

‘What underwear I like?’ Taste and (embodied) cultural capital in the consumption of women’s underwear

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Abstract

This paper argues that women’s underwear functions as a source for (re)constructing female identity, and that women’s consumption of underwear is an embodied experience through which they ‘learn’ to choose the ‘right’ underwear for the right occasion. This experience is understood here through the use of Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, taste and (embodied) cultural capital, thus expanding the limited literature on underwear and its significance in terms of identity and consumption. Through a series of focus groups and interviews, I argue that women express their taste in underwear depending on their habitus-influenced assumptions about its role and function, and that underwear works as their embodied cultural capital to support elements of female identity. The themes of my analysis include the degree to which my participants exhibit their sense of taste about the underwear they buy, and how they distinguish between the underwear that they need to wear in particular fields; the transmission of their mothers’ cultural capital and taste when it comes to their choices in underwear; and the relationship between underwear and outerwear, and how they use the former to support their dress within specific fields or contexts they move in and out of in their daily lives.

Keywords

Bourdieu, embodied cultural capital, habitus, identity construction, taste, underwear

Introduction

In 2006, the *Journal of Consumer Culture* published a brief series of articles on women's underwear and its role in terms of both advertising and use. The latest article in particular was a dialogue between Dee Amy-Chinn, Christian Jantzen and Per Østergaard (Amy-Chinn et al., 2006) reflecting on cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary debates around the role of women's underwear. Some of the debates the authors exchanged were around the meaning-versus-doing function of underwear, the eroticisation of underwear, and how the consumption of women's underwear could progressively be analysed using different theoretical frameworks, such as that of Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus and distinction.

Since then, attention around these debates has been almost non-existent despite the continuous growth of mass and media culture's commentaries that underwear is a crucial part of the 'underneath', and an important part of women's construction of female identity. For example, research from market analysis company Mintel (2011) suggests that there is an effort to introduce new products in the market so that women consumers buy underwear for 'reasons other than just replacement' (2011: report homepage, par. 1). Moreover, reality makeover shows, at least in UK television, testify to underwear's importance not only in shaping women's bodies and working together with the outer dress to enhance women's appearance, but also in generating physical

and psychological sensations such as self-confidence and sexiness, which seem central to women's performance of female identity (Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013).

This paper seeks to continue the discussion around the role of women's underwear in constructing female identity, but also aims to add to the field of sociology of consumption by paying attention to how mundane body work, such as choosing the 'right' underwear, can be seen as a tool in constructing female identity. Considering the wealth of literature that addresses other, more visual parts of women's dress (Entwistle, 2001; Entwistle and Wilson, 2001; Gillen, 2001; Keenan, 2001) or how fashion links with identity formation (Brydon and Niessen, 1998; Finkelstein, 1991; Entwistle, 2000a, 2000b), underwear has been largely neglected in this respect. Notable exceptions are the Jantzen et al. (2006) and Amy-Chinn et al. (2006) articles, as well as Merl Storr's (2002, 2003) ethnographic research on Ann Summers parties.

The data presented here are from my doctoral thesis, which focused on how underwear can function as a source of (re)constructing female identity, and how the women participants 'learn' to choose the 'right' underwear for the right occasion in order to fashion elements of their female identity accordingly (Tsaousi, 2011; also see Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013). In this paper, I specifically use Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, taste and cultural capital (particularly embodied cultural capital) as a framework for understanding women's consumption choices in underwear. In this paper, underwear is considered as part of women's embodied cultural capital, which is then transformed into other forms of capital; namely economic, social and symbolic. I

am, however, intentionally emphasising gender and how this embodied cultural capital aids these women in supporting the various elements of female identity they are called upon to play out in their everyday lives. While I recognise how Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and taste are underpinned by class structures, and that different classes 'invest' different levels of cultural capital in order to mark their distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), I choose to privilege gender as the primary classification mechanism in social life in my attempt to understand 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' and of 'doing' gender (Gherardil, 1994).

