraging the more ‘natural’, comfortable and healthy varieties. Indicative was the 1968 bra-burning protest in Atlantic City, USA, where protesters burned their bras, girdles and other ‘offensive’ undergarments (Fields, 2007). Indeed, as Fields argues, feminist movements, mass culture and the “challenging traditional wisdom about respectable femininity all informed the shape and perceptions of women’s underwear” (2007: 272) during the twentieth century.

Bringing this brief history up to the present day, women's underwear in the late twentieth century and onwards, in the west, is shrinking in size. Still, it seems to possess the same importance in terms of its social and cultural meaning and the prevailing perceptions of femininity which attach to it, as promoted by various institutions of mass culture. However, and as noted before, not enough emphasis has been given to underwear in academic literature in terms of its connections to women's identity.

Identity here is defined as the way individuals give meaning to their existence in the world, how they see themselves in relation to others and how they want to be seen by those others. But as Sawicki (1988: 184) avers,

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 contestation.

Thus, identity as a relationship between individuals' existence and the social world is not one of causal determination of the former by the latter but an ongoing task, imperative or *project*, something which is actively (if not necessarily altogether consciously) accomplished on a daily basis. Indeed there are arguably multiple discursive versions of what it means to be a woman, on which our identity projects draw in various ways, and a multitude of resources which can be mobilized in this regard. This thesis is therefore premised on the idea that a woman's identity is a complex, performative and processual project, as the following chapters will elaborate.

Underpinning the research questions of this thesis is also my contention that underwear is closely connected with identity. This is supported by Jantzen *et al.* (2006) who argue

for notions of becoming a 'real woman', or a 'woman to the backbone' when it comes to wearing the 'right' underwear, whatever that might be; these indicate then that feminine identity projects are strongly connected with underwear, and that underwear is used as a resource in these projects. Nonetheless the limited literature that attempts to make connections between underwear and women's identity projects tends only to focus on erotic allurements and the idea of wearing special, sexy underwear. No literature within the field of consumption or other cognate fields that I have been able to locate has attempted to explore the connections between the consumption of underwear, all types and kinds, with the ongoing and multifaceted female identity project.

Thus, in order to emphasise that these connections have in fact been evident throughout the western history, I decided to trace the history of underwear at the beginning of the thesis, precisely to show how underwear as part of dress has had a crucial role in articulating and constructing femininity. This brief and partial history also intended to show how women's bodies have arguably been more scrutinised and under surveillance than men's. Coming to today we witness a mass culture that puts emphasis on the female body as a project to be monitored and managed by various techniques, one of them being underwear. Underwear is now not just connected to the support of the body and the outerwear, but it is arguably also a means of feeling good about the self, and (re)constructing a sense of 'who I am' (see Jantzen *et al.* 2006). The intention thus of this thesis is to capture some of these experiences and find out something about the factors behind the consumption of women's underwear, at the same time exploring women's understanding of the feminine identity project today and the role of underwear in this regard. More specifically, to reiterate my research questions, I aim to explore the socio-cultural factors that affect women's consumption of underwear; the role of

underwear as part of dress in the construction of the female identity; the feelings and experiences women report regarding the consumption of underwear; and finally the role of taste when it comes to what underwear women choose.

### **1.3 Thesis overview**

To answer my research questions I initially build my conceptual framework. I am drawing from different theories first to lay the ground for understanding concepts like femininity, the dressed body, technologies of the self and taste and then to illustrate how these concepts can be utilised to understand the connections of underwear with identity projects and imperatives of femininity. In the following chapters these concepts are discussed, exploring possible connections with the consumption and use of women's underwear.

In Chapter 2 I draw on some of the works of Foucault, specifically those on power relations and discourse in order to locate the existence of bodies within disciplinary regimes of power. I refer to the 'docile body' that regimes of discipline and power work upon, and then engage with some of Foucault's later work regarding the 'active body', to illuminate how individuals actively engage in various practices or technologies of the self to 'fashion' and improve their selves (themselves). My intention with this treatment of his later work is to show that individuals establish identity through 'self-stylisation', a reflexive form of fashioning identity. I argue that underwear can be seen as a technology of the self in that respect.

While Foucault's turn to the 'active' body demonstrates an attempt to (re)construct identities, it is Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus that better explains how this process

is experienced. A woman's various 'dispositions'/characteristics are components of her identity and her involvement in various fields, as well as the volumes of capital she possesses, become elements in the construction of her identity project. These issues are discussed in the later sections of Chapter 2 and my intention here is to explore the role of taste as a manifestation of habitus in order to understand the different meanings and experiences that women report regarding their underwear, as well as the different tastes that they demonstrate when selecting the 'right' underwear for them. Finally this chapter concludes with reference to some selected feminists who have utilised Foucault's and Bourdieu's work to make sense of what it feels like being a woman. Thus I further demonstrate how both Foucault and Bourdieu's work operates to provide a useful conceptual framework for this research.

Chapter 3 purposefully plays with the second half of the title of this thesis because it attempts to build a discussion of how underwear forms part of material and consumer culture. I begin by referring to some key theories of consumption and how consumption has been connected with identity. I move on to the literature that focuses on gender in the context of consumption, in order to look at the importance, meanings and the symbolic value of consumption in the context of gendered identity projects. I particularly pay attention to how consumption studies have explored fashion. Finally I conclude this chapter by drawing on the limited literature that looks at underwear and its links to consumption and identity, and discuss its relevance to this thesis.

The methodological design of this research will be presented in Chapter 4. This chapter entails a detailed discussion of the process, as well as a discussion of the philosophical assumptions underpinning the thesis in terms of the generation of data. In this chapter I

discuss and justify my research methods, my sampling and my data analysis process. Finally I refer to some of the implications of this research when reflecting back on the field and what I learnt from doing my data analysis.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of this research. This is where some of the experiences and feelings of my participants are reproduced, analysed and discussed. This analysis will produce the conclusions of this research when seen closely with the theoretical framework of the research. This chapter is divided into several sections that represent some of the key themes evident in my data. Specifically it analyses the importance respondents attribute to underwear according to whether it is hidden or visible; the physical/psychological sensations it induces for the respondents; their varying mobilisations of underwear to support aspects of the female identity project; the role of taste when choosing underwear; and the experiences the respondents report regarding shopping for underwear. Throughout the chapter links are made with the conceptual framework developed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Finally Chapter 6 concludes this thesis by summarising the research findings in relation to the questions it set out to answer. More precisely this chapter reiterates the contributions of the thesis and addresses each of the questions set out in this introductory chapter. I draw this thesis to a close by reflecting on some of the implications/limitations of the research as well as discussing possible ways for further researching the role this intimate part of women's dress can play in identity construction.

## Chapter 2 Fashioning female identity

### 2.1 Introduction

As the research questions and aims of this thesis suggest, it is premised on the belief that there is something significant in the way that women select underwear. Indeed prevailing discourses concerning what is fashionable, beautiful, sexy, comfortable, normal or boring in terms of female attire are often presented, for example by mass culture, as if there is a 'natural' or obvious way of distinguishing between attributions regarding the underwear that we choose. However, I argue that all these meanings are (re)produced through the ways that we consume underwear and, moreover, that the process through which we engage with these meanings is an element of our identity projects.

Bartky (1988) argues it is crucial for a woman to sense herself as female, to have a body that is felt to be and experienced as 'feminine' and "since persons currently can *be* only as male or female" (p. 78, emphasis in original), her 'feminine' body is crucial also to her self-understanding as an functional/functioning individual. As such, prevailing discourses of femininity simultaneously imply a level of 'becoming'. That is, being feminine is an ongoing process of fitting into imperatives around femininity. Thus, our identity seems to be in constant development, a project that we have to work on, to fashion, in ways that are socially accepted. It is also impossible to talk about identity without taking into consideration the material body, as this body is the 'environment' where identity is located, articulated and performed. Practices of everyday life such as buying and putting on underwear are clearly embodied practices, so embodiment is equally important in understanding identity construction.

As already stated in Chapter 1, the research questions of this thesis turn around the experiences of women regarding the consumption of underwear, and more specifically the socio-cultural factors which influence them when buying underwear, the role of underwear as part of their dressing in the construction of their female identity and the role of taste when it comes to the underwear women choose. Moreover, this thesis aims to explore women's feelings and experiences about the consumption of underwear, e.g. how important underwear is for them, do they wear different underwear in different occasions, who they buy underwear for, and so on. In this chapter I aim to set out a conceptual framework that will help me to understand the relationship between women's experiences of underwear and their identity projects, taking into account how power relations, culture and the corporeal are all implicated during this identity fashioning. I continue this project in Chapter 3 by looking more specifically at consumption as it relates to identity.

I begin by drawing on Michel Foucault's work on power relations and discourse to locate the existence of bodies within disciplinary regimes of power. Then, as his later works emphasise the 'active body/subject', I draw particularly on his notion of technologies of the self, to understand how subjectivity proceeds from how individuals engage with such practices. I then take on elements of Pierre Bourdieu's work on the habitus, fields and capital to show how the various 'dispositions'/characteristics that a woman has are components of her identity. More specifically, by drawing on Bourdieu I argue that we can see underwear both as an important part of the cultural field of fashion and as embodied cultural capital, in order to understand the different meanings and experiences that women report regarding their underwear, as well as the different tastes that they demonstrate when selecting the 'right' underwear for them. Finally I conclude with a section which (re)turns to Foucauldian

feminism, as well as discussing feminists drawing on Bourdieu's social theory and related works which emphasise the experience of what it feels like to be a woman, in order to further demonstrate how some of the key concepts in both Foucault and Bourdieu operate to provide a useful framework for this research.

## **2.2 The regulated body: Foucault and disciplinary power**

Foucault's theories of the regulated body have been extremely influential in how we understand the place of bodies in societies. His work to some extent can be seen to constitute "a history of the body" (Bordo, 1993: 190). Indeed the genealogical approach Foucault uses demonstrates the specific historical contexts that produce different discursive formations of bodies across time and place. He asserts that any given society in any given time and place, is permeated with power relations and that the body is at the centre of a process of various power formations. In Foucault's words:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas) [...] Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the processes of history's destruction of the body. (Foucault, 1977: 148)

For Foucault the body is produced and constituted by discourse. This view of the body is dependent upon his notion of power and knowledge and how these two phenomena are connected. Knowledge is embedded in the exercise of power and power comes with knowledge. For Foucault power in modern society, as will be discussed below, is not openly or even mainly repressive but is instead exercised through processes of normalisation, such as standards and values that individuals are 'called' to adhere to.

The contribution of Foucault's work regarding the conceptualisation of power is in fact a *re*-conceptualisation of the concept. While power has conventionally been regarded in a negative manner, as a force possessed by the elite and used to repress others in order to preserve social hierarchies, Foucault sees power as an essentially positive force, entangled in all the complex relationships of people at all levels of society. It is a circulating force and not something that can be localised as a zero-sum commodity (Foucault, 1980). The conceptualisation of power as a repressive force is only one of the multiple effects produced by the interplay of power relations. Foucault's view of power allows for an analysis of the 'microphysics' of power; that is, how power operates at the micro level upon and through bodies. Viewing the body at the centre of this network of power makes it "*the* link between daily practices on the one hand and the large scale organization of power on the other" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, cited in Shilling, 2003: 66, emphasis in original). Indeed, this link can be easily illustrated by looking at Foucault's work on penitentiary systems and the history of sexuality. Here Foucault emphasises the development of disciplinary regimes to control the individual body and also to manage the mass population.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1979) Foucault demonstrates a shift of disciplinary regimes between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the west. From the public torturing and dismembering of the regicide Damiens at the end of the eighteenth century to the daily routines of a nineteenth century Parisian prison, Foucault attempts to show the shift from a system of justice that relies on excessive and public violence to one of punishment via imprisonment, and its implications. This is also a shift of discourse from constructing the body as flesh, to be publicly and symbolically meshed with the power of the sovereign to denote criminality, to constructing the body as mind or 'mindful body' with the attempted

reformation of criminals through incarceration. Punishment began to be enforced in highly disciplinary surveillance spaces, with emphasis on ‘disciplinary monotony’ and on the hierarchisation of people and activities within prisons to make certain that inmates were inserted in a network of disciplinary relations (Foucault, 1979). The example of the Panopticon is indicative of how this disciplinary power could be exercised. The Panopticon was Jeremy Bentham’s architectural design for a circular building with a central tower around which prison cells would be arranged. The idea of the central tower as a permanent surveillance place, Foucault (1979) explains, ensures the exercise of this disciplinary power over offenders who, not knowing if indeed they are being watched or not, are impelled to monitor themselves and control how they behave at all times. In Foucault’s words:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (1979: 201)

Indeed as Foucault argues, the effect of the panoptic schema of permanent surveillance and visibility was extended to other forms of social control at this time in history, “its vocation [became] a generalized function” (1979: 207) in institutions like schools, hospital, the workplace and the military. Its principle includes a permanent sense of self-regulation and self-assessment and encompasses an emphasis on normalisation. In the modern penal system this is accomplished because it does not only ensure the physical constraint of prisoners, but includes a set of relatively new forms of normative and scientific knowledge, such as

criminology, psychology etc, which makes possible the monitoring, assessment and regulation of prisoners at a micro level. On other levels of social control this normalising function produces a network of power-knowledge: the 'scientific knowledge' that a psychologist or a criminologist for example claims to have makes them regulators of behaviour bearing the values of normality. The effectiveness of the power of the norm is due to its relative invisibility, since usually this norm (society's standards and values) is grounded in the form of knowledge like criminology, psychology and also education, medicine and other emerging bodies of specific 'expertise'.

Foucault's theoretical contribution regarding this disciplinary power has been influential in the feminist conceptualisation of the construction of the female body and relatedly the construction of femininity. Mainly feminist theorists have examined Foucault's views on the discipline of the body, how power/knowledge operates in this regard and how this can be seen in contemporary societies where women are concerned with the appearance and management of their bodies so as to perform a specific kind of femininity and the implications of such processes (see for example Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2004). As hinted at in Chapter 1, women are arguably more scrutinised when it comes to having a 'correct' body and relatedly it is usually the case that women are overall less satisfied with their bodies (Bordo, 2004). This (re)produces among women constant attention to and monitoring of their bodies. Of course femininity is ever changing to suit the changing standards of society, so modern western society has for example established a version of femininity that is characterised by youthfulness and slenderness. These standards act as a norm. Norms act as a regulating technique (a panopticon) to ensure that women develop or are constantly preoccupied with developing the 'correct' physique. Thus Fine and Macpherson (1994: 229)

argue that women tend to be more vulnerable to censure on the basis of a visibly ‘unsuccessful’ body project, and as Budgeon (2003: 39) puts it,

[t]he dominant relation women are posited to have with their bodies is one which is discursively 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.

Bordo’s (1990a; 1990b; 2004) analysis of modern disciplinary regimes of diets and exercise and the reproduction of ‘feminine practices’ such as eating disorders is also very relevant here. As she argues, these practices make the female body a docile body which obeys cultural demands “while at the same time being *experienced* in terms of ‘power’ and ‘control’” (Bordo, 1993: 192, emphasis in original). She offers the example of Cher and how she has modified her appearance by plastic surgery and has now become ‘normal’ according to the demands of western mass culture. Bordo emphatically argues that

[i]n so far as the history of Cher’s body has meaning at all, it has meaning not as the ‘original’ over which a false copy has been laid, but as a *defect* which has been corrected. It becomes constructed as ‘defect’ precisely because the new image is the dominant reality, the normalising standard against which all else is judged. (1993: 195, emphasis in original)

Even though this thesis takes experience as pertinent in understanding how the construction of female identity takes place, I cannot but agree with Bordo here when she asks if we really do choose the various constructions of ourselves. The proliferation of particular ideals of beauty, sexiness and femininity in western societies has rendered them as the norm, the ‘reality’ into which women are constantly working on making themselves fit. There are specific imperatives around being female that play a crucial role in the construction of women’s identities. I will develop this point later in the chapter, but here I would like to

return to Foucault's assertion of power as positive and how different forms of power both produce and limit identities. This is fully explored in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1978).

## **2.3 Bodies of pleasure: Foucault and the history of sexuality**

In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1978) Foucault carries out a genealogical analysis of how western understandings of sexuality have emerged. He suggests that there was a shift in discourses in the eighteenth and nineteenth century when western governments became concerned with the overall management and control of the population. This was achieved by exercising control over its sexuality and reproduction. Even though conventional thinking in the West is that sexuality was repressed during the nineteenth century and that the Victorians actively silenced it, Foucault argues that this was far from what was in fact happening. During this time, sex became a social and political problem which had to be regulated: this led to a *proliferation* of discourses around sex and an *obsession* with sexuality. In Foucault's words,

There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex [...] an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail. (1978: 18)

The rise of the human and social sciences as also discussed in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) led to the categorisation of individuals according to their sexual behaviours. These discourses variously took the form of a juridical concern with 'atrocious' sexual crimes, a medical and psychiatric concern with 'deviant and marginal' behaviours, for example adultery, rape,

sodomy or incest, the use of confession in clinical sciences like psychotherapy, an intense concern with infantile sexuality and a preoccupation with female ‘hysterisation’ and the saturation of the female body with sexuality. These were forms of sexuality that “were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction” (Foucault, 1978: 36). Foucault asserts that at the end of the nineteenth century, the key social/discursive concerns revolved around marriage and the ability to fulfil the marital obligation, i.e. to procreate. However, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw “a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of ‘perversions’” (1978: 37); that is, heterogeneous sexualities that deviated from the marital laws. We see thus a shift in the mechanisms of controlling sexuality, that is, from controlling sexual *behaviour* during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, to controlling *sexuality* with regards to regulating categories of people with a particular sexual behaviour.

More specifically, Foucault identifies four interrelated operations which demonstrate the positive and circulating nature of power, all of which contributed to the ‘perverse implantation’. Firstly, sexuality becomes seen as a fundamental aspect of our identity, our ‘inner truth’. So for example, while before the nineteenth century homosexual behaviour (sodomy) was punished as a criminal act, after the nineteenth century homosexuality was not a specific act but an expression of one’s (deviant) identity. Sexuality became a tool to interpret individuals’ behaviours and personalities. Secondly, the concern with infantile sexuality was more than simply repressing a child’s sexuality. It was not only an exclusion of children from the realm of sexuality, but an expansion of the study of sexuality (and thus the possibility of individual and popular control) to other realms like the family relationship. Thirdly, the obsessive interest with sexual behaviour leads to the tendency to medicalise or psychologise sexuality and any individuals who expressed ‘irregular’ sexual behaviour.

Sexual instincts became an object of scientific and medical study, a network of knowledge about sexuality, a *scientia sexualis*. This western science of sexuality constructs sexuality as an object of study, a ‘natural’ phenomenon that needs to be ‘uncovered’ and ‘controlled’. Lastly, the concern with sexuality not only did not silence *sexuality* but led Victorian society to view everything through the lens of sexuality, and most of all to view all aspects of family life through sex. The end result is that the reproductive heterosexual couple remains at the top of the family tree and is considered as most ‘natural’ and that a whole host of other, by suspicion perverse sexualities emerge precisely because of the material effects of *scientia sexualis*.

This volume of the *History of Sexuality* offers a very specific understanding of how bodies are constituted. Because of the intense interest in sexuality, it was inevitable that bodies would also be a centre of attention since knowledge about sex and sexuality was ‘derived’ from contact with bodies (Foucault, 1978). The body was very important in how *scientia sexualis* was established, because it was through the studies of bodies that sexuality was ‘discovered’ and constituted as an area of scientific investigation. This new form of power was linked with pleasure in the search for ‘truth’ about sexuality:

The growth of perversions is not a moralising theme that obsessed the scrupulous minds of the Victorians. It is the real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures. It is possible that that the west has not been capable of inventing any new pleasures, and it has doubtless not discovered any original vices. But it had defined new rules for the game of power and pleasures. The frozen countenance of the perversions is a fixture of this game. (Foucault, 1978: 48)

Moreover, what is most significant about the *History of Sexuality* is the alternative understanding that Foucault offers of sexuality and the network of power-knowledge that constructed it. He demonstrates the evolution of how we understand bodies and sexuality, which took place under very specific historical circumstances. The role of power as a generative force is crucial here, as it literally creates new dimensions of individuals' existence (Bailey, 1993); for example the construction of the 'identity' of homosexuals and the behaviour and characteristics that are attached to this 'identity'. This suggests that sexuality is a social construct that claims to articulate something about one's 'inner truth'. As Bailey (1993: 111) notes,

[Foucault] demands that we take seriously the positive and generative, as well as the negative and coercive, possibilities of the 'will to knowledge' which is a contemporary expression of power. In the drive, the consumerist need for 'truth', most especially the drive for self-truth, identities are produced which simultaneously ground existence, and thus enable action, and also limit possibilities.

Considering sexuality as a social construct enables an understanding of bodies as not possessing a fixed biology or identity. This understanding has been of value to feminists because it not only disrupts the notion of stable categories of sex but also challenges any analyses of women's bodies and their sexuality based on more traditional understandings, such as the distinction between sex as the biological trait and gender as the cultural variable. The new forms of power Foucault illustrates, i.e. discipline and bio-power, "refuse the possibility of absolute and final cultural transformation" (Bailey, 1993: 107). Identities and categories such as sex and gender can be historically traced as discursive constructions. For example the notion of gender has been historically bound within relations of power between men and women, while these power relations have been justified by the notion of 'sex' as the

truth behind women's 'inferiority' to men. As suggested then this insight into the discursive construction of bodies and identities has greatly influenced many feminist theorists of bodies, gender identity and gender politics, such as (Butler, 1993; 1999) and Haraway (1991).

Returning to the regulation of bodies through normalising discourses of sexuality, Foucault (1978) also indicates how the Panoptic self-regulation obsession discussed in *Discipline and Punish* was further encouraged through the confessional act. Here, Foucault adds to the religious act of confession other forms of confession such as the psychoanalytic therapy session. Thus there is a shift from the act thought to be compulsory for the 'salvation' of the individual to a "voluntary act of disencumberment or liberation from physical repression" (McNay, 1994: 97). Individuals seek the help of psychoanalysts and psychologists to speak of their 'inadequacies' and relieve themselves of the pressures of everyday life' and rely on the guidance and scientific knowledge of these 'experts' in working on their selves (themselves) so that they can fit 'better' into the norms of western societies. In Foucault's words:

The obligation to confess [...] is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effects of a power that constrain us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, demands only to surface. (1978: 60)

In its most modern institution this regime of voluntary confession has developed into the occupational categories of life coaches (Paterson, 2006) where individuals who have been 'unable' to 'regulate' their bodies (or indeed their behaviour or their psyche) are 'able' to do so with help from these experts.

Reality make-over shows – another recent form of the confessional – try to encourage and convince (mostly) women that taking care of themselves is vital to their identity and how

people perceive them. These shows arguably add a new dimension to how women can manipulate their bodies into the 'right' mould as promoted by contemporary Western understandings of beauty and sexiness. Moreover, this typically comes from 'underneath' and more specifically underwear. The 'right' underwear can shape and control the body to fit social imperatives around being female. The 'underneath' thus becomes an important element of a woman's identity. Underwear as the support of the body and the outer wear has arguably been vital to women's appearance as seen in Chapter 1, however recent makeover shows emphasise that paying attention to the 'underneath' not only supports appearance but works as a tool for self-improvement and self-confidence.

This specific instance of how power is situated and exercised at the micro level of bodies in a Foucauldian reading of course lies at the heart of this thesis. Everyday practices such as wearing the 'right' underwear can have various meanings for the woman herself but also theoretically for all others whom she encounters, by whom the woman arguably comes to believe she is constantly under surveillance, even though her underwear is not (usually) visible. Indeed what we notice here again is that power does not operate on individuals simply via external societal 'constraints'. In Foucault's later works especially, he explores how individuals act upon their own ways of being, and are not just 'docile bodies'. In his own words,

[i]f one wants to analyse the genealogy of the subject in Western civilisation, one has to take into account not only the technologies of domination but also technologies of self. One has to show the interaction between these two types of the self. When I was studying asylums, prisons and so on, I perhaps insisted too much on the technologies of domination. What we call discipline is something really important in this kind of institution. But it is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies. (Foucault, 1985a: 367)

This turn to a more 'active' subject is important to note because Foucault has been criticised for his lack of an account of agency. Nevertheless, his theories can be used and have been used, by Foucauldian feminists, as a tool in understanding something about living a feminine identity or becoming feminine. A later section in this chapter focuses on such conceptualisations. However, as McNay (1992; 1994) stresses, some of Foucault's later works do question how individuals come to relate to and construct themselves in an effort for improvement. McNay (1994) notes that this turn in Foucault's work employs concepts of autonomy and reflexivity. His concept of technologies of the self is particularly important, because it complements his earlier work on power which arguably "resulted in a one-dimensional account of social agents as 'docile bodies' and a correspondingly monolithic account of power" (McNay, 1994: 134).

## **2.4 Technologies of the self: Foucault and self-stylising**

The technologies of the self give an account of subjectivity that was said to be previously missing from Foucault's work. The concept provides an analysis of how we come to understand ourselves as subjects. Thus identity for the later Foucault is not simply imposed by the 'technologies of domination' but is also "actively determined by individuals through the deployment of 'practices' of the self" (McNay, 1999:96), an ongoing process. Indeed, Foucault recognises the importance of such techniques and calls them 'arts of existence':

those intentional and voluntary actions by which men [*sic*] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *œuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria. (Foucault, 1985b: 10-11, emphasis in original)

The two later volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, namely *The Use of Pleasure* (1985b) and *The Care of the Self* (1986), along with *The Technologies of the Self* (1988b), are especially important here. In the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (rather unchronologically) discusses the 'arts of existence' of Ancient Greek and Classical Roman societies and the differences between their codes of behaviour. In the later Classical Roman era, subjectification - how individuals come to define and understand themselves as subjects - he suggests, occurs through a juridical form of moral codes, to which the individual was expected to conform. In contrast, the Ancient Greek perspective on ethics left more freedom to the individual to interpret and live out appropriate forms of behaviour according to their own preferences. However, the arts of existence were a project only for the privileged adult male citizens in Ancient Greece.

Despite the admittedly sexist nature of this phenomenon, Foucault develops a theory of the ethics of the self based on the idea of self-mastery and moderation that characterises the classical practices. The self-mastery principle had to do with the daily conduct of the Ancient Greeks and more specifically the intensity of their practices and how they distinguished between activity and passivity. Restraint and excess mostly governed their idea of monogamous relationships with their wives and the pervasive sense that being faithful was a matter of self-mastery and not an obligation. The activity and passivity dualism had to do mostly with sexual activity with their loved objects, mainly boys. In order to be a free man and a master of himself, an Ancient Greek man could not be the object of passivity and someone else's pleasure (Foucault, 1986). What Foucault values more about the ethics of the self as practised by the Ancient Greeks however was the degree of autonomy that an individual exercised in relation to the more general codes of ethics in that society. In contrast with the Ancient Greeks, Christian ethics had more to do with the subordination of an

individual's morality to the rules of conduct set by the system. The Ancient Greeks' arts of existence were practices that did not submit to such normalising. They were governed by a principle of autonomous aesthetics of the self and they sought to stylise themselves in a way that maximised pleasure and beauty in life. So, technologies of the self for Foucault are an act of self-stylisation:

[They] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (1988b: 18)

Foucault asserts that the study of morality and the relationship to self in Antiquity can be helpful in modern times in terms of contemporary ethical thinking. On the one hand Foucault urges us to defamiliarise ourselves with contemporary western practices of the self; that is, to resist (for example) western understandings of and imperatives around femininity as the 'one' way to be a woman. On the other hand Foucault argues that we need to search for 'aesthetics' of the self through the disappearing of moral codes. In antiquity for example morality was achieved not because of the strict obedience of the law, but through the relationship with the self and the practices or techniques with which individuals achieved an ethical self: "a principle of stylization of conduct for those who wished to give their existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible" (Foucault, 1985b: 250-1). In contemporary times Foucault argues for resistance to power and for utilisation of such practices or technologies that can achieve self-transformation, on an ongoing basis.

In this respect technologies of the self can be utilised as a concept to help us understand various practices and behaviours that aim to act upon the body in order to achieve self-

improvement. Entwistle (2000a) for example explains that they can help us understand modern techniques utilised by individuals to ‘fashion’ themselves. She particularly refers to power dressing as a technology of the self to show that the ‘rules’ of power dressing are presented by western culture to women as a way of succeeding in the workplace. Technologies of the self have also been utilised by Jantzen *et al.* (2006) to explain the appropriation of lingerie by women to (re)construct themselves as feminine. They stress that underwear produces bodily sensations such as pleasure, arousal or even pain that help women to ‘manage’ their conception of themselves. The authors argue that technologies of the self

[are] not a neutral set of artefacts and practices for exercising power over things and ‘others’. [They are] a rule based on a set of actions by means of instruments that also affect 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. (Jantzen *et al.*, 2006: 183, emphasis in original)

Both the above examples are illustrative of how technologies of the self are interlinked with and dependent upon the prevailing discourses of femininity. They are not ahistorical, free-floating or a simple matter of choice. So self styling is

the way in which the subject constitutes himself [sic] in an *active fashion*, by the practices of the self, [but] these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group. (Foucault, 1988a: 11)

In the example of Entwistle’s power dressing, she suggests that it can be seen as a technology of the self precisely because the prevailing discourses back in the 1980s (when power

dressing first emerged as a specific set of practices) around how professional women should be dressed at work incorporated the notion of the ‘enterprising self’: “someone who was ambitious, self-managing, individualistic” (2000b: 26). Professional women used power dressing as a way of acting on themselves and as a styling strategy that would communicate their feelings of confidence, empowerment and success to others. Similarly Jantzen *et al.* (2006) suggest that the consumption and use of a specific type of underwear – lingerie – and the feelings it produces for women creates experiences of femininity which in turn have effects on their identities.

For example Jantzen *et al.* (2006) consider femininity not as a “stable kernel” (p. 183) to be surfaced or reflected in certain practices, but as something located and (re)constructed in specific experiences – like the sensations of wearing lingerie – and which ‘reaffirm’ what femininity ‘feels’ like. Relatedly Budgeon (2003) asserts that any technique that individuals adopt to improve and reconfigure their body, appearance and self is central to their identity (2003: 35-55). Women, for example, use technologies such as make-up, dress or ‘special’ underwear in order to improve or transform their bodies and thus to (re)fashion their identity. Underwear then can be considered in this framework because of the bodily sensations it can induce and the resulting effect both on external appearance and identity.

However, Foucault can be seen to fail to analyse the process through which the technologies of the self are practised in a self-aware, reflexive manner. McNay (1994: 155) argues that this failure

arises in part because the reliance on an unexamined notion of aesthetics appears to block a thorough analysis of the power relations which overdetermine the interaction between the individuals’ behaviour and the wider social context.

She argues that such an analysis is important in order to distinguish between the use of the technologies of the self as a reflexive and self-aware practice and their use as a reproduction of social imperatives, something which is arguably more akin to the self-surveillance produced via the Panoptic disciplinary regimes. The self-stylisation practices that Foucault introduces as practices of the self need, she argues, to be seen as embodied and more situated practices. McNay offers the example of consumption as a technology of the self and how a deeper analysis is needed in order to distinguish conspicuous consumption or, as Bourdieu has it, a “sign of distinction” (McNay, 1994:155), from an act of resistance to normalising discourse. So the ethics of the self ‘properly’ surface at the moment when individuals critically examine the process by which they come to understand culturally determined notions of identity. The problem arising here is that, in order to make such a distinction, a more precise analysis of a more situated practice is necessary to show how technologies of the self are experienced. Issues of embodiment are important here as the lived body needs to surface for such an analysis to take place. More specifically, the conceptualisation of underwear as a technology of the self needs to be explored as an embodied practice in order to analyse the elements of reflexivity present - or otherwise - in each woman’s experience of her underwear. In Jantzen *et al.* (2006)’s work, lingerie is seen as a technology of the self because of the intense sensations it produces for the body, affecting women’s overall behaviour as well as identity. However if these intense sensations are merely reaffirming the feeling of being female according to the social ideals of femininity, then is there space for or any likelihood of resistance? Indeed, Grimshaw (1993) argues that it is difficult to distinguish which practices are those of freedom and which are mere internalisation of norms that undermine autonomy. This is according to Grimshaw where Foucault can turn against himself, since as she argues there might not be any difference between a male and a female

body-builder, when the latter is seemingly resisting imperatives around the elegant and delicate female body.

Bearing this in mind then, are we merely talking about the reflexivity exercised by the individuals when they use technologies of the self? Is any practice that is removed from the level of practical consciousness to the level of reflexivity a technology of the self? How is that process experienced? These are indeed some theoretical problems arising within the later work of Foucault. Thus I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, fields and capital as a possible framework that could allow for such an analysis and also give us an insight into the relation between these micro-level practices of the self and the macro level of the social context. The next section gives an account of Bourdieu's sociology of embodiment and how it can be utilised as a tool for analysing women's consumption of underwear and the factors that affect it.

## **2.5 Embodiment and habitus: Bourdieu and the logic of practice**

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology has been commended for bridging objective and subjective approaches to understanding the world. His way of engaging both with structuralist conceptions of the body and social phenomenology was to develop the concept of habitus. The habitus is a socially constituted system of "durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1994: 95) which produces the 'mechanisms' with which people operate in their social worlds. In other words, habitus is our acquired and learned ways of being and of doing, through socialisation and practice in a specific milieu. The habitus is the material conditions in which a person grows up, starting from early childhood, incarnated and embodied within the individual, and which is shaped primarily by his/her class positions. We can 'see' the habitus when we make taken-for-granted choices regarding our food, dress, hobbies,

activities etc. The habitus is not merely our sense of style: it is also embodied and inscribed in our body as our shape, posture, way of sitting or walking, facial expressions, tone of voice and other bodily manifestations.

To fully comprehend Bourdieu's notion of habitus we need to understand his attempt to create a theoretical model of social practice. He tries to explain what people do in their daily lives, without taking anything for granted. While Foucault asserts that social practices cannot be experienced or understood outside discourse, similarly for Bourdieu social practice is located in and cannot be understood outside time and space. Practice also has 'logic':

The practical mastery of the logic or the imminent necessity of a game – a mastery acquired by experience of the game, and one which works outside conscious control and discourse (in the way that, for instance, techniques of the body do). (Bourdieu, 1990a: 61)

Bourdieu's consideration of social life as a game presupposes the 'rules of the game' as the rules of social life and, secondly, a competence to play the game; that is, social competence. To illustrate, Lovell (2000: 13) refers to the example of women who cross-dressed and lived as men in the military in Northern Europe from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, when they were not permitted to serve. Her example shows us that the way these women acquired the necessary dispositions required by the habitus of the military indicated a highly developed 'feel for the game', inasmuch as they assumed the appropriate bodily 'hexis'. Bodily 'hexis' for Bourdieu is

political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking. (Bourdieu, 1990b: 69-70, emphasis in original)

Moreover, such practice - however competent and habitus-specific - for Bourdieu lacks conscious deliberation: that is, people take their social world for granted, having thus the illusion that everything in the social world is 'true' and 'necessary'. Bourdieu refers to this as 'doxa':

The coincidence of the objective structures and the internalized structures which provides the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience of the familiar universe, and which at the same time excludes from that experience any inquiry as to its own conditions of possibility. (Bourdieu, 1990b: 20)

This notion of 'doxa' concurs with Foucault's analysis of discourses and how they (re)produce social practices which become understood as 'natural', e.g. the act of confession as exemplified in seeking a life coach, or putting on makeup to 'embody' femininity or even undergoing plastic surgery. Bourdieu suggests that, even though people are characterised by doxa in the negotiation of their everyday lives, these practices are both conscious and unconscious. People might be strategically thinking, moving and acting although they are not conscious that they are always influenced by the values and expectations of their habitus. Bourdieu (1990b) argues that there is a pre-reflexive level of practical mastery that is constitutive of "reasonable" but not "rational behaviour" (1990a: 109). The example of a tennis player is illustrative of these pre-reflexive motions, as the player does not consciously think about his or her strokes during a game. Practical sense is converted "into motor schemes and body automatisms" of the tennis player and 'causes' a practice which is "sensible" (Bourdieu, 1990b: 69) or 'reasonable' in this context. Thus, according to Bourdieu embodied habitus results on many occasions in pre-reflexive motions that are not consciously performed, for example the body's posture or an accent in speaking. On this matter, however, Bourdieu has been criticised in terms of the impossibility, almost, for 'the feel for

the game' and the characteristics of any one habitus to be imitated. If bodily hexis which appears 'natural' is impossible to learn without experience or socialising in that habitus, then how come for example the cross-dressed women in the military could have such a strong 'feel for the game' and be so convincing in their masculine and 'soldierly' bodily hexis? (Lovell, 2000: 14).

McNay agrees that, indeed, Bourdieu has been criticised for determinism and stasis in the notion of habitus, "an inexorable physical control not dissimilar to the Foucauldian notion of discipline" (2000: 38). However, as she stresses, these critiques have failed to see Bourdieu's insistence on habitus as a generative structure. Indeed, the habitus works in two ways: "[it] is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification [...] of these practices" (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). The habitus is a system of classifications, a set of tastes and a 'world view' that shapes perceptions. Thus the everyday practice of people in their social worlds functions below the level of consciousness. As Crossley notes on this matter,

[a]n agent's habitus is an active residue or sediment of their past experiences which functions within their present, shaping their perception, thought and action and thereby shaping social practice in a regular way. (2001: 93)

So Bourdieu (2005) argues that the habitus is a long lasting system rather than a permanent one and individuals can be inventive and improvise in their practices due to this generative schema, within limits. He stresses that when an individual's dispositions, i.e. mode of behaviour, encounter conditions which are different to those which have constructed them, i.e. moving to a different context or what Bourdieu calls field, there is a dialectical confrontation "between habitus, as structured structure and objective structures" (2005: 46). I

could not think of a more illustrative example here than that of Andy Sachs in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the film adaptation of Lauren Weisberger's (2003) novel. Andy, a journalism graduate who gets a job as a junior assistant in the demanding (and very different from her own) world of fashion magazines, has a hard time adjusting to the ways of behaviour, dress and even walking of the other women in her new job. Her style, appearance and her taste are laughed at. At first Andy refuses to be 'assimilated' but eventually she accepts her new field and its associated habitus and even celebrates it. She slowly acquires new dispositions (e.g. running in high heels) as demanded but also generated by this new field. When this happens, she becomes unacceptable in her old field since her best friend and even her boyfriend cannot accept or even understand her 'new' identity.

Thus the generative power of the habitus lies in the relation between the habitus and the social situation, the field. Indeed, there is a dialogical relation here: the objective structures of a field condition the habitus and then the habitus is constitutive of the field as it gives it meanings and values. Or as McNay (2000: 38) describes it there is a "relation of conditioning" on the one hand and a "relation of cognitive construction" on the other. She explains that

[t]his dialogical relation can be understood in temporal terms where the incorporation into the body of objective tendencies of the world is lived as seemingly natural physical and emotional dispositions. (2000: 38)

The 'naturalness' of disposition - the traits and characteristics acquired within one's habitus - is central to Bourdieu's theory of the social construction of gender. In *Masculine Domination* (2001) he locates the social construction of gender in the invocation of biology to explain historically produced social difference as 'natural'. In the case of the 'categories' of women

or men hierarchical relations are embedded upon the bodily 'hexis' and then become naturalised: the acquisition of a gender identity is not conscious, rather it is a learnt process of acquired dispositions assumed to be 'natural'. The historically and socially produced power relations between women and men present the gender dualism as doxic and natural. It is, however, a historical relation between women and men that is structured within the habitus and appears as legitimate: the construction of gender relies on the historical inscriptions of dispositions that make us 'gender intelligible'.

Even though Bourdieu has not engaged directly with feminist thought, he is nevertheless critical of this stabilisation of gender relations (Bourdieu, 2001). He talks of the 'paradox of doxa', because even though doxic practices which are performed every day may have the effect of producing change, in the case of gender relations, there is a paradoxical doxic stability that produces the effect of 'natural' dualisms (Bourdieu, 2001). He suggests that gender identity is somatised, inscribed on the body and expressed as various traits and dispositions which have become ahistorically connected with gender. For example the prevailing western idea that women are more nurturing and sensitive than men is often thought to be a natural trait and not a socially constructed set of behaviours. For Bourdieu, people (social agents) submit to social 'orthodoxy' because of what he terms 'symbolic violence':

A gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition or even feeling. This extraordinary social relation thus offers an opportunity to grasp the logic of the domination exerted in the name of a symbolic principle known and recognised by the dominant and the dominated – a language (or a

pronunciation), a lifestyle (or a way of thinking, speaking and acting) – and, more generally, a distinctive property, whether emblem or stigma. (2001: 1-2)

The effects of this paradoxical doxa are the naturalisation and somatisation of social order and hierarchical relations which render masculine domination ahistorical and dehistoricised, in the form of everyday practices that draw upon the notion of the physical and psychological superiority of men over women.

Bourdieu often draws upon examples from the field of sports, since these can illustrate how bodies act as mediating entities between social and spatial “processes of power, reproduction and change” (Brown, 2006: 163). The characteristic of aggressiveness often portrayed by male athletes is an example of the dehistoricisation of masculine domination. Such a disposition is thought to be ‘natural’ and a result of evolution instead of a socially constructed disposition that reaffirms the very same field that has generated it. Bourdieu thinks that vision or observation results in identifying gender differences and dualisms in and on the body, similarly to Foucault’s notion of the surveilled body and how social surveillance recognises, expects and requires individuals to be normalised according to the prevailing discourses. For example observing a person wearing a skirt is usually taken to mean that person is a female and, if not, they are thought to be odd or abnormal. Indeed, as Brown succinctly puts it, “social agents assume the differentiated image of men and women to be natural, thus setting up a ‘circular causality’ of observation, somatisation, and naturalization” (2006: 169). He refers to the example of Heywood and Dwarkin’s study of children. When looking at women bodybuilders, girls were disgusted by the images and said that they would never want to be like these women and boys often turned away from looking at them. This lead Brown to suggest that, along with the feelings and emotions that a ‘transgressive gender vision’ can

create, there is also a physical reaction. It seems that boys have a far more intense reaction to an image of a woman that is different from what they understand as normative.

Moi (1991) likewise stresses the importance of understanding how socially produced power relations between the sexes can act on the body and become doxic, since

our habitus is at once produced and expressed through our movements, gestures, facial expressions, manners, ways of walking, and ways of looking at the world. The socially produced body is thus necessarily also a political body, or rather an embodied politics. Thus even such basic activities as teaching children how to move, dress, and eat are thoroughly political, in that they impose on them an unspoken understanding of legitimate ways to (re)present their body to themselves and others. The body [...] becomes a kind of constant reminder [...] of sociosexual power relations. (p.1031)

Indeed Bourdieu (2001) argues that social identity starts with sex identity and the experience of the parental body at home, i.e. the conventional/doxic sexual division of labour in the house. Early childhood experiences will shape the child's logic of practice in terms of the wider structural context and some features learnt during this time like posture, language, meanings and values or taste will be objectified to form the habitus. While, as argued in the previous section, the habitus is not static, it is nevertheless present in all our everyday practices, even the most mundane ones. It influences our taste and lifestyles, which is particularly important to this thesis. In the following section then I discuss Bourdieu's notions of capital, social fields and taste as an aesthetic judgment.

## 2.6 Having a sense of distinction: Bourdieu, capital and social fields

Despite Bourdieu's later works on gender, he is better known and mostly used by other authors for his theory of social class and distinction. His famous work *Distinction* (1984) develops a framework to explain the factors that influence social distinction and taste of individuals. According to Bourdieu, and as we have seen, the habitus is a system that is acquired by a literal integration of structures and practices. It consists of 'structured structuring structures'. So an agent is involved in structured practices; e.g. an art lover who was born in an art-loving family - structured structures - then uses these dispositions to appreciate art - structuring structures (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990a). Different habituses thus produce different lifestyles which "become sign systems that are socially qualified (as 'distinguished', 'vulgar' etc.)" (1984: 173). Taste is the "generative formula" of lifestyles (*ibid.*) - that is, the way that people relate to objects and practices - and ultimately marks the dispositions that define people's sense of distinction or difference. As Bourdieu's famous quote goes: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (1984: 6). Taste is first of all distaste, disgust related to the taste of others. It is the predisposition to appropriate classified and classifying objects or practices (Bourdieu, 1984: 173), which it transforms into distinctive signs and features, expressive of the agent's habitus and class condition. Taste is moreover a disposition that marks social boundaries as it demonstrates cultural classifications.

Bourdieu's map of cultural taste in *Distinction* argues that tastes and preferences correspond to levels of education and habitus-specific social class. He asserts that the petit bourgeoisie is the class that has the most difficulty in distinguishing a sense of taste because they want to differentiate themselves from the working class. However, they lack the education for/of 'legitimate taste', and on the other hand they lack the dispositions that have, as an effect, the

‘naturalness’ of ‘good’ taste and ‘sophisticated’ aesthetics, like the ones that the upper class has ‘learnt’ since birth. For Bourdieu furthermore individuals’ struggles for improvement in their social position are characterised by the manipulation of their cultural representations of the field they are situated in. These struggles have partly to do with their effort to establish the superiority of their taste and their lifestyle over others.

So the other crucial dimension of social practice in the work of Bourdieu is the principle of ‘social fields’. Even though I have previously referred to his notion of the field, it is important to clearly define it. In an interview with Wacquant, Bourdieu gives a more explicit definition of what this notion means:

I define a field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). (Bourdieu cited in Wacquant, 1989: 39)

The concept of social fields has been widely used and is especially useful in studies of cultural production and consumption because it helps to analyse a particular social practice and the relations between all the participants: “consumers and producers, individuals and institutions, subjectivities, and structures” (Maguire, 2008: 7; see also Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). Even though Bourdieu often uses the notions of field, social field or cultural field synonymously and with no explanation, he nevertheless defines the field as a social arena within which social struggle takes place. His notion of fields has been widely

used to understand specific social arenas, for example the field of fitness (Maguire, 2008). Maguire explains that a cultural field is a network of producers, consumers, texts and sites that produces particular meanings for the individuals in that field. A new cultural field can only emerge when there is a space for new cultural goods, created by social change and new cultural conditions. It also requires ‘players’, both consumers and producers who will identify that the goods of the field, as well as the field itself (including its rules), are both legitimate and important. This, however, is a matter of having the appropriate dispositions embedded in each individual’s habitus: the participating social actors will need to have the preferences and taste required for the field to make sense. As Maguire points out,

embedded in particular socio-cultural conditions, fields involve the interconnections between a core group of consumers, a defined set of nodes for participation and commentary upon participation (particular sites, products, and texts), and field-specific forms of capital that enable the struggles between actors – both producers and consumers. (2008: 7)

Another illustrative example of a cultural field is that of fashion which, like all fields, can be mapped according to the relations between its players who are responsible for designing, producing, marketing and retailing clothes as well as consuming them. According to Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) the field of fashion can be seen as a set of relations between these institutions and agents just as Bourdieu looks at the French field of high fashion in the 1970s in ‘Le Couturier et sa Griffes’ (Bourdieu and Delsaut, cited in Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006), and more specifically at the relations between designers and couture houses. Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) offer the example of London Fashion Week, an important event which can be defined as an institution within the field of fashion. It makes the field visible and also contributes to its reproduction. What they find important is how the visible boundaries of the field are so evident in the case of London Fashion Week since only those key players in the

field, mainly celebrities, important designers, journalists and buyers, are allowed to enter. Thus, similar to the field of fitness, key players in the field render it legitimate and important. The habitus and Bourdieu's notion of taste and capital are at play here since only the agents with the specific dispositions and with the appropriate capital can enter the event. This perhaps appears rather different from the field of fitness which seems as if it is open for everyone, but then again the field of fitness does not entail that players would just engage in exercising. The field comprises of various sites, products and texts, like producers and consumers of exercise equipment, sports clothes and accessories, nutrition supplements and so on that require some levels of 'legitimate knowledge' to be 'utilised' appropriately, i.e. cultural capital that not all people possess.

The accumulation of capital by agents of any one field is indeed central to the concept of social fields. Each field has four different forms of capital: economic (the monetary capital that one has), cultural (legitimate knowledge of a particular field, e.g. knowledge of the history of fashion), social (important relations with key players in the field) and symbolic capital (the prestige that individuals have in their fields) (Bourdieu, 1986; Jenkins, 1992; Crossley, 2001; Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). For cultural capital in particular, Bourdieu has emphasised that it is helpful in understanding embodied behaviours and experiences of agents in the field. Cultural capital includes dispositions or competences that can be 'exchanged' for other forms of capital according to social settings, e.g. literacy, posture, accent and other abilities that suffice in a particular context in order to 'impress' others (Bourdieu, 1986). Moreover as Crossley (2001: 106) notes, cultural capital

comes in three basic forms; an objectified form such as the paintings or books one might own; an institutionalised form, by which [Bourdieu] means qualifications and other official

documents of cultural standing; and an embodied form, by which he means the manifold embodied competencies which carry a cultural value.

Embodied capital is particularly important as it indicates that a person has various dispositions, including her bodily hexis, which articulate or demonstrate a legitimate knowledge of the field, similar to Bourdieu's notion of the habitus. However the term capital assumes that this knowledge can be exchanged for a form of compensation that suits that person's goals. For example fashion 'gurus' are usually individuals who have those required dispositions that enable them to distinguish fashionable styles and who have a specific bodily hexis (their personal style of dress and overall appearance) which is a visible marker of their social standing. They can exchange this knowledge for monetary compensation when they style other people as their job.

Shilling (2003) has further developed the concept of embodied cultural capital to take account of other aspects of the body that could function as capital in a field. He expands the notion in order to include other acquired traits of the body, such as fitness for example, that could be transformed into sources of capital, either social such as the development of social networks, economic such as money, goods or services, or cultural such as education. He proposes that the body which has what he calls 'physical capital' is

a possessor of power, status and distinctive symbolic forms which is integral to the accumulation of various resources. The production of physical capital refers to the translation of bodily participation in work, leisure and other fields into different forms of capital. The production of physical capital refers to the development of bodies in ways which are recognized as possessing value in social fields, while the conversion of physical

capital refers to the translation of bodily participation in work, leisure and other fields into different forms of capital. (2003: 111)

Physical capital can be distinctive body traits that are objectified according to the field an individual is part of and function as capital. An example of this is professional models who are able to maintain or mould their bodies into the slim shape required by the Western aesthetics of the fashion industry. Models need to have certain body traits, usually height, extreme slenderness, elegant features and long legs, in order to be able to work in the field of fashion and exchange this physical capital into other forms of capital, such as economic capital (the money they earn as models), social capital (the relations and connections with other key players in the field of fashion such as important designers and especially visible when a model becomes a designer's 'muse') and symbolic capital (the prestige or fame they acquire, for example supermodels who achieve celebrity status).

The theoretical framework that Bourdieu develops with the notions of the field and capital is, according to Entwistle (2000b: 37), also very useful for the study of dress. She notes that dress is an embodied practice which is always defined as a system of choices according to the "lived experience of the woman, her class, race, age, occupation and so on" (2000b: 37).

Entwistle suggests that

[d]ress in everyday life is a practical negotiation between the fashion system as a structured system, the social conditions of everyday life such as class, gender and the like as well as the 'rules' or norms governing particular social situations. [...] [Habitus] enables us to talk about dress as a personal attempt to orientate ourselves to particular circumstances and thus recognizes the structuring influences of the social world on the one hand, and the agency of individuals who make choices as to what to wear on the other. (2000b: 37)

Underwear as part of dress, I assert, is also part of this web of ‘structured, structuring structures’ as it is an element of the negotiation between fashion, gender and class and the norms regarding what a woman is/should be like. Following Entwistle’s argument above, when women make particular choices regarding their underwear it seems that they recognise on the one hand the specific structures in the social context they are located in, i.e. the choice of a supportive sports bra in the case of women rugby players, but on the other hand they make individual choices about what to wear, i.e. the choice of a famous and expensive brand of sports bra in the same example.

Entwistle (2000b) also turns her attention to how habitus can be utilised in understanding how dress styles are gendered and how gender is reproduced through dress. She uses the example of workplace dress and specifically the suit as a workplace uniform which is designated by the habitus of the masculine western workplace. The suit is said to be hiding the ‘sexed’ features of the body – even though cultural imperatives around femininity have influenced dress in the workplace to make it more suitable to the female body, such as slim line jackets and tailored waist lines. Entwistle concludes then that

understanding women’s dress for the professional workplace, how they come to wear the clothes they do, requires situating their body within a very particular social space and acknowledging the workings of a particular *habitus*. (2000b: 38, emphasis in original)

In a similar fashion, we can use Bourdieu’s framework of habitus, capital and fields to understand the consumption and use of women’s underwear. Bourdieu’s theory can help account for the embodied experience of actually choosing what underwear to wear. This framework can be used in order to give attention to the lived female body and its experiences.

We can further see underwear as an important part of the cultural field of fashion and I propose that underwear, as part of dress, can be seen as part of a woman's embodied cultural capital according to the requirements of the field she is situated in: it can be converted into other forms of capital. Underwear can be considered as a part of women's embodied cultural capital in various ways. Since it is usually hidden from view it can support women's dress and bodies in everyday life and, in specific situations where dress is converted into other forms of capital, underwear works towards achieving that. An illustration of the above situation would be the conversion of dress from physical capital to social capital in the field of Hollywood cinema and at particular events like the Oscars. The outerwear of women at this event is imperative in showing their social position, their cultural, social, symbolic and economic capital. The particularly extravagant dresses that women participants wear must be supported with the necessary underwear (when it is needed of course), in order for the dress to 'perform' in this highly and strictly surveilled field. Unfortunate situations where a bra strap might slip over a woman's shoulder, or if 'normal' panties are seen under her expensive Valentino dress, could cost the woman dearly in reputational terms and future earning power. Janet Jackson's 'wardrobe malfunction' in 2004's Super Bowl 38 in USA is an illustrative example of how underwear can work as embodied cultural capital. While Janet Jackson sang with Justin Timberlake during the halftime of the show, he accidentally tore part of her outfit, revealing that she was wearing nipple protectors and no bra. The unfortunate event created a massive furore by the media, indicative also of the imperatives around how a woman needs to be presented.

'Push-up' bras are another example of how underwear can work as embodied cultural capital for women. The famous advertisements for Playtex Wonderbra in 1994 featuring Eva Herzigova wearing a push-up bra shows how the bust can be shaped and then objectified to

fit social imperatives around sexiness. The breasts are indeed objectified as the advertisement's slogan shows: *'Hello Boys'*. The Wonderbra push-up bra has been further developed by other underwear specialists and is now available in the market as an ultra bra or miracle bra. It functions as a 'natural' enhancement of breasts and creates the illusion of a bigger and more 'lifted' bust. With the illusion of a different bust size or shape, women can use their appearance to achieve other forms of capital, for example a small breasted television news presenter would appear more womanly if she looks like she has a bigger bust, especially since usually news presenters are shown from the waist up.

The example of the Wonderbra also illustrates how underwear can be seen as an important part of the cultural field of fashion. The variety in women's underwear, such as the push-up bra, minimiser bra, sports bra and others, shows that there is space for development of new cultural products because dynamic social and cultural settings allow for such developments. Underwear specialists are, relatedly, involved in creating products that target specific segments of the market such as pregnant women or women doing sports; different types of underwear that are targeted to support women's bodies in their different life stages or during specific activities. As the concept of cultural field suggests, it is a network of sites (shops and internet retailers), texts (adverts) and agents (producers and consumers) amongst whom there must be a general appreciation of the 'rules of the field/game' and of the products it produces. Each woman's habitus is likewise important as it comprises the dispositions that have as an effect their taste in underwear. The use of push-up bras for example shows a dialogical relation between the field of fashion and habitus. Its production is juxtaposed with the habitus-specific practices that women engage with in their attempt to fit into social imperatives around femininity, i.e. accentuating their bosom. As Entwistle (2000b) suggests

this entails also a sense of agency as women are active agents in the transformation of their bodies into sources of capital within specific fields.

To reiterate, following my discussion in the previous section it seems that a woman's habitus (her various dispositions) and thus her taste (the way that these dispositions mark her perceptions of objects or practices) affect the choices she makes in underwear. Underwear is after all a product and its consumption will depend upon the taste of each woman as manifested by her habitus. Thus we must see both its material as well as its symbolic value to women's bodies and identity. The dispositions embedded in the habitus affect all practices of consumption. Lury (1996) provides an example of taste and preferences which can be helpful in understanding divisions of taste - and thus in consumption of products - in contemporary societies and amongst consumers:

A person who carries out manual labour, and whose access to basics of sustenance and comfort is not guaranteed, has a respect and a desire for the sensual, physical and immediate. An individual who has been brought up in the abstractions of education and mental labour and who is certain of obtaining daily necessities cultivates a distance from these needs, and affects a taste based in respect and desire for the abstract, distanced and formal. These objective conditions are interiorized through habitus as desire in taste (Lury, 1996: 86).

We could juxtapose this example with that of dress. Designers' clothes present trends and changes in the fashion system, which are then often followed by the mass production of similar designs in the wider market. A person who is able to recognise these trends and changes before they are mass consumed would often be someone who was brought up in the material conditions that allowed for such dispositions to take place. For example she would

wear expensive brands, or would be interested in fashion and style magazines. It is that ability to distinguish fashion trends and have the competence to make any form of dress seem fashionable (almost literally make fashion out of anything) that differentiates this person from someone who might be wearing expensive brands but does not possess these specific dispositions shaped within their habitus. This is what symbolic capital also entails, levels of legitimised cultural capital. In a later section I will revisit this issue to suggest that attempts to advance class mobility face this exact obstacle of 'legitimate' knowledge that middle-class people for example possess.

Of course here we can argue that, in this sense, we cannot escape our class conditions which are embedded in the habitus. However, as Lury suggests, "although the habitus provides a framework of action, it is not static, and can be shaped by the outcome of the interaction of the strategies adopted by different social groups" (1996: 86). Moreover, and as suggested previously, in the case of dress, other factors play a crucial role in determining choices of dress in everyday life, such as the 'rules' of social situations *vis-à-vis* fashion norms; a negotiation within structured systems. The field of fashion is a system that adapts to as well as producing social imperatives, e.g. the introduction of mass produced bras after the development of cheaper materials as mentioned above, or the introduction of strings or thongs that resulted from the need for invisible underwear to better support outerwear, specifically as it became tighter and more revealing. Thus the consumption of underwear can also be seen as a negotiation within a structured system. However because it is mostly hidden, not visible in everyday life practices, it is even more interesting to pay more attention to this negotiation between the structuring system and agency in terms of the choices of underwear that each woman makes.

## 2.7 'What it feels like for a girl'

While in the previous sections I have discussed how the works of Foucault and Bourdieu could be utilised in this thesis, I have not expanded on how these works have been utilised by feminists in their attempt to make sense of what it feels like being a woman. Indeed, even though neither Foucault or Bourdieu offer a specific thesis on the lived gendered body, their works have served as tools for other commentators to understand on the one hand “the centrality of the [female] body as a site for workings of discourse and power” (Pringle, 2005: 261) and on the other hand to understand how “it is possible to link the humdrum details of everyday life to a more general social analysis of power” (Moi, 1991: 1020). I have already discussed in previous sections in this chapter how the works of Foucault and Bourdieu have been utilised by feminists such as Bordo, who has used Foucault to analyse anorexia nervosa or Entwistle, who uses Foucault to explain how specific types of dress such as power dressing entail a sense of self-monitoring but also work as a technology of the self. Also I referred to Maguire and how she uses Bourdieu’s notion of cultural field to explore the field of fitness and the struggles and negotiations of the various forms of capital that take place within this social arena. In this section I will be drawing some of these commentators, amongst others, together, and extending this analysis to emphasise precisely how Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s works can serve as a useful framework for this thesis, given the primary role of gender in my research questions.

Bartky (1988) uses the early Foucault to examine the disciplinary practices that produce a recognisably feminine body, in both appearance and movements. She argues that prevailing discourses produce a female body which is thin and youthful, constantly preoccupied with its shape and general configuration. Similarly Bordo (1988; 2004) argues that modern western imperatives around femininity have resulted in pathological epidemics amongst young

women and adolescent girls, such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa. Particularly anorexia nervosa has become for women in the late twentieth and twenty first century what hysteria was for women in the nineteenth century (Bartky, 1988: 65) or what Bordo (1988) calls the crystallisation of a widespread cultural obsession. Indeed Bordo (1990a; 1993; 2004) utilises Foucault to account for the conscious involvement of women in the “bodily tyrannies of fashion” (1993: 189). She argues that Foucault’s conception of modern power, a “non authoritarian, non-conspiratorial and non-orchestrated power” (1993: 190), a micro-power, is what can best explain the production and normalisation of bodies to “serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination” (*ibid.*). Bordo finds that the most important appropriation of Foucault by feminists is that of how the prevailing forms of subjectivity are not imposed on individuals through external coercion but through self-surveillance and self-normalisation. This is crucial in order to explain how disciplinary practices like dieting, exercising, hurting the body with fashionable artefacts like high heels or uncomfortable underwear, are not used by women because they are imposed by a specific ‘disciplinarian’. Indeed, Bartky (1988: 75) asks “Who is the top sergeant in the disciplinary regime of femininity?”. The answer is no one and everyone. The discursive constructions of femininity now permeate all aspects of our lives especially now that with the available information and communication technologies such as the Internet or WAP mobile phone images of various versions of femininity are ever-present and ever-circulating. Shifts in the imperatives around femininity, e.g. from the curvaceous Marilyn Monroe to the adolescent body-type of Kate Moss, are (re)produced and proliferated as norms, for example through these images. But as Bartky (1988: 75) says

[t]he absence of a formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural. [... O]n the one hand, discipline is something imposed

on subjects of an 'essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical' system of authority. [...]

But discipline can be sought voluntarily as well...

In that sense, women are not necessarily held at gunpoint to engage in routine practices of beauty (Bartky, 1988). Some women for example would argue that they put on their sexiest underwear when they are home alone because they want to feel sexy even in their most private moments and when no one else is looking. The logical conclusion of this argument is that, the process of self-surveillance has been internalised to such a degree because we act as willing participants in various practices. These on the one hand are disciplinary practices because they delimit who we 'are' and can 'be', but on the other they have the potential to be transformative for our identity projects, because they comprise a certain degree of reflexivity (Armstrong, 1993; Howson, 2005). Power in this case is indeed not imposed from above: it is a relationship between actors free to act and also to resist (Grosz, 1994).

The issues of agency and resistance have been further developed by Foucauldian feminists, by examining the ways in which female identities are constructed through the internalisation of these disciplinary practices. The literature on women's sports has made particular use of Foucault's work. Chase (2006) for example draws on Foucault's account of disciplinary practices in modern society to examine how these produce the 'docile bodies' of women playing rugby. However she also draws on various authors (see Chapman, 1997; Markula, 2003; 2004) who have used the late Foucault to show how women in sports exercise a degree of freedom when resisting normalising practices of femininity. For example, Chase (2006) suggests that women who play rugby realise that this specific sport will shape them quite differently than the ideal and normative feminine body. She argues that the women in her study

actively work to construct athletic and powerful bodies that challenge ideals of normative feminine bodies [...] They see their bodies as resistant and transgressive, and as a result, construct their bodies as undisciplined and demonstrate an acute awareness of the ways in which their bodies resist ideas of normative femininity. (2006: 245)

Similarly, in their analysis of female bodybuilding, Mansfield and McGinn (1993) argue that women bodybuilders are constantly aware of their resistance to feminine ideals in a field that is overly ironic and contradictory with regard to issues around the relationship between muscularity and femininity. Mansfield and McGinn suggest that female bodybuilders are conscious of these contradictions, as there is an important difference between bodybuilding and any other exercise. Women who enter a gym with the purpose of weight training are not just choosing between different exercise routines: instead they are choosing “between a perceived masculine or feminine process of altering the body image” (1993: 58). Notwithstanding this, bodybuilding is a particular type of exercise which demands a highly disciplined routine of the body, which includes rigorous physical training and a healthy diet. Bordo (1988; 2004) argues that body building is about feeling the accomplishment of mastering the body and the self. This feeling of accomplishment derives from two sources, first being the comfort of knowing that you can overcome any obstacle in order to accomplish your goals and the other being the thrill of feeling in total control of how your body is shaped. That resembles, according to Bordo (1988), the dramatic self-discipline and control that anorexic people demonstrate. Thus, on the one hand exercising, dieting or playing sports seem to be regimes that produce the body as ‘docile’. On the other hand women involved in these practices also use them as empowering practices that enable them to manage their bodies and to construct their identities while opposing perceived female characteristics of powerlessness and vulnerability.

Indeed the late Foucault has been particularly influential for feminist analysis of women's resistance and acts of freedom. As Thorpe (2008) notes, even though Foucault is not clear as to whether technologies of the self can necessarily lead to the transformation of power relations, some feminists have used his framework to demonstrate how technologies of the self can have a 'liberational' intent. She uses the example of female snowboarders and how they critically interact with discursive constructions of femininity and specifically female snowboarders within media texts to "engage in active self-fashioning to produce sites of contestation over the meanings and contours of discursive constructions of femininity" (2008: 218). Indeed, Loyd (cited in Markula and Pringle, 2006: 152, emphasis in original) stresses that any practice of femininity has

the potential to operate transgressively if it is embedded in the double act of critical self-stylization. [...] It is not the activity of self-fashioning in itself that is crucial. It is the ways in which that self-fashioning, *when allied to critique*, can produce sites of contestation over the meanings and contours of identity, and over the ways in which certain practices are mobilised.

This reflexive, self-critical process resembles what Jantzen *et al.* (2006: 179) describe as a "field of contradictions". As they explain,

[l]ingerie 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. (2006: 179)

Thus, looking at underwear as a technology of the self implies that it is a concrete embodied practice that produces and guides women into the 'right' use of their bodies and towards their interpretations of being appropriately feminine. The contradictions here are evident again, since being feminine is following specific disciplinary practices as already discussed, i.e. wearing the 'right' underwear. However, in the case of underwear and because it is usually hidden, it is often used for sensing the body in a different way or which might defy a woman's existing self-image (Jantzen *et al.*, 2006). For example wearing 'sexy' underwear at home can create feelings and sensations for the body and the overall self that can have implications for identity or, as Jantzen *et al.* (2006: 198-9) put it, "transforming an ordinary weekday into an extraordinary sensation". This transformation is central to these authors' study because it shows how a woman can transform herself into 'a woman to the backbone'. It demonstrates exactly how normative identities are embodied and then transformed through the willing, perhaps even empowering, participation of actors and with the use of various technologies, such as underwear.

Similarly to Foucault Pierre Bourdieu's social theory has also been critiqued for its disavowal of feminist theories of the reproduction of culture and power. I have suggested that Foucault can be connected to Bourdieu, moreover, as indicated in many cases in my discussion in the previous sections. According to Adkins (2004) recent use of Bourdieu's social theory by feminists is not necessarily concerned with a sociologically defined gender. Instead she argues there is a much more dispersed relationship between the social and the concept of gender. Some of the concerns emerging in feminist theory that uses Bourdieu's social theory are

the theorization of social action as always embodied (of the social as incorporated into the body), of power as subtly inculcated through the body, of social action as generative, and in

[Bourdieu's] emphasis on the politics of cultural authorization, recognition and social position taking [...] (Adkins, 2004: 5)

Relatedly, Moi points out that Bourdieu can develop a microtheory of power. His theoretical model of social practice takes into account more than simply what people do in their daily lives but without neglecting social life. This is important because it allows for an analysis of routine and mundane everyday practices of life or, as Moi (1991: 1019, emphasis original) emphatically puts it, "Bourdieu makes sociological theory out of *everything*". Thus practices such as categorising your underwear as 'work' underwear or 'going out' underwear, or disliking specific colours or fabrics of underwear, can be analysed using Bourdieu's framework of habitus, capital and the field.

In a similar tone Skeggs (2004: 21, emphasis in original) argues that Bourdieu's social theory offers "*explanatory power*", missing from feminist sociology. Firstly, Skeggs argues, he manages to link objective structures to subjective experience. Also, he analyses social space and how individuals become mobile within the various fields by carrying different volumes of capitals. Lastly, he brings reflexivity as a methodological insight which is crucial in feminist theory and critique.

Indeed, Bourdieu's metaphorical notions of capital and those of habitus and fields have been widely used in feminist social theory (Moi, 1991; Lawler, 1999; 2000; McRobbie, 2002; 2009; Fowler, 2003; Skeggs, 1997, 2004). Some of these works emphasise how Bourdieu's social theory can be extremely useful in explaining social mobility in terms of class. For example Lower's (1999) study of mother-daughter relationships was extended to examining class formations through the lens of Bourdieu's notions of symbolic capital and habitus. Lawler's participants were working-class born women who moved into the middle class via

the acquisition of economic capital (marriage) or cultural capital (intelligence gained by education). These women express taste judgements different to their mothers in the process of defining themselves as middle class, alluding to how their cultural capital has become legitimised in this class mobility. In fact Lawler points out that these women's cultural capital (intelligence and taste) was as thoroughly inscribed as if it were innate, being "less about what they owned than about *who they were*" (1999: 9, emphasis in original). This allows Lawler to see some of her participants' narratives of this class mobility as an actualisation of their 'real' selves, which, she then argues, fail due to some expressions of 'lack' of legitimised knowledge or 'feel for the game' of the middle class. This results, as Lawler argues, in shame:

[W]hen cultural capital cannot be converted into symbolic capital, when a specific habitus is not fully 'inhabited', it is not what you own but *who you are* that can be exposed and uncovered. (1999: 18, emphasis in original)

The feeling of shame about not successfully or comprehensively acquiring middle class habitus is also examined by Angela McRobbie (2004; 2009). Her analysis of British makeover shows demonstrates how shame and guilt characterise working-class women who seek help from the experts in order to acquire this habitus. She also illustrates how social divisions between women are (re)produced via the cultural and media fields and that these divisions are in themselves highly feminised, arguing that women's bodies and appearance articulates class divisions. The makeover shows that McRobbie analyses turn around the idea of working-class or lower middle-class women demonstrating a 'poor' sense of taste and being in need of the help of cultural intermediaries, i.e. fashion gurus. She argues that the notions of habitus, fields and capital are important in this case because they illustrate precisely the social realignment between class and gender taking place within these shows

and in contemporary Britain as a whole. These makeover shows attempt to transform the participants into middle-class women by instructing them how to dress, behave and how to take care of their overall presentation. This is an attempt at the transformation of habitus and it is seemingly achieved by momentary feeling of thrill and glamour once the transformation has finished. As McRobbie points out

[t]he habitus is to be brought into line so as to conform with, as Bourdieu would say, the 'needs and norms' of the emergent consumer-dominated cultural field, and by these means women are both individualized and respectabilized. (2004: 104)

While this thesis does not emphasise class, nevertheless class dispositions are deeply incarnated into habitus, influencing thus the set of judgements women might make when it comes to the underwear they choose. While class mobility is the central theme in the examples above, other issues such as the workings of habitus as world-view shaping the perceptions of women and of taste as an aesthetic judgement are also important in this context. So when it comes to buying the 'right' underwear taste is an important aspect in this process and it also links with how women might relate to their body.

A further illustrative work of how habitus and capital can illuminate the relationship between women and their bodies is that of Dumas *et al.* (2005). In an attempt to draw the connections between age and bodily appearance, Dumas *et al.* (2005) use the concepts of habitus and economic and cultural capitals to understand how older women relate to and feel about their ageing bodies. Their research was premised on how the body and its evident natural features show the deepest dispositions of habitus: its shape, dimension and other visible forms of the body reveal the relationship a woman has with her body, in terms of how she treats it and takes care of it. The use of various techniques and practices such as ornamentation of the

body, diets, make up, moisturisers, cosmetic surgery etceter are only some of the ways in which this taking care of the body was described. Perhaps unsurprisingly much of Dumas *et al.*'s data suggested that there is a linear relationship between economic capital and the use of these techniques: the less economic capital their participants had, the less the use of these practices and techniques for the body was. However, they also found that women who possessed higher cultural capital spoke of inner-beauty and gave emphasis to the use of practices such as physical exercise, diets and other, for the better presentation of their body, thus using their bodies to attain a sense of distinction. Some of their participants for example sought for information about clothes and cosmetics in order to distinguish quality. Thus, the authors stress:

[W]omen's desire for social distinction [was] most apparent in situations of *intra*-class social dynamics. Many of the affluent participants expressed judgments – their likes and dislikes – about affluent class factions that followed a particular logic of distinction, which might explain their heightened interest in features of bodily appearance other than strictly physical beauty; they were seen and used as markers of differentials in later life. (2005: 898, emphasis in original)

What is evident from this research is that social class is particularly important in how women perceive issues like the presentation of their bodies. For these women ageing was important in that they could distance themselves from fashion norms, i.e. getting away with wearing perhaps not too fashionable but yet comfortable clothes; still the levels of economic and cultural capital differentiated working-class women and middle-class women in terms of their relationship with their body. For Bourdieu, the inherent dispositions that social class provides are important and evident when it comes to how the body is presented. However, echoing Bourdieu the authors also argue that

the age-related conceptions presented [in this study] are compelling examples of how older women both internalise a structure of age-norms and define and legitimise an altered conception of bodily appearance in old age. (2005: 900)

This section's objective was to draw on some Foucauldian and Bourdieusian feminism and related works to illustrate how their theories can become tools for analysing women's social lives and practices. While Foucauldian feminism explains how women indulge in self-disciplinary and self-monitoring practices satisfying social imperatives and norms of femininity, other feminists have drawn on Bourdieu to explain issues like the social mobility of women. Such analyses are important to this thesis because they show the importance of Foucault's and Bourdieu's work in exploring how identity construction can take place through a many times mundane or routine process of choosing and wearing the 'right' underwear.

## **2.8 Summary**

This chapter has explored issues around identity formation and subjectivity. One of the concerns of this thesis is how the experiences that women report regarding underwear can be seen as part of their identity construction. Thus, it is important to set a theoretical framework that will allow us to understand how this 'fashioning' takes place. I have drawn upon two conceptual tools that form this framework, notwithstanding my admission that other concepts and theories could have been used in my attempt to understand identity construction. However, I see identity as an ongoing process of becoming, a project that feeds on the different social milieux in which women are situated and the way women reflect upon the effects these social milieux have on them. I find that the two conceptual tools I have drawn

upon in the above discussion are appropriate for analysing the relationship between their experiences of underwear and their identity projects.

I have firstly discussed the 'regulated body' using Foucault's work on how regimes of power and knowledge act upon the body. Foucault draws attention to the constructed and, thus, alterable elements of identity. While his earliest work emphasises the docile body that disciplinary regimes inexorably work upon, opening his work to criticisms of determinism, his later work shifts towards a more reflexive engagement with how individuals come to act upon their selves through various practices, the technologies of the self. Identity is not imposed on people due to power from 'above'. Instead, individuals actively establish identity through 'self-stylisation', a reflexive form of fashioning identity. However Foucault's concept of technologies of the self could not alone explain the socio-cultural and psychological factors that affect women when choosing what underwear to wear.

I have thus incorporated Bourdieu's work on habitus and practice to complement Foucault's work in this conceptual framework, as far as further conceptualising taste as aesthetic judgment and its relationship to identity projects goes. In a similar fashion to Foucault, Bourdieu also locates power relations as acting upon the body and the dispositions of individuals but it is his notion of habitus that is more important for this thesis as it provides an understanding of how the social is incorporated into the corporeal. This system of dispositions described by the habitus is what makes bodies 'conform' to the given 'demands' of a field. I propose that we see underwear as an important part of the cultural field of fashion and underwear as embodied cultural capital, in an attempt to explain how underwear is mobilised by women in order to achieve other forms of 'capital'. The notion of habitus can be used in understanding how particular dispositions come to the surface when women consume

underwear. Buying underwear, as with most consumption practices, is after all a matter of 'taste' and taste is the way that people relate to objects and everyday practices, which ultimately shows which dispositions are surfacing and their sense of distinction.

Finally I have used Foucauldian feminists like Bartky and Bordo to emphasise the importance of looking at the actual experience of being a woman and what it feels like. The title of this chapter, as well as the thesis title, purposefully plays with the phrase 'fashioning identity', to show both the idea that underwear is part of the fashion system, a socially and discursively constructed system of meanings, as well as to show that identity is a project that needs to be worked on. Thus women mobilise various technologies in order to construct different aspects of female identity. It is important to see how the works of Foucault as well as Bourdieu have been utilised by feminists to show how power and the social influence our understanding of how identity is constructed. Disciplinary practices such as dieting, exercising or playing sports have been analysed from a Foucauldian perspective in order to show how they produce a recognisably feminine body. However it was argued that the most important appropriation of Foucault by feminism is that of how the prevailing forms of subjectivity are somatised through self-surveillance and self-normalisation. Even though some of these practices are disciplinary practices, women also show a sense of reflexivity and resistance that has an important effect on their identities. Women playing arguably masculine sports like rugby or women bodybuilders are examples of this resistance to normative identities. The last section also argued that women use self-stylisation as a way of developing a sense of 'who I am'. Underwear can indeed be mobilised to serve as a technology of the self because of the feelings and sensations it can induce in the body while being ostensibly hidden from view. However underwear needs also to be seen in terms of the symbolic meanings it produces for women and 'taste' arguably is an important factor of determining women's sense of

distinction. The notions of habitus and capital can indeed serve as a micro-theory of how 'taste' affects women's underwear consumption habits. Even though the last part of the final section discussed feminist and related works regarding class mobility or class appropriated practices, they nevertheless illustrate how dispositions embodied and incarnated deep into a woman's habitus can influence and shape her perceptions and set of judgements. Habitus, as well as the volumes of capital possessed by women can influence even the relationship with their bodies as demonstrated by Dumas *et al.* (2005). Some of these issue are evident in this thesis too and will be further examined in later chapters.

While this chapter aimed to set a conceptual framework that sees identity as a process and how underwear can be part of its fashioning, the next chapter will deal with extant empirical evidence around the actual consumption of underwear. After all underwear is a commodity. If as I propose, we should consider it as part of the cultural field of fashion, we need to examine all the elements of this network, namely the sites, the texts, the 'rules of the game' and aspects of production and consumption within this field.

## Chapter 3 Consuming underwear

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided an account of the theoretical and conceptual tools that I am using to understand how female identity is constructed through choosing, buying and wearing underwear. I drew from two theoretical frameworks to help me interpret the factors that influence women when buying underwear and the experiences they report regarding their underwear: Michel Foucault's docile body as well as the technologies of the self, and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of taste, habitus, fields and capital. This chapter aims at locating underwear as a commodity within the fashion system and as a consumption practice that invokes meanings for the consumer and has symbolic connotations for the wearer. Thus it is important first to look at some of the discussion around consumption and the consuming subject, and how consumer culture has emerged as one of the ways through which identities are negotiated and (re)constructed. Gendered consumption and its importance is also one the key themes of this chapter, and particularly how women and consumption practices have been inextricably linked.

This chapter argues that consumption is a social and cultural process and not just the economic process of acquiring goods (or services) against their monetary value. I consider consumption in the same terms as Zukin and Maguire. That is,

*as an institutional field*, i.e., a set of interconnected economic and cultural institutions centered on the production of commodities for individual demand. (2004: 175, emphasis in original)

Consumption in this broad sociological sense is seen on the one hand as mass consumption produced by structural and economic changes in western society especially and on the other as a consumer culture that is produced by cultural changes in society where individuals use commodities to define their way of life (lifestyle) and to negotiate their identities. These issues will be discussed shortly.

Consumption is also part of cultural reproduction. Everyday consumption practices reveal how social agents use their cultural resources, e.g. language and material objects, to shape their social world and form relations (Slater, 1997). For Slater consumption is all cultural. He argues that even the simple act of eating results in cultural reproduction not only because the food you prepare is usually part of an ethnic cuisine but also because eating is also part of social rituals like how you eat the food, where and with whom. As Slater (1997: 132) puts it

[i]n order to 'have a need' and act on it we must be able to interpret sensations, experiences and situations and we must be able to make sense of (as well as transform) various objects, actions, resources in relation to these needs.

People consume material objects, images and experiences to give meaning to their lives, to 'fashion' their selves (themselves) and to construct identities. Commodities thus need to be understood beyond their economic meaning or value, since consumption has now transcended the mere purchase and use of material goods, becoming a social practice that informs and reproduces social order, conformity and identity.

Relatedly Featherstone (1991) states that one way of looking at consumption is by exploring its experiential dimension and the pleasure and emotions that it offers to

consumers. This chapter will emphasise this particular perspective on consumer culture since the thesis tries to draw connections between identity and the act of buying and wearing underwear, focusing on its emotional aspects, even in its more 'mundane' form such as buying underwear for work or for the gym. This framework allows me to understand the consumption of underwear not only as the exchange of money for goods, but as a process that has symbolic meaning for the individual woman; for example how each woman decides what is the 'right' underwear for her, or how each woman decides that one underwear shop is more appropriate for her than other shops (e.g. Marks & Spencer's vs. Ann Summers).

With the following sections I have no intention of concentrating on the study of consumption from a historical perspective, nor to review the vast literature that deals with the various perspectives on consumption, as this is not relevant to this thesis. My aim is rather to concentrate on everyday consumption practices and their importance in how consumer culture is (re)constructed, how it is part of our negotiation of our identities, but also how it is informed by gender. As Bristor and Fischer (1993: 519) argue "[b]ecause gender is a pervasive filter through which individuals experience their social world, consumption activities are fundamentally gendered". In fact, women and consumption have been inextricably linked both discursively and in the academic commentary and it is worth exploring this aspect of consumption, particularly in a consumer culture where the commercialisation of bodies, appearances and identities is far more extensive than ever before. As already seen in the previous chapter, looking at mass culture and the media in particular, the constant reflection on and understanding of an ever-demanding project of the self is promoted for women especially. This translates

into a continuous self-monitoring of appearance and emotions that necessitates various commodities to be mobilised in the process.

Therefore, in the first section of this chapter I refer to some of the key theories of consumption, focusing on the emergence of consumer culture and its connection with identity. I then explore the literature which looks at gender in the context of consumption. This research has taken up consumption as an object of study in its own right, producing empirical as well as theoretical work that explores everyday practices of consumption and how these are influenced or informed by gender. Later I return to the importance of meanings and the symbolic value of consumption. In particular I look at fashion and its relevance to consumption. Underwear, after all, is part of the fashion system and thus reference to how fashion is used as a signifier of identities in consumption is important. Finally, I concentrate on the limited but important literature on underwear - some of which has already been discussed in Chapter 2 - and further discuss its relevance to this thesis.

### **3.2 Theories of consumption: consumer culture and identity**

The emergence of academic journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Culture* and *Consumption, Markets and Culture* in the last two decades is evidence of the growing engagement of scholarly research with social and cultural approaches to consumption (Casey and Martens, 2007b: 1). Some of the most prominent theoretical contributions to the study of consumption in this period are perhaps those of Campbell (1987), Featherstone (1991), Slater (1997) and Miller (1987; 1998). Campbell is influenced by romanticism in his analysis of consumption and believes that modern consumerist hedonism is not about the satisfaction of a need but about the pursuit of the pleasure of

consuming. This pursuit of the experience of pleasure is what fuels consumption. On the other hand, Featherstone (1991) examines consumption and the rise of consumer culture in postmodernity. In particular, he stresses that there are three main perspectives on consumer culture. Firstly, he sees consumer culture as a product of capitalist mass production which seeks to seduce the population into an individualistic 'freedom' of choice. Secondly, he views the different use of products by consumers as a result of their desire for distinction, also suggested by Bourdieu (1984) and discussed in Chapter 2. Lastly, he suggests that products offer emotional pleasure to consumers, giving more emphasis to the symbolic value of commodities and the meanings that they produce or invoke. The latter can be argued to form part of how consumers exert their sense of distinction but it can be arguably be connected to Foucault's technologies of the self and to the reflexive self in terms of the meanings commodities invoke to individuals.

Slater (1997) is more concerned with the everyday struggles of life that structure what we have come to call consumer culture, thus putting more emphasis on how consumption offers different ways of life through which the construction of identities and relations takes place. Finally, Miller (1987, 1998) focuses on the everyday practices of consumers, which is of particular importance for this thesis, because it marks the importance of looking at the micro aspects of consumption and how consumers' identities and lifestyles are constructed or influenced by them. Similarly, Douglas and Isherwood (1979), Bourdieu (1984) - as we saw in Chapter 2 - and Appadurai (1986) have focused on patterns of consumption and the meaning and significance that these have in people's everyday lives, instead of looking at consumption as a result of production, which was previously the focus of consumption scholars. Another perspective regarding the relationship between consumption and production is given by

Zukin and Maguire (2004: 180) who look at production and consumption as interconnected and suggest that consumption is socially constructed

partly through industry-fostered changes in cultural models and strategic practices of marketing (“supply”), and partly through changing demographics, shifting means of self-expression, and new social practices (“demand”). A more speculative view, however, relates this demand for goods to changes in the consuming subject.

Consumer culture emerges as the “culture of consumption” (Slater, 1997: 8) and as a way of differentiating the west from the rest of the world as modern and free. Slater (1997) suggests that consumer culture is characterised by a pluralisation of choices ready to be consumed. Similarly Baudrillard (1998: 77) speaks of a “generalised hysteria”, a complex world of objects and needs that “become a vast paradigm for another language to work through, for something other to speak”. This plurality of lifestyles and the commercialisation of these lifestyles and experiences through marketing and advertising, have created a myriad of ways of being and living, an “identity-crisis on a mass scale” (Slater, 1997: 84). Slater justifies his argument about identity crisis linked with consumer culture on three bases. Firstly, he suggests that identity is better understood through consumption, as individuals can choose from a plurality of experiences and objects to form, as well as to maintain an identity. Second, identity is itself a ‘commodity’, since we regularly have to ‘sell’ identities in the various fields in which we are situated in order to maintain social relations. Thirdly, the material and symbolic resources with which we sustain our identities are often consumer goods. Thus, consumer culture offers to the consuming subject commodities and saleable experiences as an answer to the search for identities. The reference to the consuming subject in the cultural field of consumption has to do with the quest for

identity by individuals through self-reflection and a process of individualisation (Slater, 1997; Bauman, 2000). Studies which focus closely on consumption practices have linked our choices of goods with our taste, thus our habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), as already being discussed in Chapter 2. Exercising judgement over particular goods displays our lifestyle choices and expressions of identity (Paterson, 2006), as it will be argued later on in this chapter.

Consumer culture then, from this perspective has made the problem of identity a 'technical' issue that can apparently be solved through various commodities (Bauman, 2001). Thus the production and management of the self can now be achieved by different sets of commodities, for example cosmetics for women which attend to different parts of women's bodies and are considered 'essential' for a 'responsible' individual who takes care of her body and her self. The resulting dilemmas of consumers over their choices, or whether they are 'doing it right', are solved using two distinct features of our modern life, 'experts' and lifestyle (Slater, 1997). As noted in the previous chapter, identity can now be managed by the expert guide of psychologists, life-coaches, self-help books and self-esteem manuals. Similarly 'experts', as mentioned above, provide the necessary skills, in the form of commodities, for the production of the self and management of identities. As Giddens (1991) argues this can also be solved by the adoption of lifestyles; an assertion of specific taste in goods, practices and generally a way of life which is manifested by an individual's habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Lifestyle provides a unity in the practices of individuals and their preferences in commodities, reducing thus their choices, dilemmas and anxiety into a "more or less ordered pattern" (Giddens, 1991: 81).