In what follows, I explore my participants' choices in underwear in my attempt to understand how habitus-specific capital and taste can determine these choices, as it differentiates their assumptions about underwear's role and function in their daily life, and thus distinguishes the different mobilisations of underwear in their attempt to construct their female identity. The themes of the analysis include a discussion around my participants' taste in underwear in relation to what it 'does' for them, but also how it connects to their overall sense of style and taste; how they recognise their mothers' influence on their choices in underwear; and finally how they use underwear in relation to their outerwear, and how it supports this dress in the different contexts or fields they move in and out of in their everyday lives.

I begin by situating my analysis on underwear within a Bourdieusian framework, and by arguing that we can use Bourdieu's notions of habitus, (embodied) cultural capital and taste to understand women's embodied experiences with underwear.

Bourdieu's framework

Bourdieu's work has contributed to various legacies and disciplines, but notably his work on habitus, fields, taste and capital attracted much attention in the fields of consumer culture and sociology of consumption. His contribution was mainly to explain the links between objective structures and subjective experiences, and the development of the metaphoric model of social space. According to this model, there is an integration of contextual structures and practices, which shows that these structures cannot function unless they are embodied by individuals. Bourdieu's notion of habitus shows this exact embodiment of practices and structures, and demonstrates the ways in which the social world exists *in* the body (Bourdieu, 1977; Reay, 2004b). Bourdieu argues that the habitus is:

... a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu, 1998: 81)

Thus different habitus produce different perceptions of the world, i.e. lifestyles which 'become sign systems that are socially qualified (as "distinguished", "vulgar"

etc.)' (Bourdieu, 1984: 173). Taste is the 'generative formula' (Bourdieu, 1984: 173) of these lifestyles – the way that people relate to objects and practices – and ultimately marks the dispositions that define people's sense of distinction or difference. As this paper will discuss, 'taste' in underwear comes down to making aesthetic judgments not just about what is 'suitable' for a particular context – determining, that is, what is the 'right' underwear for the 'right' occasion according to the field a woman is located in or a particular stage of life (Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013; see also Jantzen et al., 2006) – but also making aesthetic judgments about what underwear other women wear. This is mostly exhibited when related to body size and specific types of underwear or colours (for example, a pink coloured bra worn by an older woman). Thus I argue that women's different habitus demonstrate their varied assumptions about the role of underwear in their identity projects.

My participants' different taste in underwear is also expressed in terms of the stocks of cultural capital they possess. Indeed, within Bourdieu's model of social practice people learn to embody and carry with them volumes of different 'capitals'. Bourdieu's concept of capital is a relational concept (Reay, 2004a), thus it cannot be understood in isolation from its different forms: 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 (the prestige that individuals have in their fields) (Crossley, 2001; Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Jenkins, 1992). 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). Depending on the different volumes of cultural capital individuals carry, it can initiate and sustain identities and create group boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2001; Warde, 1994), but it can also mark social distinctions (Katz-Gerro, 2002).

Cultural capital is also vital in terms of the cultural competences people acquire when they practice their ‘sense of distinction’ through the lifestyle and consumption choices they make. Cultural competence is the habitus ‘capacity to produce classifiable practices and works and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). Part of individuals’ cultural competence is the ability to distinguish between legitimate stocks of cultural capital, the ability to master the social skill of using the acquired cultural capital, and also the skill to deploy these ‘abilities’ in order to advance in social situations (Murdock, 2000). Cultural competences are primarily reproduced via family and educational systems. According to Bourdieu, it is via the former in particular that children acquire the primary habitus and cultural capital (Huppatz, 2012; Reay, 2004b). As Silva 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. (Silva, 2005: 84)

Therefore it seems that cultural capital is the most complicated type of capital, as it also takes three forms: the objectified cultural capital (in the form of objects and instruments); the institutionalised cultural capital (in the form of educational qualifications); and the embodied cultural capital, which comes in the form of embodied competencies or dispositions which carry cultural value (Crossley, 2001: 106). Bourdieu has it that embodied cultural capital ‘presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies labour of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor’ (1986: 49). Huppatz (2012) explains that if this is true, then embodied cultural capital is also the product of self-improvement. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that underwear is used by women to demonstrate their ability for self-improvement and the importance of feeling ‘special’ it has to their female identity projects (Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013).