Equally and relatedly, this body of theory suggests that people employ different lifestyles in an attempt to feel different and be noticeable. People seek to differentiate themselves from each other by acquiring exaggerated and eccentric styles of dress and behaviour for example, in order to assert individuality in what are often their highly impersonal and anonymous urban lives (see Simmel, 1997: 69-80). There is strong emphasis in contemporary consumer culture on how individuals can be improved and excel compared to others and, as Giddens (1991) puts it, there is a continuous demand for self-reflection. People are constantly reminded, by the media mostly, that they need to pay attention to their overall project of the self, as previously discussed in Chapter 2. This involves self-monitoring and ongoing scrutiny of appearance and behaviour; all these towards gaining a coherent sense of the self and continual improvements in the project of identity.

Consumption then is central to this project of the self. The choices we make as consumers will ultimately signify our 'progress'. What we wear, what we eat, where we shop, which car we drive, all 'define' elements of ourselves. As Slater (1997: 91) puts it,

[a]s a result, all aspects of our existence are monitored and scrutinized as objects of instrumental calculation in the creation of the self. And consumer industries stand ready with things one can buy [...] advertising and the media routinely offer aspirational narratives of the self - images of lifestyles, goods, advice - with which the viewer can identify. [...] [T]hey offer up the very idea of the self as a narrative form, something to be constructed through individual choice and effort.

Arguing that the choices we make as consumers become elements of our identity construction brings us closer to the need to examine how different consumption practices, like buying underwear, can be part of this construction. Indeed consumption practices are arguably highly gendered or assert gender connotations. Drawing from the discussion above, it is predominantly women who are more scrutinised in terms of their self-regulation and self-monitoring, as argued by Foucauldian feminists like Bordo and Bartky (see Chapter 2) and consumerism has played a major role in that. On the other hand, since many of the products we buy are for domestic use, then it is more likely that any study of consumption will involve women consumers, since women are arguably more related to domesticity. Thus it is important to draw attention to how consumption is informed by gender and what the dynamics of gendered consumption are in relation to identity construction.

### **3.3 Women's everyday consumption practices**

Historically gender has not in fact been an important theme in studies of consumption (Silva, 2007). Only recently has there been a preoccupation with gender in the relevant analyses, when attention from scholarly research was placed on everyday elements and practices of consumption. Moreover, even though a number of feminist scholars have used consumption as an important concept in their work (see for example de Grazia and Furlough, 1996; McRobbie, 1999; 2000; Bowlby, 2000), only limited studies have actually taken up the intersections between gender and consumption as a research topic in itself. But as Silva (2007: 141) notes,

[i]f consumer culture impacts on domestic practices, gender practices within the domestic setting should be regarded as most significant for the transformation of consumer culture.

Indeed, consumption is part of our everyday lives: it is mundane and routine in many cases and also highly domesticated. But, as suggested, it is only recently that research has been done that concentrates specifically on everyday aspects of consumption by women, and this is crucial in learning how consumer culture is informed by gender.

Even though this systematic research into elements of women's consumption is a relatively recent phenomenon, the preoccupation, particularly in mass culture, with the connections of women and consumption is not. From the mid-nineteenth century, in the west at least, women, and mostly middle-class women, have been closely discursively connected with shopping and commodities as they have taken their consumption practices from the domestic sphere to the public one. As Andrew and Talbot (2000b: 3, emphasis in original) explain "the emergence of the new domestic ideology of middle-classness ... was pivoted upon a notion of women in the home, but, as time progressed, on the necessity for women to go *outside* the home to purchase *for* the home". The appearance of department stores in the west in the early twentieth century, together with the emergence of women's magazines, etiquette books, marriage and other manuals, provided a cornerstone for the construction of women as "shoppers *par excellence*" (Casey and Martens, 2007b: 2) as it was mostly women who did the shopping, as part of their task as 'homemakers' (see Giles, 2007 and Nava, 1996). Department stores in particular provided a 'safe place' for them to move out from domesticity and become public consumers:

As institutions the department stores made a major contribution to the twentieth-century consolidation of women as consumers and to consumption and consumer expertise as activities that were as gendered as production. (Nava, 1996: 66)

These stores provided a 'safe' environment for women's socialising and offered limitless possibilities for new commodities – mostly clothing and furnishing – that could help with their domestic needs as well as their self-fashioning (Felski, 1995; Nava, 1996; Bowlby, 2000). Following Nava, Giles (2007) argues that, in department stores, women acquired the ability to assert their taste and read signs:

[s]hopping was not simply about realising dreams or an enjoyable leisure activity for the affluent. It involved work: the work of decoding and encoding new and complex signifiers that enabled women to acquire the cultural capital required to function as effective housewives. (p. 19)

However, women as consumers were also demonised as irrational and frivolous. The irrationality of inchoate desires were also attributed to female consumers some time in the mid-nineteenth century, where

the idea of the modern becomes aligned with a pessimistic vision of an unpredictable yet curiously passive femininity seduced by the glittering phantasmagoria of an emerging consumer culture. (Felski, 1995: 62)

However, despite the demonization of women as consumers, mass culture and consumption nonetheless arguably offered them more possibilities to enter the public realm than ever before and to seek equality, primarily for middle-class women. The rise of big chain stores at the turn of the nineteenth century and the fast growth of retailing

also offered women new employment opportunities, and class distinctions between them were gradually diminished. For example, Nava (2000) notes that working-class women the new - 'factory girls' - were particularly attracted to fashion with the appearance of stores like Marks and Spencer's, and good-quality but cheap, ready-made fashion gradually reduced to diminish class distinctions in terms of outward appearance.

Suburban domesticity was another important element of consumption in the early twentieth century. An expansion of house-building in the western suburbs created this domesticity with new houses and cheap mortgages on offer, as well as new events and exhibitions that promoted the modern lifestyles and appropriate tastes for people living the suburban life. Working-class families had an opportunity to move to the suburbs and middle-class and lower-class women found themselves having similar domestic needs for their suburban houses (Nava, 2000; Giles, 2007). Suburban domesticity or 'suburban modernity' was "part of the process of becoming middle-class" (Nava, 2000: 55), and consumption had a major role to play since a far larger proportion of women than ever before were now shopping for their families and themselves as an everyday activity.

As already suggested, some feminist literature exists that explores and analyses women's domestic contemporary consumption practices such as shopping, food and household management (see for example Charles, 1988; Jackson and Moores, 1995). However, Casey and Martens (2007a) argue that few feminist attempts have been made to use conceptual frameworks coming from the perspective of consumption studies to analyse the importance of consumption to women's lives. They stress the importance of looking more closely into the link between everyday consumption practices and gender.

Their edited text work especially focuses on routine operations of consumption and how they are informed by gender. For example Giles (2007), in this collection, argues that it is important to eliminate the distinction between public and domestic spaces (the public being work and the city where production takes place and the domestic as the space to which consumption is mostly linked) in order to fully understand the importance and the meanings of everyday life experiences of women and how these are linked with consumption. Routine or detailed aspects of women's everyday life, for example the organising of children's birthday parties, can demonstrate how consumption can (re)produce women's identities, e.g. motherhood (Clarke, 2007). Clarke argues that the organisation of children's birthday parties and involvement in the 'birthday culture' can be seen not only as an extension of women's domestic consumption but also as an insight into how motherhood and consumption have been interlinked, simultaneously, giving mothers a way of "subvert[ing] the tyranny of idealised roles as carers and find[ing] alternative renditions of being a 'mother'" (2007: 81). Thus, the attention given to these aspects of women's daily lives can give an insight into how women produce and reproduce identities through consumption.

Relatedly, an earlier edited collection by Andrews and Talbot (2000a) also conceptualises everyday consumption practices and their effects on women's lives. The editors stress that consumption is an inevitable experience in women's lives and it is important to explore and understand how "changes – such as the introduction of self-service food shopping or the commercialization of female sanitary products – affect our lives" (2000a: 1).

In a similar vein this thesis is also premised on a mundane or routine but nevertheless discursively important consumption practice, that of choosing and wearing underwear, which can also be seen as a source for feminine identity construction. I particularly look at how different aspects of women's identity necessitate various mobilisations, i.e. specific types of underwear, in order to support their body and appearance, and in a more general sense their identity projects. I now further explore the meaning/s of consumption, in terms of how commodities can transmit meanings and become markers of different kinds of identity project.

### **3.4 The meaning/s of consumption**

In the previous section I stressed the importance of the conceptualisation of everyday, routine practices of consumption and our understanding of how these are informed by gender or how gender identity might be constructed. The interest that research now demonstrates in such mundane elements of consumption is due to the fact that commodities have symbolic meanings, beyond their utilitarian qualities, as discussion so far has suggested (McCracken, 1988). Goods transfer meanings and can be markers of gender, class and so on. Douglas and Isherwood (1979), in particular, echo this in their book *The World of Goods* and stress that goods are “needed to make visible and stable the categories of culture” (p. 59). Commodities, such as clothing for example, act as symbols of social relationships and classifications. These meanings have been assigned by the social and are central to its reproduction. The complex system of meanings that goods evoke allows people to understand and interpret their meanings when they buy them for themselves or when they see them used by other people, within their social fields. Consumers become intelligible, adopting a sense of style or taste according to the cultural and symbolic capital they inherit (Bourdieu, 1984), as

discussed in the previous chapter, and also through their interpretation of the meanings of commodities and the impact that it has on their identities.

Particularly important in understanding how commodities invoke particular meanings to consumers has been the study of semiotics, which treats elements of culture metaphorically as text, through the signs that it transmits. Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972) is a prominent work in the study of semiotics where with his brief stories he examines the wider meanings that everyday objects can invoke. Barthes distinguishes the meanings that everyday objects invoke into connotations and denotations, where the latter is the literal messages transferred and the former the symbolic and cultural meanings transmitted. Advertising has often been analysed via semiotics where meanings both literal and metaphorical/symbolic are dissected (e.g. Williamson, 1978). The (re)construction of a particular type of femininity through advertising is one example of how the connotations and denotations of advertising derived from but also affected affected cultural processes and understandings. Underwear advertising for example often portrays young and slender women who invoke a sense of sensuality. These images connote western cultural imperatives around the youthful, slender body of a 'beautiful' woman who 'deserves' to wear the type of underwear advertised. Thus, cultural expectations are (re)created as to what women should wear when it comes to certain body types (Tischner and Malson, 2008).

By acknowledging the denotations and connotations of elements of culture, i.e. objects or events, it seems that consumption provides an array of possibilities for the ongoing project of identity. Commodities not only are what they represent (their actual meaning), but their symbolic meaning offers a multiplicity of potential identity projects.

Commodities can externalise the various aspirations of adopting or appropriating, for example, a version of womanhood or femininity that suits the context or the field a woman is situated in. For example, the tailored suits worn by professional women can assert the sense of power and authority needed for a woman to establish herself as a professional (Entwistle, 2000b). In his ethnographic study of shopping in North London, Miller (2001) also tries to illustrate this by using an example of one of his participants shopping for shoes. This participant had gone back to university to study for a postgraduate degree as a mature student, and she felt that new shoes ‘appropriate’ for her new identity as a student were necessary. While this participant felt that she was more ‘herself’ when wearing high heels, her new identity as a student and the new “academic ethos” (p.44) she had entered offered her a new project that ‘required’ dressing down and wearing more comfortable, everyday shoes. However, her difficulty in finding these ‘appropriate’ shoes was a result of the contradictions she felt when she was confronted with her more usual shoe style. As Miller suggests,

[t]he shoe here is not just a commodity that intervenes in the relationship between person and discourse, but it reveals itself equally as discourse, that is, as the commercial semiotic of difference that feeds into the imagination of different possibilities for the self that were raised by the very idea of shopping for shoes. (2001: 44)

The consumption of clothing, then, as we have seen in Chapter 2 is a prominent example of how consumers assert their intelligibility. Clothing is part of the fashion system, a claim which is said to be underdeveloped in sociological studies (Crane and Bovone, 2006). Fashion has been generally defined as a system of change (Wilson, 1985; Entwistle, 2000a); more specifically Wilson stresses that

[f]ashion is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles. Fashion, in a sense *is* change, and in modern western societies no clothes are outside of fashion; fashion sets the terms of *all* sartorial behaviour. (Wilson, 1985: 3, emphasis in original)

Entwistle (2000b) stresses that fashion as a system is a hybrid one and is found in societies where class mobility and forces of productions and consumption are possible and that it thus develops under specific socio-historical conditions. Fashion can be defined as an ever broader phenomenon, that is, “the creation and attribution of symbolic values to material culture” (Crane and Bovone, 2006: 320) *per se*. Indeed, material culture, for example clothing, as Crane and Bovone (*ibid.*) argue, can be used as a “medium for cultural change through its capacity to embody symbolic values and to change or reinforce those values in consumers when they acquire and use material objects”.

Overall, though, clothing as a system of meaning and values is often seen as conveying precisely historical meanings or values, which indicate how the clothing can be or should be employed. For example, the Victorian corset which has been linked with the modification of the female body into a certain presentation of femininity as discussed in Chapter 2, is seen now as an erotic garment, as underwear, as a fetish item, or even as part of outerwear for a special occasion or party. Steele’s (1985) alternative supposition that the corset connoted a socially assertive woman shows how clothes can also invoke meanings crucial for how individuals assert their social status, gender or sexuality. Clothing can likewise be used to denote subcultures and distinct identities of youth groups perhaps in particular, such as gothic or emo fashion. Clothing is part of the fashion system, as a system of dress which includes any type of adornment of the body,

it is a complex system of meanings, because we can never ignore who interprets/decodes these meanings (Wilson, 1985; Davis, 1992; Grove-White, 2001). For example, a fashion guru is more likely to describe an everyday dark outfit as dull and inexpressive, while the wearer might feel comfortable and as if they are not standing out.

Indeed, individuals' understanding of the fashion system and their relationship with the clothes they wear is crucial, since as this affects or constructs their lifestyle and identities (Entwistle, 2000b). After all, clothes perpetuate socially constructed meanings that classify people as tall, petite (distinctions in, usually, women's clothing), feminine, masculine, sexy, dull and so on. As Grove-White (2001: 194) argues, when it comes to buying clothes, people are also influenced by several factors "which include social class origin, the impact of feminism, body size, age and maternal influence". For the latter, it could be assumed that, especially for underwear, the maternal influence might be strong because it is usually the mother who is involved in a girl's first experience with her underwear. Indeed, as Chapter 5 will show, my participants talk quite a lot about the influence of their mothers in terms of the underwear they wear.

Clothes also invoke an aesthetic value to the wearer and that is why colours, for example, and the feelings and emotions they induce in the wearers are an important element of the consumption of clothing. As Grove-White (2001) stresses, colours can establish a new trend in the complex fashion system, but can also denote or affect an individual's mood. Colour is the most visible sign of the meanings of clothing and is crucial in determining change within the complex fashion system. In the case of underwear, this is even more interesting, since even though it is ostensibly hidden from

view, the colours of underwear can still be important to the wearer in terms of the meanings these colours might transmit. Colours can influence or signal a woman's mood and emotions about her body (as argued above) but also, her identity or her understanding of the prevailing moral order - the connotations of black underwear, for example, arguably related to overt sexuality or sensuality (Fields, 2007). In the following section I draw upon the limited literature on underwear as material culture and focus on its relevance to this thesis.

### **3.5 Underwear as commodity and its implications**

As I have already argued, there is only limited research on the consumption of underwear. Storr's (2002; 2003) ethnographic study of Ann Summers' parties and Jantzen's *et al.*'s (2006) seminal research on how special and delicate underwear, i.e., lingerie, connects with women's identity are the most prominent empirical studies that look at this intimate aspect of material culture. Even though other aspects of dress have been given a lot of attention in the studies of consumption, and the consumption of other everyday objects have also been the focus of scholarly research, at least recently, underwear as a means of identity construction has been largely ignored. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, the literature on underwear is mostly concerned with a historical perspective on underwear's meanings and social classifications and its connection to the female body in particular. I contend that underwear equally deserves to be explored as an element of material culture and a marker of identity. It is also particularly important because if one 'brackets' its utilitarian function, that is to protect our bodies' intimate parts, the symbolic meanings and values it produces for the wearer are of great importance. Moreover, despite the fact that underwear is ostensibly hidden from view, a large number of women consumers spend a great amount of money on

buying underwear and invest substantial effort in determining the 'right' underwear for any given occasion (Jantzen *et al.*, 2006).

In her article 'Classy Lingerie' (2002) as well as her book *Latex & Lingerie* (2003), Storr tries to relate the consumption of underwear to social class. Her research is based on an ethnography of Ann Summers' parties in London and Essex. Storr's aim is to identify and relate her participants' (both partygoers and party organisers) social class to their buying behaviour as far as underwear is concerned. Storr argues that

Underwear [...] plays on the ambiguities between concealment and display; between seductiveness and respectability; between eroticism and romance; between the feminine and the sexual; and between the luxurious and the 'cheap'. .... There have been few if any studies [...] of the ways in which women negotiate these ambiguities in their everyday practices of buying and selling underwear. (Storr, 2002: 20; 2003: 186)

Storr traces other ambiguities in underwear and presents them as binary pairs, such as public/private, sleaze/respectability and luxury/utility (2003: 191). For the private/public binary she notes how her participants talked at the parties about underwear that could be worn as tops. This brings to attention the implications of visible underwear and whether or not, if worn as outerwear, it is more easily accepted. This reminds us of social surveillance and monitoring as discussed in the previous chapter and how society 'regulates' styles of appearance in terms the expectations and imperatives evident in specific times, and also how fashion is linked to these social imperatives. For example corsets are now worn as party tops, and even though they still

bear the markers of a certain kind of femininity due to the moulding of the body, it would not have been acceptable two centuries ago for women to be seen as such.

Nevertheless, Storr particularly emphasises the luxury/utility binary because one of the findings of her research was that social class does seem to connect to her participants' consumption of Ann Summers' products, although she notes it would be an error to "assume that the relationship between social class and fashion is simply about buying what one can afford" (2003: 191). She mentions that some of her participants, who were all working-class women, thought that they were giving themselves a 'treat' when buying Ann Summers' underwear. Moreover, in Storr's research we find her participants asserting that it is the kind of luxury that they would not normally buy, while in a similar situation in Jantzen *et al.*'s (2006) research a 'treat' is interpreted as something for self-fashioning and increasing self-esteem. As the women in Jantzen *et al.*'s research were middle-class women, this indicates how class distinctions influence the interpretations the meanings that commodities might invoke and it also reminds us of Dumas *et al.* (2005), discussed in Chapter 2, and how class as part of habitus affects women's relationship with their bodies. In the example of Storr's and Jantzen *et al.*'s studies the different definitions of 'treat', regarding luxurious or special underwear, show exactly how middle-class women might give different meanings to underwear in terms of how it makes them feel than those given by working-class women. For the working-class women in Storr's study, this type of underwear is expensive and underwear is more about necessity than making yourself feel good.

Jantzen *et al.* (2006) specifically explore how underwear can induce emotions and sensations in women, which in turn have effects on their experience of their own

feminine identity. Their work is especially important here in terms of how they appropriate Foucault's technologies of the self, in a similar fashion to how the concept is used in this thesis and discussed in Chapter 2, to analyse how the sensations induced in women by their lingerie can affect the way they feel about themselves and increase their self-esteem. Jantzen *et al.* draw attention to the dynamics that come into play regarding women's decisions about the 'right' underwear, which shows exactly how they try to become, as noted above, 'intelligible' in their self-regulation and consumption.

However, while Jantzen *et al.* (2006) assume a connection between lingerie and sexuality or sex, Amy-Chinn, in a published dialogue between her, Jantzen and Østergaard (Amy-Chinn *et al.* 2006), particularly criticises the other authors for this quick assumption. She claims that Jantzen *et al.* in their 2006 article have developed and taken for granted this argument too rapidly and that the link between underwear and sexuality is likewise presupposed by advertising and media culture more generally. She also claims, as women consumers make distinctions between respectable or nice underwear and 'harlot' underwear (2006: 184-185), it would be interesting to know where the boundaries of this link lie.

Indeed, Entwistle (2000b: 203) suggests that "[w]hen one considers its proximity to its body, it is not surprising that underwear is the focus of intense erotic interest". This eroticisation of the naked and simultaneously dressed female body in underwear is of course an extension of the cultural inscription of a female body as sexual. Moreover, feminists have always expressed their concern about the way the female body has been portrayed in underwear advertising from the twentieth century onwards. Amy-Chinn

(2006: 157), for example, refers to the crucial role which the UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), and their 1990 study *Herself Reappraised: The Treatment of Women in Advertising*, played in how underwear advertising has prolonged the showcasing of the female body as a sexual object (*ibid.*). She particularly refers to the ASA's claim in this study that

[t]here is no escaping that nature made women sex objects to men just as she made men sex objects to women [...] It is the case, though, that for many people brought up in our culture and erotic heritage, that *young women are nicer to look at than men, especially when they are naked* [...]. So it is *natural and inevitable* that permissiveness spreads to advertisements. (ASA cited in Amy-Chinn, 2006: 157, emphasis in original)

The naturalisation of the naked female body as sexual has been inscribed into these cultural affirmations and the image of a naked body, even if partly dressed in underwear, is usually eroticised. Media culture, and especially advertising, has proliferated this affirmation in texts such as the 'Hello Boys' advertisement for the Playtex Wonderbra in 1994. Bra advertisements inevitably draw attention to women's breasts and this has always been an issue: how do you advertise a bra without sexualising it when it is literally attached to a visible naked body (Schultz, 2004)? Amy-Chinn criticises this, arguing that,

[..] the public circulation of images of women in states of undress is *always* liable to offend the sensibilities of some sections of the population. And the link between *déshabillement* and sexual activity makes it easy to claim that any such representations inherently position women as sex objects [...].(2006: 156, emphasis in original)

Relatedly, looking at the sports bra, for example, which is designed for women who are active and fit and is particularly promoted as such, Schultz (2004) nevertheless stresses that it is still associated with sexual connotations and is eroticised when it is on display. According to her,

[b]rassieres of all sorts are sexualized, but the sports bra presents an interesting case because it is simultaneously lingerie, sports equipment, and a fashion statement. In addition, sports bras have traditionally compressed women's breasts for comfort and protection in physical activity. (2004: 199)

She refers to a specific sports event that was discussed in the US media for quite some time. In 1999, Brandi Chastain, a soccer player for the US national women's team, took her jersey off when she scored in a penalty shootout that gave her team victory against the Chinese national team. The image of Chastain in her black sports bra was scrutinised by cultural commentators as an act of stripping off. It was also mocked by male soccer players who, on similar occasions, imitated Chastain by taking off their jerseys to display a sports bra, thus undermining the importance of their fellow athlete's triumphant moment and "reducing it to an incident of frivolity" (2004: 192). This is what Schultz finds intriguing, stressing that as soon as the sports bra became visible, it was eroticised:

In the case of [the male athletes] the media give the sports bras primacy after the removal of their jerseys. In the case of Brandi Chastain, however, it is somewhat more difficult to discern whether her 1999 World Cup celebration is better understood as the act of taking off her shirt or about the exposure of the bra. (2004: 193)

According to Schultz (2004: 195), the sports bra is also “implicated in the creation and maintenance of dominant cultural ideals of women’s breasts”. Bras mould and shape women’s breasts according to their type and the effect the woman wants to create. It is the same for sports bras: they also mould the breasts into a ‘squeezed’ position, usually, so that they are protected from physical activity. However, Schultz (2004: 196), argues that,

[t]he sports bra, like any other bra, is concerned with promoting a sexuality that most appeals to the masculine gaze. As an object of consumption, the sports bra plays on and reinforces hegemonic notions of femininity.

She analyses sports bra advertisements to find that there is no ‘natural’ shape of the breasts or of the body in that respect, especially as sports bras now do more than just support the upper body during physical activity. Now they also accentuate breasts rather than flattening them as they used to do. The cultural imperatives around the athletic female body are now seemingly demanding well-defined and definitely not flat breasts. This body is here further normalised according to the social and cultural imperatives of femininity, “disguising the discipline necessary to achieve that body” (Schultz, 2004: 196).

From this brief review and the discussion in Chapter 1, it is evident that the literature on underwear either looks at the historical aspects of its development, or takes up the assumption that there is a close link between underwear and eroticism. Within consumption studies, the prominent works of Storr and Jantzen *et al.* do put forward the idea that the consumption of underwear is connected to issues of identity construction but from a limited perspective. However different elements of the experience of

choosing and wearing underwear are at play here including ambiguities about how different stages of a woman's life or different activities that a woman performs involve different experiences with regard to her body and her underwear. A woman athlete, a mother, a pregnant woman, an older woman or a working woman may, we could assume, report different experiences of their underwear, which will ultimately affect her choices and her perspectives on what the 'right' underwear is.

### **3.6 Summary**

This chapter has situated underwear as a consumption practice within the system of fashion. With reference to some of the most important perspectives of consumption and consumer culture, my aim was to show how consumption practices, indeed in this case choosing and buying underwear, become one of the ways in which identities are negotiated and (re)constructed. I first made reference to the emergence of consumer culture and its connections with identity, drawing attention to how consumer culture has been connected with the production and management of identities. I then focused on everyday consumption practices and their importance in how women mobilise everyday commodities as sources of their female identity project. Finally I looked at the meanings that commodities might induce to consumers and then the limited literature on underwear as a consumption practice and its connections to identity.

There are some interesting ambiguities when it comes to underwear, which can be located in any research that seeks to understand the experiences of women in this regard. Some have been identified in the studies by Storr (2003) and Jantzen *et al.* (2006). In contributing as yet to this limited commentary, this thesis will also examine some of these ambiguities and how women might negotiate these in their everyday lives

and identity projects. If identity is an ongoing project, any aspect or indeed commodity that asserts meaning in the lives of women influences their identity projects. The meaning and signification that underwear as part of dress might influence these identity projects in various ways, for example how underwear might feel on the body when at work, or how the sensations it produces for the body work as a technology of the self. My later discussion in Chapter 5 will seek to understand the experiences that my women participants report regarding their underwear. The next chapter however presents the methodological design that this research adopted.

## **Chapter 4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present and justify the methodological strategy of this research. In the first section 4.2 I discuss the importance of my research questions as a social inquiry and how these research questions mirror my own assumptions about what social inquiry is and how it can be done. I then move to the second section in which I link my discussion from the section 4.2 to my ontological and epistemological assumptions about reality and the social world. I also refer to the methodological strategy that follows these assumptions, giving an account of what the social reality is that I try to ‘capture’ with this particular research project.

The third section documents my selection of methods and sampling. I first justify the use of focus groups and one-to-one interviews in my research, and then I go on to explain the strategic purpose of my sampling. The next section represents my reflections on the actual empirics and my role as a researcher in the field. An account of the data analysis process follows, where I refer to my understanding of what data analysis means as well as to my use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 8). Finally, this chapter ends with an account of the ethics of this research and some implications or inevitabilities of the methodology chosen.

### **4.2 Research questions**

Before I discuss issues of ontology and epistemology, I find it useful to reiterate my research questions, in order to show how they indeed connect to the set of assumptions I

make about social reality. The questions indicate the suitability of qualitative research, which, as Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 1) stress, is usually or typically

oriented to the inductive study of socially constructed reality, focusing on meanings, ideas and practices, taking the native's point of view seriously without questioning either the wider context of it or the process forming it.

The thesis asks:

- i. What are the socio-cultural factors that influence women's consumption of underwear?
- ii. What is the role of underwear as part of dress in the construction of female identity?
- iii. What kind of feelings and experiences do women report regarding the consumption of underwear? (e.g. how important is underwear to them?; do they wear different underwear for different occasions,?; for whom do they buy underwear?)
- iv. What is the role of 'taste' when it comes to the underwear women choose?

A careful reading of the questions reveals my intentions of grasping respondents' experiences, interpretations and feelings, which suggests a commitment to the 'native's point of view'. Even though all my questions begin with '*What...*', I contend that the answer to this 'what' is subjective since I do not see a definite, objective or scientific answer 'out there'. I begin with the assumption that women have different experiences, particularly with this private and intimate part of their clothing. My aim as a researcher is to capture some of these experiences and offer a contribution to knowledge about how these experiences as well as the choices that women make every day regarding their underwear relate to their identity projects. Female identity is an ongoing project which is constantly constructed, reconstructed and co-constructed, and underwear, as

we have seen in previous chapters (see Chapter 1 in particular), has played an important role in how the female body and femininity are represented in history.

Moreover underwear has never been so diverse in design, material and functionality or more sellable as a commodity than nowadays in the west, and with the increasing emphasis given to its ability to induce psychological effects in women's lives, effects which can influence their identities, it is important that these connections are explored. Of course not all women are able to realise and articulate these connections and not all women give much attention to their underwear: this is indicated at the start of this thesis. Some of the respondents in this research indeed said as much. But nevertheless they make choices as consumers as to what type of underwear they wear and when. These choices for me reflect how these women make sense of who they are, how they want to be represented in their world and what it is like being female. Their understanding of these links will form the answers to my research questions.

Thus this thesis presents a qualitative inquiry into this part of women's worlds and as such there are specific theoretical and methodological concerns that underpin it. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 21) stress

[s]ubjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts or stories, about what they did and why.

As a researcher I intend to explore these accounts but what I eventually offer is my own interpretation of them. For me, just as there is no definite, objective or scientific answer to my research questions, there is no correct or one best method to employ which would allow for a 'true' and unbiased transmission of my participants' feelings and the

meanings of their actions. After all, I am looking for answers to particular questions which are guided by what *I* consider to be an important social phenomenon. Any researcher is led by a “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990: 17) which direct her in terms of what social phenomena she thinks should be studied, as well as how she will interpret any set of data. My beliefs and values influence not only my choice of research questions, but the way I will set about answering them, in terms of how I will collect, analyse and interpret my data. This set of beliefs belongs to what Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 22) call the interpretive paradigm which in their words “makes particular demands on the researcher, including the questions he or she asks and the interpretation the researcher brings to them”. This definition alludes to issues of ontology, epistemology and methodology which will be discussed in the following sections.

### **4.3 Making sense of the world: the essence of this social inquiry**

As noted in the previous section, this thesis adopts a qualitative mode of inquiry to which a certain set of beliefs pertain. By this I do not mean to argue that undertaking qualitative inquiry presupposes a specific and definite set of theoretical and methodological concerns. In fact Schwandt (2003: 293) stresses that qualitative inquiry

is more comprehensible as a site or arena for social scientific criticism than any particular kind of social theory, methodology, or philosophy. That site is a ‘home’ for a wide variety of scholars who often are seriously at odds with one another but who share a general rejection of the blend of scientism, foundationalist epistemology, instrumental reasoning, and the philosophical anthropology of disengagement that has marked ‘mainstream’ social science.

Nonetheless I share the aforementioned rejections and thus my ontological and epistemological commitments rest within qualitative inquiry. Indeed, any sort of social research requires the researcher to be clear about the “essence” of her inquiry by producing an “intellectual puzzle” (Mason, 2002: 13) that articulates firstly her understanding of social reality and the possibility, status and limitations of knowledge about that reality. Her research will inevitably derive “out of a background set of ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 23). Guba and Lincoln (1998: 108) similarly refer to the ontological, epistemological and methodological questions that drive the researcher as “fundamental questions which are interconnected in such a way that the answer given to any one question constrains how the others may be answered”. Bearing this in mind then, I now go on to evaluate my specific ontological and epistemological commitments

Ontology asks whether “the ‘reality’ to be investigated is external to the individual [...] or the product of individual consciousness; whether ‘reality’ is of an ‘objective’ nature, or the product of individual cognition.” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 1). This research seeks to understand the experiences and feelings of individuals according to how they make sense of the social phenomenon under study. As such this thesis is underpinned by the belief that multiple social realities are constantly constructed and co-constructed: the complex material world is understood through our own practices of making meaning. Shankar *et al.* (2001: 438) refer to Marsden and Littler’s argument that “an underlying assumption of an interpretive ontology is that human beings are proactively engaged in giving meaning to their world”. I share this assumption and I argue that seeking the experience of women with regard to the underwear they choose to buy and

wear is to seek the meaning they give to their actions in this regard, which constitute an important aspect of their reality.

Epistemology follows ontological positions and asks “how might one begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings[?]” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 1). My epistemological position reflects the broad constructivist paradigm which asserts that knowledge about reality or social phenomena cannot be discovered: instead it is constructed by the research subjects, by the researcher and by the interaction between the two. As I have already argued, there is no social world that exists ‘out there’ and about which we can learn the truth. It is rather a process of interactions with others and with material ‘reality’; objects, bodies and so on, to which individuals give meaning with the use of language, routines and actions. As Guba and Lincoln (2005: 203) echo

constructivists [...] take their primary field of interest to be precisely that subjective and intersubjective social knowledge and the active construction and cocreation of such knowledge by human agents that is produced by human consciousness.

I do not argue that there is *no* social reality, but that there is no definitive knowledge about this/ese reality/ies available to be grasped by the ‘expert’ researcher. Instead, I agree with Stanley and Wise’s (1993: 9) stance that social reality “recognizes that social life is in good part composed of discussions, debates and controversies concerning precisely what this objective reality consists of”. As such, knowledge about the ‘nature’ of the world is subjective and is always relative to the socio-cultural and historical context of the social phenomenon we are inquiring into.

Methodological assumptions then follow ontological and epistemological ones and speak of “the way in which one attempts to investigate and obtain knowledge of the social world” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 2). My position is that a researcher, at least in part, can understand and interpret a social phenomenon by allowing the participants to interpret their own actions, their symbols of communication and meaning and how they make sense of these symbols within their actions and the actions of others. My aim is to comprehend social reality by understanding something about how others interpret their actions and experiences. I seek to understand how women choose their underwear by listening to their experiences and how they interpret these experiences in relation to how their identity is constituted in various contexts (Goffman, 1990). Goffman refers to the multiple roles that humans are called upon to play in order to construct their identities, which echoes my assertion in Chapter 2 and that identity is multi-faceted and ongoing. In a Foucauldian sense, individuals’ identities are the products of a relation of power and their own self-fashioning.

Thus the different encounters of our daily life call upon us to perform different aspects of our selves. Gillen (2001: 91) agrees that versions of a self can be presented according to situations. As part of the ongoing project of female identity, different situations such as stages of life, contexts and activities can emphasise different parts of female identity. These include colleague, mother, friend or lover (also see Elliot, 2001). Therefore it is important to understand women’s experiences in the multiple roles they play in various contexts each day, performing diverse sides of identity that I will call identity *opseis*.

This term originates from the Greek *όψη* which means an aspect or side of – and represents exactly these various contexts in or stages of everyday life where women

arguably play out or are required to focus on specific parts of their identity. My intention with this notion of identity *opseis* is to deliberately ‘hail’ these various identities in my data gathering (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) and then understand how underwear’s role and significance might vary between these *opseis*. As established in Chapters 2 and 3 women use clothes to present different parts of their identity (Goffman, 1990; Gillen, 2001 Tseëlon, 2001) and, through this process, clothes help them to (re)construct their female identity. Thus, underwear as part of women’s clothing is another aspect of their experience of their ongoing female project; one which, since it is ostensibly hidden from view, makes it even more interesting than outerwear, as established from the outset of this thesis.

Coming back to Mason’s (2002: 30) intellectual puzzle, it is crucial that my “methodological strategy”, which is the logic by which I will be answering my research questions, does indeed connect to my research questions and underpins the research methods that I have chosen. Taking into consideration Mason’s examples of intellectual puzzles, and after outlining the ontological and epistemological concerns of this research, I would argue that my own puzzle is an *interpretive* one which is similar to Mason’s ‘mechanical puzzle’. It tries to understand how *x* and *y* work but also to interpret these workings within their social context. Interpretivism as a qualitative approach aims to explore people’s understandings and sense of the social reality that they (re)produce with their activities. As Blaikie (2000: 115) stresses,

[t]his everyday reality consists of the meaning and interpretations given by the social actors to their actions, other people’s actions, social situations, and natural and humanly created objects. [...] In order to negotiate their way around their world and

make sense of it, social actors have to interpret their activities together and it is these meanings, embedded in language, that constitute their social reality.

Thus the reality I am interested in here is one that is constituted by the social actors of this research, i.e. my participants, and the one in which they make sense of their actions and the actions of people around them. I acknowledge the fact that these social actions form part of a person's individual identity and the social and cultural understandings of the context located in. Thus, a woman's experience of choosing and wearing the 'right' underwear implies a level of agency. However I also have to acknowledge that most of the participants in this research come from and all live in the UK, which means that they in all likelihood adhere to particular social and cultural understandings around being female. As the conceptual framework of Chapter 2 suggests, even though these women live in socially constructed realities, nevertheless these realities can sometimes be so restrictive and so embedded in prevailing understandings of the social, that they translate into normative, seemingly 'natural' or indeed 'objective' reality. This coincides with what Stanley and Wise (1993) argue in the quote previously cited.

The following section goes into the more practical elements of this research, such as the justification of the methods used, the sampling strategy and other aspects of the collection of my data.

#### **4.4. Research design: methods and sampling**

As Guba and Lincoln (2005: 205) argue no method “is the royal road to ultimate knowledge”. If there is methodologically strategic thinking behind the research, then some methods are indeed more appropriate than others for that specific project. The selection of my methods should be based on the ontological assumption that people’s experiences, understandings and interpretations construct social reality, as asserted in the previous section and on the epistemological assumptions that “a meaningful way to generate data” (Mason, 200: 263) is to interact with people in order to obtain some purchase on and interpret these experiences understandings and interpretations. Indeed I agree with Mason when she stresses that data are generated and not collected, which again conforms with the epistemological assumptions that underpin this research; that is, knowledge is constructed and is not ‘out there’ for the researcher to ‘capture,. My role as a researcher is to choose a particular set of methods to construct or generate this knowledge, so I can then translate it into the answers to my research questions.

The data here are the discussions in which my participants engage, in my presence as the researcher, with regard to the experiences they have with underwear. Any appropriate method for the generation of these data should allow this to take place, facilitating a verbal transmission of these experiences. Of course it is never possible to assume that all women would be willing to talk about their underwear or that it would be easy for them to talk about this a group of people. The social effects/dynamics of the group is always a disadvantage and I will further elaborate on this below, as it is a disadvantage for any topic that might seem relatively sensitive to participants. Nevertheless, since arguably women might be more willing or more used to discussing issues like fashion, dress and underwear with other women, I considered the most appropriate methods to invoke conversations about underwear

to be focus groups and one-to-one interviewing. The following sub-sections define the particular methods as ways of generating data, as well as further justifying the appropriateness of these methods.

#### ***4.4.1 Focus Groups***

One of the first focus group studies in social science was that of Merton and Kendal (cited in Morgan, 1988) during World War II. At the same time focus groups were used in marketing research by Lazarsfeld. For Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) the first recognised use of focus groups as a method for social research was in fact by Lazarsfeld and Merton together in 1941, in a project to evaluate the effect of the media on people's attitudes towards the involvement of America in the war. However the use of focus groups during this time was secondary: they were always a method to supplement the more 'legitimate' quantitative methods. After its disappearance and subsequent re-emergence in the 1970s, the focus group as a method of social research was no longer considered as an adjunct to quantitative methods. In contrast with Lazarsfeld and Merton's work, social researchers were now "focusing on group dynamics themselves, believing that the meanings constructed within groups [...] were largely socially constructed" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005: 899).

Since then focus groups have become an accepted method for social researchers who want to grasp group dynamics as well as individual experiences. As Seale (2004: 194) argues,

[f]ocus groups [...] are not simply a means of interviewing several people at the same time; rather, they are concerned to explore the formation and negotiation of accounts within a group context, how people define, discuss and contest issues through social interaction.

This social interaction between the participants is described by Morgan, cited in Wilkinson (2004: 178), as the “‘hallmark’ of focus group research”. An underlying assumption of focus groups as a research method is that reality is co-constructed 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). “[T]he synergy and dynamism generated within homogeneous collectives often reveal unarticulated norms and normative assumptions” (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005: 903) which can become rich data in themselves for the researcher. In the previous section I have referred to these normative assumptions as the ‘objective reality’ that participants may see themselves as existing within.

I find this particularly useful to explain why the interaction between participants achieved in focus groups is a key issue for this research. Underwear as part of dress is also part of the cultural field of fashion, as suggested in Chapters 2 and 3. Thus, fashion by definition is a “particular set of arrangements for the production and distribution of clothing” (Entwistle, 2001: 45). It is a set of systematic changes in styles of dress, made *by* the social *for* the social; a system that is constituted and disseminated through social interaction and discourse, including fashion shows, the media, shop windows and going out with your friends, who are all ‘players in the game’ of this field in Bourdieusian terms. Social interaction is what constitutes and reflects fashion styles and gives meaning to different parts of dress, underwear being one. If fashion is constituted by social interaction, then underwear as part of it, even though it is mostly hidden, can also be understood in terms of social interaction and thus my focus groups become part of this “‘real’ social process” (Seale, 2004: 197). What is more interesting than exploring the meanings that women assign to a hidden part of their dress while talking to other women?

The sampling process will be discussed in a following sub-section. However, I find it useful here to note that I have chosen to use ‘pre-existing’ groups; that is, clusters of women who already knew each other, either by working or playing sport together, or belonging to a group with a ‘purpose’, for example my group of first time mothers. The advantage of having pre-existing groups is that these women already knew each other, and without undermining the dynamics that might develop in a group discussion, it was arguably easier for them to feel comfortable and talk about their underwear with friends or colleagues. Also, I agree with Kitzinger (1994: 105, emphasis in original) when she stresses that “[b]y using pre-existing groups [the researcher is] sometimes able to tap into *fragments* of interactions which [approximate] to ‘naturally occurring’ data”, or what Seale (2004: 197) calls the “‘real’ social process”. Kitzinger here does not suggest that there is anything ‘natural’ about focus groups: rather, she acknowledges that focus groups are a staged or artificial occurrence and similarly Seale suggests that through the interaction emerge social accounts and not individual opinions. However, going back to Kitzinger’s argument, she notes that when people in the group know each other, perhaps the topics under discussion might have already been discussed within the group, which makes the group a site of “collective remembering” (1994: 105). In the case of my focus groups, many participants reported talking about underwear before within the group. Thus it was easier for these women to relate to or remember past conversations about underwear and thus it also seemed more ‘natural’ to them to talk about such a topic again. I return to this point in section 4.4.3 where I discuss the context of the groups and the connections between the women within the groups.

So it is the interaction between the participants in focus groups that should be of great importance to the researcher. As Seale 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. (Seale, 2004: 198)

The interactive nature of focus groups can, as suggested, lead to richer and more meaningful data (Morgan, 1988; Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson, 2004). It allows for a “synergistic effect” (Stewart *et al.*, 2007: 43) because participants respond to and build on other participants’ views and ideas. The discussion can sometimes ‘stray’ to issues that the researcher has not thought about and which can provide very useful data. This is also true for less structured interviews too, but it might be more likely to happen in focus groups, especially in larger groups. It also has another dimension: the shift of power from the researcher to the participants. It is often mentioned that one of the ethical issues of one-on-one interviews is the level of power that the researcher can have over the participant, in terms of controlling the proceedings or regulating the path for what the participant talks about to reflect their own objectives (Morgan, 1988; Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson, 2004). The issue of power within the research process has been a key ethical concern for feminist researchers in particular (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Skeggs, 1995; Taylor, 1996; Jowett and O’Toole, 2006). In focus groups, while this ethical concern does not disappear, since the researcher still facilitates discussion and of course controls the analysis of data, it is nevertheless reduced to a huge extent. The balance of power shifts and participants arguably have more control over the interaction between them than the researcher does.

This was evident in the case of this research too, when at points participants in some larger groups were interested in elaborating on a particular conversation with a few other participants and in reflecting on past experiences without me being able to clearly listen to the conversation they were having. Griffin (1986) for example notes that, during her research, the

young women participants would often start discussing issues amongst them without waiting for her next question. She notes that these discussions were not always on the list of themes or topics she wanted to hear about but the richness of data ‘forced’ her to amend her list.

An additional advantage of focus groups identified by Seale (2004) which is at the same time a possible limitation is that

in certain contexts, group discussions may encourage people to speak with greater openness than they would in one-on-one interaction with a researcher; in others the group contexts can be inhibiting. (2004: 197)

The last may be especially true when sensitive issues are the subject of the research. Some people would either not participate at all or could find it difficult to open up to a group and thus they would tend to follow the trajectory of the group without giving their own perspectives on the issues involved. Discussion about a woman’s underwear could be considered a sensitive subject because it connects with private issues; intimate parts of the body, personal moments with partners, social conditions like not being able to buy the latest trend in underwear styles due to low income, cultural or religious convictions about dress including underwear, or beliefs about one’s body size and shape. I tried to avoid this limitation of focus groups, with the additional use of one-to-one interviews in my research design.

#### ***4.4.2 One-to-one semi-structured interviews***

Focus groups have often been used in combination with one-on-one interviews and the data treated as commensurate, but often with no discussion about the relationship of the two methods, or any justification about the use of both methods (Wilkinson, 1998). Moreover,

and following from the discussion above, Seale (2004) suggests that interviews are helpful when it comes to sensitive or contentious issues that individuals might feel uncomfortable about revealing in a group. Indeed, if arguably sensitive issues are to be discussed, a group context might be inhibiting. Notwithstanding this, the individual interviews I conducted were mostly because of practical issues rather than my participants feeling inhibited taking part in a group.

The use of one-to-one interviewing also reflects my ontological and epistemological assumptions and the overall methodological strategy of my research. It provides “contextual, situational and interactional” knowledge (Mason, 2002: 64) about the particular phenomenon under research and does not suppose an objective reality that will be ‘excavated’ by the questions asked. Miller and Glusner (2004: 137) have it that “a strength in qualitative interviewing is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts of social worlds”. Even though my aim is to explore how the participants give meaning to their experiences, I elected not to use the unstructured type of interviewing which could lead to entirely different discussions and as the interviewer I may have lost control completely. Moreover, as Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 72) argue there is much criticism of the naïve view which has the researcher capturing “genuine experiences” with unstructured interviewing. They continue by emphasising that “the intended effect of the interview is often to give a good impression or just to make a situation work. (A good conversation calls for efforts to be made)” (*ibid.*) That is, people might often exaggerate or act differently because the situation they are in seemingly demands this, or simply because they want to give a good impression to the interviewer. That might be true for the interviewer as well, who may put in a lot of effort to make sure that a conversation takes place; indeed one that will give her data. So interviews cannot be assumed to approximate to a ‘transparent’ information exchange.

Moreover Mason (2002) stresses that it is difficult to gather data in a wholly unstructured manner anyway because all researchers have pre-existing assumptions that are expressed in their research questions and affect their decisions about data collection. I find myself in agreement with these authors. This also reflects what Gummesson (2000: 67) calls preunderstanding, that is the combinations of the researcher's own experiences, as well as other people's experiences which "constitutes a store of knowledge" representing how she makes sense of the research that she is about to engage in. Thus it was more appropriate for me to use semi-structured interviews which allow for more direction and focus on the questions that need to be covered but have the flexibility to allow the participants to draw upon other experiences as well, in order for me to have a better understanding of how they give meaning to their experiences with underwear. A schedule of questions was used, similar to the one used in the focus groups, but it likewise did not dictate the interviews completely. I wanted the interviews to be 'active', where there would be an interaction between me, the interviewer, and the respondent - a social interaction (Silverman, 2001) - so the participant was not distracted by fixed questions that she had to answer in a certain way.

To reiterate, the data from qualitative interviews, whether that is one-to-one or group interviews, should be regarded as constructed/generated and not just excavated (Mason, 2002). Bearing this in mind, I needed to be reflexive in how I interpret the data. Indeed, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2005: 5) stress that

empirical data are the results of interpretation. [...] Consideration of the fundamental importance of interpretation means that an assumption of a simple mirroring thesis of the relationship between 'reality' or 'empirical facts' and research results (text) has to be rejected.

As such the context into which I have placed my participants either in the focus groups or the interviews should be taken into consideration in the interpretation of the data. I return to this issue again in a later section of this chapter when I reflect on the process of conducting the focus groups and interviews. In the following section I justify the decisions around the sampling approach used for my research as well as how this sample pays heed to some of my theoretical assumptions regarding issues of identity.

#### ***4.4.3 Sampling***

Sampling as a term comprises the principles of identifying and accessing sources of data. It often seems to be more associated with the logics of measurement and probability which are often elements of positivistic, quantitative research. Still most forms of empirical research require sampling in the pragmatic sense that particular participants are chosen from a population and it is important that the researcher establishes an intellectual relationship between her participants (sample) and the wider population. Sampling is thus important for qualitative research, even though here it is usually not an approach that allows for generalisation of findings, but rather exploring participants' perspective on a focused topic. Where focus groups in particular are concerned, Seale (2004) stresses that sampling is critical not

for the purpose of generalizing from individual responses to external populations [...] because focus group research does not provide access in any systematic way to individual responses, but rather to *interactive discussions*. (p. 199, emphasis in the original)

Identifying and selecting participants from a wider population with a clear rationale is called by Mason (2002) *strategic* sampling, simply because of the strategic purpose behind the selection of the participants. Quoting Mason,

the relationship between [the researcher's] sample and the wider population is not *ad hoc*, accidental, purely opportunistic or indeed representational. (p.124, emphasis in the original)

This strategy of sampling is also known as purposive sampling, where the researcher selects the most productive sample in order to answer her research questions, are which is usually underpinned by a framework of the variables that might inform the data that she is looking for. For this research, sampling decisions were rather difficult because it is not research done in a particular environment where the populations and thus the sample can be identified or selected easily. I am using very broad parameters: most if not all women wear underwear. So which women should I choose? And moreover why do I choose women and not men? While it might be interesting to research how men choose their underwear and if they have particular experiences concerning their underwear that they would like to share, still it is a very sensitive subject and, as a woman, it would be rather uncomfortable to do such research. Moreover, it is could be argued that, while men do discuss consumption issues, these might be quite different than what could be regarded as an intimate part of their dress. Further, as already discussed at the outset of this thesis, but also in Chapter 3, women are generally considered to be more concerned about and scrutinised regarding issues around their bodies, i.e. body size, appearance, dress, including underwear (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1990b and 2004; Felski, 1995) and thus it is perhaps more interesting to see how this intimate part of their dress is an element of their identity projects.

Coming back to the methodological strategy, since I am assuming a socially constructed reality which involves a multiplicity of social roles, my sampling strategy fits with what I have previously called identity *opseis*. My intention was to capture women's identity *opseis* in their everyday life. I then use these *opseis* as the common characteristics of the women I select, which is extremely important when planning focus groups. Collecting data from

participants with a common role in a specific context means that it would be best if they knew one another to provide a “comfort zone” (Stewart *et al.*, 2007: 19). Indeed “[t]he usefulness and validity of focus group data are affected by the extent to which participants feel comfortable about openly communicating their ideas, views, or opinions” as Stewart *et al* (*ibid.*) stress. This is why using pre-existing groups can be a good strategy, especially when it comes to a sensitive topic like underwear. I have thus identified pre-existing groups of women exemplifying a specified identity *opsy*<sup>9</sup>, but not as representative of these *opseis per se*. This was not just important for establishing a comfort zone within the focus groups, but for the interviews as well. All participants were invited to choose either to take part in a focus group or a one-to-one interview with me. As suggested however, in some circumstances, the choice of whether to do a focus group or an interview was my own, because of practical reasons like getting access to a group, making the necessary arrangements which can be very difficult, and so on.

The argument about homogeneity within the focus groups can be reversed into a critique, especially because these women know each other and because of the nature of the topic discussed. I was aware that this homogeneity could silence voices that might want to express themselves differently or, because of the need for compatibility within each group, other views from people with different characteristics could also be lost. Such a sampling strategy with the rationale of selecting participants with an aim of getting *directive* insights (Seale, 2004) could likewise be criticised as an attempt to see the homogeneous sample extending to the wider social group as if they had similar characteristics. I do not make such an argument in this thesis. In fact, my participants might belong to other groups in terms of identity *opsy* simultaneously, and that is the importance of the concept itself, that is, the ‘hailing’ of a

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<sup>9</sup> *Opsy* is the singular of *opseis* as pronounced in the Greek language.

*particular side* of these women's identity. Selecting participants for qualitative research might always bear the question of how they relate to population but as Sanger (1996: 20) asserts social science researchers should bear in mind that "[r]ather than observing people and objects as samples of larger groups in some presupposed classificatory system [... they should] examine them in their complex singularity".

The identity *opseis* that I have selected and are the following:

- Professional women who work as University English tutors.
- Professional women working as University administrators.
- First time mothers (who had recently given birth).
- Gym clients.
- Gym instructors.
- A women's rugby team.
- A Widows And Divorcees (WADs) group comprised of women over 60.

Selecting these groups also required a great deal of luck as well careful consideration of practical issues, like finding ways to access the groups of women I wanted to interview. In many cases I used the snowballing technique (Burgess, 1984; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Kuzel, 1999), which is selecting people who know other people who can participate in the research. I have not used snowballing in the way Kuzel (1999: 41) notes, to saturate my sample - finding as many participants as possible - but sampling as a way of getting access to these women. Thus snowballing came to complement the purposive sampling, as far as choosing my participants was concerned.

The University professionals were chosen partly as the easiest groups to access. However the additional rationale behind this choice was that both groups exemplify the identity of the working woman, in an intellectual environment. The University is not any given working place. In such a setting we can suggest that university staff's identity is discursively constituted around the mind, without although assuming a natural or essential distinction between mind and body. It can nonetheless be argued that these women rely more on their mental ability during their work and less on their physical aptitude. But their dressed body is still on display and it needs to be dressed such that it fits into the University as a workplace. The tutors' dressed bodies especially are more scrutinised and monitored by the student-audience in front of whom they stand all day. Thus these women have to consider the ethics and politics behind their dress for the workplace, including their underwear.

My way of accessing this group was via a snowballing process that started off as one of the tutors, who I was familiar with and invited first to take part in the research, asked some colleagues in her department and then an administrator who she happened to know. That administrator then informed some colleagues of hers about my research, who she thought might be likewise interested and willing to take part.

The mother's group was chosen as motherhood is an identity that perhaps speaks more to the female body than any other role a woman is called to play. Women's identity as mothers is constituted around the reproductive parts of their body and all the feelings and experiences that this entails. Key elements of femininity are at work here, like sensitivity, nurturing, care and so on. Furthermore, underwear arguably changes as a result of 'becoming a mother'. Gathering a group of first time mothers was not intended in the first place but it has suited the project well since these women were unfamiliar with this experience and were, I presume,

able to express more vividly their experience of the changing body than women who have experienced motherhood more than once. Also, being very new mothers, they could readily recall the experience of the changing body both during and after pregnancy. These women met at National Childcare Trust seminars and kept in contact during pregnancy and afterwards. They now meet regularly in each other's houses to talk about their experiences with their new babies. As one of my supervisors knew one of these women, she gave me access to the group in its 'natural' context, inviting me to her house at one of their regular gatherings. I am not suggesting here that this gave me more 'natural' data, as I have previously discussed, but the familiarity between these women and the fact that I was on their 'ground', I believe gave me richer data. As the focus group took place at a usual gathering it did not feel 'fake' or 'staged' to them, especially since all had their babies with them and had arrived even before I got there.

The two groups from the gym were selected because the *opseis* of these women speaks to the body as a practice, making explicit cultural scripts around what the female body should look like. However, for gym instructors their body is mainly a labouring device which they use to assist others (clients) with their body work, while for the clients their body work is a part of the feminine identity project. Women clients can report their efforts to construct and sculpt their bodies and how underwear changes during or supports this process. A gym is also a site where the body is monitored not only in the exercise rooms but also in the changing rooms where it and intimate parts of our clothing like underwear are on display. Gym instructors on the other hand are able to express experiences regarding their working bodies and how underwear supports them during this process, but also their experiences with their clients and their bodies.

Accessing the gym comprised the usual problems of accessing an institution: the research process can be disruptive and intrusive to that institution (Wolff, 2004; Flick, 2009). I composed an access letter in order to negotiate my access (Wolff, 2004) which was addressed to the manager of a local Health Club (see appendix 1). Being a member of the club myself would make it - I had hoped - easier to gain access. The access letter asked for permission to approach clients and instructors and to invite them to take part in the research, as well as permission to place 'invitations to participate to research' in the changing rooms in order to attract participants. Of course it also reassured the manager about confidentiality issues involving the club. The manager assured me she would inform the instructors about me approaching them as well. At that point I was slightly concerned that the manager's involvement would have been construed as pressure for the instructors to accept the invitation. However this was not the case as in fact I later found out that the manager did not inform the instructors at all about my presence there. Moreover, mostly for practical reasons, like time scheduling, I was not able to form a focus group, thus I had to arrange one-to-one interviews, since I had to approach only those gym instructors working at the times I had access to the gym. Similarly with the gym clients, the invitations I placed in the changing rooms were 'lost', probably thrown away by the cleaners, thus I had to approach some members while I was there to exercise.

The women's rugby team focus group was also put together via a snowballing process since I knew the captain of the team personally. It was organised as a focus group consisting of seven participants who were interested and able to come on the specific day and at the time that the focus group was arranged. Talking to these women, who all happened to be students, was interesting in that they saw rugby as the bodily practice of playing a somewhat masculine and 'brutal' sport. These women suggested it requires a specific body type and particular

support for the body that is under severe pressure during the games and also training. The masculine characteristics that this sport entails dictate in a way how these girls behave and move during that time, so how they support their body is crucial to how they actually play. Thus underwear becomes a way of controlling and supporting their bodies in an active and masculine context.

The Widows and Divorcees group was the last of the focus groups and its importance lies in the fact that these women participants are all over 60. Getting older brings a lot of changes in the body and it was interesting for me to explore how these changes might lead to changes in the underwear that a woman wears. How a mature woman selects her underwear as well as her experiences of what the 'right' underwear is might be different from those in her younger years. However this group do not call themselves 'older women' but WADs. The group meets regularly to talk about activities they organise, such as trips, charitable functions or other events. These women formed this group a while back precisely because they do not have partners, but as they are getting older some of the experiences of ageing were also shared during the discussion.

To summarise thus far, choosing participants who exemplified the specific identity *opseis* I am dealing with in the thesis was also a matter of luck or, better put, a matter of serendipity. My women participants certainly play out various identity *opseis* and belong to other groups as well. Thus, grouping women together under a unique characteristic such as one identity *opseis* can be complicated. For me however, it wasn't such a complex matter and it seems that serendipity in research can be extremely gratifying. For example in the case of the mothers, the size of the group and ultimately the data I got was a real surprise and something that I did not anticipate. Similarly with the women's rugby team, again ending up with this

group had an element of serendipity, since my association with the team's captain proved as a possibility for gathering participants.

#### **4.4.4 Interview schedule**

The interview schedule was an important part of the process of my research. It set the agenda for interviews and focus groups, and capturing data which would answer my research questions depended on a well designed schedule. Time wise my empirical process started in November 2007 and lasted until October 2008, with unavoidable gaps between some focus groups and also between the two interviews because of access issues. The schedule, especially for focus groups, needed to comprise of questions that sounded conversational in order to elicit discussion (Morgan and Scannell, 1998; Krueger, 2000; Stewart *et al.*, 2007). It was likewise important to avoid questions that merely required a yes or no answer. Also, according to Stewart *et al.* (2007), the phrasing of the questions needed to avoid offending the participants or putting them on the defensive.

However, not all the questions are the same type: some are key questions that reflect the research questions directly and some are transitional questions that make for a smooth shift between different subjects or key questions (Morgan, 1988). For this research, I also developed different interview schedules that corresponded to each of the identity *opseis* I used (see appendix 2). However all interview schedules were composed based on the same structure: an introductory question (the same for all *opseis*); a transitional question; some key questions that covered one or two important aspects of the research, then another transitional question that led to other key questions and so on. Finally the interview schedules ended with a concluding question which was the same for all *opseis* as well as an invitation to participants for comments regarding the interview process or questions. The schedules were

as suggested roughly similar in format for focus groups and one-to-one interviews, but depending on the identity *opseis* that characterised the group or interviews, some were slightly longer than others. For all groups as well as one-to-one interviews, participants were asked to fill in a brief form for biographical data so that I would have some information that related to the identity *opseis* I was concentrating on, e.g. for the mothers' group these questions related to how long ago they gave birth, if they belonged to the NCT etcetera. The biographical data thus differ in terms of which *opseis* I was focusing on. In summary, five focus groups were created: the University tutors with 4 participants, the University administrators with 4 participants, the post-natal mothers group with 7 participants, the women's rugby team with 7 participants and the widows and divorcees (WADS) group with 9 participants. The two gym clients and the gym instructor were interviewed. All the participants were white British, with the exception of one University tutor who was white Asian but had lived in the UK for many years. More demographic data were collected about all the participants depending on their identity *opseis* and this is listed in Appendix 4.

To illustrate some of the differences between schedules, for the mothers' group I focused on their experience of pregnancy and new motherhood and how their underwear changed, if relevant, during that time. Also I needed to include questions about maternity underwear and their feelings about and experiences of this. On the other hand, for the rugby women, key questions had to do with the underwear they wear when playing, if this differs from everyday underwear, and how. The identity *opseis* strategy helped in hailing different aspects of these women's experiences with their underwear which was necessary in order to answer my research questions.

In terms of similarities, the introductory question, about whether or not they talk to other people about their underwear, was meant to challenge or reaffirm my assumption that women would feel comfortable talking about their underwear with other women. The concluding question was the hardest of all, as all my participants mentioned, as it required them to comment on the statement that in today's world it is argued that 'we are what we wear' and if they thought that was true when it comes to underwear. Several participants understood the question differently, which proved that the question was not easy to answer. For example, some participants talked more about their outerwear and how they feel that affects them in their daily lives, neglecting to talk about their underwear, or briefly mentioning that they just coordinate their underwear to suit their outerwear. Others though talked about how their underwear might not reflect who they are because they would compare underwear with their outerwear, noting that outerwear is more important to them in reflecting aspects of their selves (themselves). Nevertheless, my intention with this question was to elicit a response that would shed some light on how each woman thinks about herself and the relationship between her clothes, underwear and her feelings about being a woman.

Importantly also, the first transition question for all schedules included the use of some stimulus material (see appendix 3). This was several pictures of different types of underwear with the aim of stimulating a discussion about the different types and make the participants feel more comfortable with the topic. In the next section I explain the process of selecting the stimulus material and why I felt it was important for the interview process.

#### ***4.4.5 Stimulus material***

Stimulus material is often used in focus groups and interviews as a way of introducing the research topic (Morgan, 1988). This can often include videos, pictures, storytelling etc. The

stimulus material in this research comprised of pictures of various types of underwear and worked as a potential ‘can opener’ in terms of getting my participants to talk about the types of underwear they wear or do not and how they feel about the different types by identifying them using the pictures. The images were all taken from the websites of different shops. The shops I used were Marks and Spencer’s which is according to Mintel one of the favourite shops for underwear shopping in the UK (Mintel Marketing Intelligence, 2009), Ann Summers which specialises in a more sensual type of underwear and TheSpecialCollection.com which specialises in underwear for more mature female bodies, for women with bigger breasts or women who have undergone surgery for breast cancer, as well as maternity underwear. Models in all the photographs were given a pseudonym so that participants could easily refer to the various pictures and of course for more practical reasons, such as it being more straightforward for me to distinguish which of the pictures my participants would talk about when transcribing the recordings.

The first picture (Debby) featured what could be called an everyday type of underwear, a plain black cotton set of bra and the briefs taken from Marks and Spencer’s website. The bra was non-padded and underwired and the briefs were plain, that is they featured no lace or other embroidery on. This bra could suit a big busted woman, as indicated by the model in the picture. The second picture (Lara) depicted a green lacy set of padded, underwired bra and boy pants taken from Marks and Spencer’s website. The third picture (Liza) featured a pink set of embroidered, non-padded, underwired bra and briefs, also from Marks and Spencer’s, and which could be characterised as a more ‘romantic’ set. The models in these three pictures have a similar posture, smiling at the camera with one or both hands on their waist. The fourth picture (Camara) depicted a white set of embroidered push-up bra and a low waisted thong with tiny ribbons on the front. This picture was taken from the Ann Summers

website. The fifth picture (Laris) featured a black 'babydoll' with matching black, low waisted string and stockings, also from Ann Summers. The sixth picture (Joanna) depicted a white lace basque with a very low waisted string and detachable suspenders, again from Ann Summers. These last three pictures could be considered as more sexual as the models are featured in a more provocative posture. Indeed Ann Summers' advertising is characterised by more sensual /sexual imagery *per se* which is of course reflective of the type of underwear and other products it sells. Other specialist underwear shops like Victoria's Secret use a similar advertising theme, which is often viewed as controversial (see for example Juffer, 1996), but nevertheless is recognisable by consumers. Indeed, as will be shown later in the thesis, some of my participants identified these pictures as Ann Summers' advertising. The seventh picture (Lia and Lianne) featured two white cotton bras which could be worn as sports bras, the second being for a much larger chest. The eighth picture (Sarah and Niki) shows a black cotton panty girdle and beige high waisted/tummy shaper briefs, both from TheSpecialCollection.com. The last two pictures were only used in the mothers' group as they featured pregnancy underwear, so that they could be used as stimulus pictures for the mothers group. Picture number 9 (Helen) showed a set of black and white nursing bra and low waisted boy pants and picture number 10 (Julie) showed a plain black cotton set of bra and high waist briefs. Both pictures were taken from the Marks and Spencer's website. The choice of these images was purely subjective but I tried to include as many different types of underwear, in different colours and materials, as possible. The images were not intended to represent all types of underwear in the market but to be an indicative sample of what can be found in famous high street or internet shops. As a 'can opener', these images not only provoked conversation about the underwear featured in the images but also types of underwear not included there.

I had three sets of the pictures printed out so I could use them according to the group or person I was interviewing. For the University staff I used large A3 laminated printouts since I could place the pictures around the room where the focus group took place so that everyone could see them. For the mothers and the women's rugby team I used A4 printouts as these were easier to handle at the time. The third set of printouts was A4 pages that could fit 3 or 4 pictures on each. These were used for the interviews so that they could be easily put in front of the participant to see, no matter what the environment.

To reiterate so far, in this section I have justified the methods used when conducting this research as well as the sample of participants involved. In the next section I discuss some of the issues that I faced while in the field, reflecting back the process of conducting the focus groups and interviews and how different data have been collected from each.

#### **4.5 Reflections on the field**

Thinking about and planning a focus group is rather different from actually doing one. Undoubtedly a researcher is not really ready for what is about to follow and how she can control the group in order to generate the data she needs. Planning the first focus group with the University tutors was indeed quite demanding and a challenging experience for me. It was the first focus group I had ever organised and, lacking experience of moderation, I had no idea what to expect or what would be the outcome. Indeed, all the focus groups were quite different in terms of my feelings about them afterwards. Some were better than others in terms of the discussion that took place and generating what I considered as 'good' and rich data, some lasted longer than others, and some indicated that I could get different and/or richer data, as these women would engage in a discussion that I had not anticipated or did not think about, and in fact asked each other questions that I had not identified.

The context where each focus group or interview took place, as previously suggested, was very important and affected the outcomes. For example the tutors' focus group took place in a coffee room in their office building where they usually go to chat and relax and, as it was late in the afternoon, after work hours, I had the sense that they felt at home. It was still a place where they played the role of the professional working woman I was focusing on as a researcher, but they were also in their own comfort zone. Moreover, as one of the participants confided, all of them were very excited about the focus group and over the last few days the whole issue of the focus group had become their little secret. They had written on a small whiteboard that was in the room a note saying "Christiana's underwear thing", with the place and the time that the focus group would take place. This created a buzz especially amongst male colleagues who kept asking them what this 'underwear thing' was that was going to happen. Within this group, my initial contact was one of the participants too, so I also felt more comfortable with the other women who I had never met before. She also took the role of 'helping out' during some silences at the beginning. In contrast, in the second focus group with the University administrators, all were strangers to me and I had only been in contact with them via emails. I also had the difficult task of matching a name with a face. It was a rather more challenging situation for me thinking that it could turn out to be as comfortable as the tutors' focus group. The participants in this group were quieter and at some points I had to take the initiative to ask them directly one by one about their thoughts on specific questions. It was an unknown room to them which might have made them feel out of their comfort zone. However, they all knew each other so it felt like they were comfortable enough to talk to each other about their underwear. Two of the women confided that they had been talking about underwear at work already because one of them was getting married and wedding underwear had triggered this conversation. Nonetheless, this focus group, even though it was a pre-

existing one in terms of the familiarity between these women as colleagues working in an open plan office area, still felt more 'staged' than the first one.

This feeling was also evident in the fourth focus group with the women's rugby team. I met them when they were taking pictures outside with their coach and trophies so they were all very excited. As aforementioned, the captain of the team was my contact and arranged that the other women would take part in the research. However, she seemed to have some power in getting participants from the whole team; not in an authoritative way but because she was older and she was the captain. Thus it was not a simple invitation to take part; perhaps it was more that they felt they *had* to take part.

As a group this was the most non-talkative one. My presence as the researcher seemed very evident to participants because the focus group took place in a seminar room at the University where they study, so it felt as if they were holding back. They were also very cautious of the recorder. One of the girls actually mentioned this to another when she started talking about her relationships with men and revealing some intimate information. The discussion about general experiences with their underwear was not as open and rich as I had anticipated or experienced with the other groups. I felt that these were women still quite young with not so many experiences to report and maybe they were also not eager to discuss more sensitive subjects with an older stranger.

The importance of the environment where the research took place is even more evident with the mothers' group, the WADs group and one of the gym clients who I interviewed at her house. More specifically, the mothers' focus group took place at the house of the sister of my contact, who in fact was away at the time. I did not know what to expect and, as I entered the

house, I was faced with seven women who were breast feeding, nappy changing or otherwise caring for their babies. As stated earlier these were all first time mothers who have recently given birth but still got together to discuss their experiences with their new babies and motherhood in general over some nibbles. It was a regular setting for them so it was a comfortable environment to talk to each other and to me about underwear.

The same situation occurred with the WADs group which also took place in its 'natural' setting. When I visited the group, they were having one of their regular gatherings. I even felt like I was taking up their time when they had important issues to discuss, since they were planning a charity event. However that did not affect the conversation that took place and this was the longest focus group I had. Similarly, when I interviewed one of the gym clients at her house, where she felt relaxed and comfortable on her 'own ground', the conversation was more detailed and lasted longer. This was also the last interview I conducted and I felt more experienced as a result. Further, even though the interview with the other gym client took place in a small coffee shop, she still felt more relaxed and comfortable because it was very quiet and it was her usual place for drinking coffee and reading books.

My first interview on the other hand was with the gym instructor and it took place in a seating area at the gym where she is employed. The instructor confided that she felt nervous as this was the first time she had given an interview. Even though we were sitting away from the exercise rooms and the noise, it was still her workplace so I felt this also affected her demeanour. Unfortunately doing the interview at the gym was also easier and more practical for my respondent. I used the small printouts of the stimulus photos because I was aware that I could not use the space as previously with the focus groups. We were sitting at a small

coffee table and we were both conscious of not letting other people see the pictures as they passed through.

Since this was my first interview after doing some of the focus groups, I found that my argument stated in previous sections about the limitations of focus groups and of women who might find groups intimidating was not borne out. Talking to me about the underwear she wears was not easy for this gym instructor. Her answers were brief and she could not loosen up in order for me to make the discussion more comfortable for her. Her answers prompted more questions for me to ask. However it was not the rich conversation I hoped for. I felt that the location of the interview took place was one of the major factors in my participant not being open.

When reflecting back on my fieldwork, other interesting issues also spring to mind. For example during the mothers' focus group I remember that many of them were teasing others about their choices of underwear. It was quite intriguing that by the end the women were still teasing each other about now knowing what underwear each other wears. They even involved their husbands in the conversation, giggling about also teasing them in future. However they all mentioned that this was the first time they had thought specifically about their underwear in general and their pregnancy and post natal underwear, even though they have discussed all sorts of other issues about pregnancy. Similarly the administrators' group noted the fact they felt it was interesting learning so much information about each other's underwear. Indeed, even though this was not as talkative a group as the tutors' group, still the conversation ran for about an hour. What was interesting to me is that, after I thanked them for taking part, they started asking me questions like what my conclusions were so far about how women buy

their underwear, so this triggered another ten minute conversation which likewise contributed to my data.

The outcomes of my research and my conclusions so far were also some of the questions I got from the WADs group. They felt that it was an interesting topic but they were curious as to why I chose it in the first place, even though I had introduced my topic at the beginning and gave them a brief explanation as to why I was there. Again that triggered some more minutes of conversation which revealed additionally interesting data.

These reflections on the field were all noted after the end of each focus group or interview. I wrote memos for all the events since I felt that the whole process, including the environment, the relations between the participants, the settings, even the time that each interview or focus group took place, affected the outcome and thus the data I collected. These memos were also used as part of the analysis process. The next section refers to this analysis, where I explain how I have handled, organised and categorised my data into meaningful themes that respond to my research questions.

## **4.5 Data analysis**

All focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and kept as a digital file until transcribed. Transcriptions were usually done soon after each focus groups or interview in order to recollect any parts of the conversation than might not have been clearly recorded. The transcriptions were done with a high level of detail that includes 'ers', pauses, emphases or incomplete sentences. They also include details of expressions and gestures which I recalled from memos. Miles and Huberman (1994) note that transcriptions can be done at different levels of detail and that it depends on the researcher's 'selective' process. Only the

researcher has experienced the data collection process and any detail that she includes or excludes depends on her choice to do so. As such, “What you ‘see’ in a transcription is inescapably selective” Miles and Huberman (1994: 56) argue.

Furthermore, many qualitative data analysis books suggest that analysis should be ongoing and simultaneous with data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Maxwell, 2005). Indeed as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) note, some researchers consider data analysis to be the process of coding, sorting and in general manipulating data. I agree with the authors when they argue that this perspective equalises data analysis with data handling, and also that data analysis is not merely an interpretation of data. For me data analysis starts from the process of collecting the data, since the analysis reflects how I experienced this process. It goes on to the process of listening to the recorded conversations, writing memos which facilitate analytical thinking, sorting and coding the data and categorising them into ‘organisational’ and ‘theoretical categories’ (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell here argues that it is important for the researcher to organise data into theoretical categories, that is, categories that link to a concept or an idea related to the conceptual framework of the research, but also into organisational categories - categories that represent key themes arising from data - in order to organise and handle data. Further, categorising data into themes is not merely data handling but a contribution to theory as well. As Richards and Richards (1994: 447) stress

[d]ecisions are being made about what is a category of significance to the study, what questions are being asked, what concepts developed [...] Second, decisions about what text segments are relevant to a category are never merely clerical decisions; they always involve some theoretical considerations. Third, the viewing of segments from many documents on one topic or selected topics always offers a new way of seeing data.

In agreement with the authors above, I consider every step of data gathering and reading, sorting, categorising and coding into themes as part of the data analysis process. After all, the theoretical categories and codes that I have used in my data analysis respond to the main themes and issues that arise from my research questions. Moreover, since research is always underpinned by specific theoretical considerations, as well as the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions, this also affects the data analysis process. The theoretical framework discussed in chapters 2 and 3 indicated some of the theoretical categories and codes that I could use when analysing my data, for example one being 'technologies of the self'. The theoretical and organisational categories I created had a particular meaning which was significant in the context of my research. On this matter Miles and Huberman (1994: 56-57) note, by referring to Bliss *et al.* that,

a word or a phrase does not 'contain' its meaning as a bucket 'contains' water, but has the meaning it does by being a choice made about its significance in a given context. That choice excludes other choices that could have been made to 'stand for' that word or phrase, and that choice is embedded in a particular logic or a conceptual lens ...

However, before I move on to discuss further the coding and categorisation process, I must state here that I have used NVivo 8 qualitative data analysis software which is also an important element of the data analysis process. The use of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) like NVivo 8, continues to be a matter of debate amongst qualitative researchers, because, as some argue, it could be seen to conflict with "the epistemological and ontological axioms underpinning the chosen research approach" (Morison and Moir, 1998: 115). CAQDAS differs from software for quantitative analysis in that this cannot calculate or automatically categorise or handle data. It does not create relationships, codes or mappings unless the researcher is involved. Some CAQDAS packages

do have an auto-code function but this can only be used under specific circumstances and for specific formats of data.

Atherton and Elmore (2007) offer a useful dialogue regarding the use of CAQDAS and more particularly NVivo 6. The authors suggest that the use of CAQDAS is not suitable for all qualitative research, a statement that I must disagree with. In explaining my disagreement with Atherton and Elmore, from this point on I will refer to my experience of NVivo 8 which has major differences from NVivo 6 in terms of the software structure, the complexity of its functions and that it can handle and analyse visual and audio data, whereas NVivo 6 is a basic ‘code-and-retrieve’ software. Atherton and Elmore (2007) argue that NVivo 6 offers standardised formats of data analysis and this neglects the contextual dimension of data. They particularly refer to the fact that using generic formats of data analysis “creates an epistemological ‘comfort blanket’ for researchers, in that they produce an expected and defined approach to dealing with data (again regardless of context)” (2007: 67). However, I argue that context is still important in this case, as well as where the researcher is ‘coming from’. Keeping in mind the arguments that coding and categorising data is part of forming theories and that codes entail meanings that are underpinned by the researcher’s assumptions about the world and the context where she has collected these data, then why would the researcher disappear from the process when data analysis is computer assisted?

Indeed the functions available in NVivo 8, including categorising data, coding, building trees, i.e. categories of codes that link back to a key theme or idea, writing memos and annotations, i.e. feelings or reflections the researcher has while collecting particular data, or other important notes relevant to the data being coded, and linking memos and annotations with codes can simply replace the *manual* handling of complex data without taking out the

presence of the researcher. The de-contextualisation of data might become a limitation in the use of NVivo or any other CAQDAS packages, if the researcher uses functions like auto-code, auto-mapping and other functions that suggest variables' relationships. That usage alone entails potential problems relating to the researcher's assumptions about the data and the context where these data came from, as Atherton and Elmore suggest. Thus, it is up to the researcher to use software like NVivo 8 up to the point where she is still present in the data analysis. I have done just that. I have used NVivo 8 not to achieve generic and standardised formats of data analysis, but as a tool to handle rich data that I felt I could not easily manually organise.

When using NVivo 8 I structured my approach into three sections, one being the recordings of all focus groups and interviews, the second being the transcriptions of the recordings and the third the categorisation and coding of the data. Having the recordings within the software meant that I could find any minute of the recordings and hear the conversation again if I wanted to recollect details mentioned in the data. Because the collection of data was done over a period of a year with big gaps between some of the focus groups especially, I started the organisation and coding of data from the early stages of data collection. The handling of data required going through the transcripts several times and free-coding (selecting random, recurrent or important sentences and words from the transcriptions, and transferring them to the free-coding file within the software) so I could detect themes/categories and codes that seemed to matter. The free-coding process helped to identify themes that I had not thought about before, for example when my participants referred to their mothers and how some of their experiences with underwear relate or do not to those of their mothers. Identifying the word 'mother' as a code allowed me to gather all the related references my participants made and then use these data as one of the important themes in my analysis.

I then used coding to group the free-coded sentences or words together and highlight the context that these sentences or words came from within the transcripts. The codes were then grouped into categories or themes, although in some cases I started off by creating a category and then created codes within that category. For example one category or theme that emerged is called Hidden versus Visible. Codes for this category included beneath dress, attached to skin, public monitoring and underwear on display. The functions of NVivo were such that I could see in an instant the sentences or texts under each of these codes, and I could either group the selections together with details about where they came from in the data or jump to the original text if I wanted to read the selected part in its original context. This helped me keep in mind the context of my data and at the same time organise them into codes and the codes into themes that responded to my research questions.

The analysis and interpretation of my data is presented in the next chapter where the categories/themes I have used in NVivo make up the sections of the chapter. However, before I proceed to Chapter 5, I reflect on the ethical issues that arise from this research as well as discussing some of the implications of the research process.

## **4.6 Ethics and implications of this research**

### ***4.6.1 Ethics in social research***

This section mainly focuses on ethical issues around research; however, I take a broad perspective on the issue of ethics to include some of my reflections on the research process and my role as the researcher.

Ethics in social research “refers to the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of researchers throughout the research process” (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002: 14). It is also defined by Saunders *et al.* (2003: 129) as “the appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work”. Feminist research in particular has contributed heavily in opening up discussing ethics and politics in social research, especially stressing the need for reflexivity and for recognising diversity and difference while researching others. We can ask how we should research ‘others’ and how we should ‘invade’ an individual’s life to learn about her world. What is the ‘correct’ or ethically responsible way of doing that? From a slightly different angle how can a researcher conduct research having one social relation with the researched? There is usually more than one social relation between a researcher and the ‘others’, the researched (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004). For example, I had more similarities with my research participants than just being a woman and at the same time more differences than us just being the researcher and the researched. I am a white, middle class, educated woman like many of them. However at the same time I am different to them in terms of the identity *opseis* they were supposed to exemplify at the point of the research. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996: 1-32) echo that otherness alludes to a great deal of issues, and the debate is far from fixed (also see Fawcett and Hearn, 2004). I do not intend here to discuss the various accounts of ‘otherness’ in feminist research. Rather my intention is to pay attention to the fact that, when researching ‘others’, the relation between ‘others’ and the researcher gives rise to many ethical considerations that have to do with power, diversity and difference. Moreover, research questions alone may invoke ethical and political concerns when it comes to researching these ‘others’.

There are many ‘models’ of ethics available for researchers to consider, including the more institutionalised codes of ethics that require, for example, the informed consent of the

participants, the truthful presentation of the research topic to participants to avoid deception and the safeguarding of privacy and confidentiality (Christians, 2003). In terms of informed consent and truthful representation of the research project, since I used the snowballing technique, I made sure that my initial contact in each case was fully aware of what the research was about and what the process of focus groups or interviews would be. In many cases, women were invited to choose between taking part in a group discussion or one-to-one interview. I used several methods of informing my participants about the project and getting their consent. For the tutors and administrators group I sent individual explanatory emails (see appendix 1) to all the women I invited, after I got their information from my contact, who had first obtained their consent to do this. For the mothers' group and the WADs I made sure that my contact would inform the other women about my research and I printed out a small summary of the project which explained the research's aims. I used the same summary to inform my contact from the women's rugby team who informed the other women. Finally, an access letter was used for accessing the gym, and small poster-like 'invitation to participate to research' invitations for the members (likewise see appendix 1).

Moreover, at the start of all focus groups and interviews I reiterated the research's aims and intentions, I explained to the respondents that the conversation would be recorded for the practical purposes of remembering it after it had finished and I also obtained their consent about giving me some biographical information. I reassured all participants about anonymity and confidentiality and that the information they give me would only be used for the purposes of this research or any subsequent publication from the thesis. I also told them I would use pseudonyms in any writing when referring to each respondent.

The above issues map to the conventional code of ethics that a researcher needs to abide by. However researching also ‘others’ has to do with more complex issues of power and researchers need to be aware of this (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002). As previously addressed, the use of focus groups takes away some of the issues of the power of the researcher. However, in the case of the women’s rugby team as mentioned in section 4.5 I felt that my presence as *the* researcher to be very evident. That could have potentially affected the participants’ willingness to share further details about their experiences with underwear. Nevertheless, even during that focus group I felt that the data I was gathering were very interesting, but as a researcher I never stopped wondering whether they could have shared more if the setting or the process of gathering them had been different.

Reflecting on the data collected and the impact that participants, as subjects and subjectivities, and the researcher have on these data is part of the process of being reflexive in qualitative research. Mauthner and Doucet (2003:42) argue that

subjects are reflexively constituted between the researcher and the researched, and that while they are therefore always incompletely unknown, it is possible to grasp something of the articulated experience and subjectivity through a research encounter.

That is, despite the ‘difficulty’ in researching ‘others’, the constructed ‘situation’ created between the researcher and the researched can give an account of experiences. Of course that admittance means that data are hindered by the subjectivity of this ‘situation’; however I had always been aware, and it has already been stated before in this chapter, that my epistemological and ontological assumptions have underpinned my research questions, my research methods, the selection of my participants, the questions I asked them and the analysis of my data.

However, there is another dynamic in this research that is seminal in how the data I collected were formed. The fact that the participants were exemplifying a particular identity *opseis* during the focus groups and interviews could also mean that they were performing their identities at the time of the research. This was more evident with the mothers and the WADS groups which I had visited in the places and times where they usually met as a group. The mothers group, for example, during their group interview were not just answering and interacting with each about questions that were emphasising a particular identity *opsy*, but they were playing out or performing that identity *opsy* at exactly that moment: they were gathered with their babies to talk about their experiences as young mothers. That of course had a huge impact on the data collected and it can be viewed in both negative and positive ways. The positive perspective is that the data are richer: they include not only verbal data (what they said) but also my notes on 'Reflections on the field' which included their physical reactions and interactions with each other and their babies. It was also easier for me as the researcher to ask questions about this particular element of their identity, which was very recent for them and finally acting out their 'first-time mum' element of their identity at that time meant that more themes were emerging than those I had on my interview schedule, hence the richer data. The negative side of my participants performing their identities at the time of the interview is perhaps an element of power that is present that can lead to them perhaps overstating their experiences. Of course, qualitative data always include the limitation of overstated or false representation or reflections of experiences, but nevertheless as Holloway and Jefferson (2003:3) stress "there is [always] a relationship between people's ambiguous representations and their experiences". After all, the researcher does not intend to uncover data that 'exist out there', but to engage in co-constructing data with her participants Mason (2002).

Of course and as also stated above, researching ‘others’ experiences with underwear and trying to determine the factors that influence them when selecting and buying underwear deals with many sensitive issues, like the relationship these women have with their bodies, their sexuality, perhaps their partner and friends and elements of their taste. In terms of how easily they would talk to others about underwear, many of these women said that they would not talk about their underwear to ‘just anyone’. They would talk to friends, family or perhaps female colleagues over a conversation about clothing or shopping. Indeed many of them had mentioned at the end of the interview or focus group that they never thought before about all the issues related to underwear we discussed, or, in the case of focus groups, that they felt strange and ‘funny’ about learning about the underwear experiences of the other women, even though some might have talked about underwear before. Putting on underwear can be mundane and wearing it throughout the day can feel like a second skin. However, as noted earlier when asked to think about their various experiences of underwear, then unsurprisingly these women felt they had more to say about it.

#### ***4.6.2 Research implications***

Throughout this chapter I have tried to indicate some of the implications or, perhaps more precisely, inevitabilities of the methodology used. This section summarises these implications with regard to the methods selected, the sample, the data collection process and the data analysis.

As far the methods selected are concerned, many of the implications arise from my choice of using focus groups. The implications of focus groups have been discussed earlier. However I would at this point refer to one prominent implication which links back to the discussion in

the previous section about the ethics of my research. This has to do with my influence on the data collected, and which is said to be one of the main implications of focus groups as compared to other methods (Morgan, 1988). It could be argued that the planning and staging of focus groups influences the participants' accounts of reality. Indeed, in the cases of the women's rugby team, and the administrators' group, I could not as suggested help reflecting back on the setting and the whole conversation and thinking how I might have influenced the data as the planner and moderator. However this power I had as *the* researcher was also evident in the case of the gym instructor's interview. Nonetheless, as Morgan (1988) argues, there is no hard evidence that the influence of the researcher in the focus groups is stronger than in any other research method, such as qualitative interviewing. All research methods have their strengths and weaknesses and I hope that my justification for choosing focus groups as well as one-to-one interviewing is enough to mitigate some of their individual weaknesses.

Regarding my sample, it could be argued that I have excluded many 'others': women of different races, ethnicities or religions could have contributed greatly in understanding more about women's experiences with underwear. While class, for example, could have been a very important element of analysis in this research, especially since it is central in the work of Bourdieu, which forms part of the conceptual framework of this thesis, I have selected to concentrate on gender and how my participants construct elements of their female identity. As already established in Chapter 1, *doing* gender in social situations is a social dynamic and a process of experiencing the world, as gender is the primary classificatory system when encountering others (Gherardi, 1993; Brewis, 2005). Bristor and Fischer (1993) go further to argue that consumption is fundamentally gendered as it is a means of asserting and reproducing gender. Thus the consumption of women's underwear is indeed fundamentally

gendered and becomes a way of experiencing 'being a woman'. Since the connections between the consumption of women's underwear and the construction of female identity have been largely neglected by organisation studies and other cognate fields as already noted in Chapter 1, it constitutes a very rich theme of its own that can contribute to this gap without the necessity of connecting other social elements like class, ethnicity, race and other, here at least. Undoubtedly, engaging with other discourses such as class, or race when it comes to the consumption of women's underwear as a means of identity construction can be a route to further progressing this research. For example Storr's (2003) work on Ann Summers parties contributed, at least to a certain extent, to understanding the connections of class and the consumption of particular types of underwear. This can be extended further to link social class and taste, in a Bourdieusian sense and offer a much sought contribution to consumption studies.

Focusing on gender and excluding other social variables from my research had, of course, certain limitations regarding the sample of this thesis. My participants, as mentioned earlier, were all white British with the exception of one white Asian who had lived in the UK for long time. My participants were also all middle class, educated women and as far as I know, heterosexual. Nevertheless, my intention with the notion of identity *opseis* as the framework with which the sample was chosen was not to include as many women as possible, but to explore as many different roles as possible that a woman plays each day or the different life stages she can be in, and how that affects her decisions about the underwear choices she makes.

Finally, the use of NVivo 8 can be argued to be an implication of the data analysis process. The de-contextualisation of data and the distancing of the researcher from the data, as well as

the contradiction between using standardised formats of qualitative analysis and the ontological and epistemological assumptions the qualitative researcher could be seen to have, are some of the implications of using CAQDAS (Atherton and Elmore, 2007). Even though I acknowledge these particular limitations as possibilities, I do not agree with all of them and my discussion in a previous section in this chapter reflects this. I have used NVivo 8 only as a tool for handling rich data, but nevertheless the advances in this version of software as compared to previous versions show that some of the concerns raised by qualitative researchers previously are being addressed. As discussed earlier, the contextual dimension of my data was never lost and the functions of free-coding helped me to identify important themes that might have been lost if I had followed manual coding.

#### **4.7 Summary**

This chapter has discussed in detail the methodological strategy of this research, justifying this with a discussion of my ontology and epistemology and how this research can be considered as a social inquiry. I have shown the link between my research questions and my assumptions about reality and the social world. I have also justified my choice of research methods as focus groups and one-to-one interviewing, with particular attention to the implications as well as the strengths of each method. The sampling process was then discussed, offering a justification regarding how women participants in this research were chosen. More specifically, the notion of identity *opseis* was explained and how this notion worked as the framework by which the sample was chosen. Some reflections on the field and the process of data collection as well as a discussion of the data analysis were also presented in this chapter. The data analysis section involved a discussion and justification of the use of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Finally I have considered the ethics and implications of this research in the final section.

The following chapter will present the empirical findings of this research, which reflect the discussions that took place in the focus groups and interviews I conducted. It also discusses how these findings relate to the concepts and the literature discussed in the previous chapters of the thesis.

## **Chapter 5 ‘What it feels like in my underwear...’: Underwear and identity construction**

As already established in this thesis, in academic literature underwear is a largely neglected part of women’s clothing which is, I contend, as important as ‘outward’ dress itself; indeed in some ways more interesting in the sense that it is usually hidden from view. It appears to have considerable social importance which is not often articulated in scholarly research – especially compared to the wealth of discussion about other, more visible elements of women’s dress and appearance. Thus, to reiterate my research questions, I aim to find out what are the socio-cultural factors that influence women when choosing and wearing the ‘right’ underwear; what is the role of underwear as part of dress in the construction of female identity; what are the experiences that women report regarding the consumption of underwear; and to assess the role of taste when it comes to buying underwear. Answering these questions will contribute to the gap in the literature about this important part of women’s clothing and the role it has in their identity construction.

This chapter presents the data collected from my fieldwork, and suggests that underwear can be a means of experiencing and expressing the ‘self’ and that it can act as a carrier of feelings about the body and a woman’s identity. Indeed even when women scarcely ‘feel’ their underwear since in many cases it is almost part of the skin or part of the body, it is nonetheless seemingly supporting their bodies and appearance. Thus it is still a significant element of women’s identity projects. As established earlier in the thesis I see identity as an open-ended and ongoing project and performance of culturally available meanings. This

means that we also focus on different parts of our identity in different social milieux. In Chapter 4 I have explained that by using the notion of identity *opseis*, meaning aspects or sides of identity, I aim to hail the particular aspects of identity that my women respondents were selected to exemplify during the focus groups/interviews. The identity *opseis* that I see my participants as performing play an important role in how they understand their choices of underwear and their negotiations around femininity, comfort and overall appearance. Nevertheless the experiences and feelings they narrate often represent other identity *opseis*, for example sexual partner or daughter: this speaks to the way in which underwear is mobilised to support other aspects of these women's identity projects, emphasising thus the ongoing and multi-faceted character of female identity.

The first section of my data analysis deals with the hidden/visible distinction of underwear which was quite evident in these data. These women's consumption of underwear depends on different situations and contexts which either necessitate that underwear remains hidden and firmly attached to their dress (and body) or is seen by others and the implications of this for their identity. The second section deals with the bodily sensations that underwear produces in the body and ways in which these sensations intersect with or inform these women's identities. The next section explores these women's taste in underwear and what seems to affect it. Issues like what colour/material they choose and their mother's influence on their taste are discussed in this section. Finally in the last section the respondents discuss their experiences of the actual process of consumption of underwear; that is which physical or online shops they choose and why, if they buy underwear for presents, if they go shopping for underwear alone or with other people and how this makes them feel.

The extracts from the data have been reproduced in accordance with the following protocol. ‘Abby-F1’ or ‘Amy-I1’ are examples of the pseudonyms given to each respondent. F1 and I1 next to the name refer to the focus group or interview in which each took part. ‘Int’ refers to me 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 the respondents’ verbal emphasis.

## **5.2 Hidden versus visible underwear**

### ***5.2.1 The strawberry bra: comments on visible underwear***

Crane (2000: 1) suggests that clothing “as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity”. Since underwear is mostly hidden, as suggested, it becomes even more interesting to understand its importance for the body and consequently the project of identity, an importance that is highly pronounced in contemporary mass cultural offerings emphasizing ‘how to be a women’, as seen in previous chapters. When it comes to outerwear, the visible clothing becomes a substantive element of a woman’s identity since it is part of the way that her body is presented and she may well be consciously (or unconsciously) dressed according to the norms and expectations of society (Entwistle, 2000b). However things become more complicated when it comes to underwear. As we have seen in previous chapters and more specifically in Chapter 1, in the past underwear apparently used to function solely as a support for the outer dress. It was not visible and more or less looked the same. Some differences in the material were evident mostly in the kind of underwear upper class women wore, but still this was usually not visible. During the twentieth century when underwear became mass produced in various

materials and in different shapes and designs, it begins to function not just as a support for the outer dress but also as part of the overall fashion system. Indeed especially in the case that underwear is visible it becomes part of the outerwear, the connections between underwear and identity and judgments about the wearer are more easily made by others. This was an important aspect of the experiences my respondents reported and the following sections deal with the visible-hidden element of underwear.

The contrast between visible and hidden came up quite often during my focus groups, on a number of different occasions. My participants had made various distinctions as to when and for what reason underwear is seen. Most of them thought that underwear should be seen usually privately in the bedroom, by their partner. However underwear is not always privately seen by others and there are various occasions when a woman would be seen in her underwear more publicly, e.g. in the gym changing room. What mostly triggered the discussion though was the instance when parts of underwear would be ‘flashing’ from underneath outerwear.

The university tutors’ group (1) for example made three different distinctions about visible underwear: first, it is unintentional and sometimes unexpected; second, it is intentional and signifies an attempt to be sexual; and, third, it is a conscious fashion statement. In the first case the women in group (1) thought that this was acceptable, but did not mention that it could be sexy, like they did for example for the second category. As for the third category they were unsure as to what might be the occasion where this would be acceptable. The exchange below is illustrative:

Wendy-F1: Is it OK culturally in Britain showing the kind of bra top?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wendy is not British, hence her query here.

Paulette-F1: You mean the strap?

Kate-F1: I think it's become so. It didn't used to be.

Abby-F1: 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-F1: Or like a strapless kind of bra.

Abby-F1: Yeah!

Wendy-F1: Well always showing three or four kind of straps everywhere, it's really weird.

Paulette-F1: 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-F1: It would have to look good. Because for some it looks good.

Abby-F1: Yeah but wearing a blue top and having a, a, a purple bra! [laughter and talking]

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

Abby-F1: I used to do that, but ...

Paulette-f1: It's horrible, isn't it?

Int: You used to do it?

Abby-F1: 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-F1: 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.

One of the themes in this exchange is women's intentional display of g-strings over the waistband of trousers or intentionally wearing bras that visibly clash with the colour of a woman's top. It seems these women agree that this kind of display is not acceptable. They did not consider these intentional displays of underwear an attempt to attract sexual attention but more that they are somehow vulgar. In this case and as suggested in Chapter 2, underwear becomes an element of our embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, Crossley, 2001; Shilling, 2003) in terms of how other people judge our appearance, which is also a fundamental aspect in the construction of identity. Embodied cultural capital is valued differently in different fields and it should transform into other forms of capital, like economic capital or symbolic capital (Shilling, 2003). Indeed, as will be discussed several times in this chapter, underwear for my respondents works as embodied cultural capital to support them in the different fields in which they are located and thus to transform this into other forms of capital. Returning to the issue of underwear being visible, since dress, as Entwistle (2000b) suggests, is a negotiation between structured systems like fashion and the

norms of particular social milieux, then underwear seems to enter this negotiation as soon as it becomes visible. In this case Abby and Paulette think that displays like those in the exchange above are tasteless, or at least *déclassé*. This for me bears out Bourdieu's claim that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (1984: 6). The way we exhibit our sense of taste, or distinction, therefore additionally reveals something about our own socialisation or our habitus, and taste, as suggested in Chapter 2 and again following Bourdieu (1984), is in the first place *distaste* regarding the taste of others. Indeed, if our habitus is the material conditions in which a person grows up, embodied and inscribed in our body and the mechanisms through which we operate in daily life, it enables us to consider visible underwear as part of overall appearance, and make judgements regarding the choices of other people.

Regarding the first dimension of the visible/hidden contrast, the unintentional 'flashing' of underwear, my participants in group (1) felt that it is usually embarrassing like a gaping blouse or undone trousers. They felt that underwear is intended to be hidden - except when visible as a fashion statement, or as a 'come-on' - and if otherwise it could attract ridicule. In these cases judgements about the inappropriateness of the appearance would be easily made.

For example:

Abby-F1: 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-F1: Oh no!

Abby-F1: It was in here wasn't it or was it in the middle of the coffee shop or something ... ?

Paulette-F1: Oh she must have felt awful.

Abby-F1: 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.

Here Amy, Abby and Paulette's colleague, did not realise that her blouse had come undone and she immediately felt embarrassed. Perhaps she felt embarrassed because she was seen

like that in her workplace by a colleague, or in a public place *per se*. This says something about our feeling of humiliation when our appearance does not correspond to the norms of the social context we are currently located in, here the workplace. In a Foucauldian sense, we are constantly monitoring ourselves in order to fit the norms of our social milieu (Fine and Macpherson, 1994; Tischner and Malson, 2008) and to appear ‘appropriate’ both in terms of how it is expected from us to present ourselves in a context like the workplace (Shilling, 2005) but also in terms of what is deemed ‘appropriate’ to wear in specific contexts or according to body shape and size (Tischner and Malson, 2008). Indeed the other women in this group agree that Amy must have felt awful, as presumably they would in a similar case. Nevertheless, Abby’s first impression that Amy’s strawberry bra was meant to be seen hints that women sometimes leave part of their underwear on display deliberately, as discussed above.

In fact where underwear is visible then it is quite often perceived - at least as suggested in my data - as an attempt by the wearer to be sexual. A blouse undone which reveals some cleavage is usually considered to constitute part of a more ‘tantalizing’ appearance; likewise a g-string showing over the top of the skirt or trousers. Paulette’s recollection below is indicative:

Paulette-F1: 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 ... ermm 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-F1: Hmm, it depends if you are advertising or not. [laughter].

Paulette-F1: What?

Abby-F1: If you are advertising yourself, if you want to collect [*sic*] a partner.

Abby seems to suggest here that showing off her underwear is something that a woman might do if she wants to seduce someone. From this data we can read that Paulette’s friend certainly seems to think that flashing underwear makes a woman seem more attractive, more sexual

and more appealing if she is trying to seduce a potential partner. This was an important element of the hidden/visible contrast which I discuss further in a later section.

Visible underwear was an important issue for women in other focus groups and interviews as well. Many of them stressed that they would not wear a shirt or a blouse with a darker coloured bra because they would be conscious of it showing underneath. This seemed to be very important for the WADS group (5), especially for Mary, one of the oldest women in the group, who stressed that she hates looking at a black bra under a white shirt. However this does not suggest that age is the reason for this dislike since other participants, such as Christie, one of the gym clients, or Samantha from group (2), who are in their late twenties and early thirties respectively, also mentioned the same feeling. Erica, one of the gym clients, whose age range is between Mary's, and Christie's and Samantha's, also stressed that the bra should not be seen underneath the clothes, especially now that fabrics are usually very thin.

However, underwear's proximity to the naked body and skin makes it almost like a second skin, and in some cases it is experienced as more of an element of the body than of clothing as such. For example Christie, the gym client, says that when she changes at the gym she is always conscious of her underwear being seen by other women there because of how it moulds to and reveals her body:

Christie-I3: I'm always conscious when I'm changing my shorts because I am always wearing g-strings and I'm a bit conscious of that .. you know what other women would think of my bum when I change so I tend to turn around with my face facing the other women and my bum facing the locker. So yeah I am conscious of that. And it is mostly about my body not about my underwear, but I guess it's the same; it's because of my underwear that my bum is showing. So I'm always conscious about my pants not for my bra because I don't wear a bra when I'm exercising like I told you. Yeah.. just my pants... because you don't really like seeing other women wearing g-strings in the gym. Usually they have to be really young girls and then just me! [laughs].

Christie's narration indicates that, to the extent that underwear would definitely be seen by other people, women might be conscious of it for various reasons. Christie seems to consider

her underwear as attached to her body: thus she feels conscious about both. She dislikes seeing other women of her age or older wearing g-strings and that is why she is also conscious about herself wearing this particular type of underwear. When continuing with this narration she also says that she feels conscious of herself wearing a g-string because she has gained weight and she does not like seeing a chubby woman wearing this underwear. What lies behind this perception seems to reflect current norms about women's bodies and about which dress or underwear goes with which body. Underwear advertising usually portrays young women with slim and well defined bodies wearing underwear such as g-strings or thongs. According to Juffer (1996) underwear advertising aims to present the 'classical' female body, emphasising fitness of the body and youthfulness, and distinguish it from the 'tasteless'. And of course as Bordo (2004) suggests there are specific socio-historical standards of beauty that govern the norms of how a woman should be presented, what she should be wearing or doing according to how she looks or what age she is. Tischner and Malson's (2008) work also suggests that people make judgements about how others should be presented and specifically dressed according to their body size. In cases like Christie's narration above visible underwear is experienced as the basis of public monitoring of a woman's body and identity. This leads to some disquiet at her part about how others 'classify' her in Bourdieu's (1984) sense as a result. In the following section my participants discuss how they feel when on various other occasions other people would be seeing the underwear they choose to buy and wear.

### ***5.2.2 Don't judge me by... my underwear! Monitoring and classification by others***

Underwear being subject to scrutiny and monitoring by others when it becomes visible - exactly as outerwear and the female body are more generally (Fine and Macpherson, 1994; Budgeon, 2003) - was, as suggested in the previous section, an important aspect of the

hidden/visible distinction in my data. Here underwear stops being ‘personal’ or ‘private’ and comes into the ‘social’ or ‘public’ domain. The apparent expectation from others of ‘socially appropriate’ underwear was also identified by some of the respondents who commented on how their underwear style changes when someone else – mother, mother-in-law etcetera – will be doing their washing and hence will definitely see it, even touch it.

Wendy - F1: 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 - F1: Really?

Wendy - F1: It’s not really controversial, just to be conventional, because that’s what she wants to see. So that’s kind of changing personality I think.

Abby - F1: 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<sup>11</sup> there. Also at my mum’s house.

Wendy - F1: Yeah because that’s what they want to see.

Paulette-F1: Really??

Wendy - F1: Well she would be very surprised if she [was doing the] washing and she found that kind of thing [she shows stimulus picture 4 and laughs].

For Wendy putting on more ‘conventional’ underwear for the ‘sake’ of her mother-in-law was not a mere change of style: it was a change of identity *opsy*. In this case she needs to be the asexual and respectable daughter-in-law who wears conventional underwear which represents this particular *opsy*. Here, the ‘relationship’ between clothing and identity becomes more evident because underwear not only stops being private but it is also closely examined and touched by others and therefore it is seemingly completely open to the judgment of these others about its wearer. The identity project here becomes a dynamic project as not only does it involve what one wants to project to others, but also how others perceive us. This suggests how the standards and values of society about what is appropriate and suitable are so internalised that in any particular case different mobilisations are needed - in this case conventional underwear - to exemplify our identity or a specific identity *opsy*. Based on

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<sup>11</sup> Abby’s weekend underwear is more special and ‘sexy’ than her everyday underwear and it is intended for the private moments with her husband. She refers to her weekend underwear many times and more extracts are included in other sections of this chapter, and more analysis as to what this might mean.

these data Foucault (1979) is correct when he argues that society's norms are internalised as personal values and in this case Wendy is acting upon them. She is performing some gender specific practices that act as a normalised way of fitting as a 'proper' woman within specific contexts. Barker (2001) stresses that people have the ability to recognise what is 'fitting' in any specific situation and refers to Sorokin who calls this ability a logico-meaningful integration. Wendy is able to realise that she needs to mobilise conventional underwear in order for her to successfully perform her *opsy* as a daughter in law. Indeed Wendy and Abby – the only married women in the group – were especially aware of this need when the person monitoring their underwear was their mother-in-law.

Shopping for underwear similarly was considered by group (1) as something very challenging, especially regarding the assumptions that other shoppers make about them. The feeling that someone watches what underwear you buy acts for them almost as an intrusion into the naked body and suddenly it is either embarrassing or a taboo. In a Bourdieusian sense these women felt once again classified by those who they feel will judge them by the underwear they buy. It seems that individuals can worry about cultural capital even when the 'classifiers' are not known to them. Thus we could speculate that individuals are concerned about asserting their 'taste' and most of all about being considered 'tasteful' in any field they are in. Moreover issues of body size and 'appearance appropriateness' surface again since they felt that anyone who might see them buying underwear – especially if it is in a non-underwear shop - could criticise or question their taste or body size:

Wendy - F1: 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!" [They laugh]

Paulette - F1: Yeah I agree.

Abby - F1: 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 ... [They laugh]

Abby - F1: 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! [They laugh]

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

Paulette - F1: Yeah it's like "maybe you shouldn't wear this one but that one!" [She laughs]

Wendy - F1: Well it's kind of embarrassing to stand in the queue and stand in front of the pants!

[They laugh]

Wendy - F1: Toilet roll doesn't have size. [She laughs]

Paulette - F1: Yeah size or colour!

[Others laugh]

But the most evident element of the hidden/ visible contrast according to my participants was the extent that at some point underwear would be unavoidably be seen by others and how that makes them feel. In all cases it was clear that as soon as underwear is visible it becomes as important as outerwear in clearly signalling one's identity; and a special effort is seemingly then made to ensure it is 'socially acceptable'. Paulette, for example, during our discussion about whether she categorises her underwear, says that despite everything being quite random in her underwear drawer, when she goes to the gym she finds something that matches so she doesn't look "weird" to others. Similarly Erica, the gym client, kept mentioning that she always feels confident in her underwear, even if she is in the gym's changing room, because her underwear, being very expensive, fits her well and thus she always feels quite presentable in it. She says she is not concerned about other people watching, or as she put it, "I'm not there to show off my underwear". However, she does confess that she would never go to the gym with underwear that has a hole in it. That, she thinks, would be seen as inappropriate by others and she feels she could not get away with it. Thus, when underwear is publicly visible, women may lose the advantage of 'getting away with it', i.e. not wearing matching or even particularly attractive underwear. Underwear here for Erica can be seen as embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Crossley, 2001) as she affirms her knowledge of what is appropriate to wear in the field of fitness. She also asserts her taste here as she acknowledges that her underwear, being expensive, should serve their purpose of appearing presentable and presumably tasteful to other women around her. The relationship between taste and social norms here shows a link between Bourdieu's (1984) notion of taste as a manifestation of

habitus and Foucault's (1978) assertion about society's expectations and values being internalised in individuals.

However, changing rooms were not the only place that these women felt that their appearance in their underwear had to be 'appropriate'. One particularly important element of the hidden/visible distinction was the extent to which underwear is routinely hidden but still there might be a possibility that at some point of the day underwear would inevitably be seen by others. In almost all my conversations with these women at some point there would be a reference to 'in case you are hit by a bus'. The idea that, at some unexpected time, underwear would be visible to others is disturbing for these women and seems to produce a constant monitoring of how they dress even underneath their outerwear. As Jane and Marcy from the WADS group (5) emphatically put it:

Jane-F5: I don't find [underwear] too important now as long as I am comfortable. If I have an accident I'll be all right. I won't be embarrassed about what I'm wearing [They laugh].

Marcy-F5: Yeah mothers used to say don't go out with your tatty underwear in case you're run over by a bus.

All: That's right!

For Jane, even though at this stage of her life she finds that comfort is the important factor regarding the underwear she chooses, this is also linked in these data to having something on when she goes out that will not embarrass her if it becomes visible. Thus, when visible, underwear for these women becomes as important as outerwear, clearly signalling elements of the wearer's identity. Effort is thus made to make even this hidden aspect of appearance 'socially acceptable'.

So in general, in my data underwear if it is on display becomes a symbol of cultural inscriptions, communicating a sense of 'who I am' to others. So when it is visible it is

putatively open to monitoring and control and the advantage of ‘getting away with it’ is lost, i.e. not wearing fancy, matching or ‘appropriate’ underwear.

### ***5.2.3 “Don’t switch the light on darling...”: the eroticisation of visible underwear***

Another important element of the hidden/visible contrast is the extent to which these women would be seen in their underwear by their partner. An illustrative example of how these women pay particular attention to their underwear when they know that at some point they will be seen in it by their partners was Kerry’s evocative story, during the mothers’ focus group (3), about a friend of hers. This individual knew that an evening out might end with her taking her clothes off in front of her new boyfriend, so her underwear had to suit the occasion:

Kerry-F3: 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].

In this particular case Kerry’s friend actually changes more conventional underwear that best supported her dress during her evening event for a more attractive and sexy set of underwear when she would be seen in it only by her boyfriend. This reminds us of Wendy’s need to mobilise a different type of underwear to perform a different identity *opsy*. Similarly Kerry’s friend uses different underwear to perform a different identity *opsy*, that of a sexual partner, illustrating thus the complex, dynamic and performative character of a woman’s identity project (Entwistle, 2001; Guy *et al.*, 2001; Keenan, 2001; Tseëlon, 2001 following Goffman, 1990). In the process of constructing and assembling a sense of ‘who I am’, women seem to mobilise various ways to help them ‘switch’ to the identity *opsy* that they are called to

perform. Underwear here acts a technique/resource of shifting identity *opseis*, as the sexier underwear transmits the sexual partner *opsy* she was called to perform.

The story about Kerry's friend is not surprising when we consider the other experiences that my participants reported, especially regarding the cases when their underwear would be seen by their partner. In fact the bedroom was one place where these women felt once again that they cannot 'get away with it'. Samantha from the administrator's group (2) for example felt that, when a woman is likely to take her clothes off in front of her partner after a night out, what she wears underneath might matter:

Samantha-F2: 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-F2: You wouldn't show it to anybody? [they laugh]

Samantha-F2: No, your husband maybe, your husband if it's your anniversary or something, 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 should only be visible to others in the bedroom. Many of the other respondents likewise reported that they would wear special underwear for their partners suggesting that underwear unsurprisingly is mobilised as a technology of presenting the eroticised side of the female body or the female identity project.

Thus when visible, underwear is potentially eroticised; particularly, for these women, when underwear is seen by a man. Let us remember the case of Abby from group (1) who stressed that showing off your underwear signals a woman's strategy to seduce a man. Abby attributes a sexual connotation to visible underwear: a woman 'hunting' a partner would use underwear as a signal of the sexual, erotic side of herself. Showing off your underwear here, in the sense of it peeping from an unbuttoned blouse in a particular context, say, is an act of self-

promotion, thus sexualising the outfit, the underwear as part of ‘what is beneath’ and the woman herself and signalling her quest for a sexual partner. This reminds us of Entwistle (2000b: 203) when she stresses that it is underwear’s proximity to the body that gives it its intense erotic meanings. Also, as suggested in Chapter 3, the eroticisation of the naked yet simultaneously dressed female body in underwear is an extension of how the female body is culturally inscribed as a sexual body, something that has been widely reinforced especially by western media and underwear advertising (Amy-Chinn, 2006). Thus, again unsurprisingly, Samantha’s claim that underwear should be seen in the bedroom suggests that women may mobilise underwear as a resource or tool of performing the *opsy* of lover/ sexual partner. However as we will see in section 5.3 and elsewhere this tends to be a specific type of underwear.

Indeed the husband/partner factor seems to be quite important for these women and their underwear choices. Equally the WADS respondents mentioned that perhaps one of the reasons that they do not consider underwear so important any more is because they live alone:

Jane-F5: Yes, that’s what I’m saying, if you haven’t got a man..

Claire-F5: Yes. We live on our own for whatever reason so it doesn’t bother us because of that.

Louise-F5: I think that makes a lot of difference. If you had a partner who you think he was taking notice it might have been different. You might go out of your way to...

Ruth-F5: But your man might not notice! [they laugh]

Mary-F5: I’m sure you agree on that, don’t you? [she asks me] That if you have a man you pay more attention, you would probably coordinate and generally bother much more than we do?

The presence of a partner then, and the expectation that he will see you in your underwear at some point during the day, influences these women’s perceptions of what underwear they need. It is also not as simple as ‘getting away with it’ in this case because underwear, if on display, is part of the sexual and eroticised body. What seems interesting in these data is the

extent to which underwear is important for these women regarding when their sexual partner sees them getting *undressed* but *not* getting dressed in the morning, for example. None of these women mentioned that it is important for their partner to see them getting dressed in 'pretty' underwear; suggesting thus that sexy/pretty underwear is expected at bedtime and for sex. This also echoes Foucault (1978) and how sex has been normalised in modernity as heterosexual, and properly confined to the couple's bedroom. Indeed, since all of these women were heterosexual, as far as they have told me, they all seem to suggest that wearing sexy underwear for a (male) partner is strictly for sex.

It is not surprising either to expect a certain degree of eroticisation of images of women in underwear in advertising, and some underwear retailers specifically play on sexual provocation in their advertisements, like Ann Summers, from whose website stimulus pictures 4, 5 and 6 were taken. When looking at the stimulus pictures, Christie, the gym client, described these particular pictures as "come and get me" pictures and commented on the way the models are portrayed, their posture and expressions. She actually guessed that the images were Ann Summers' lingerie:

Christie - I3: Usually I look for something really low on the tummy like that [the g-string in picture 4]. But this one is awful; I don't think I would go for something with bows. And the model is very kinky isn't she? The way she's posing. Where did you get this? Ann Summers?

Int: Actually yes.

Christie - I3: [She laughs] I knew it! All the Ann Summers' models pose like this; I don't get it. This set is not something kinky like picture 6 for example and still the model is like this. All Ann Summers' advertising is like 'come get me'. But I guess they've built their marketing on that, you know the very sexy, kinky underwear and the other stuff! [She laughs].

Christie is right to suggest that advertising has an important role to play in our perceptions and understandings of what is sexy, and feminine - or indeed appropriately masculine. Indeed, and as already suggested in Chapter 3, advertising (re)produces gender identities by drawing its imagery from stereotypical iconographies of masculinity and femininity (Hall,

1980; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2003; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). For Foucault (1978), mass culture has contributed to and promulgated in the form of knowledge the normalisation of dualistic gender roles. We can then extend this to suggest that these limit our perceptions of male and female consumer ontologies. Gender performances are linked with appearance; not only 'looking like' a woman or a man in a strictly psychological sense, but also what clothes you wear, your body movements and other elements of your appearance are all reiterated gender performances (see Butler, 1993 and 1999). Butler's (1993, 1999) notion of performativity asserts that gender is produced by sustained, repetitive social performances and that femininity is constructed through a process of reiterated performances that once internalised, are then defined as 'gender acts'. Underwear seems to be an important element of these gender performances. My participants comment that there are stereotypical perceptions about sexy or feminine underwear. However, one question they all seem to bring up is, sexy for whom? They seem to be of the opinion that what women think is sexy and what men might consider as sexy could differ. For example, while most the participants commented on picture 5 as sexy underwear, Abbey and Paulette from group 1 and Samantha and Karen from group 2 thought that men might be intimidated by a woman wearing such underwear. The important thing here is that my respondents consider these tensions around sexy underwear and about what men do or do not find sexy in their own responses to the stimulus pictures and also when reflecting upon their relationship with the underwear they wear. I will return to some of the tensions around sexy underwear in the next section.

Summarising this section, the hidden/visible contrast of underwear is therefore an important distinction that these women make and one that influences the underwear they buy and wear. We have seen that the different identity *opseis* they are called on to perform might demand different underwear and they pay particular attention to wearing the 'right' underwear on the

right occasion. Whether they are at work, focusing on their professional *opsey*, in a changing room in front of other women, or in the bedroom with their partner, being seen in their underwear has different meanings for these women. But in all cases the monitoring (whether literal or imagined) by others makes underwear as important as outerwear since it (potentially) becomes a visible element of their appearance. There is an issue of visible underwear being part of others' scrutiny of these women's bodies (and vice versa) or identities and in other cases the fact that visible underwear is usually eroticised. All of this affects these women's choices of what they wear and for what reason.

The following section explores the extent to which underwear remains hidden from view but still has particular importance for these women, because of how it feels to wear it. The sensations that underwear induces for my respondents are analysed, including feeling comfortable and what this means for these women and the feeling of 'specialness' that underwear can produce. Also discussed in the next section is how my respondents interpret these meaning and perform various *opseis* in their effort to (re)construct female identities.

## **5.3 The physical and psychological sensations induced by underwear**

### ***5.3.1 Comfort defined***

To the extent that underwear remains hidden from view, other factors contribute to why it is still an important part of women's clothing, in particular the bodily sensations that it induces in the wearer or that the wearer seeks. From my data we can read that these sensations fall into two categories, physical sensations and psychological sensations. These sensations more than often intersected. The physical sensations had a direct impact on the psychological

sensations underwear produced and on these women's understanding of what identity *opsy* they were performing.

One feeling/bodily sensation that almost all the women reported as an important factor of choosing what underwear to buy was comfort (or discomfort). During all interviews and focus groups there was some reference to comfort which was defined in many ways. Physical comfort as suggested many times was defined as leading to psychological comfort. This reflects the definition that Holliday (1999: 481) gives to comfort in the case of her participants: "the comfort one feels from the degree of fit between the outside of one's body and its inside (not blood, guts or organs, but the 'imagined' or 'true' self) – the way in which identity is mapped onto the body".

The simplest definition of comfort was the physical comfort or discomfort that the material of the underwear produced for/on the body. The material of the underwear or its type also appeared as a determining factor of choosing which underwear to buy or when to wear it. For Kate and Abby from the tutors' group (1), if the material is itchy or rough, immediately it becomes uncomfortable:

Int: What about lace? [...]

Kate-F1: 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-F1: 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.

Similarly Paulette from the same group mentioned that the underwear she buys is "cute" but it also has to be comfortable, so it is always made of cotton. Cotton was noted by many of these women being a comfortable material, as well as lycra in some instances. For example Amy, the gym instructor, said that she usually wears lycra when she is teaching because her

job demands that she is constantly moving fast, so she needs something that will be comfortable, flexible and supportive. She also said that she buys absorbent bras (for sweat) for the same reason. For Amy the material of the underwear plays a vital role in the identity *opsy* she is performing at work. Comfort is vital for this aspect of Amy's identity and is defined purely on a physical level. This suggests something additional about how underwear becomes an element of our Bourdieusian embodied cultural capital which is then transformed into other forms of capital, i.e. economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Crossley, 2001; Shilling, 2003). In this case Amy's underwear provides the necessary support both physically and psychologically for her to be able to perform her job as a gym instructor (where her economic capital comes from).

Int: What kind of pants do you wear at work?

Amy-I1: Thongs.

Int: Why is that?

Amy-I1: I don't know. I just do. Because when you wear something tight... Cause I have to wear quite tight fitting clothing, so I don't like to be able to see any underwear or others to see. And others usually see my back so... no... I hate it if my underwear sticks out.

Int: If you had to wear regular pants would you be conscious of it?

Amy-I1: Yeah. Yeah definitely. I don't think I own any. At all!

In a case where Amy felt uncomfortable in her underwear, to the extent that this would be visible by her gym clients either literally in the changing rooms<sup>12</sup> or underneath her sports outfit, she would feel conscious of it. It is also important for her to demonstrate that she is aware of what is necessary to support her body in this physically demanding job, so that she is able to advise her clients accordingly:

Int: And what do [women gym clients] usually ask?

Amy-I1: Just about what kind of bra they should be getting for their exercising, if they can get away with normal bras or do they need extra support, general stuff like that really.

Int: And do you recommend a sports bra?

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<sup>12</sup> This particular gym does not have separate changing rooms for the instructors so female instructors are also seen in their underwear when changing.

Amy-I1: Yes I do recommend.. well I always wear a shock absorbent bra, I normally wear those and they still are very nice, they look quite nice too. So those are the ones I would recommend because they give quite a lot of support.

Int: Is it better for the body if they have extra support?

Amy-I1: Well yes. If a woman doesn't have the right support she'll probably get back aches, back pains, especially for larger ladies.

As discussed in Chapter 2 underwear is an important part of the cultural field of fashion (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). We can see in the above narration that both Amy as the instructor and her clients are involved as players in this field, since all are implicated in its social production and reproduction by acknowledging that the necessary underwear is required to support the body during physical exercise but that this could/should also look “nice” as part of the fashion system. After all, as we have previously established, cultural fields emerge and persist only if there are conditions for the creation and sustenance of specific products - in this case underwear suitable for physical exercise - since there is an interest in certain activities, here exercise (Ferguson, 1998; Maguire, 2008).

In other cases where women perform different activities then underwear's functionality also matters to them so that they feel physically comfortable. Abby from group (1) for example explained that, when she plays the violin, she likes wearing sports bras because she can cross the straps over and they don't fall off her shoulders. Indeed when underwear is not suitable for the specific activity performed, then it results in an uncomfortable sensation that affects how these women perform the particular identity *opsy* they are exemplifying. The most vivid illustrations of feeling uncomfortable when performing specific activities or *opseis* were given by the rugby women. The underwear worn by female rugby players, as these women explained, is quite specific, i.e. large pants and sports bras, since it needs to fit both the context of the game and also to provide the comfort and the support their bodies need. Indeed for women who participate in sports, their underwear becomes actually part of their sport's

equipment(Schultz, 2004), just like the correct shoes, ball, racquet and so on. Rugby of course is usually seen as a more masculine sport. In fact, a vast body of research suggests that it revolves around images of “normative, athletic masculinity” (Chase, 2006: 230) and thus women’s participation in rugby challenges the ideas of normative femininity and appropriate female bodies. Also, as discussed in Chapter 3, even in sports any flashing of women’s underwear could lead to its eroticisation and to further undermine women’s position in masculine-coded sports especially. The example of Brandi Chastain, the US national women’s soccer team player who took her jersey off when she scored a penalty (Schultz, 2004) discussed in Chapter 3 is illustrative. So, what underwear to put on when playing rugby, for example, is not just a matter of wearing the right underwear for support. The exchange below demonstrates some of these tensions:

Int: So is that the kind of underwear you wear when you’re playing rugby?

Ellie - F4: Yes big boxers; it’s the most brilliant thing ever! [she is being ironic]

Fay-F4: Big knickers!

Int: Why do you prefer those?

Ellie-F4: Do you know what undershorts are?

Int: Yes.

Ellie-F4: Well if you don’t wear ... If you wear anything smaller underneath it will suck everything up. Your pants will go up your ass; *not* very comfortable! [she emphasises]

Sam-F4: Think of when you’re running and you’re trying to [she mimics pulling out her pants from behind]...

It’s not good! [she laughs]

Sharon-F4: It hurts!

Helen-F4: It’s not the prettiest of things or the most elegant of things trying to get your pants out of your bum especially when you’re playing and everyone is watching.

Helen’s remark about it not being elegant for others to see them pulling at their underwear when they are playing rugby again brings to mind how women in particular are constantly monitoring their selves/themselves in order to fit into the normalised expectations of being female. This is another example of how power is situated at the micro-level of our bodies in a Foucauldian reading. Wearing the ‘right’ underwear, or in the case of the rugby women *not* wearing the ‘right’ underwear, can have various meanings for the wearers but potentially also

to others, especially since these women feel themselves to be constantly under surveillance. Therefore they are acting upon social imperatives around how a woman should behave, even in a more masculine sport, which shows once again the dynamic and multifaceted nature of women's identity projects: trying to be several, perhaps incompatible things at once (here both feminine and masculine). These data support Foucault's (1978) assertion that power does not operate on individuals simply via external societal 'constraints'. Instead there is an element of self-monitoring which means that women have to be reflexive as to how they behave or act in front of others (McNay, 1992, 1994). Thus, the physical comfort that the 'right' underwear gives these women transforms into the psychological comfort that their appearance and conduct are 'proper'. However, physical comfort for these women took its more literal definition when I asked them about not wearing a bra, for example, when playing rugby:

Int: Would you ever play rugby without a bra?

All: No, no!

Sam-F4: That'll be so uncomfortable!

Helen-F4: It's uncomfortable enough not wearing the right bra and that gives you some kind of support. If you have no support then that'll be awful.

Fay-F4: That'll hurt!!

Ellie-F4: I don't think the coach would let you play.

Others: No.

Int: Let's say that you weren't wearing the right sports bra, would your coach stop you playing?

Helen-F4: No I don't think he would stop you from playing.

Becky-F4: You would have to take that decision for yourself.

Vicky-F4: But we are not supposed to play with [an] underwired [bra].

Denise-F4: Are we not?

Vicky-F4: No, no, cause if [the wire] came out it will really hurt.

Becky-F4: It's dangerous!

Ellie-F4: You could lose an eye! [they laugh] Yeah if someone tackles you and they're wearing an underwired [bra]!

Comfort for these women at the physical level was associated with how much support they can get without hurting their bodies and each other. The physical comfort of underwear however was defined in other data as the way it 'structures' the body. Particularly the bra has

an impact on the posture of the body, something that the WADS group identified. When Jane's daughter bought her bras from Rigby and Peller, which is a very expensive specialist shop offering higher quality underwear, she immediately felt the difference of wearing a good quality bra. She mentioned repeatedly what an impact it had on her, the cost notwithstanding. On the purely physical level it was her body posture which changed when her breasts were lifted to what 'should' be the 'right' height and which did not hamper her waist or shoulders:

Claire-F5: I always buy my pants from Matalan because I like the way they fit, they are comfortable...

Ruth-F5: Comfort is very important.

Jane-F5: I have to say that since my daughter brought me these fancy bras, it's made a massive difference to me. I never realised in my whole 66 years that wearing a good make of bra would make such a difference to me. In how I feel, how comfortable I feel and how I stand. I can't believe it because I've been wearing anything and everywhere. It has made such a difference to me.

What is interesting in this exchange is that, while Claire and Ruth talk about the physical comfort that the 'right' underwear provides for them, Jane's admission that her new underwear has made her stand differently and even feel different shows how interrelated physical and psychological comfort are for these women. Underwear here works as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988b) and can offer a sensation of self improvement and feeling good about herself. The use of underwear as a 'technology of the self' will be further discussed below; however and relatedly we can also see the use of underwear as a technique of the body (Mauss, 1973: 70), i.e. Jane's body posture has changed when wearing the new bra, as she is arguably supported better by it. Outdress has certainly been seen as a technique of the body, for example the business suit, which not only makes a person walk differently but also feel differently because of the bodily sensations that it implies in terms of how it enables and at the same time constrains movement and posture (Sweetman, 2001). Equally the bodily sensation Jane felt when her new bra lifted her breasts and her body posture changed is arguably the result of wearing the 'right' underwear and it informed/affected her identity project, similarly to how Budgeon (2003) stresses that any

technique that women employ to reconfigure and improve their body is central to their identity project: Jane repeatedly said “I’m a new woman now!”.

On the other hand for some of my participants comfort is a matter of accepting or trying new things to which you can then get used. Samantha from the administrators’ group says that, looking at thongs before she tried them on, she always thought they were uncomfortable, but she then got used to them:

Samantha–F2: I think I wear them more from the point of view that I wear trousers mostly and then... well I used to wear proper briefs but I was always very conscious of them and it was a friend of mine that just persuaded me to just try a thong.

What Samantha thought would be uncomfortable actually suited her outward appearance better, so comfort in this case is a matter of attaching a garment to your skin and getting used to it because it suits your outer appearance. Similarly Christie notes how differently she feels about her bra when she is in the privacy of her own home:

Int: Are there days that you don’t wear underwear, for example no-bra days?

Christie–I3: When I’m at home. When I’m at home I always take my bra off. It makes me feel much more relaxed. It’s strange actually because when I’m away from home I don’t feel it at all, but once I get home it feels like a weight, it feels too tight, uncomfortable and it bothers me.

There is a question here about whether comfort is something you automatically or instinctively ‘feel’ or that you get used to in certain contexts. Christie’s view implies that underwear becomes one with the skin when it is ‘necessary’ to have it on: in the comfort of her home though, where she can relax away from socio-cultural perceptions of how a woman should be presented, underwear starts feeling uncomfortable on both the physical and the psychological levels. In her words it becomes “a weight”. This suggests something about how underwear is worn because of the socio-cultural meanings it is invested with and its centrality to the overall identity project. Not wearing underwear, indeed the ‘right’ underwear, can

result in ‘improper’ support of the outward appearance - for example Samantha feeling uncomfortable wearing briefs under her trousers and now wearing thongs for this reason - which is key to women’s identity projects. However, the comfort that the privacy of their home provides may immediately create sensations of being uncomfortable in a garment that previously felt almost like a second skin. Again this suggests how the physical is interlinked with the psychological and perhaps in this case vice versa: it is probably the psychological comfort of being properly dressed and supported in specific contexts, central to the identity *opseis* these women perform, which makes them feel also physically comfortable. But when the context changes to a more private one, then immediately they feel ‘constrained’. Thus underwear can be almost unnoticeable and then momentarily a constraint depending on the environment, context or the *opseis* these women need to perform and move between in their everyday lives.

Physical and psychological comfort were especially central for the WADS group. Because of their age, they themselves suggested, comfort was the most influential factor when it comes to the underwear they buy and wear. It was noted several times that their underwear was not so important any more, as long as it is comfortable. This is something that has already been discussed in the hidden versus visible section, but it seems contradictory in the sense that, because of the changes the body is going through due to age, the more support the body arguably needs to be ‘pulled together’. This idea is especially accentuated by a range of mass cultural artefacts including television reality shows, such as makeover shows, which focus on (re)constructing the female body and become a ‘proper’ feminine body. Their emphasis is on ‘pulling’ and ‘moulding’ the body into a shape that is ‘correct’ for a feminine and fit body. This is something that the women in focus group 5 realised and mentioned – yet they wanted me to know that, in their case, it was not so important to them. “As long as I am comfortable”

was repeated several times. There was also a definite interplay between physical and psychological comfort here. Towards the end of our discussion these women offered some kind of explanation of what ‘feeling comfortable’ means. It was a matter of being within their “comfort zones” as Jane called it. Their comfort zones represented their understandings of feeling good in what they had on, or not feeling it at all. Anything new is also deemed both challenging and risky:

Ruth-F5: You don’t think about looking for anything different. You’re just going for the same thing again and again because you’re happy in it.

Marcy-F5: Sometimes it’s easier.

Lauren-F5: I think it’s because of our age that we don’t try new things.

Ruth-F5: Just occasionally you tend to try something and it doesn’t work and you say well ‘I should have stuck to the same thing’. You just need to feel that it pulls you in and new underwear might not do that.

In this case these women are *used to* the comfort of the underwear they usually wear, perhaps, as they suggest, because of the stage of life they are at. They need to feel that they are ‘pulled in’; nevertheless they say that they have not changed their underwear as their bodies change. Wearing their standard underwear is enough to make them feel ‘pulled in’ and that is another definition of comfort in these data.

In the case of the mothers it was likewise quite evident how the physical intersected with the psychological. Pregnancy and also the post-natal period necessitated various changes in the body and thus different underwear; not only because of body changes but also because of new kinds of physical comfort being sought from underwear. The need for practicality and the comfort of wearing certain underwear was discussed based on physical changes that their bodies have gone through and also due to the body healing after birth:

Rebecca-F3: I really had problems when... 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-F3: Or low.

Rebecca-F3: No, low doesn't actually work at all; because it's always just ... [she shows a position very low on the waist].

Kelly-F3: Something like this? [she shows the boy pants in stimulus picture 2]

Rebecca-F3: Yeah, something like this.

As previously suggested in this thesis, motherhood is one aspect of the feminine self, an identity *opsy* where perhaps feelings such as sexiness come second. This is something that these respondents were also very aware of, emphasising that there is an 'unwritten rule' that forbids pregnant women to put certain psychological needs, such as to feel feminine or sexy, first:

Claire-F3: 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-F3: Yeah I did as well. [Others agree as well]. I went from an uplifting bra to a bra with no uplift at all. [Laughter]

Kelly-F3: No style!

Kerry-F3: No style. I found.. I found that ... cause I didn't feel any sexy anyway...

Kelly and Liz - F3: No! [agreeing]

Kerry-F3: And underwear becomes incredibly practical...

Kelly-F3: Yeah...

Kerry-F3: 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 "un-sexy".. because you are wearing cotton, big knickers and a really boring bra! And that's all there is to offer!

The boundaries between the *opseis* of motherhood and 'sexy femininity' were quite distinct for these women because they felt that practical, comfortable underwear could not be sexy; something that seems to have had a definite impact on how they felt during their pregnancies and after giving birth. However, they also saw motherhood as a very feminine period, which reflects the findings of Warren and Brewis (2004) where some of their participants also reported this period of their lives as being extraordinarily intense and that they were more immersed in their female corporeality. Some of my participants suggested, quite strongly, that even though they felt quite feminine, still the underwear market does not offer anything for pregnant women that could be both comfortable and sexy - or at least stylish:

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

Kelly-F3: 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... wearing all fuddy-duddy rubbish. 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 would feel sexier in during your pregnancy?

Kelly-F3: If it'd been comfortable, 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.

For Karen in group (2) on the other hand comfort was associated completely with her body size and how comfortable or uncomfortable she felt about her overall clothing. She continually mentioned that her body size was a big factor in which underwear and more generally which clothes she wears. Indeed the underwear she buys is not necessarily because she likes it but because she feels physically comfortable in it. Karen even admitted that, if she was slimmer, then comfort would not be her priority regarding underwear. For her, comfort was associated with her overweight body and sexiness was associated with periods when she was slimmer and more generally with a slimmer body per se:

Karen-F2: 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-F2: Well just more, like prettier stuff, ehmm, 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.

Karen's narration here suggests that her physical comfort in the underwear she chooses to wear now leaves her at the same time not feeling 'feminine enough', something that she would seemingly feel if she was slimmer. She 'disguises' her body with 'not sexy' underwear in order to feel comfortable but at the same time this 'not sexy' underwear exacerbates her discomfort of not being feminine because it reminds her of her 'fat' body. This is another

example of how female identity projects are complex and always shifting to fit into social norms around what it 'feels to be a woman'.

Moreover, Karen's narration again suggests something about how deeply women can internalise western values and imperatives around femininity, in that they draw discursive connections between 'sexy femininity' and slenderness like Karen does. This data reminds us of Bordo's works (1988; 1990b; 2004) on how femininity is associated with youthfulness and slenderness and that women are constantly monitoring themselves as a result and feel that their bodies and in sequence their identities are a constant project for improvement likewise. Body size, according to Tischner and Malson (2008), is not just about beauty but also about the 'irresponsibility' that accordingly accompanies an overweight individual in terms of them seemingly not paying the 'necessary' attention to either their appearance or health. Fuller bodies are now associated with laziness and lack of control (Bordo, 2004). Indeed studies show that larger people are viewed as "less happy, more self-indulgent, less self-confident, less self-disciplined, lazier, and less attractive" (Grogan, 1999: 11). These imperatives become internalised to such an extent that, Bordo argues, "[m]ost women in our culture, then, are 'disordered' when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies" (2004: 57). Karen certainly does not feel that she can wear the 'pretty' underwear she wants to because she is not comfortable in her own body. Her overall appearance in terms of the clothes she wears has changed because of her feeling that she has gained weight.

In a later exchange in the administrators' group (2) about wearing what could be regarded as sexy underwear Karen again mentioned her current weight:

Karen-F2: I've worn something similar in the past but I wouldn't now, only if I lost some weight but not at the moment. You need to be really slim to wear something like that [talking about stimulus picture 5].

Int: [Looking at Samantha] I'm sure you wouldn't wear it ... [they laugh]

Samantha-F2: Never in a million years! [others laugh] Basically because I don't have any confidence in how I look now so the underwear that I wear just serves its purpose.

What is clear in this extract is how careful and attentive both Karen and Samantha's self-monitoring is. This reminds us of Tischner and Malson's (2008) respondent 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, emphasis removed). Both Karen and Samantha, similarly, seem to feel it is impossible for them to wear sexy underwear, exactly because they have internalised these discursive imperatives about what a 'fat' person should be wearing or not. This is also reminiscent of Christie earlier when she says it is "weird" for her looking at a "chubby" woman wearing a g-string and thus she feels uncomfortable in the gym changing room because she always wears g-strings, even though she also feels she has gained weight. Like the respondents in Tischner and Malson's (2008) research, some of my respondents too seem to feel that they do not conform to current feminine norms. This reminds us of the dynamic and shifting character of power relations when people are constantly feeling they are under others' surveillance and also in Christie's case, like Emily in Tischner and Malson (2008), when they are monitoring others too.

When talking about sexy underwear, and continuing with the conjunctions between physical and psychological comfort the tutors' group (1) commented on the stimulus pictures regarding what they saw as sexy underwear. Paulette thought that the lingerie in picture 6 is neither sexy nor comfortable and Abby agreed, emphasising the fact that a woman cannot feel sexy if she is uncomfortable. This contrasts with what she described as her sexy 'weekend' underwear (I will discuss this further in a later section), which she wears for her

husband and which can be a bit uncomfortable. However this points to the possibility that what is usually out there is not always what a woman wants to buy in order to feel sexy or comfortable, or both. The stimulus pictures certainly included some underwear which would be conventionally regarded as lingerie or sexy underwear. However, when my participants were prompted to identify what ‘sexy’ was for them, the responses varied. For some sexy was defined in relevance to comfort and not just what the underwear looks like. In several cases my participants said that lingerie or conventionally sexy underwear can be physically uncomfortable. Abby for example stressed that “‘sexy’ is uncomfortable”. She identified Laris (picture 5) and Joanna (picture 6) as wearing sexy underwear but added this would not be the kind of underwear she would buy:

Abby-F1: These are really gorgeous [picture 5 and 6] and my husband would love that but I don’t think I’ll ever buy this.

Int: Why?

Abby-F1: Because it would be too difficult to clean, I wouldn’t wear it very often, uncomfortable and not worth the money.

[...]

Abby-F1: I would only wear it in the house, so that means I would wear it for [her husband], so it would only stay on for two minutes so I wouldn’t really get the value out of it.

The mothers’ group also referred to the sexy underwear as uncomfortable and again their reference was to the two Ann Summers pictures 5 and 6:

Kerry-F3: Joanna and Laris are too fancy for me.

Kayla-F3: Bet it would take you three days to get in [to it].

Laney-F3: I think that Joanna is more of wedding underwear.

Kerry-F3: I actually bought something like that for my wedding but it was too uncomfortable and at the end my husband never saw it because I took it off [she laughs].

Apparent in these exchanges is these women’s motives for wearing sexy underwear and how these lead back once more to the idea of bedtime and sex. Christie for example says that the only ‘sexy’ underwear she has ever owned was a black corset that someone bought her as a

present a long time ago. This was intended for a special occasion, or for being with her boyfriend. However she found it irritating to wear because it dug into her stomach:

Christie - I3: I remember once I had something like a corset ... God I don't even remember who gave me that, if it was my old boyfriend or if it was a present from my best friend. It was something like this [stimulus picture 6] like a corset, a black see-through. I wore it a couple of times but it wasn't very comfortable. It bothered me here at the belly and I was really conscious of it. To be honest I thought I looked ridiculous because I was so conscious of it. But anyway it's not something you would wear every day. It's only for special occasions.

Summarising so far, we have seen that the different definitions these women gave to the sensations that underwear produced for them vary, often because of the connections between the physical and the psychological. The feeling of comfort was central to these respondents in terms of the physical and psychological sensations that their underwear produced for them. Starting from the simplest definition of feeling comfortable in the material of the underwear, other physical and psychological sensations were also produced by underwear according to these women. Feeling comfortable or uncomfortable depends also on the identity *opseis* these women are performing. Their ability to perform various activities or even their job in the case of Amy was central to how they defined comfort. Physical comfort was clearly interlinked with psychological comfort in examples such as the rugby women who defined comfort in terms of wearing the 'right' underwear when playing, not only for the support of their body but also for the 'proper' appearance of their bodies in the eyes of those watching them. The support of the body was important in another definition of comfort given by the WADS group and about feeling good in that stage of their lives when their body needs to be 'pulled in'. Moreover, feeling comfortable was also defined as not noticing your underwear when performing certain identity *opseis* although in the private space of the house it can then become a weight; feeling comfortable then is about taking off your underwear.

Comfort in terms of practicality on the other hand was defined by the mothers' group and it was mostly about their changing pre and post-natal bodies, but comfort was also discussed in terms of how sexy underwear is or is not comfortable. Many of my respondents reported that sexy underwear cannot be comfortable and feeling sexy in your underwear is definitely associated for some with their body size. Thus, the boundaries of the physical or psychological sensations underwear produces are not clear: rather I find the two interconnected and strongly influencing the buying choices of these women. Depending on the identity *opsy* these women were focusing on, underwear could also produce different feelings supporting this particular persona. Drawing from this, the following section shows how underwear and the sensations it induces in the body can be understood in terms of how these women's underwear makes them feel and, as an aspect of identity construction, can be mobilised as a technique of feeling 'special'.

Indeed in terms of the other psychological feelings that underwear produces for my participants, one of the most important aspects of their underwear they reported was how the 'right' underwear can make you feel special, feminine, sexy or in general 'good' about yourself. Their conceptions of what feminine or sexy means were based on what they feel when they have specific underwear on. One of the few scholarly analyses of the contemporary importance of underwear, that of Jantzen *et al.* (2006) show similar findings since their participants also discuss the feelings underwear can produce for the wearer. According to them, and as already discussed in Chapter 2, the sensations that underwear produces for its wearer become a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988b) because they serve as part of the woman's identity construction by reinforcing her self-confidence and self-esteem. Jantzen *at al.* stress that lingerie enables consumers to successfully 'manage' their conception of femininity, arguably because of the way it makes them feel.

As already mentioned in Chapter 3, Jantzen *et al.* explore how consumers relate their lingerie to sexuality and sensuality. The category of lingerie, of course, usually entails the kind of underwear which is considered perhaps for more special occasions or for sexual encounters. The name lingerie was originally given to more luxurious undergarments during the nineteenth century and the Edwardian period (Willett and Cunnington, 1992). This thesis however is premised on a broader conceptualization of underwear, including what could be considered as mundane or not 'special', allowing thus for a wider understanding of the role underwear plays in the everyday lives of women participants. Notwithstanding this, unsurprisingly, many of these women also suggested that the type of underwear which makes them feel special would be categorised as lingerie. As we have seen earlier Abby from group (1) says that she wears special underwear during her weekend, during her quality time with her husband. Moreover, as she also said earlier this would be the type of underwear that is pretty, though sometimes uncomfortable:

Abby-F1: [...] 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 [...].

Abby's weekend underwear contrasts to her work underwear, for example, which she described as asexual. She explains that she needs to be focused on her job, thus it is important for her not to notice her underwear. This again says something about how underwear can be mobilised in focusing on different identity *opseis*, reminding us once again the complexity of identity projects. In Abby's case her weekend underwear speaks to her *opsy* as a sexual partner but her work underwear is used for her *opsy* as a professional.

In the same group an assumption emerged that wearing special, feminine underwear 'creates' a more sexually aggressive woman. Wendy recalls the case of her sister for whom she bought

sexy lingerie, since her sister could not buy them in Japan where she lives. At this time of her life, her 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 what she might consider as sexy underwear. The other women were shocked when Wendy actually said that it worked because her sister got a boyfriend as a result. In another example, from the rugby group (4) in response to a question about when they would wear sexy underwear, Helen’s reply was illustrative:

Helen-F4: Well it depends what you are doing. If you put [sexy underwear] on and you go for lectures or whatever then I don’t think it feels normal. But if you’re wearing it *for* someone.. you kind of get that feeling woo ...

Becky-F4: I’m a sexy bitch!!!

[They laugh aloud]

Ellie-F4: Becky, you realise that this is recorded!!

Becky-F4: So??

Once again these data lead back to the assumption that sexy underwear, if it is seen, is usually intended for a sexual partner. However, Paulette from the tutors’ group (1) in a similar discussion wondered whether it would be possible to wear special underwear during the day, when she usually would not, since, as Abby said, when at work women may feel that they need to be quite asexual:

Paulette-F1: But I think it’s interesting ... 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.

Abby-F1: Like walk funny!!!

[They laugh]

What is interesting in this exchange is how their identity *opseis* have quite strong boundaries for these women; such that Paulette wonders what would happen if these boundaries would change if she wears different underwear, for example. This says something about how women use various techniques, such as underwear, to consolidate or articulate a sense of

'who I am' in particular situations. As Budgeon (2003: 37) argues any technique that a person adopts to improve and reconfigure their body, appearance and self is central to their identity. Again of course this also reflects Jantzen *et al.* (2006) who suggest that wearing special underwear transforms women's self-image. The women in the tutors' group were particularly emphatic on how they perform their identities while at work. How they dress and what underwear they wear changes for their working hours. Abby, for example, stressed that she wears plain cotton underwear to work because she needs to feel that her body is as "invisible" as possible when she teaches. In order to perform her professional identity, she uses underwear as a tool for the successful construction of that identity *opseis*. This also shows the emphasis that women might place to render their feminine body invisible in the male dominated, rational context of organisational life. Underwear here for Abby can be seen as part of her embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as it is rendered almost invisible, as her outerwear (she also refers to her outerwear as being quite 'plain'). According to her, this is required in her work environment, where she stands in front of students in order to feel as 'not feminine' as possible and exemplify thus her professional *opsy* as an academic. On this, Shilling (2005: 73) stresses that individuals engage in "*unofficial* tasks [that are] involved in maintaining the embodied self as viable within the environment of waged labour". He cites Hochschild who suggests that individuals engage in 'deep acting' when they change their appearance and thus feelings to meet their work environment's expectations (2005: 95). In order for Abby to accumulate her cultural capital as an academic (and thus transform it into other forms) she mobilizes underwear, working together with her outerwear, in order to move from other identity *opseis* she performs when not at work (e.g. sexual partner) to her professional *opsy*.

So for these women a change in what they wear underneath means a change in what they feel about their body and how it looks. Thus underwear also becomes a tool, a technique of manipulating feelings about the self, and because of the sensations they suggest it creates for them, their body language changes too. Thus unsurprisingly these women argue that they need to wear more ‘mundane’ or ‘plain’ underwear at work because they need to be focusing on their identity as professionals. Similarly Amy, the gym instructor, also feels that her work underwear is not the same as her home underwear:

Int: So would your underwear change when you go home?

Amy-I1: Yep!

Int: How important is that for you?

Amy-I1: Very much so! Because when I’m at work and I’ve got support on .... I want to feel girly as well, but when I go home I definitely want to feel girly. So I have to change it.

In the case of Amy and also the rugby women, their underwear would also be dirty and sweaty at the end of the day, so it is crucial that they change it. However the fact that these women change into something completely different also suggests that specific types of underwear speak to different identity *opseis* as it produces different feelings for them. Most of the women in the rugby team, similarly to Amy, stressed that when they go home they put on something completely different that would feel ‘girly’. For them girly underwear is more elegant than their sports underwear, patterned and colourful. But what also emerges as important here is the extent to which putting on such underwear makes these women *feel* different, more feminine, which is what, as I stressed in Chapter 2, makes underwear a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988b). The following section illuminates further how underwear becomes a technology of the self, a means of identity construction.

### *5.3.2 Technologies of the self*

Foucault's concept of technologies of the self links here with the overall intention of using underwear as a tool of feeling good about yourself and to manipulate the sensations and feelings it produces in/for your body for the overall "cultivation of the self" (Foucault, 1986: 279). Foucault (1986: 45) argues that taking care of the self is an imperative that has become inculcated in our way of living and has evolved into a set of practices, procedures or behaviours that modern western individuals have developed. Here, underwear serves as a technology of changing the way these women feel about themselves, their body and their identity project. In fact the idea that underwear can produce feelings of being more feminine or sexy was evident across all my data. Nonetheless, many of the women also remarked that underwear is intended to be hidden from view and so wearing such 'girly', 'sexy' or 'special' underwear is just a case of feeling good about themselves:

Christie-I3: [...] it changes the way I feel, I would feel nicer, it would make me feel different. I mean when I buy new underwear I do feel different, especially when I buy a new bra and because I don't buy them so often I'm very conscious of it: I like wearing it, it feels different, I feel more special. No one sees it, it's just for you. It's like when you buy new clothes you feel different, and with underwear it is even more intense because no one sees it, it just touches your body. You feel extra nice, you feel that something is different; maybe you get some more confidence.

Christie wanted then to be able to use underwear as a technology to improve her self-confidence. She considered herself boring as a result of not giving too much attention - due mostly to her financial position (she works part-time) - to what she was wearing, both in terms of underwear and outerwear. For Christie wearing new underwear produces the kind of sensations that make her feel she is putting some effort into her project of the self. Relatedly some of the other women considered wearing special underwear as a way of producing a sense of feeling sexy or feminine, and that it had a direct link to what they wear 'on top':

Ruth-F5: And they match right Phyllis? [Phyllis nods as yes and laughs]

Jane-F5: And they always have to match when you're going somewhere special [laughs]. I usually have my Sloggies on but if I'm going out I put some other things on.

Susan-F5: Do you have them in your bag? [they laugh]

Lauren-F5: But that's interesting isn't it? Because nobody's going to see it, but if you're going out...

Marcy-F5: Yeah if you're wearing a nice outfit you probably want to wear something nice inside...

All: Yes

Marcy-F5: Because it all goes together.

'Special' underwear, which includes sexy lingerie or even just matching underwear, as suggested by my participants, can, it appears, boost confidence and produce feelings of femininity. Some of the exchanges that follow demonstrate this theme again; that, to the extent it remains hidden, these women put on 'special' underwear just to feel good about themselves:

Int: Why do you have the need to wear matching underwear for special occasions?

Kerry-F3: 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.

As suggested by Jantzen *et al.* (2006), simply putting on special underwear can produce sensations that exemplify one's sexuality, even though it might not be seen by others. This suggests that this type of underwear in particular is saturated with erotic cultural connotations. Thus simply by putting it on and when aligned with all the other practices of femininity women engage in, it serves as a Foucauldian technology of the self in terms of how my respondents prepare themselves for particular occasions. Underwear intersects and reinforces other mobilisations or technologies such as perfumes, depilatory work and so on, which are subtle adjustments to the body, but all come together to allow 'feeling special':

Kelly-F3: 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 ...

Claire-F3: It just finishes everything ...

Kelly-F3: It's about feeling good about yourself.

As we have seen earlier the mothers' group was especially interesting to listen to because of the connections they drew between 'feeling sexy' and their body changes during pregnancy and post-natally. For many of them buying non-pregnancy underwear was a priority after the baby was born in order to be able to emerge out of the motherhood *opsy*. Kerry for example stressed that the nursing bra reflected her more than any bra before because the sensation of putting it on so explicitly represented the identity *opsy* she was focusing on. For her it was all about feeding the baby, a "selfless" act as she describes it. However, buying non-maternity underwear a few months after giving birth - that is, by the time I met them - had become a priority for these women. For Kerry buying new underwear signalled the end of the experience of 'physical' motherhood, i.e. breast feeding:

Kelly-F3: 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-F3: Sexy?

Kelly-F3: Normal!

Kerry-F3: I have to say, just thinking about it 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*. [they laugh]

Tara-F3: Ooooooh!

Kerry-F3: Yeah I'll show you all! [they laugh]. Kyle<sup>13</sup> is already saying to me "we'll go and buy something for a treat to properly say it's over!".

Kelly-F3: That's nice!

Buying something colourful meant almost like a new Kerry was emerging: it would be a 'treat' to mark the ending of a particular stage of her motherhood. Similarly for Jen buying a well-fitted and expensive bra would mean the end of this experience and the return to her 'normal' self, even though she was still aware of the effects that pregnancy had had on her body:

Jen-F3: 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, cause that's my worry .. getting something that doesn't fit ... cause my boobs are kind of going under [laughter].

Kerry-F3: I want underwired.

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<sup>13</sup> Kerry's husband.

Others: Yeah!

Kerry-F3: That's what I'm looking for ... an underwired bra again.

In another case from my data, Erica the gym client also made a reference to underwear as a tool of improving your self-confidence and appearance and making an effort; “looking after yourself” as she says. This is again evocative of Jantzen *et al.* (2006: 179, emphasis in original) who argue that wearing the ‘right’ underwear is indeed a “working of identity”, which “may fulfil or generate longings, thus potentially leading to intensified experiences, feeling and sensations of ‘who I *really* am’”.

These data for me bear out Foucault's (1986: 43) famous phrase *heautou epimeleisthai* which means taking care of oneself. Underwear becomes a way of managing one's conception of self and a way of communicating one's identity, thus a technology of the self. According to these data, Foucault is right here to argue that

[t]he self is not clothing, tools, or possessions. It is to be found in the principle which *uses* these tools, a principle not of the body but of the soul. (1988b: 25, emphasis added)

As suggested in Chapter 2 and looking at underwear within this framework, we find that it has more effects than just moulding or supporting the body or outerwear: it is also about conjuring feelings and sensations to manage, enhance or bolster one's self. As we have seen Foucault (1988b: 24) stresses that people use certain technologies in order to “attain a certain state of happiness”. For my participants this ‘state of happiness’ was at least partly achieved by wearing the ‘right’ underwear - especially ‘pretty’, well fitted, colourful, ‘sexy’ or even just matching underwear - as closely related to their understandings of their femininity. It was a matter of taking care of yourself physically and achieving that ‘state of happiness’ by

reaffirming a feminine identity with the manipulation of the sensations that are produced in the body by wearing the 'right' underwear:

Erica-I2: I could be wearing.. erm.. let's say a suit for an interview, and no one really knows what I've got on underneath, as long as I feel comfortable and it's doing what I want it to do, people wouldn't know. But it's important ... for the individual ... To dress and feel a part.

Christie-I3: [...] you know you feel different, you feel like you're in a movie or something. But then again it depends on the partner you wear it [lingerie] for. If he considers it sexy then you would feel sexy too. If he doesn't pay attention to it then it's not special any more, is it? But you know some women would just buy sexy lingerie just for themselves. I know my sister does. She doesn't have a boyfriend and whenever she goes out on Saturday night she just wears really nice sexy underwear. Because it makes her feel good. It feels extra special for her. She's all dressed up to go out, she puts on her make up, so underwear is the last touch. I've never tried it [she laughs]. Maybe it works! [she laughs]

Christie's narrative here suggests that for some women at least wearing 'special' underwear creates a feeling of being different or of excitement. Underwear here stimulates a feeling of being 'especially' or perhaps 'erotically' female that perhaps on other occasions these women might not feel. This suggests that women's physical senses are an element in constructing their female identity, which is also evident for example in McNamara's (2000) findings. These indicate that women can be stimulated by using specific products, especially in terms of their senses. She cites Faust:

[W]omen have a highly eroticized sense of touch, referring to women's fashion as serving both epigamic display (that is to attract a mate) as well as meeting a more personal, almost narcissistic hunger - women's pleasure in haptic stimulation [...]. (cited in McNamara, 2000: 92)

Indeed Christie comments that the material of underwear or its colour can produce intense sensations which equally become important to how she feels:

Christie-I3: Because when you say lingerie what comes to my mind is something for a special occasion is not something that you wear every day. It's something that you wear for someone and not just for yourself. I don't

think something that you wear underneath your work clothes is sexy. I guess it's a way of reminding yourself you are a woman, which you kind of forget sometimes. I mean if I was wearing this [stimulus picture 3] ... I would feel quite feminine, maybe because of the colour or the fabric, I don't know... I can't really define it. It's something about this that makes you look at it and you say 'yes this is really beautiful, it's feminine and I want to wear it'.

Christie is uncertain about how colourful or better quality underwear attracts her to buy and feel 'special' wearing it because of what it might mean. McCracken (1988) on this stresses that commodities' importance lies not only in their utilitarian function but also their symbolic meanings; their connotations and denotations (Barthes, 1972) as seen in Chapter 3. What is important here and has been researched extensively in consumer culture scholarship, as seen earlier in the thesis, is how consumers make sense of, interpret and act upon these meanings. For example Christie here suggests that perhaps the colour or the material of the underwear transmits a certain 'specialness' which as she emphatically puts it will make her feel feminine and beautiful. Thus, as suggested in Chapter 3, the colour, for example, of underwear can evoke different meanings for women which can then become central to their identity projects (Grove-White, 2001) or, more specifically, *opseis*. I will expand on how colours become important for these women respondents in a later section: however the case of Samantha from the administrators' group (3) is worth mentioning here.

Samantha also thought that colourful underwear could induce a feeling of excitement or adventure for her since she always wears plain underwear. As she already stressed she does not feel comfortable with her body and thus does not buy "special" or "fancy", as she says, underwear. However she narrates a story about her husband buying her underwear for a Christmas present:

Samantha-F2: I thought he would buy me something that he wanted me to wear [...] but I was so disappointed by this boring bra! [she makes a funny disappointed face].

Karen-F2: Did he get the size right?

Samantha-F2: Yeah he did but it was really ...

Caitlyn-F2: [It] wasn't what you wanted.

Samantha-F2: No, I think ... maybe I thought 'Oh an opportunity to have a kind of pretty bra in my drawer and you gave me a white one!' [they laugh].

Julie-F2: Did you wear it?

Samantha-F2: Yes I do wear it cause it's a comfortable everyday bra and I didn't say anything to him. I said 'it's very nice dear but you could have been more adventurous or exciting!' [they laugh]

Samantha's disappointment about her husband buying her a plain, everyday bra contrasts with her earlier statements that she would never wear anything sexy in the way that sexy was defined in her focus group, i.e. patterned, coloured underwear. Even though she would not buy it for herself because of what Grogan (1999) calls her distorted body image, she still felt that a colourful bra would be more exciting and adventurous for her. It would also be something her husband bought, which leads back to the idea that, when underwear is seen, then it is probably meant for sex.

Summarising this section, to the extent that underwear remains hidden, some of these women suggest it is all about feeling good about themselves. The sensations that 'special' underwear produce for/in their bodies brings them to a 'state of happiness' and serve in a Foucauldian sense as a technology of the self, an element of their identity projects. Underwear then emerges as a technique of self-construction and self-expression, depending on the identity *opsy* a woman plays out. The examples from my data discussed in this section suggest that underwear can be used to arouse and bolster feelings of confidence and sexiness, i.e. Abby's 'pretty' underwear at the weekend, or the new mothers' plans to buy non-maternity underwear. This 'special' characteristic that underwear might have as a key element for choosing what underwear to wear notwithstanding, other factors that influence these women when buying underwear were also obvious in these data. The following section discusses some of them.

## 5.4 'The underwear that I like': The role of taste in the consumption of underwear

Women's taste in underwear and the aesthetic judgements they receive from and make about others are central to their female identity project. It allows them to interpret the various meanings of the various types of underwear (including their colours and materials) and to mobilise them on different occasions in order to perform different identity *opseis*. Moreover on many occasions the underwear they wear forms part of their embodied cultural capital which they utilise to transform it into other forms of capital, e.g. economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Crossley, 2001).

Indeed taste was another factor in how my participants choose their underwear; what colours they like, as well as their preferences in material and type of underwear. Thus many questions on my part were about finding out these elements of their taste in underwear. The respondents' identity *opseis* on many occasions necessitate particular types of underwear anyway, such as sports underwear for the rugby women or maternity underwear for the mothers. However these types also have different styles, brands and other more practical differences like colours or strapping, elements that can play an important role in what these women choose to consume. Their preferences for example in everyday underwear differ from those in sexy underwear, while their definitions of sexy, as we have previously seen, were also quite different. Some consensus on what is pretty underwear, special or sexy underwear was evident but both similarities and differences are interesting here since taste is one link between how these respondents experience themselves and their social environment, how they feel about themselves and how they want others to feel about them:

Christie-I2: Thinking of myself, my underwear like my clothes is a bit boring. It's the same story, I don't wear anything fancy: I mean my clothes are not so fancy. I don't have a particularly great sense of style so I guess

my underwear is quite similar in that sense. But I wouldn't say that.. that is who I am. Up to a certain point it's how I am used to, or how I grew up, but I wouldn't want to think that I would continue wearing the same things. I would love to have some more variety in my underwear and my clothes. I just can't afford that right now.

Christie's narration here exemplifies how taste is a manifestation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) since she makes some connections about her aesthetic judgments – her sense of style – and her habitus. This once again bears out Bourdieu's (1984: 6) assertion that “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier”, as Christie reveals something about her own socialisation and habitus: she classifies herself as someone with no great sense of style. An element of anxiety is evident here about how others would judge her based on the underwear she wears. As Featherstone (2007: 19) suggests

[c]onsumption and lifestyle preferences involve discriminatory judgements which at the same time identify and render classifiable our own particular judgement of taste to others.

Interestingly, Christie seems to be classifying herself as someone with no great sense of style, which shows that she is aware of the different types of underwear she could be wearing. Underwear after all, and as suggested in Chapter 2, is part of the cultural field of fashion which serves as a cultural intermediary (Bourdieu, 1984) transmitting information to the middle and working class about cultivation of lifestyles (Featherstone, 2007). However, Christie's urge to argue that she does not think she would continue wearing the same 'boring' underwear suggests how habitus is not static but entails a dialogical relation between the objective structures of a field and an individual's cognitive construction (McNay, 2000). Christie here assumes that the accumulation of different forms of capital (mostly here economic capital), once she is in a different professional field, will adjust her habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Lury, 1996) to the requirements perhaps and the different lifestyle that the new field will require, i.e. the different underwear she would choose might induce different

feelings about herself and her sense of style, thus she might be classifying her own particular judgement of taste differently.

Christie's low economic capital (she works only part time as already established) appeared early in the interview as one constraint on her consumption 'desires'. Many times during our interview she mentioned her memories of being younger and living with her parents; a time when she was able to afford much better clothes and a "better quality of life" as she admits. However, she also affirmed that her underwear was very boring and that she did not pay too much attention to it, as long as it did what it was supposed to be doing. A couple of times she mentioned, rather embarrassed, that she had only two bras, just because she could not afford more or because she would rather spend her money buying 'outer' clothes. But an additional explanation of why she never buys 'fancy' underwear was her mother's taste because she too did not wear 'pretty' underwear or have a great sense of style in her outerwear. Thinking of her mother's choices in both outerwear and underwear appeared to me to be a way for Christie to understand her choices not only in underwear but in dress in general:

Christie-I3: I don't remember what I did when I was younger but I know I always had one white and one black bra. I think it's my mother's fault. She was very boring too, underwear-wise. She was always wearing the same beige bra and I mean literally the same. She would always buy the same underwear of the same brand, a Marks and Spencer's one. So I guess that made me not to give much attention to underwear.

Once again, and as discussed above, this is evocative of Bourdieu's (1984: 170) notion of habitus, as both a principle of classifying judgements and a system of classification of these judgments. Christie here assumes that her taste in underwear is affected by her mother's taste in underwear when Christie was growing up. Here then we can see a fairly explicit example of Bourdieu's definition of taste as a manifestation of habitus. Christie suggests that her 'lack' of style, i.e. choosing colourful clothing or underwear, is a result of how she grew up, of her environment and the structures she grew up in. Here we see a contradiction in the

previous narration by Christie, where she says that her rather poor sense of style now is due to her low economic capital. However, she affirms that her sense of style is a result of how she grew up. Christie's sense of style, her way of thinking and other dispositions, work here as her cultural capital and symbolic capital, influenced, of course, by her habitus. This reflects Reay's (2000) discussion regarding cultural capital, i.e. modes of thinking, quality of style etc, and how this is transmitted primarily through the family. Reay refers to Bourdieu and how he particularly emphasises the importance of the mother's involvement in the 'quality' of the cultural capital transmitted to the child. Cultural capital as well as symbolic capital, i.e. the signs of the dispositions and classificatory schemes that make individuals acquire a certain prestige in their field in a particular society, betray the individual's origins, since these dispositions are manifest in their habitus: body dispositions, ease or discomfort with their body. As Featherstone (2007: 21) asserts "culture is incorporated, ... [i.e.] it is not just a question of what clothes are worn, but how they are worn".

The involvement of their mothers as an important factor influencing these women's choices was evident elsewhere in my data:

Samantha-F3: [...] But when I go shopping, clothes shopping with my mum she's always saying "have you got proper pants [on] today?" [they laugh] and I'm like "Mum you don't have to see my bottom" [laughter all around]. Yeah she's funny. But I think I get a lot of my ... erm... sort of underwear erm ... what's the word?

Karen-F3: Hang-ups?

Samantha-F3: Yeah, from my mum. Yeah I probably have a lot of those from my mum.

Caitlyn-F3: Why?

Samantha-F3: Cause me and my mum are very similar; I mean she ... she's kind of a large, busty lady ... and erm ... she's ... erm ... she's very much "underwear serves a purpose" and ... you know.. you just need a bra to just pull your boobs in and that's it. She's not gonna particularly look pretty and she certainly won't be putting it on for my dad's benefit [laughter]. I think when you grow up with that and you go shopping with your mum.. you know.. and your mum just hands you over a white bra or a cream bra ...

Julie-F3: My mum, I know this is really weird, but my mum didn't want me to get like my first bra. She tried to keep me with those tops ...

[Others talk together saying that their mums did the same]

[...]

Karen-F3: Yeah they don't want you to grow up.

Samantha-F3: It was my cousin who in the end told my mum "you know, you really have to buy her a bra".

Similarly to Christie, Samantha also seems to think her taste in underwear has been influenced by her mother's taste. Again this echoes exactly the definition of taste as a manifestation of Bourdieu's habitus, as she thinks growing up like that influenced her style regarding underwear and what she perceives its purpose to be. Another interesting motif in this exchange is the involvement of mothers in these women's first experience with 'adult' underwear. The women in group (3) all shared that their mothers delayed buying them their first bra, which to them meant that their mothers did not want them to grow up. Overall these data arguably say something about how underwear functions as cultural capital, plus how family and especially the mother influence this. As Silva (2005: 84) stresses,

cultural capital [fulfils] the social function of legitimating social differences and establishes that it is produced (as taste, knowledge and ability), as well as consumed, in certain legitimate areas sanctioned by 'culture' (e.g. painting and music), or in personal areas (e.g. clothing, furniture and cookery), where early familiarization establishes legitimacy. Familiarization guarantees a 'natural' acquisition of social dispositions as an essential ingredient for the transmission of social positions. Home and family are central to these areas of personal life, where women, as mothers and homemakers, play a crucial role in individual early development, and ensure the transmission of particular values of cultural capital, which cannot be guaranteed otherwise.

However, Christie in her previous narration mentions that she does not think that this is who 'she is *really*'. There is a question here about how she understands her self, that is, ultimately a self different than what she reveals so far and a question about if there is indeed a 'true self' that is hidden away and will be revealed if her actions, her behaviour or even simply her consumption patterns change. Christie was quite contradictory, saying on the one hand that she does not wear fancy clothes or underwear because she "is not that kind of woman who

will look for matching underwear, or embroidered”. However, she also admits that she would like to have “fancier underwear”, or coloured underwear, although she cannot afford to, assuming here that fancier underwear for Christie also means expensive underwear. There is a conflict here between class as a material position and her subjective position of caring for the self. Her wish of, at some point, revealing or perhaps constructing her ‘other self’ depends on her career progress, and how her taste might change regarding the consumption of underwear and clothes might change when she has a higher income, which reminds us the generative power of habitus and that it is a long lasting system of dispositions rather than a permanent one (Bourdieu, 2005).

Erica on the other hand, who according to her biographical data is a middle class woman, can afford a membership at one of the most expensive health centres in her city. She also notes that she spends a lot of money on underwear because she believes that many cheaper underwear brands either do not fit well or the underwear is made of poor quality material. As she explains, talking about Rigby and Peller,

Erica-I2: It’s *the* place to go in the country for lingerie. The Queen gets her underwear from there. And you can pay about £60 or £70 for one bra. But they’re really quite good because there they don’t use a tape measure.

[...]

Int: And what about material?

Erica-I2: Something that’s comfortable. I don’t like some of the cheaper fabrics that they use to make bras now because they can be quite.. erm you know at the back of the bra, when they haven’t finished it off properly and the fabric is the cheapest in the market, it can be quite irritating.

Further, Erica repeatedly asserted that underwear should be an important element of a woman’s dress as it can accentuate her bodily dispositions towards showing off her ‘assets’. These data are indicative of what Bourdieu (1990b) calls *doxa*, the illusion of immediate or self-evident understanding of various structures, practices, norms and beliefs that govern an individual’s actions within a particular social field. She is highly influenced by her middle class habitus in her understandings of what underwear’s function is, that is and in her words

“to do everything for me” in terms of how it fits and accentuates those parts of her body she thinks are important for her feminine identity. Erica here is arguably trying to assert her superior taste, even by saying she shops at the shop where ‘The Queen’ does. According to Bourdieu (1984) individuals’ struggles for improvement in their social position are characterised by the manipulation of their cultural representations of the field they are situated in. These struggles have partly to do with their effort to establish the superiority of their taste and their lifestyle over others. Thus taste becomes the mechanism by which people ‘distribute’ their symbolic resources, i.e. the cultural and symbolic capital they possess.

On the other hand the rugby women were not particularly concerned about how their underwear fits but whether it looks ‘pretty’. Their exchange about which stores they buy their underwear from shows the flip side of Erica’s commentaries regarding cheaper shops and the quality of underwear they sell. These different preferences in shops demonstrate the different modes of thinking (habitus, taste, economic capital and cultural capital) regarding the perceived purpose of underwear for these women:

Int: But what about your sports bra?

Vicky-F4: Primark.

Denise-F4: Primark.

Becky-F4: I buy mine from a sports shop, or TKMaxx. As I like mine to be professionally made for sports but I want them to be cheaper and TKMaxx has some.

Ellie-F4: I’m waiting for my mum to get me some for my birthday.

Sam-F4: You get sports bras for your birthday?

Ellie-F4: Yeah, cause sports bras are expensive and I don’t wanna spend so much money on bras. I don’t want to spend more than £10.

Becky-F4: Wow... my sports bra cost about £30!

Ellie-F4: I don’t really need much fabric! [they laugh]

While Erica stresses that her underwear needs to be good quality in order to support her body well physically, something that also affects her psychologically as she feels she is always presentable because of her ‘appropriate’ underwear as we saw in the visible versus hidden section, the rugby women feel quite different. Perhaps because they are also students, they do

not consider underwear worth spending a lot of money on. Even in the case of Becky, who likes to wear better quality, or ‘professional’ as she says, bras, still she buys these in discount stores like TKMaxx. Thus the perceived purpose of underwear as well as what it should cost in the case of the rugby women differs from what other respondents report.

Returning to colour as an aspect of women’s taste in underwear, many of these women mentioned that they like coloured underwear but almost all of them had a black, white or cream bra and knickers set in their drawer. Erica went so far as to describe this as the “bog standard British habit”. Others said similarly that they buy the standard Marks and Spencer’s box of black knickers. These “bog standard” knickers were everyday underwear for many of these women and what they felt was the most functional. Thus they distinguished practical, everyday underwear from special, romantic or sexy underwear, which, as previously suggested, was patterned and colourful or anything that was more revealing - and not ‘Bridget Jones<sup>14</sup> type’ knickers in particular. For example:

Int: What comes to mind when you hear sexy underwear, sexy lingerie? What kind of underwear would that be?  
Erica- 2: Something pretty. Something that’s... a little bit more revealing. Less of it. Not like too Bridget Jones, but something ..erm, I don’t know, something like that [ stimulus picture 5]. Probably with a thong. It makes you, kind of, feeling... romantic.

Also on the subject of colour Erica explained that she does not really go for colours and if she did she would want them to be matching because as she says “It doesn’t seem right [...] to have a green bra and white underpants.” On the other hand, as previously noted, Christie said that she does not necessarily wear matching underwear, as did many other participants who stressed that they do not coordinate their underwear. For example Christie mentioned that she

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<sup>14</sup> The heroine in Helen Fielding’s novels and their movie adaptations *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001) and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004). Bridget Jones’ knickers are the body control pants that the heroine wears in order to mould what she regards as her overweight body.

does not bother that much about wearing colours even though she likes coloured underwear, which reaffirms her previous statement about her seemingly ‘not so great sense of style’:

Int: Which of this underwear is the type you would usually wear [referring to the stimulus pictures]?

Christie-I3: Ahem... well I don't wear matching underwear and these [pictures] are all matching underwear, so I have to say that I would wear something like that picture 2 for a bra and picture 4 for a thong. But it wouldn't be these colours. I don't usually wear colours, so it would have to be this design but usually in black. The bra in picture 3 is nice, I mean I would wear it but again either white or black.

Int: Are these the only two colours you wear?

Christie-I3: Yes usually. I can't really remember wearing another colour, not that I don't like other colours, but it's just that I don't really bother. Actually I like other colours. I really like picture 2 but I don't think I would buy it when I'm in the shop. I usually go for a black. I told you, I'm really boring. It's pathetic.

Relatedly Sam from group (4) also referred to herself as boring because she usually wears black or white. She described these as “default colours”, because they go with anything. On the other hand, the women from the rugby team suggest their taste in underwear, has more to do with how it looks and its affordability, as mentioned above. Perhaps because of how young they were our discussion about underwear was quite different than with the other groups. The rugby women did not account for functionality, as Erica indicates above (except in terms of black underwear being easy to wash), as much as colour or type of underwear (e.g. thong, g-string or padded bras) or if it is affordable. The conversation mostly turned around these factors, unless my questions were directed to their sports underwear. Some of them described their underwear as ‘pretty’, like Becky, but others said that the colour of their underwear depended on their outerwear:

Ellie-F4: I think I own that black set [she points to stimulus picture 8 and laughs].

Kelly-F4: My bras are not pretty at all, they're just boring, black or white.

Becky-F4: I like pretty bras. Those that have bows and dots! [they laugh]

Sharon-F4: Is that what you're wearing now?

Becky-F4: I've got a white one on right now, thank you very much!

Kelly-F4: Mine are really simple like that [she points to stimulus picture 1].

Int: So what do you mean when you say pretty bras?

Kelly-F4: Well if they have a pattern on them or lace.

Vicky-F4: Like these ones [stimulus pictures 2 and 3].

Becky-F4: Yeah, with a bit of padding as well.

Denise-F4: Well [it] depends on what I'm wearing outside. I've got some plain ones, I have got some with details on but I usually go for black.

Int: Why do you usually go for black?

[Many of them together]: It's easy to wash [they laugh].

Helen-F4: If you wear white ones they never stay white.

Denise-F4: Yeah a black one stays black. And also my clothes are black so it makes sense.

Int: OK what about if you're wearing a red bra or a pink bra underneath a black blouse, that wouldn't show would it? How would you feel about that?

Denise-F4: Oh I don't wear pink or red because it clashes with my hair! [they laugh]

Summarising so far, the factors that these women reported playing a part in their choices in underwear, include the colour of the underwear, its quality, how it fits and how it looks. In several cases, Bourdieu's notions of habitus, taste and aesthetic judgments (1984, 1986) were used to discuss and explain some of the narrations of my participants in an effort to understand how they make specific choices about their underwear and why these differ. For example, some of my respondents felt that their mother's influence on their taste is very strong, thus their choices now in underwear remain predictable and 'boring', as in the case of Christie or Samantha. Also underwear was seen on many occasions as these women's embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1976), which they used in different occasions in their specific fields. Erica, for example, considers her expensive underwear as 'proper' to appear in her gym's changing room. Also, Christie suggested that her taste in underwear would change when she enters a new professional field, i.e. working full-time thus gaining more economic capital. It seemed that she would use the 'not so boring' underwear – more expensive underwear – in order to classify herself differently, in a more positive and perhaps 'fashionable' way. This suggests a relationship between these women's identity projects, habitus and taste as a generative form of lifestyle, which indicates once again how complex and dynamic these projects are, bending and flexing according to the different stages and contexts these women are in.

The mothers' group on the other hand had more to say about how their underwear fitted them during the particular lifestyle they were in - that is, shortly after giving birth. Being gathered

in a regular environment for them, with their babies, kept this identity *opsy* in focus and all our conversation turned around motherhood and pregnancy. A lot of our discussion focused on the changes in their bodies, so their point of reference as to what they like to buy and wear was very much post-natal. For example:

Int: What is your everyday underwear?

Many of them: Marks and Spencer's! [they laugh]

Kelly-F3: Something like Debbie's pants [stimulus picture 1] definitely, something simple.

Kerry-F3: In black or white.

Jen - F3: I have naughty colours!

Kayla-F3: What I like about Marks and Spencer's is those bras that you can buy them individually or three for a tenner, but those that are not boring.

Int: What is your boring underwear?

Kayla - F3: It would probably be something like Debbie because I didn't go back to the size that I was and I hope that it won't be too long that I buy some new stuff.

Kelly - F3: Oh I have a bag full of underwear that I don't wear any more and I hope that one day I will be able to fit in again.

The changes in their bodies due to pregnancy and giving birth have affected these women's choices in underwear. Even though some had already stopped breast feeding, thus they did not need to have nursing bras any more, still their changed bodies necessitated different underwear to some extent from what they had worn before. Although, as we have seen, some women like Kerry or Jen said that when they finish breast feeding they will buy special underwear to mark the end of that stage of motherhood, others like Kayla or Kelly kept longing for the underwear that they wore before, and so bought only 'simple' underwear until their efforts to turn their body back to its old shape and size yielded some results. Buying new 'special' underwear, for these respondents, would mean they accepted the fact that their body had changed and that their pre-pregnancy underwear needed replacing.

These women's concerns point to body image dissatisfaction and arguably show some contradiction in terms of how they feel about their body changes. Even though most of them found pregnancy to be a very feminine period in their lives, body-wise they still feel that they

need to return to their previous size. Johnson *et al.*'s (2004) findings also point to the various feelings that women might harbour regarding their bodies during and after pregnancy. For example they refer to research that shows women are more dissatisfied with their weight and body size during pregnancy than in the post-natal period while other studies show that women might feel protected during pregnancy against body image concerns. In the case of my participants, as pregnancy and early motherhood have ended, they seem to have become worried about their body image once again and underwear's attachment to the body makes them especially aware of how much their body has changed. These data reflect these women's attitudes around slimness and fitness which are the dominant social imperatives around femininity (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1988, 1993) in the West. Their concern to return to a more toned and slimmer body, even after the physical changes of their body because of pregnancy shows the central and at the same time conflicting role of motherhood in femininity. This conflict reflects the dynamic and multifaceted role of women's identity projects as they are 'expected' to attain several roles at the same time.

Colour was once again a key factor for the mothers' group regarding their choices in underwear. Kerry's response was that she wears dark colours because light colours do not suit her skin tone and that is a definite issue for her. Laney on the other hand said that she owns a set of red underwear, which came as a surprise to the other mums. Red had specific connotations in some of the groups where it was mentioned. Paulette for example from the tutor's group connected red with sexy underwear:

Int: Would you ever wear red underwear? [a question to Paulette]

Paulette -F1: [Chuckles] ... Red underwear seems like the most... erm explicitly sexual really, I suppose, isn't it? Like ... I don't know, like "come and get me" underwear.

Abby-F1: Yeah

Paulette-F1: And a little bit cheap ...

Colours like red or black in underwear have certainly been connected, at least in the West, with a more erotic appeal as (re)constructed especially in pornographic material and images of sexually active or sensual women in mass culture (Kent and Brown, 2006; Fields, 2007). Black lingerie, according to Fields, was associated from back in the early-mid twentieth century with “disreputable sexuality and commercially available female bodies” (2007: 160-161). Black leather corsets, for example, and other types of undergarments have also become fetish items alluding back to the mourning widow and vampirism (Kunzle, 2004; Slade, 2001; Fields, 2007). Entwistle (2001) reminds us that fetishism is the most obvious illustration between adornment and sexuality. She follows Kunzle (2004) and suggests that “[a]ny object that adorns the body can lend itself to fetishism – corsets, bras, high heels ...” (2001: 192). It should be noted here, though, that these are specific types of underwear, i.e. erotic lingerie that transmit a certain degree of sensuality and sexuality and not be something worn every day. In their research, Jantzen *et al.* (2006: 185), for example, found that some of their participants felt that black lingerie is “cheap” and “brothel-like”. Their participant Jane specifically mentions that “black underwear is vamp like” and that the first time she wore black lingerie she felt “so cheap” and like “those girls who wear such clothing in order to earn some money” (*ibid.*). Interestingly, for this participant black underwear is associated with prostitution and death, whereas my participants made several classifications of black underwear. However, in Jantzen *et al.*’s research the participants talked about specific types of underwear, whereas this research included all types of underwear, including everyday, ‘standard’ underwear. Thus, my participants talked about black underwear being their ‘bog standard’ underwear, but in other cases when it came to lingerie, black underwear, as well as red, was associated more with erotic appeal and sex.

The mothers' group gave sexual connotations to red underwear and kept teasing Laney regarding her sex life with her husband as a result. This reflects the discussion above that more generally in the West red or black have indeed been explicitly sexualised as colours. For Laney though, red was just another colour, and as she said, because she likes the practicality and the feeling of this particular underwear, she bought the same set in different colours, red being one of them.

Like the rugby women, the mothers' group also mentioned the underwear – outerwear relationship. Tara for example has a blue bra to match a light blue blouse that she wears at work. Similarly the WADS group particularly stressed that they did not like to see a bra's colour under a blouse, something that has been discussed in the Hidden/Visible section, so most of them agreed that cream for example can be worn with almost all light colours, even white. For Tara however matching underwear was of the highest importance because she particularly wears her blue blouse at work. This suggests that underwear works as part of her embodied cultural capital in a Bourdieusian sense (1986), in order to support her outerwear at work. Wearing the 'right' underwear at work has already been discussed as an important element of how these women perform their professional *opsy*. Not wearing the right underwear can have serious implications for how professional they look and feel. The support of the 'right' underwear can help these women turn their overall cultural capital into other forms of capital (i.e. especially economic capital as derived from their jobs). This also bears the marks of habitus since, as discussed in Chapter 2, understanding how women dress at work requires "situating their body within a very particular social space and acknowledging the workings of a particular habitus" (Entwistle, 2000b: 38, emphasis removed). Remembering Abby's case once again about how her work underwear needs to be as asexual as possible, she also mentions how this affects her outerwear:

Abby-F1: My underwear is more me than the clothes that I wear! Quite often at the weekend I wear more things that I like, but when I come to work, I'm wearing those sorts of underwear [she shows stimulus picture 1], so I think I wear very boring clothes to work because of my underwear.

Kate felt the same, although she did not agree that she gave more attention to her underwear than her clothes *per se*. She did say however that her work underwear had to be as 'simple' as possible:

Kate-F1: I think I would be embarrassed to think that my students could see me wearing a pink bra. They would go: 'ooh the granny wears pink!' [they laugh]

Kate here implies that there are 'unwritten rules' about which colours or in a more general sense which clothes or underwear are suitable for any particular age, something that has already been discussed in this chapter. She asserts that she would not wear colours that are more associated with youthfulness in her workplace, where these might be seen. Being on display, in front of students, makes these women especially conscious of both their outerwear and their underwear. These data reflect Foucault's (1979) discourse on surveillance and other feminist works (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1990b, 1993) which suggest that women have to be constantly engaged with self-monitoring, and especially in the case of the tutors, but also the rugby women, where other people are literally watching. This also reminds us of the rugby women who mentioned previously that they are concerned about appearing 'appropriate' when they play rugby. Underwear here again appears as a technology of the self because it allows these women to concentrate on the particular identity *opsy* they need to perform, i.e. being in a class full of students. Relatedly underwear can also be read as an element of these women's embodied cultural capital, which serves not only to support their outerwear, but also to maintain their credibility as tutors in regards to their students' attitude towards them.

In the same vein Amy's underwear also works as part of her embodied cultural capital while she is at work. Underwear's physical support is quite important: her body moves and sweats quite a lot in a gym class so her underwear needs firstly to be invisible under her work outfit, i.e. thongs, and to hold her body while it moves. Also as stated in a previous section the material needs to be such that it absorbs her sweat, so that she looks appropriate while teaching. As seen earlier, Amy explains: "because I have to wear quite tight fitting clothing, I don't like to be able to see any underwear myself, let alone my clients".

Similarly, the women from the administrators' group also wear the 'standard' white, cream or black underwear at work. Caitlyn actually made a clear distinction between her work underwear and the rest in terms of its colours. She said that white and black are for work, while pink for example is for her leisure time, since her husband likes pink. This is reminiscent of Abby and her weekend underwear and it is particularly important to note how different colours can make underwear serve different functions. These data are reinforced by Grove-White's (2001) argument about how colours not only can establish new trends in fashion but can also affect or denote the wearer's mood. Wearing pink underwear for Caitlyn is about having something special on for her husband to see, while her plain black and white work underwear is meant to be hidden. This shows once again how the hidden/visible element of underwear surfaces. Depending on the different identity *opseis* these women perform, the colours of their underwear denote a different mood and feelings, for example the different classification of black underwear, thus being a key element of their identity projects.

In conclusion, colour seems to be quite an important factor in how my participants choose their underwear. The colour and the detail of the underwear, mostly of the bra, makes it work in different ways for these women: some noted the adventurous and exciting side of such

underwear in contrast to how ‘boring’ they feel with ‘standard’ black or white underwear. Underwear thus becomes these women’s embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For Amy the gym instructor, for example, like the women in the tutors’ group, wearing the right underwear, in the right colour, works both physically together with the outerwear, and psychologically in how underwear becomes a second skin. Thus underwear becomes their embodied cultural capital in their work environment, which then transforms into other forms of capital. Another conclusion that is evident in how these women defined their taste in colour was the connection to wider socio-cultural assumptions about different colours and their connotations, which again suggests a relationship between Foucault’s social norms and Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and taste. For example stimulus picture 6 was defined as wedding underwear, because it was white, and red was more connected with sexy underwear but also described as ‘cheap’. On the other hand anything with pink colour or dots was described as pretty and sweet. In general, while non-embroidered white or black underwear was considered as simple and sometimes boring, patterned and colourful underwear was considered pretty, special and sexy. However almost all of these women mentioned that ‘simple’ underwear can be more practical in the sense that it can be worn under anything, which for some respondents was very important.

The next section describes some of the experiences that my participants report while shopping for underwear, which gives further indications about their taste in underwear but also some information about the actual process of consuming underwear. My participants choices of underwear shops and their assumptions about these shops also suggests they way they choose to assert their taste and aesthetic judgements. Even though some of the data below refer to sizes or shop assistants, the experiences these women express suggest

something about their habitus and cultural capital in the way they assert their knowledge of this particular field.

## **5.5 Shopping for underwear**

Since one of the questions this thesis tries to answer is about the experiences women report regarding their consumption of underwear, it was important to learn more about the actual process of shopping for underwear either for my respondents themselves or for others. The questions on my part were about the shops where they prefer to buy underwear, how often they shop for underwear, if they go alone or with other people, if they buy underwear online and if they buy underwear for presents. These questions provided food for discussion not only about the actual underwear they buy, but also about what is available in the market or the services that underwear shops provide.

A particularly in-depth discussion about what the market had to offer and which shops are best took place in the mothers' group. Of course the period of pregnancy and early motherhood as already suggested requires different underwear, like nursing bras. These respondents also gave me information about the shops they liked before they became pregnant. However it was regarding maternity underwear where the mothers felt the market was insufficient. As we saw in a previous section, these women felt maternity underwear just serves a purpose, while some of them reported wanting to wear something sexier or pretty so that it matches how womanly they felt while pregnant. Indeed most of them agreed that while pregnant, with their bust size changing, it was very difficult for them to find the right underwear:

Jen-F3: Breast-feeding bras are more sexy than the pregnancy bras like the Elle McPherson, they have some really comfortable ones, well-fitted and something that your mom wouldn't wear. You get more choices with breast-feeding bras than with pregnancy bras.

[...]

Jen-F3: I went to Mothercare [while pregnant] a few times and I got myself fitted and it must have been in the same couple of weeks and I got three different people and I came out with three different sizes which all of them were wrong!

Kerry-F3: I looked in Marks and Spencer's and I really couldn't find any maternity bras which is why I didn't go there.

Kayla-F3: No, I got a few from there and they were all fine ... nothing special, just plain without being massive.

These women reported various factors for choosing their underwear shops before becoming pregnant. Tara for example said that she always bought her bras from John Lewis because of the brand quality and the service she received. Others said that they always went to Marks and Spencer's because of the big selection of underwear it has. Kerry on the other hand said that if she wanted to buy something for a special occasion she preferred a more specialist underwear shop like La Senza. At that point Kerry explicitly clarified that she did not mean anything like the underwear types in stimulus picture 5 and 6 but something with more detail on and in a pretty colour. Kerry seemingly felt the need to distinguish between her own special occasion underwear and the images in pictures 5 and 6, because earlier the underwear in these pictures was characterised by this group as sexy lingerie. She did not want to be associated with this provocative, 'come and get me' underwear. This here suggests there is a dynamic effect of the group acting as surveillance for Kerry, as she was cautious about the other women there associating her with not so appropriate underwear – especially since she was exemplifying the identity *opsy* of motherhood there, which could be seen as contrasting with the *opsy* of a 'sexually' provocative woman. This reminds us once again how self-regulation and self-surveillance are internalised to such an extent that individuals feel the need to separate themselves from what society might hold as deviant (Foucault, 1978, 1979). The pictures Kerry refers to were also the pictures where other women commented on the overall image and not simply the type of underwear advertised. They commented on the pose

of the models and that it transmits sexual connotations. Indeed as mentioned before and clearly commented on by Christie, Ann Summers' advertising usually portrays models in an arguably sensual or sexual pose. Other specialist stores use the same motif in their advertising, for example Victoria's Secret. Indeed the sensual and arguably provocative element Victoria's Secret give to their advertising has often been characterised as soft porn. As Juffer (1996: 32) argues Victoria's Secret only "escapes the label of porn because it works so hard to operate legitimately within the public/private dichotomy that has functioned both to contain women and to define porn". Of course underwear advertising always runs the risk of being described as pornography because of the visible, partly-naked body it usually involves, and the eroticisation of this body.

Regarding the specialised underwear shops that Kerry mentions, Jen said that this kind of shop has different sizes than the usual ones as offered say by Marks and Spencer's so she always struggles to find something to fit. Christie felt the same about the sizes offered by shops like La Senza. She said that, while her sister buys almost all her underwear sets from there, she had been in the shop a few times but she could never get the right size:

Christie-I3: OK they [La Senza] have a large variety and lately they have really nice and quite modern and sexy underwear. My sister buys all her underwear from La Senza and she's just in love with the shop but me ... because sizes are a bit different, once or twice I went there to try on a bra, I was so frustrated with the sizes because nothing fitted, I couldn't find my size so I never bothered. If a bra doesn't fit I would never dress and then go outside to take another size and try it on again or ask the assistant cause I get really frustrated. And I never get myself measured which I know is mad, especially if you want to find the right size and particularly in my case. And probably I should do it now that I've put on some weight but I was hoping that I would lose the weight and go back to my normal size.

Christie's comment here about her putting on weight links back to Kayla's and Kelly's comments on how they long for the underwear they wore before falling pregnant. Christie too is indecisive about buying new underwear now that she has put on weight because it would arguably mean that she has accepted her body changes. This reinforces the idea of women's

bodies as an unfinished project always in need of ‘improvement’ (Fine and Macpherson, 1994; Budgeon, 2003). More specifically, in her research, Budgeon (2003) found that her participants treated the idea of constantly working upon their bodies as ‘normal’. She advocates that

having a problem with the way one looks was interpreted [by her participants] as quite a ‘normal’ relationship, so, rather than feeling as though one’s body was abnormal and in need of transformation, it was *that very feeling* which was normalized. (2003: 44, emphasis in original)

She follows Davis who suggests that

“subjectivity and the material body [i.e. how individuals choose to modify it and alter it] are aspects of the self which are irreducibly linked such that bodies are never just objects but part of a process of negotiating and re-negotiating self-identity (2003: 45),

something that reaffirms the idea of identity as a processual and dynamic project.

Further, while most of the other women said that they shop for underwear twice or more a year, as established earlier, Christie said that she hardly ever shops for underwear, especially bras, and she would only go and buy a new one when her old ones are ruined. She kept saying that, because she is financially not well off, she would prefer to spend any extra money on buying new outerwear than underwear. Again as we have seen, she felt quite embarrassed saying this and during our discussion repeated that she thinks underwear is very important for a woman’s body and that she felt very bad that she did not give so much attention to it any more. Christie here shows how thoroughly she has internalised discursive imperatives about what it ‘takes’ to be female, i.e. taking care of yourself by paying attention

to your underwear. As already discussed in Chapter 2, the proliferation of particular ideals of femininity through the media, mass culture etcetera, has rendered them normative and women are constantly working on making themselves fit and often chastising themselves because they do not. Christie was often almost apologetic during the interview about her apparent ‘neglect’ of her underwear. On several occasions she said that she ‘had’ to have more coloured underwear, or matching sets or more special sets but she could not afford them at that point in her life and that she often preferred to buy outerwear than underwear for that reason. As the interviewer, I became her ‘scrutiniser’ and she was apologetic about the fact that she was not fitting into the norms of femininity she has internalised. Moreover, Christie’s feelings here suggest once more that she classifies her aesthetic judgements and she expects that she is also classified by me.

Erica, on the other hand, explained that she goes once or twice a year to Rigby and Peller, and buys some really expensive bras. She felt strongly that other shops like Marks and Spencer’s are not so good in terms of measurement and fit:

Int: How about Marks and Spencer’s?

Erica-I2: Hopeless! Absolutely hopeless! Last time I went there, a couple of years ago to try, I just wanted one more try, and they wanted to put me in something like 32GG, and it was hideous. It didn’t fit; it didn’t fit here [she points to under her breasts]. It wasn’t doing what I wanted it to do. Because most women want it to.. kind of.. fit perfectly, show off your assets, if you have them. It was just so bad. And they [Marks and Spencer’s shopping assistants] insist and go “Oh I don’t know who put you in 30G, that’s wrong”. Well Rigby and Peller did. They are *the* place to go. There is nowhere better in the country to go. I think Marks and Spencer’s are hopeless, they’ve got too much variety on the shop floor and they tend to aim their stuff at the younger market ... the teenage market. And they [young girls] probably go around in bras that don’t fit them.

Some of the WADS respondents also reported going to Marks and Spencer’s but having trouble finding what they like. It seemed to happen often because, when I asked them if they usually discuss underwear with other people, Ruth said “You would talk about it if you go to Marks and Spencer’s and you don’t find anything, wouldn’t you?”. Other WADS respondents

said that, because they live in a small town, there are not many underwear shops around so they end up at Marks and Spencer's. However, similarly to Christie although for different reasons, some of these women said that they do not shop for underwear a lot any more:

Jane-F4: Usually I'd go to M&S bras, or even Avon.

Mary-F4: Yeah they have nice bras.

Jane-F4: Cause I don't bother going to a shop.

Marcy-F4: But we would never think of underwear when we go shopping for example and say 'let's go for a new bra'. It's more of a necessity now.

[Others agree]

Int: So you don't go particularly for underwear shopping?

Jane-F4: Only when [the underwear is] hanging out and you need another one. [they laugh]

From these data it is evident that these women felt that their underwear most importantly serves a purpose, that is, to pull in and support their bodies, as seen before. They would also not buy anything uncomfortable. Even though they agreed about what can be considered as special underwear - this would have to be embroidered and colourful - and that it could influence a woman in how she feels, still they say they do not give that much attention to their underwear any more, other than it being comfortable and supporting their bodies. One of the reasons is that they do not have a partner in their lives any more, as we saw in the previous section. This also explains why these women do not bother looking for other shops to buy underwear from, other than the ones they are familiar with like Marks and Spencer's.

Other shops that my participants reported buying underwear or lingerie in the past from are Figleaves, Bravissimo, Fenwick and Ann Summers. Primark and TKMaxx were also mentioned by the rugby girls. Most of the experiences they shared regarding these other outlets were about poor fittings, like Caitlyn from group (2) who said that it was Bravissimo where she was wrongly fitted for a bra. The assistant insisted she was wearing the wrong size and Caitlyn ended up wearing the bra she bought there only twice and experiencing pain

throughout the day. Other women complained that they have difficulty finding the right size *per se*. For example Helen from the rugby group said that, because she has a large chest, it is difficult to find underwear in shops like Ann Summers. She also said, which surprised the other girls, that she never went to La Senza because that type of shop targets a specific market, with pretty bras but with no sizes especially for big breasted women. “And it always ends up like a little smaller than what I need. And they never quite do my size. It’s like the 38 D is a bit too small but the 38 DD is far too big”, Helen explained. For their sports bras, most of the rugby women said that they buy them from Primark because they are cheap, except Becky who buys them from TKMaxx, as seen earlier, but again for the same reason.

Relatedly, online shopping for underwear was not something that all women reported doing. Most of them stressed that they are concerned with the sizes as sizes can differ across various shops, as we have already seen. The women who did report buying online said that they had purchased the same underwear before from the same shop, so they ordered it online and saved time, instead of going to the physical outlet. Kayla and Liz from the mothers’ group also said that the reason they shop on the Internet now is because shopping with babies is very difficult so they find it easier to order underwear online, even though they risk the chance of it not fitting. Tara also said that she shopped on the Internet only because the specific shop had a very good return policy:

Tara-F3: Fagleaves was very easy because of their return policies. I can’t remember if it was free return or free postage which makes the whole experience much easier. If I had to pay for postage and so on it might put me off. Not for the money but all I had to do was put in the box outside my house. It is very easy and when they come everything is properly wrapped up and boxed.

Another question regarding their shopping experience was whether the respondents like to go underwear shopping alone or with other people. Most of these women said that they do not go specifically to shop for underwear anyway. However some of the women from the

mothers' group said that they specifically shop for underwear, like Liz who shops at Triumph in Germany when she goes to visit her parents, since they have some very good sales there. Also Erica, as we have seen, said that she goes to Rigby and Peller once or twice a year to buy her expensive but well-fitted bras. Most of these women also said that they like to shop for underwear alone or with female family members like their mother or sisters, which reminds us how taste is a manifestation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). A mother or a sister could share similar dispositions with the respondents, thus it would be easier for them to understand the respondents' taste. They find the whole experience quite personal especially if they need to try underwear on or get measured. Erica said that she only took a boyfriend once with her to shop for underwear and found the experience rather uncomfortable:

Erica-I2: Well I tend to go on my own, and I've only taken a boyfriend once. And he just sat there amazed [laughs]. No it's actually less painful when you go on your own [laughs]. .

Int: How was it when you took a boyfriend with you?

Erica-I2: Well we went to Bravissimo in Nottingham and because the fitting rooms are upstairs I left him .. It's kind of like a waiting room with chairs and he was the only man there. But the underwear section was not very far from there and he said 'well that was very nice I enjoyed that!' [laughs]. But I guess I could do something like that unconsciously like if I'm going there I have to think of how long someone is prepared to wait because for me it is something that I don't care how long it takes. Often an hour. Like Rigby and Peller you could go down on the train and you could wait an hour, an hour and a half, but it's so worthwhile. I don't like to put a time limit on that.

Julie from the administrators' group said that going with other people to shop for underwear feels strange to her because she feels other people would be judging her for the choices she makes. Because she is big breasted, she felt that her family or boyfriend would actually realise what a big size she needs, so she feels embarrassed. For her, "a massive bra is not a pretty bra". This leads back to the idea of the societal Panopticon (Foucault, 1979) and the "ever-present potential of being watched" (Tischner and Malson, 2008: 262). Julie feels that the potential of her boyfriend or members of her family noticing the size of bra she is wearing means she will be judged about her body size, even by these intimates.

In conclusion these women's taste in underwear partly determines what shops they choose to buy their underwear from. However other reasons play an important role as well. The price of the underwear is a significant factor. For example the rugby women prefer to shop at cheaper shops such as Primark, because they do not give that much attention to other qualities of the underwear such as the material, the fitting and so on. The fact that all of these women are undergraduate students might also be a reason for them preferring cheaper underwear. These women need underwear to serve its basic purpose and be pretty or practical. More mature women like Erica seem to be particularly concerned with how underwear fits, not only so that she is comfortable but also about how well it supports her body. Shops like Marks and Spencer's, which is where many of these women tend to buy underwear from or have at least visited for its underwear, seem on occasion nonetheless to be insufficient for their tastes and preferences. For example many of the mums found that Marks and Spencer's does not have the bras that they wanted during their pregnancy. Also the WADS groups found that shops now tend to target the younger market or they do not have a range of sizes to suit big breasted women. It also seems that buying underwear is a very personal shopping experience for the respondents. Almost all of these women reported that, even though they do not often shop for underwear, they tend to go alone or with female family members, most likely mothers in the case of younger women.

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter has presented both an analysis of my primary data and a discussion of this analysis together with the conceptual framework of this thesis. It explored the factors that influence women's consumption of underwear and the experiences they report regarding their underwear. Some extracts from the data have been reproduced in order to show the richness of the conversations my respondents had and their actual responses to my questions. The

conceptual framework identified earlier in this thesis was particularly important when reading these data. Specifically, the early and late works of Foucault (1978, 1979, 1988b) were used to understand the connections between how these women choose their underwear according to internalised social norms around ‘being a woman’ and a process of self-monitoring (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1988, 2004; Fine and Macpherson, 1994) or according to whether underwear worked as a technology of the self, producing feelings of femininity and self-confidence, defined as a crucial element of their identity projects. Moreover, Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, field, taste and embodied cultural capital (1984, 1986) were used to understand the consumption of underwear as a more embodied practice where women’s habitus and taste determined their aesthetic judgements and classification of others’ taste regarding underwear.

Regarding the factors that inform the respondents’ consumption of underwear, these can be distinguished into socio-cultural issues and in terms of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Some of these factors had to do with the feelings and the sensations underwear produced for them either physically or psychologically – even though these two categories were more than often interlinked – and to the extent that underwear would either be hidden from view or would be visible, intentionally or not and visible to whom. For example to the extent that underwear would be seen by their partners as part of foreplay, this would have to be something special or ‘pretty’. In contrast if their underwear would be seen by others, such as Wendy’s mother-in-law, this would have to be carefully chosen to fit the context: underwear thus is seemingly mobilised to suit the particular identity *opseis* these women perform. The underwear they wear at work is another example of how carefully they choose it. In some cases this needs to be as asexual as possible or working together with outerwear in order to focus on their professional identity or appear ‘appropriate’ during this time. Thus underwear works as part

of these women's embodied cultural capital, which helps them transform this into other forms of capital. The rugby women likewise use specific underwear to support their body while playing, and the use of incorrect underwear can have serious physical and psychological consequences for these women. Social imperatives about what it 'takes' to be female are internalised by these women, resulting in their thorough self-monitoring (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1988, 2004; Fine and Macpherson, 1994). These social imperatives were similarly evident in terms of how these women distinguished appropriate underwear either for their body size or age or both.

Moreover, to the extent that underwear remains hidden we saw that it can work as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988b), and because of the sensations that some underwear produces in/for their bodies, these women reported a heightened awareness of sexiness and femininity. These women use underwear to constitute themselves in an "active fashion" (Foucault, 1988a: 11) and guide them into a 'proper' use of their bodies, enhancing thus their feelings of femininity. The 'specialness' of underwear was one factor for these women when buying underwear, but comfort was central to how it felt on their body and their overall identity. Physical and psychological comfort defined some of these women's choices in underwear, but other reasons such as colour, material or their mothers' influence relate equally to their taste.

In conclusion, underwear in this chapter emerged as a technology for self-expression in terms of how these women asserted their taste and aesthetic judgements, as well as a tool for self-construction in terms of how it was mobilised in different ways in their processual identity projects, but also and inevitably as part of their self-monitoring as they have internalised societal norms and imperatives around what it is 'like being a woman' and which they have

to meet. The identity *opseis* these women are called upon to perform influence their choices in underwear, showing once more how the ongoing and multifaceted female identity project requires such mobilisations for its construction.

While this chapter sought to discuss my primary data as related to the conceptual framework discussed earlier in this thesis, the final chapter will draw the conclusions of this thesis together by addressing each of the research questions in turn. This summarises the conceptual and methodological frameworks of this thesis and pulls out the key findings, illustrating thus its theoretical and empirical contributions.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusions**

This thesis has sought to explore the consumption of women's underwear, and its role in the fashioning of female identity. As stressed throughout the thesis this part of women's clothing has remained quite underdeveloped in academic literature, despite the volume of discussion and conceptualisation of more visual elements of women's clothing and appearance. Indeed, only a limited amount of research has tried to connect issues of identity construction and the consumption of underwear, despite its discursive importance in how women use it to support their body, their outerwear and the different personae they are called upon to perform in their everyday lives. This thesis has argued that underwear is as important as visible clothing in terms of its role in 'fashioning' female identity, and indeed in some ways more important since underwear is ostensibly hidden from view. Since, as suggested before, there is limited empirical research on this issue, this thesis has aimed to contribute in that respect to the field of the sociology of consumption.

The thesis asked:

- i. What are the socio-cultural factors that influence women's consumption of underwear?
- ii. What is the role of underwear as part of dress in the construction of female identity?
- iii. What kind of feelings and experiences do women report regarding the consumption of underwear? (e.g. how important is underwear to them?; do they wear different underwear for different occasions,?; for whom do they buy underwear?)
- iv. What is the role of taste when it comes to what underwear women choose?

The underlying rationale for these research questions is that identity is an ongoing process of 'becoming', a project that women are called to act on continuously in an effort to 'be a woman' in the contemporary West. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 1, there are so many versions of being a woman, and mass cultural artefacts have contributed much to presenting idealised images of femininity that women are constantly advised to achieve. Even though the imperatives around femininity in Western mass culture are mostly about women's appearance, this research has shown that the impact of internalised imperatives affects these women psychologically in terms of constantly controlling and monitoring not only their bodies but also their behaviour with regards to others' expectations about 'being a woman'. Thus, considering identity as the relationship between individuals' existence and the social world, then 'becoming a woman' is an ongoing task, a *project* that is actively worked upon on a daily basis. The discursive multiple versions of femininity suggest that women's identity projects are multifaceted and complex as women need to mobilise various resources to support all the elements or *opseis* of their identity they are called to perform in the various contexts or stages of their lives.

Moreover, this research is premised on gender as a key element of identity construction as gender is the primary mechanism through which individuals classify others in their socialisation (Gherardi, 1994; Brewis, 2005). As noted on several occasions throughout the thesis, other elements of identity, such as class, race, religion and so on, are also vital in understanding the construction of female identity, especially in research that looks at the consumption of women's underwear. However, I privilege gender here, as I consider underwear to be one of the resources, tools or mobilisations that women use in the constant reworking of their female identities and the consumption of underwear as an activity of *doing* gender. Gender is performative (Butler, 1993, 1999) and doing gender is about those reiterated and deeply internalised acts and practices that construct women's identity. My thesis goes against the idea of putting women into boxes, e.g. middle class professional lesbian or black women; without minimising these identity elements' importance. However, I find that doing gender in particular social situations and looking at the gendered identities in these situations is a major contribution to the field of Sociology of Consumption, since such forms of body work have been understudied; yet again they establish an understanding of the complex and dynamic character of women's identity projects. Consuming the 'right' underwear for the 'right' occasion forms part of this body work and these reiterated gendered acts, as it is part of everyday routine practices of dressing and presenting the female body and also part of those practices that women perform to enhance their feelings of femininity.

This chapter offers an overall conclusion to the thesis by summarising the key findings of the research and how the research questions have been answered. Thus in the section to follow I will summarise the strategies followed in this thesis, both conceptually and methodologically, as well as some of the key findings. Then the research questions will be answered, drawing on Chapter 5 in particular where the data of the research were analysed and discussed. Next

the contribution of this thesis will be reiterated, to be followed by the implications of this research in terms of how it opens up trajectories for future scholarship on the subject.

## **6.1 Summary of conceptual and methodological frameworks**

Given that the objectives of this research were to find out the socio-cultural factors that affect women's consumption of underwear, its role in the construction of female identity and to explore the experiences they report regarding their underwear, including how their taste affects the underwear they choose to buy and wear, my theoretical framework followed from the requirement to conceptualise underwear's importance in fashioning female identity. I also coined the concept of identity *opseis* to give emphasis to the ongoing and multifaceted nature of this identity project. Chapter 1 comprised of a brief history of women's underwear and some explanatory arguments in terms of *why* women's underwear: what is so interesting about its development over the years?; and how women's identity construction has been and continues to be influenced by the mobilisation of technologies like underwear. In Chapter 2 I moved to develop my conceptual framework. Some of Michel Foucault's most intriguing works were discussed, in an effort to illustrate their importance in understanding the discursive construction of women's identities. Specifically the three volumes of the *History of Sexuality* (1978, 1985b, 1986), *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and *Technologies of the Self* (1988b) were discussed. Then Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus, fields and cultural capital (1984, 1986, 1994) were analysed, where I drew some connections between these concepts and how they can be utilised to explain women's consumption of underwear. Finally several works by Foucauldian and Bourdieusian feminists, and related works were used to further establish how these frameworks show how women's identity is constructed or 'fashioned'.

The following chapter (3) offered an analysis of the consuming subject and how women's everyday consumption practices are important in understanding how consumer culture is informed by gender and the centrality of consumption in the identity project. Furthermore, I discussed how fashion as a system of dress produces symbolic meanings that help the consumer to become intelligible, i.e. as having a certain style or form of taste. As the consumer culture literature suggests, commodities invoke meanings for consumers that are central to their identity projects. Finally, in this chapter I have drawn on some of the limited research that connects the consumption of underwear with issues like sexuality and class, for example Storr's (2003) work on Ann Summers parties and Jantzen *et al.*'s (2006) work on lingerie and identity construction.

The research strategy I used in this thesis was extensively discussed in Chapter 4, where I referred to the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research and the research methods I considered as the 'best' to use. The methodology was designed based on the concept of identity *opseis*, which was used to hail the different aspects/sides of women's identity which they are called out to play in their everyday lives. With a set of focus groups and interviews from a sample of women in the UK, and specifically the Midlands, qualitative data were gathered which were then analysed with NVivo 8 qualitative data analysis software. The chapter ended with a reflection on ethical issues and some of the related implications that arose during the empirical research.

Chapter 5 presented the data gathered, reproducing some verbatim in order to illustrate the richness and depth of these women's insights in terms of their experiences of buying and wearing the 'right' underwear. Chapter 5 also offered a theoretical analysis of these data, with regards to the conceptual framework of this research. Some of the key themes that came out

of my data were the visible versus hidden element of underwear; the ‘specialness’ that underwear might connote or invoke and the physical and psychological sensation it produces for my respondents; their taste in underwear and the factors that might influence these women’s taste/s; and finally the actual experience of shopping for underwear. The visible-hidden element of underwear was evident in several discussions. For example the meanings that visible underwear might have were important for my respondents and they defined visible underwear in several ways. Also the element of visibility was brought up in discussion about other people seeing their underwear and the impact this has on their identity projects in terms of *who* sees their underwear and on *which occasion* – e.g. their partner in the bedroom. These data also offered insight into how these women make aesthetic judgments about themselves and others when it comes to visible underwear and they assert their taste, influenced highly by their habitus when making these judgements. The ‘specialness’ of underwear and the sensations it produces for/in the body was another important issue for my respondents as they regularly talked about how different underwear, in specific contexts, might make them feel. Physical comfort was an important factor for almost all of these women but psychological comfort was equally important: in fact many times these phenomena intersected, and seemed to be central to the personae these women were exemplifying. Moreover, an important element of underwear’s ‘specialness’ was the intense feelings and sensations it produces for them when they wear what they defined as ‘special’ or ‘sexy’ underwear. On this occasion, as elsewhere, underwear was seen to work as a technology of the self in a Foucauldian sense because of the impact it has on these women’s mood, self-confidence and their feelings on femininity.

Regarding my respondents’ taste in underwear, several factors were found to affect it. What colours, material and type of underwear these women liked was linked to their sense of taste.

Taste was discussed in a Bourdieusian sense as the manifestation of habitus, thus these women's habitus was identified as crucial to their consumption of underwear. Class, lifestyles and cultural capital as elements of habitus were some of the issues discussed in this chapter. Moreover, maternal influence was also an important factor influencing these women's taste in underwear. Finally the chapter ended with a discussion of the actual experience of shopping for underwear, including issues like buying underwear from the Internet, their difficulty in finding the 'right underwear (both in style and size) from the High Street shops, and with whom and under what circumstances the respondents go underwear shopping.

Having summarised the thesis so far, in the following sections I synthesise the answers to the research questions outlined above, and reiterate the contribution of this research.

## **6.2 Research question 1**

*What are the socio-cultural factors that influence women's consumption of underwear?*

This first question aimed to uncover some of the socio-cultural factors that influence women when choosing underwear. The social and the cultural in this respect seemed to be closely interconnected as was often seen in the analysis and discussion of my primary data in the previous chapter. Thus, I treat the two as intersected and interrelated.

The hidden-visible aspect of underwear emerged in Chapter 5 as an important contrast for these women. While they considered underwear's main purpose to be hidden, they also defined some of the ways in and the extent to which it can (or should) be visible. The extent to which their underwear was seen (or likely to be seen) by others affects these women's choices in what they wear and where. They reported being conscious of non-intimates seeing

their underwear or seeing them in their underwear, at the gym for example, or when buying underwear, or even when mothers or mothers in law did their laundry. Thus on many occasions these women reported that they use different types of underwear so that they 'fit' the situation. These data agree with Foucault (1979) who claims that society functions as a permanent surveillance that emphasises normalisation and individuals being constantly engaged in self-regulation and self-monitoring. This normalising power produces a network of power-knowledge, a group of experts who are the regulators of behaviour. In terms of social norms and imperatives around femininity these experts also take the form of what Bourdieu (1984) calls cultural intermediaries, for example mass cultural artefacts like underwear advertising or fashion gurus that proliferate ideal versions of femininity, drawing on the fact that these imperatives are deeply internalised by women, propagating thus a feeling of constantly working on female identity and women's understanding of what it is (or should be) like being a woman. Foucauldian feminists, like Bordo (2004), assert that women, in their effort to meet imperatives around femininity, engage in practices that discipline and survey their bodies, in terms of how they should be presented, including how they should be dressed (Entwistle, 2000b). Indeed my participants reported often judging other people about their underwear, of course when visible, as to whether it is proper for the context they are in.

On the other hand visible underwear is often used according to my data for sex, as part of foreplay, and is considered by my participants as intended to be seen by their sexual partner. Thus attention to the underwear they wear is heightened if at some point they will be seen in it by their partner. This alludes to how advertising and mass culture in general have promulgated the eroticisation of specific types of underwear, as worn by those female bodies that are thought to be beautiful or sexy. Understandably thus, my participants were able to distinguish sexy/ special underwear and in which context these types of underwear were

‘necessary’. Indeed as seen in Chapter 5 they set strong boundaries between the identity *opseis* they perform and the underwear they wear when performing them. Contexts like their workplaces, particularly for the tutors’ group, necessitate underwear that does not create any sort of sensations for/in their body. However, in other moments like in the bedroom, special underwear may well be mobilised. These women also commented that ‘flashing’ underwear may be deployed as a technique to seduce men.

On the other hand, as my data suggested, the bedroom is one of those places that these women also felt they cannot ‘get away with it’, i.e. paying no attention to their underwear. The presence of a sexual partner influences these women, in terms of what underwear they think they ‘need’. At the same time the absence of a partner makes them think that underwear is no longer important in that respect, as we have seen in the WADS group. Thus special underwear becomes a technology of the *oppsy* of sexual partner: it is used as an act of ‘self-promotion’ to sexualise or advertise ‘what is beneath’. Further, due to the fact that ‘special’ underwear or lingerie is saturated with erotic cultural connotations (Entwistle, 2000b), it can be aligned with other practices that these women engaged in to prepare their selves. Indeed, as suggested in Chapter 5, women often considered ‘special’ underwear as important as other practices like putting on perfume, in order to feel a ‘complete’ sense of femininity. These heightened feelings of femininity appeared as crucial for these women’s understanding of ‘who I am’ and an important element of their identity projects. In this sense, underwear was seen to work as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988b) and guide these women into a ‘proper’ use of their bodies (Jantzen *et al.*, 2006). Underwear carries a characteristic of ‘specialness’ that is a key element for choosing the ‘right’ underwear for the right occasion. These occasions can, as we have seen, include the bedroom, but also going out or just about

feeling good about themselves. In any case, my respondents suggested that special underwear creates intense sensations and feelings that assist them in feeling they are ‘making an effort’.

More than this, however, the physical and psychological sensations that underwear produces for these women in general are often a factor of choosing particular types of underwear, and particularly those which support these women’s bodies in the identity *opseis* they are exemplifying. This was particularly evident in the case of the mothers’ group who reported feeling especially feminine during their pregnancies but found no underwear in the market to bolster these feelings for them. However, they also wanted physical comfort. Indeed in each identity *opseis* discussed in this thesis comfort was always important in supporting the respondents’ bodies physically but also psychologically in terms of feeling ‘appropriately’ presented. Body size in particular seemed to demarcate this theme in the data. Body size and appearance came out as a crucial factor determining these women’s relationship with their bodies. This was not surprising, since as Budgeon (2003: 39) claims

the dominant relation women are posited to have with their bodies is one which is discursively 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.

When these women feel unhappy about their bodies, they reported the physical comfort factor of underwear as more important than that of the ‘specialness’ that it can invoke. As they felt unhappy about their body sizes and appearances, feeling sexy or feminine was not they argued achievable for them and underwear had a major role to play in separating these sensations and feelings. It seems that underwear once again is seen as a technology to mobilise particular sensations - ‘happiness’ or ‘sexiness’, but only when they are ready

psychologically to feel as such. At other times physical comfort feels 'sufficient' for these women.

Finally, other socio-cultural factors that emerged in this thesis as important for my respondents when choosing what underwear to buy were colours and maternal influence. In terms of colours, this was particularly mentioned as a factor when buying special underwear, because of the erotic meanings that specific colours like black or red have in a cultural sense. But in general most of these women agreed that colours need to be coordinated according to outerwear. Most of them concurred that it is necessary to coordinate dark coloured underwear with coloured outerwear and vice versa when light colours are worn 'on top'; when this is not done then underwear might be visible with the consequences already discussed in terms of its visibility. The different classifications of colours' meanings and how these women used colours to distinguish different types of underwear in terms of wearing the 'right' underwear, made it an important socio-cultural factor. On one hand, their judgements on what different colours mean revealed once again how deeply they have internalised social imperatives around femininity and what is appropriate to wear according to the context, the stage of life one is in or according to the overall appearance, i.e. body size. On the other hand, choosing the right colour came down to using underwear as their embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in terms of how it supported their outerwear and their body in their fields.

Maternal influence, finally, was another important factor for these women when choosing their underwear. Some reported that their mother's choices have determined to some extent the underwear they feel comfortable buying. These data suggested that women's habitus determines the amount of their cultural capital, since, as suggested, mothers have an important role in passing over cultural capital (Reay, 2000). Since cultural capital is

important for individuals as it transforms into other forms of capital (Crossley, 2001), looking at underwear as embodied cultural capital gives us an insight into how these women mobilise underwear in different contexts or fields, and transform it into other forms of capital like economic capital or symbolic capital, illustrating once again the dynamic character of female identity projects and the utilisation of various resources in the effort to perform their identity *opseis*.

### **6.3 Research question 2**

*What is the role of underwear as part of dress in the construction of female identity?*

The second question this research asked was how underwear as part of dress becomes a source of identity construction. In many cases as seen in Chapter 5 underwear was discussed as central to my respondents' identity projects. The most evident perhaps was the case of when underwear is visible and how it becomes then part of outerwear, explicitly signalling elements of who these women 'are'. When underwear is visible it becomes part of the discourse of dress and the connections between dress and identity. It can signal elements of these women's class, taste, gender identity, sexuality etc. From my data it was evident that self-monitoring and self-awareness are especially intense in the cases where underwear is visible. In fact when underwear is unexpectedly 'flashing', this is yet more intense as it is deemed to have the potential to attract ridicule and issues of appropriateness and social expectations arise. Internalised judgements and expectations about what, when and where it is appropriate for a woman to wear seem to keep my respondents conscious and alert about how they are presented in public, whether that is for example their workplace (underwear is not visible) or at the gym (where underwear might be visible when changing).

Body size and appearance ‘appropriateness’ were other connected issues that seem important for these women in terms of the underwear they wear and how this might affect how they feel about their selves (themselves). As already discussed, some of my respondents who reported feeling overweight or in general unhappy about their body image also reported that their underwear need only feel comfortable but not what they would describe as special. They associated ‘special’ underwear with normalised conventions of the female body and as they felt they did not fit into these norms they choose not to wear such underwear. They reported monitoring themselves to that level and feeling inadequate and insufficient when it comes to their body project and their overall identity project. I argue these data illustrate Foucault’s (1979) assertion of how power operates on the micro-level of our bodies. Bartky (1990) and Bordo (1988, 2004), as already discussed also stress how women are discursively ‘mandated’ to be especially concerned with their appearance and body management, so as to perform a specific kind of femininity. Thus the body and the self become ongoing projects, never ending and ever demanding.

As aforementioned, public visibility and scrutiny therefore were seen as being one of the most important factors that affect my respondents’ feelings about themselves and their underwear. However, visible underwear as also established is part of the eroticisation of the female body, as special underwear can be mobilised to exemplify the erotic and sexual self. The intense eroticisation of visible underwear was discussed in this thesis as part of how the female body is culturally inscribed as a sexual body by western media and mass culture, as a resource for the performance of the sexual partner *opsy*. Indeed advertising in particular was seen as playing an important role in socio-cultural understandings of what is sexy and feminine in underwear.

I have also alluded to the physical and psychological sensations that underwear produces for/in the body, and these likewise are another element of how it can be a source of identity construction. Particularly the feeling of comfort, and the intersections between the physical and psychological comfort, were seen to emerge as one of the most important factors of how underwear was connected with the project of identity. Underwear was discussed as an element of our embodied cultural capital, because physical comfort was in many cases necessary to support the performance of various identity *opseis* and then transformed into other forms of capital, such as economic capital.

Physical comfort was seen as especially important because it can then lead to the psychological comfort of a 'proper' appearance. This was seen as impacting the identity project, because inappropriate appearance arguably had serious consequences both physically and emotionally for these women, e.g. the rugby women. These participants felt that wearing the wrong type of underwear would be uncomfortable but also inappropriate since they are being watched. Also underwear can 'alter' the body structure (e.g. body posture), which can offer a new experience of the self. Many of my respondents suggested that the 'right' underwear can make you feel different about your body; like a 'new woman'. Underwear then, I stressed, can be seen a technology of the self in a Foucauldian sense, offering a sensation of difference, 'fit', improvement and so on. This is central to the performance of particular identity *opseis* like motherhood, sports participant or sexual partner, indicating once more the multifaceted character of female identity projects.

Comfort on the other hand, both physical and psychological, was seen as something that a women can get used to: a specific social context or an identity *opsy* seems to necessitate specific types of underwear that is then thought to be 'part of the skin', almost literally

imperceptible. In the comfort of their own home though, some of these women reported the same underwear becoming a weight. Thus it seems that underwear is often worn because of the socio-cultural meanings it provides for the female identity. It can be both part of the skin and a constraint, depending on context or *opsy*.

Particularly for the *opsy* of motherhood, the physical comfort underwear might produce was necessary in terms of how it supported the changing body but, as seen before, psychological comfort was also eminent in bolstering the feminine feelings that pregnancy invokes. The mothers' group made clear distinctions between various *opseis* of the female identity and how underwear can be mobilised to exemplify or (re)construct these *opseis*. On the one hand they reported needing 'better' maternity underwear, like special or sexier underwear, and on the other hand they reported the need to buy new underwear, marking thus the end of this period in their lives. They considered buying new underwear or wearing the underwear they wore previous to becoming pregnant as a way of (re)constructing their selves as the women they 'were before'. Thus underwear in this way becomes a marker of identities and an important source of identity construction in the female identity project.

The 'specialness' of underwear was also discussed thoroughly in the thesis in terms of the impact it can have on identity. The use of underwear as a technology of the self was particularly seen as a way of improving and reconfiguring the body, transforming thus these women's body image. As suggested above, putting on 'special' underwear was seen by my respondents as making an effort, looking after yourself and reaffirming the feminine identity. Underwear was seen as a technique of self-construction since it can arouse or bolster feelings of confidence or sexiness. As a technology of the self, it was indeed about achieving a sense

of happiness as these women mobilise the sensations special underwear produces for/in their bodies as part of the “overall construction of the self” (Foucault, 1986: 279).

### **6.4 Research question 3**

*What kind of feelings and experiences do women report regarding the consumption of underwear? (e.g. how important is underwear to them?; do they wear different underwear for different occasions,?; for whom do they buy underwear?)*

The third question intended to explore some of the experiences of my respondents regarding their underwear and their feelings and understandings of more ‘practical’ issues regarding their underwear such as categorising their underwear, shopping for underwear, buying underwear for other people and buying or receiving underwear as presents. As my data showed, my respondents had a lot to say about this kind of experience as they are part of their everyday, routine experience of choosing what underwear to put on.

Starting from the simple act of categorising their underwear, many of my respondents suggested that they have specific underwear for specific occasions. As seen in Chapter 5 work underwear and special underwear are the two most frequent categorisations these women make. For some this was particularly important, while others mention that their knickers drawer might be quite random. Nevertheless, most of them reported one or more categorisations they make of their underwear as they choose the ‘right’ type for the right occasion.

The relation of underwear with outerwear preoccupied my respondents quite a lot. Their admission that they might talk about underwear with other people, with the most usual starting subject being a conversation about outerwear or shopping in general, shows how the

two intersect. Some considered outerwear as more important than underwear in terms of how they present themselves in the public but without diminishing underwear's importance in terms of how outerwear is supported. The most relevant, for most of my respondents, aspect of this relation with dress was the issue of colours as discussed previously. The coordination of colours with outerwear seemed to be crucial for these women since visible underwear has several implications, as already seen. Finally, the link between outerwear and underwear was also seen in terms of how these women prepared themselves for special occasions or going out. This link was not only shown in how they gave emphasis to the 'right' support for outward dress but also in their preference for special underwear on these occasions. This preference was described by my respondents as a matter of "completing the look". This shows the discursive importance given to underwear; how it becomes part of the discourse of dress and its connections with identity projects.

The experience of shopping for underwear was another aspect discussed in this thesis. In some groups this was discussed more thoroughly than others because of the identity *opsy* the group was exemplifying. The mothers' group for example had more to say about the actual experience of shopping for underwear because they had needed to buy various different types of underwear more often than usual during their pregnancies and after they gave birth. Thus because motherhood is arguably a period when underwear should support the pregnant or the 'healing' post natal body, these respondents' experiences and feelings about underwear show how its meanings and sensations during these times are also more important than just the physical comfort it arguably produces for these women. Difficulties with sizes, styles or even their physical experience of shopping were some of the experiences these women reported, implying that the market for pregnancy and maternity underwear needs development,

something that was even acknowledged in market research such Mintel (2009, Market in Brief: section 5)<sup>15</sup>.

Similar difficulties in shopping for underwear were reported by other participants too. Problems with finding the correct size, improper fitting or unhelpful assistants were some of the difficulties other women discussed during our conversations. One of the stores mentioned in most of the groups and interviews was Marks and Spencer's, one of the top shops in underwear sales as seen in the statistics in Chapter 1. Even though most respondents have bought or still buy underwear from Marks and Spencer's, they mentioned buying multipacks of cotton underwear or 'simple' everyday underwear. On the contrary other shops like La Senza, Primark, T K Maxx and Figleaves were associated with underwear of specific types (e.g. sexy underwear, cheap underwear, sports underwear). Thus, some of these women made distinctions regarding the shops they buy underwear from and, if they shopped on the internet, which only a few did, the emphasis was on these companies having good return policies.

More generally my participants stressed that shopping for underwear can be quite a personal experience, thus they do not usually go shopping with other people. When shopping specifically for underwear they said that they would go with a female member of their family or in some cases their partner. However, those women who mentioned shopping for underwear with their male partners also mentioned that they would have rather been alone, since they feel they needed more time to try on different underwear.

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<sup>15</sup> Section: Strongest and weakest

Finally, another important aspect of women's experiences with underwear was buying underwear for presents or receiving underwear as a present. Most of these women said that they would not buy underwear for "just anyone". The most frequent occasion they bought underwear as a present was for female members of their families. They stressed that underwear is something personal, a sensitive part of people's clothing and there are issues like proper fitting or finding the right type of underwear: thus underwear becomes a difficult choice for a present.

## **6.5 Research question 4**

*What is the role of 'taste' when it comes to what underwear women choose?*

The last question this thesis aimed to answer is about the role of 'taste' as a Bourdeusian concept in how my respondents choose the underwear they buy and wear. Taste was used in this thesis as the aesthetic judgements made by individuals and which is above all a manifestation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Taste as Bourdieu argues is above all a *distaste* about other people's taste and this was shown in many cases in this thesis. My respondents made aesthetic judgments not only about the underwear they buy but also about the underwear that other people might wear. This was mostly exhibited when it had to do with body size and specific types of underwear, for example g-strings worn by larger women. I argued that this shows how thoroughly these women have internalised western imperatives around slenderness and youthfulness and what it is appropriate (or not) for them to wear (Bordo, 2004; Tischner and Malson, 2008).

Taste as a manifestation of habitus was also exhibited in discussions about these respondents' preferences in colours, material and types of underwear they might choose in different

contexts. Economic capital came up in many cases as a constraint in what underwear these women chose, indicating that social class might indeed be another important element in the construction of their identity and could be considered as a way to progress this research. These women's different habituses demonstrated their different assumptions about the role of underwear in their identity projects. Erica, one of the gym clients, for example, had different assumptions as to what the function of underwear was, thus her choices of where she buys underwear from, or how much she would spend on underwear, differ from other participants who have lower economic capital, like Christie. The rugby women, who were all students, reported choosing their underwear using other criteria like what it looks like, but also how much it costs. The differences in taste expressed by these women when choosing underwear were also discussed as differences in the cultural capital they possess. I argued that cultural capital, i.e. modes of thinking or quality of style, determines many of these women's choices, as it legitimises social differences (Silva, 2005). The volume of cultural capital they possess determines their taste in underwear and their assumptions about underwear's functions.

Cultural capital was also understood in this thesis as something strongly transmitted by the family and especially the mother, as suggested by Bourdieu (1984). Indeed, as seen previously, my data suggested that early familiarisation, development and 'passing on' of cultural capital by the mother influenced these women's cultural capital and their choices in underwear. Their mother's choice and sense of taste in underwear influenced many of these women's taste as well, and some reported that their mother's 'boring' choices in underwear or their considering underwear as merely functional had profoundly influenced their adult lives.

However, on the other hand it was also argued that taste is a mechanism by which individuals distribute their symbolic resources like cultural capital in their struggles to improve their social positions. This also indicated that their understandings about the types and quality of underwear they would like to consume, had they had higher economic capital, which might be different from what they consumed at the time of our conversation.

## **6.6 Contributions and implications of this research**

### ***6.6.1 Theoretical and methodological contributions***

This thesis used two major thinkers has offered an indication of the relevance of both the works of Foucault (1978; 1979; 1980; 1985b; 1986; 1988b) and of Bourdieu (1984; 1986; 1990b; 1994; 2001) on power and how it operates to construct female identity. Their works were used as a framework in understanding the socio-cultural factors that influence women's consumption of underwear including how taste as an expression of habitus is expressed by women's choices in underwear. Both Foucault and Bourdieu consider social practices as something located within discourse and understood according to time and space. Moreover they see identity as constructed by social relations and power relations, indicating thus that female identity is an ongoing project of 'becoming'. While Foucault shows how regimes of power and knowledge can act on the body and identity to construct it, and his later works suggest how identity can be established through 'self-stylisation', Bourdieu's notion of habitus shows how the social is literally incorporated in the corporeal by examining how individuals' dispositions can make them 'conform' to the demands of a 'field'.

It is this construction of identity through micro-power suggested by both theorists that I consider essential in understanding women's consumption of underwear and how it works as

a source of identity construction. I consider the combination of Foucault and Bourdieu to work as a valuable contribution to knowledge around how identity is constructed through consumption. Underwear in this thesis was seen as both a technology of the self in a Foucauldian sense and as embodied cultural capital in a Bourdieusian sense. Moreover the use of this framework is particularly important when women, such as my participants did, make judgements about their own as well as other women's choices in underwear and, at the same time, it is evident of how thoroughly they have internalised social imperatives around female identity.

Other works that draw on Foucault and Bourdieu have also been discussed in this thesis. This was necessary as neither Foucault nor Bourdieu offered a specific thesis on the lived gendered body. Nevertheless, feminists have expanded on their works and utilised them in their attempt to make sense of what it feels like being a woman. Feminists like Bartky (1988) and Bordo (1988, 1990a, 1993, 2004) have used Foucault's earlier works to examine how disciplinary practices and power relations produce a 'recognisable' female body. Their works have been used in this thesis in contributing to the understanding of how imperatives around femininity and female identity become key factors influencing women's consumption of underwear. The works of Chase (2006), Mansfield and McGinn (1993), Thorpe (2008) and Jantzen *et al.* (2006) were also discussed in an attempt to link social practices with elements of reflexivity through self-stylisation and technologies of the self that Foucault proposes.

Similarly I have drawn on other feminists to show how Bourdieu's work is crucial in understanding the construction of female identity. Drawing on Moi (1991), Lawler (1999) and McRobbie (2002, 2009) among others, I have illustrated how Bourdieu's works can offer insights into how habitus and its expressions in class divisions or aesthetic judgments become

an important aspect of the process of ‘becoming’ a woman. While most of the works discussed emphasise class and class mobility, the thesis privileges gender as the primary classification mechanism in social life and offers a more general analysis of habitus and its various elements in my attempt to understand women’s choices in underwear. The danger here could be that the thesis might be neglecting important aspects of women’s identities, like class or race, but on the other hand it offers an understanding of how underwear is used as a resource, a tool or a practice in women’s daily efforts to construct a sense of ‘who I am as a woman’. Thus consuming underwear in this thesis is established as a way of *doing* gender and ‘fashioning’ female identity.

Moreover, in order to locate underwear within the practices of consumption and the meanings it might invoke for the consuming subject, I have drawn on relevant theories of consumption with the aim of examining the importance of consumption practices, such as buying underwear, in (re)constructing consumer culture and in forming part of our negotiation of our identities. Therefore this thesis has used a theoretical framework to excavate an underdeveloped topic: while other parts of women’s clothing have been thoroughly analysed by the field of consumption, as well as other cognate disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies, underwear as a form of dress and how it connects with issues of consumption and identity, has been largely ignored. Thus this thesis addresses remarks like Gimlin’s (2007: 355) that “sociology has largely ignored ... the more mundane forms of body work”.

This thesis is not an attempt to exhaust the discussion around women and their relationship with underwear, but it has aimed at exploring some of these issues and establish an understanding of the role of socio-cultural imperatives and of taste when choosing what underwear women buy and wear, when and how. On these grounds this thesis offered a

valuable contribution to academic analysis of identity construction, with insights on how underwear as part of the overall ‘fashion system’ can be mobilised in the female identity project.

In terms of the methodological contributions of this thesis, while its title alludes to my assumption regarding the ongoing character of female identity as being constructed and ‘fashioned’, the thesis was also premised on the idea that female identity can comprise different aspects or sides that women might arguably exemplify in their everyday lives. Thus the research strategy, including sampling, was designed around the concept of identity *opseis*, which represents these different aspects of women’s identity. The term exemplifies exactly what Gillen (2001) and also Elliot (2001) suggest about the different versions of the self that individuals can present according to the situations they find themselves in. I argued that various identity *opseis* are present in women’s everyday lives, such as that of a colleague, a mother or partner and the aim of the thesis was to ‘hail’ these *opseis*. The concept served as a justification of my sampling strategy as I have selected women participants to exemplify certain (again by no means exhaustive) identity *opseis*. The concept was also helpful in the analysis of my data since it was often used theoretically when exploring how underwear was mobilised in ‘fashioning’ the various *opseis* of my participants’ identity.

In conclusion, this thesis has contributed to knowledge by exploring an underdeveloped topic, that of underwear as part of dress and how it can be seen as a source of identity construction. Even though, as suggested previously and throughout the thesis, I aimed at answering specific questions around the consumption of women’s underwear, the thesis has not been without some implications both theoretically and methodologically. The following section

notes some of these implications and moreover suggests how future research around this topic can be developed.

### ***6.6.2 Implications of this research and future research***

There are some inevitable implications in this research which influence the conclusions drawn so far as well as the answers to the research questions. While I have used seven different identity *opseis* that women could exemplify, still these are not exhaustive and they are not drawn from anything approximating to representative samples. Thus the results and conclusions of this thesis are in no way applicable to the wider population of women in the UK or indeed elsewhere – even if such an endeavour were possible. Further, some of these women belonged to other identity *opseis*, as pointed out previously in the thesis, suggesting that my data could have been different if women from the mothers' group for example were used as a group exemplifying the *opseis* of gym clients. Some of the questions asked and the discussion generated in the groups or during the interviews differed in order to focus mostly on how underwear was related with the specific identity *opseis* in focus. Thus the results might have been different if the concept of identity *opseis* was not used or if all women were asked the exact same questions.

Future research could therefore expand the concept of identity *opseis* to include other important sides of female identity. An interesting path this research could have explored was that of professional women who are required to wear uniforms, such as nurses and especially those who are in arguably more masculine professions like the military or police service. The role of underwear in supporting these women's bodies during work hours and how it might or might not differ from what they wear outside their work environment would be an important expansion and development of this research.

Moreover, other unavoidable implications arise considering that other factors such as social class, ethnicity, religion or sexuality were not considered when selecting my participants. Even though class differences were evident in my data and a discussion around class as an aspect of my participants' habitus took place in Chapter 5 in particular, it was not a distinguishing factor in the sampling process nor was it theoretically developed or expanded thoroughly in this thesis, as previously discussed. Thus future research might want to look at the relation between factors like class, ethnicity, religion and sexuality and the consumption of underwear. Also a comparative study between the UK and locations elsewhere in Western Europe or further abroad would have been an interesting addition in developing a theory of how underwear is consumed in different contexts.

This thesis has also provided an understanding of the factors that might influence women's consumption of underwear and their experiences of underwear. However, further research might consider examining men's experiences with underwear and how it could be seen as a source of the masculine identity project. Considering that men construct masculine identities and also arguably exemplify various identity *opseis*, further research could explore underwear's meanings and possible sensations it may invoke for the wearer and how this impacts on men's identity construction.

## **6.7 Summary**

This chapter has synthesised the main conclusions of this thesis in an attempt to answer each of the research questions the research was premised on. While a summary of the previous chapters was given, each section thereafter aimed at clearly addressing the research questions. Thus, the first section outlined the socio-cultural factors that affect women's consumption of

underwear; the second discussed how underwear as part of dress can be seen as a source of identity construction; the third explored some of women's experiences of underwear; and lastly, I discussed the role of taste in how women choose their underwear. The contributions, both theoretical and methodological, were then discussed, in order to suggest that this research has genuinely contributed to knowledge by addressing an underdeveloped area in consumption studies, as well as in other cognate fields, with the use of a theoretical framework that combined works from Foucault, Bourdieu and feminists inspired by their concepts, and selected theories from consumption literature. Underwear's discursive importance in women's lives has been explored, in terms of how it is mobilised to support women in performing different identity *opseis*, and has established an understanding of how mundane forms of body work can be elements of constructing women's ongoing and complex identity projects.

# Appendices

## 1. Access Letters

### *1.2 Email to University staff*

Dear ....

I am writing to ask if you would like to participate in a group discussion that is part of my doctorate research, about women's underwear. I'm a PhD student at the School of Management and my research is mainly concerned with how women choose their underwear, from where, how important underwear is for them and so on.

You might have heard about this research before, however it has been delayed due to some personal family problems I had a few months ago at home. Nevertheless I am hoping that now I'll raise your interest in participating in this research and hopefully I'll be sending you a more formal invitation soon with a time and a place (most probably a room in the University).

Just to let you know, I'm only inviting a few other women colleagues of yours from the [...] with the aim that I can have a group of women that know each other so that we can have a nice, friendly discussion about underwear! However if you have some other women colleagues that would be interested in taking part then please could you let me know?

I hope that you will be interested in taking part in this focus group and I would be grateful if you could please let me know as soon as you can if you are indeed interested in participating.

Kind Regards

Christiana Tsaousi

### ***1.2 Access letter to the gym***

The Manager  
[...]

01/02/2008

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to introduce myself as a doctoral student from the University of Leicester, School of Management and ask for permission to approach some of the female members and female instructors of the Club for the purpose of inviting them to participate in my research. This research is concerned with how and why women choose their underwear and how different factors, psychological, physical or social, affect the underwear that women buy and wear.

Health clubs and gyms are an important resource for 21<sup>st</sup> century women because they provide the opportunity to improve both the external and the internal health of their bodies. I am especially interested in discussing with women members and instructors of the Club whether and how improvement in their physical condition because of exercising has affected these choices.

Regarding the female instructors, with this particular group, my interest is in discussing issues such as how their occupation affects their choice of underwear and why this might be, as well as how they might select different underwear for different aspects of their lives.

The invitation to both members and instructors will be to participate either in group discussions (of 5-6 women) or one-to-one interviews with me, hopefully during the next month or so. The invitations will be for voluntary participation in the research, which will probably take place at the University of Leicester or at the Club if possible (and if of course permission is granted). I would like to stress that anonymity and confidentiality will be guaranteed to the participants. I would also like to stress, especially where the staff of the Club is concerned, this research is entirely independent from this company and at no point in the thesis the name of the company would be used.

I would be extremely grateful if you could give me permission to approach and invite members and instructors to participate in the project. As I am already a member of the Club, I already have access to the premises and I am familiar with the environment and some of the members and instructors. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any other information. My contact details are stated below. You may also wish to contact my supervisor, Prof. Joanna Brewis, who can of course vouch for me. Her details are also given below.

Yours sincerely

Christiana Tsaousi

Research Student  
School of Management  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester, LE1 7RH  
Email: ct77@le.ac.uk  
Tel.: Office 0116 229 7421, Home 0116 262 5750

Supervisor's details:  
Prof. Joanna Brewis  
School of Management

Ken Edwards Building  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester, LE1 7RH  
Email: j.brewis@le.ac.uk  
Tel.: Office 0116 2523891

### *1.3 Invitation to participate in research*

## Invitation to participate in research

Would you like to participate in research about  
**women's underwear?**

This is an invitation to participate in a doctoral research study that is concerned with how and why women choose their underwear. What are the factors that affect what underwear we buy and wear? The research tries to understand how underwear supports women in their everyday lives and focuses on how underwear changes according to women's activities, stage of life, age.

This invitation to take part in the research is either for group discussion (small groups of women where we all discuss our underwear) or one-to-one discussion (interview). Questions could be for example about what kind of underwear you usually wear, where you buy them from and so on. Group discussion or interviews will take place in September 2008 and venue is upon agreement.

If you would like to participate please write below the dates and times you are free during September. Please include your name and a contact number and return the invitation to the address below or alternatively you can email or call me.

Name

---

Tel.

Email 

---

Possible dates and times you are free

---

**Researcher:**

Christiana Tsaousi  
PhD Student  
School of Management  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester, LE1 7RH



**University of  
Leicester**

## 2. Interview and Focus groups schedules

### 2.1 Tutors and administrators schedule

1. Bio-data
2. How do you feel about talking about underwear with other people? With whom do you usually have this kind of discussion?
  - 2.1 Does the conversation usually start with underwear as topic or conversations about other topics shift to talking about underwear?
3. What do you think about these types of underwear? Which of this underwear are the types that you usually wear?
4. Which is your everyday underwear?
5. Do you categorise underwear, for example special occasions, work underwear, period days or fat days?
6. What about the other types of underwear? Would ever choose underwear like this and how would feel if you had to wear it?
7. How often do you go underwear shopping?
8. Have you ever shopped for underwear on the internet? (If yes from where and how was the experience?)
9. Do you tend to shop for underwear alone or with others (friends, family, partner?)
  - 1.1 How would you feel if you had to shop alone/with other people?
10. From where do you usually buy underwear?
11. Is there a particular reason that you don't go shopping in other shops?

12. What underwear would you say you buy more often: bras, pants (thongs, strings), camisoles, bodysuits, nightwear?
13. What colours underwear do you usually wear? Why?
14. Would you ever consider wearing other colours that you don't usually wear? When would you consider that?
15. What type of material do you usually choose for your underwear?
16. Would you ever consider buying other material and when would you consider wearing it?
17. What type of underwear comes to your mind when you think of sexy lingerie?
18. Have you ever bought sexy lingerie? How do/did you feel when/if you wear/wore sexy lingerie?
19. Do you buy underwear for presents? For whom would you buy underwear for present?
20. Has anyone bought underwear for you as a present? Who? What was the occasion? How did you feel?
21. Would you wear something that you don't usually just because it was a present?
22. Are there days that you don't wear underwear, e.g. no bra days? When?
23. (If no) Would ever consider not wearing underwear to work?
24. (If yes) How does not wearing underwear make you feel?
25. In today's world some would probably argue that "I am what I wear". Do you think that this goes for underwear as well?

## ***2.2 Mothers' group schedule***

1. Bio-data
  
2. How do you feel about talking about underwear with other people? With whom do you usually have this kind of discussion?
  - 2.1 Does the conversation usually start with underwear as topic or conversations about other topics shift to talking about underwear?
  
3. What do you think about these types of underwear? Which of this underwear are the types that you wore before getting pregnant?
  - 3.1 (Pre natal) Are these the types of underwear that you wear now that you are pregnant?
  
4. How do you feel about wearing underwear for pregnancy?
  
5. How do/did you feel about maternity bras?
  
6. Before the pregnancy which was your everyday underwear?
  
7. Did you categorise underwear, for example special occasions, work underwear, period days or fat days?
  
8. How often do you go underwear shopping, before and after getting pregnant?
  
9. Have you ever shopped for underwear on the internet? (If yes from where and how was the experience?)
  
10. Do you tend to shop for underwear alone or with others (friends, family, partner?)
  - 1.1 How would you feel if you had to shop alone/with other people?

11. From where do you usually buy underwear? What about now with the pregnancy/ after giving birth?
12. Is there a particular reason that you don't go shopping in other shops?
13. What underwear would you say you buy more often: bras, pants (thongs, strings), camisoles, bodysuits, nightwear? What about now?
14. What colours underwear do you usually wear? Why?
15. Would you ever consider wearing other colours that you don't usually wear? When would you consider that?  
Transition:
16. What type of material do you usually choose for your underwear?
17. Would you ever consider buying other material and when would you consider wearing it?
18. What type of underwear comes to your mind when you think of sexy lingerie?
19. Have you ever bought sexy lingerie? How do/did you feel when/if you wear/wore sexy lingerie?
20. Do you buy underwear for presents? For whom would you buy underwear for present?
21. Has anyone bought underwear for you as a present? Who? What was the occasion? How did you feel?
22. Would you wear something that you don't usually just because it was a present?
23. In today's world some would probably argue that "I am what I wear". Do you think that this goes for underwear as well?

### **2.3 Rugby team schedule**

#### 1. Bio Data

24. How do you feel about talking about underwear with other people? With whom do you usually have this kind of discussion?

2.1 Does the conversation usually start with underwear as topic or conversations about other topics shift to talking about underwear?

2. What do you think about these types of underwear? Which of this underwear are the types that you usually wear? (stimuli pictures)

3. What type of underwear do you wear while playing rugby? Is it necessary that you wear this type of underwear? Why? Does it offer some kind of special support for your body movements while playing?

4. How would feel if you had to wear different underwear while playing?

5. Are you conscious of your underwear while playing?

6. Do you categorise underwear, for example special occasions, period days or fat days?

7. From where do you usually buy underwear? What about your 'rugby' underwear?

8. How often do you go underwear shopping?

9. Do you go underwear shopping alone or with other people?

10. What colours underwear do you usually wear? Why? What about for your rugby underwear?

11. What material do you usually wear for your underwear?

12. What type of underwear comes to your mind when you think of sexy lingerie?
13. Have you ever bought sexy lingerie? How do/did you feel when/if you wear/wore sexy lingerie?
14. Do you buy underwear for presents? For whom would you buy underwear for present?
15. Has anyone bought underwear for you as a present? Who? What was the occasion? How did you feel?
16. Would you wear something that you don't usually just because it was a present?
17. Are there days that you don't wear underwear, e.g. no bra days? When?
18. Would you play rugby without underwear for example no bra?
19. In today's world some would probably argue that "I am what I wear". Do you think that this goes for underwear as well?

#### ***2.4. Gym clients schedule***

1. Bio-Data
2. How do you feel about talking about underwear with other people? With whom do you usually have this kind of discussion?
  - 2.1 Does the conversation usually start with underwear as topic or conversations about other topics shift to talking about underwear?
3. What do you think about these types of underwear? Which of this underwear are the types that you usually wear?
4. Which is your everyday underwear?

5. What type of underwear do you wear at the gym? Is it different from every day? (If yes) Why?
6. Do you categorise underwear, for example special occasions, work underwear, period days or fat days?
7. What about the other types of underwear? Would ever choose underwear like this and how would feel if you had to wear it?
8. Would you say that you are conscious of your underwear when you are in the gym locker rooms with other women and changing?
9. How often do you go underwear shopping?
10. Have you ever shopped for underwear on the internet? (If yes from where and how was the experience?)
11. Do you tend to shop for underwear alone or with others (friends, family, partner?)
  - 10.1 How would you feel if you had to shop alone/with other people?
12. From where do you usually buy underwear?
13. Is there a particular reason that you don't go shopping in other shops?
14. When you go underwear shopping do you buy underwear that you would wear specifically for the gym?
15. What underwear would you say you buy more often: bras, pants (thongs, strings), camisoles, bodysuits?
16. What colours underwear do you usually wear? Why? What about when you go to the gym?
17. Would you ever consider wearing other colours that you don't usually wear? When would you consider that?

18. What type of material do you usually choose for your underwear? What about when you go to the gym?
19. Would you ever consider buying other material and when would you consider wearing it?
20. What type of underwear comes to your mind when you think of sexy lingerie?
21. Have you ever bought sexy lingerie? How do/did you feel when/if you wear/wore sexy lingerie?
22. Do you buy underwear for presents? For whom would you buy underwear for present?
23. Has anyone bought underwear for you as a present? Who? What was the occasion? How did you feel?
24. Would you wear something that you don't usually just because it was a present?
25. Are there days that you don't wear underwear, e.g. no bra days? When?
26. In today's world some would probably argue that "I am what I wear". Do you think that this goes for underwear as well?

## ***2.5 Gym Instructor schedule***

1. Bio Data
2. How do you feel about talking about underwear with other people? With whom do you usually have this kind of discussion?
  - 2.1 Does the conversation usually start with underwear as topic or conversations about other topics shift to talking about underwear?

3. What do you think about these types of underwear? Which of this underwear are the types that you usually wear? (stimuli pictures)
4. What type of underwear do you wear while working in the gym?
5. Is that different from the underwear you wear while not working?
6. What kind of support are you looking for in the underwear you wear at work?
7. Are you conscious of your underwear support your body while working?
8. Did it ever happen to you, your underwear to be showing while teaching a class? How did that make you feel?
9. Beside your work underwear, do you categorise underwear, for example special occasions, period days or fat days?
10. From where do you usually buy underwear? What about your work underwear?
11. How often do you go underwear shopping?
12. What type of underwear comes to your mind when you think of sexy lingerie?
13. Have you ever bought sexy lingerie? How do/did you feel when/if you wear/wore sexy lingerie?
14. Do you think that women who come to gym should wear specific type of underwear? (If yes) why?
  - 14.1 From your professional experience, how important do you think is what underwear women wear at the gym?
15. Do women ever ask you about what underwear they should wear at the gym?

15. Do you think that the underwear you wear during work, represent you more as a woman?

## **2.6 WADS schedule**

1. Bio-data

2. How do you feel about talking about underwear with other people? With whom do you usually have this kind of discussion?

2.1 Does the conversation usually start with underwear as topic or conversations about other topics shift to talking about underwear?

3. What do you think about these types of underwear? Which of this underwear are the types that you wear or perhaps used to wear?

4. Do you find these types of underwear to be different than the underwear you wore when you were younger?

5. Do you think that underwear choices change as women grow older? (If yes how?) (If no why?)

6. Do you think your underwear will be different in the future?

7. In my work, I argue that underwear's importance lies in how it supports women during different activities, or stages in their lives, for example during pregnancy, exercising and so on. How do you feel about that, especially when thinking about the stage of life you are at the moment?

8. Do you categorise your underwear, like exercise underwear or going out underwear etc?

9. How often do you go underwear shopping? When you were younger did you shop for underwear more often than now or less?

10. Have you ever shopped for underwear on the internet? (If yes from where and how was the experience?)
11. Do you tend to shop for underwear alone or with others (friends, family, partner?)
  - a. How would you feel if you had to shop alone/with other people?
12. From where do you usually buy underwear?
13. Is there a particular reason that you don't go shopping in other shops?
14. Have you always shopped in particular shops or have your preferences changed over the year?
15. What underwear would you say you buy more often: bras, pants, camisoles, bodysuits?
16. What colours of underwear do you usually wear? Why?
17. Would you ever consider wearing other colours that you don't usually wear? When would you consider that?
18. What type of material do you usually choose for your underwear?
19. Would you ever consider buying underwear in other material and when would you consider wearing it?
20. What type of underwear comes to your mind when you think of sexy underwear?
21. Have you ever bought sexy lingerie? How do/did you feel when/if you wear/wore sexy lingerie?
22. To whom do you think sexy underwear is targeted at? (How do you feel about that?)
23. Do you buy underwear for presents? For whom would you buy underwear for present?

24. Has anyone bought underwear for you as a present? Who? What was the occasion?  
How did you feel?

25. In today's world some would probably argue that "I am what I wear". Do you think  
that this goes for underwear as well?

### 3. Stimuli material



Pic. 1: Debby



Pic. 2: Lara



Pic. 3: Liza



Pic. 4: Camara



Pic. 5: Laris



Pic. 6: Joanna



Pic. 7: Lia  
and Lianne



Pic. 8:  
Sarah &  
Niki



Pic. 9: Helen



Pic. 10: Julie

## 4. List of participants

### F1 - University Tutors (October 2007)

Name	Age Group	Marital Status	Occupation	Education	Career Background	Ethnicity
Paulette	26-35	Single	English Tutor	BA Hons English Studies	Worked in Tokyo as Higher School English teacher, and Waseda University, P.T tutor at University	White British
Abby	36-45	Married	English tutor	BA Hons, MA Education, currently PhD	Music teacher for 3 years, English teacher and then English tutor at University	White British
Kate	46-55	Divorced	English Tutor	BA, MA	Secondary School teacher, English tutor in Tokyo	White British
Wendy	36-45	Married	Secretary, Tutor/ P.T.	MSc, MBA	8 years Advertising in Japan	White Asian

### F2 - University Administrators (November 2007)

Name	Age Group	Marital Status	Occupations	Education	Career Background	Ethnicity
Karen	26-35	Single	International officer, University	BA, MA, Diploma in Marketing	First full time job since leaving University	White British
Julie	26-35	Co-habiting	International officer, University	BA	Sales administrator, English teacher, Course Manager,	White British
Caitlyn	26-35	Married	International officer, University	BA, MA	Program Co-ordinator University of Bradford	White British
Samantha	26-35	Married	Study Abroad advisor/P.T.	BA	First job since leaving University	White British

### F3 - Post-natal Mothers (November 2007)

Name	Age group	Marital status	How many children	Date of last birth	Member of NCT / pre/post natal group and which?	Occupation	Ethnicity
Tara	26-35	Married	1	25-7-07	No (1 course with NCT)	Chartered Accountant	White British
Kerry	26-35	Married	1	25-7-07	NCT pre & post natal group	Laboratory Manager	White British
Kayla	26-35	Married	1	20-8-07	NCT pre natal	Sports Manager Practitioner	White British
Laney	26-35	Married	1	21-7-07	No (1 course with NCT)	Sales development Manager	White British

Kelly	26-35	Married	1	27-8-07	NCT pre natal group	Marketing in charity	White British
Liz	26-35	Married	1	2-7-07	No (1 course with NCT)	Campaign coordinator	White German
Jen	26-35	Married	1	21-7-07	NCT	Events Manager	White British

#### F4 - University of Leicester Women's Rugby Team (May 2008)

Name	Age group	Marital status	How long playing for rugby team	Occupation	Education	Ethnicity
Denise	18-25	Single	2 years	Student	LLB Law	White British
Sam	18-25	Single	1 year	Student	LLB Law	White British
Ellie	18-25	Single	7 months	Student	BA Criminology	White British
Sharon	18-25	Single	1 year	Student	BSc Geology	White British
Becky	18-25	Single	2 years	Student	BSc Mathematics	White British
Helen	18-25	Single	1 year	Student	LLB Law	White British
Vicky	18-25	Single	1 year	Student	BSc Medical Studies	White British

#### F5 - WADS (October 2008)

Name	Age group	Marital status	Occupation	Career background	Educational background	Ethnicity
Jane	66+	Divorced	Retired	Fraud officer	Highschool, A levels	White British
Phyllis	66+	Widowed	Retired	Shop assistant	Highschool	White British
Claire	66+	Widowed	Retired (still working)	Council officer	Convent School, A levels	White British
Suzan	66+	Widowed	Retired	Teacher	Art School	White British
Marcy	66+	Divorced	Retired	Doctor's secretary	Highschool	White British
Mary	66+	Divorced	Retired	Receptionist	Convent School	White British
Louise	66+	Divorced	Retired (still working)	Local government officer	Highschool	White British
Lauren	66+	Widowed	Retired	Sales assistant	College	White British
Ruth	66+	Widowed	Retired	Medical secretary	Convent School	White British

**I1 - Gym Instructor (May 2008)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>How long working as gym instructor</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Career background</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Amy	26-35	Single	10 years	A-levels, Dip in Sports Therapy	Retail, Fitness	White British

**I2, I3 - Gym Clients (October, November 2008)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>How long beings member of gym</b>	<b>Gym and membership type</b>	<b>Education background</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Erica	46-55	Divorced	University administrator	1 year	Cannons health centre/ full	Degree, MBA	White British
Christie	26-35	Single	P.T sales assistant	6 months	Aylestone Leisure centre / contract	BSc	White Mediterranean

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