For this paper, embodied capital is particularly important, as it indicates that a person has various dispositions, including her bodily *hexis*, which articulates or demonstrates a legitimate knowledge of the field. 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 then exchange this knowledge for monetary compensation, i.e. economic capital, when they style other people as part of their job.

Underwear and Bourdieu's theories

Bourdieu's theory of habitus, fields and capital has been a very useful framework for the study of dress and fashion in general (Entwistle, 2000a; McRobbie, 1998; Rocamora, 2002); indeed because as consumption practices, they are also embodied practices, defined as systems of choices according to the 'lived experience of the woman, her class, race, age, occupation and so on' (2000a: 37). Specifically when it comes to studying dress,

... habitus enables us to talk about [it] 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. (Entwistle, 2000a: 37)

Underwear, as part of dress, is also part of the 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. I contend, however, that it is even more interesting to study underwear in this respect because it remains usually hidden from view. Thus, it could be argued that the consumption of underwear is not so much a means to mark distinction but a way to understand how taste and aesthetic judgements are a habitus-specific process and how it demonstrates the embodied state of cultural capital accumulated by a process of embodiment and incorporation (Bourdieu, 1986). Following Entwistle's argument above, when women make particular choices regarding their underwear 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 (some of my participants); 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). It is these differences in aesthetic judgments women make regarding the underwear they choose to wear or about the underwear that other people wear, and the sense of taste they display that makes Bourdieu's theory so useful and interesting here. And it is exactly why emphasising more on gender and not social class as the imperative of analysing the data presented in this paper that makes a particular contribution to the field; because Bourdieu's concepts are used here to understand a situated practice, a 'lived experience' of bodywork. I am viewing cultural capital here in its embodied form – in some occasion this functions as symbolic capital – which is undeniably linked to the body (Bourdieu, 1986). I am far from suggesting that other theoretical frameworks could not have contributed to this analysis. In

contrast, in other works (Tsaousi, 2011; Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013) I have discussed the ideas of underwear becoming a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988), part of an ongoing project of presentation and as a technique women may use, together with other techniques such as make up or specific types of dress to fashion themselves in accordance with prevailing imperatives around femininity (Bordo, 1993). However these theories are not sufficient in fully understanding the embodied experience of actually choosing what underwear to wear for which occasion, field or stage of life a woman is in. I argue that Bourdieu's framework of habitus, capital and fields can give us a further insight into the consumption and women's choices of particular underwear, thus attention is given to the lived female body and its experiences.

Underwear in this paper is also seen as an important part of the cultural field of fashion, and I propose that underwear is part of a woman's embodied cultural capital according to the requirements of the field she is situated in, and that this can be seen 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, as well as 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.

‘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 – ‘Hello Boys’ – shows. 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 feminine if she has a bigger bust, especially since news presenters are usually shown from the waist up.

The example of the Wonderbra also illustrates how underwear is 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 (Maguire, 2008). Each woman's habitus is likewise important as it comprises the dispositions that have an effect on 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; that is, accentuating their bosom. As Entwistle (2000a) suggests, this entails a sense of agency, as women are active agents in the transformation of their bodies into sources of capital within specific fields.

Methodology

The empirical data presented here were gathered from five focus groups and three interviews during 2007 and early 2008, which was the empirical research of my doctoral thesis. All participants were invited to choose either to take part in a focus group or a one-to-one interview. In some occasions the choice was determined by practical reasons like busy time schedules. These two methods were selected based on the assumptions that people's experiences, understandings and interpretations construct social reality, and that in order to capture a glimpse of this 'reality' is to interact with them. I found

social interaction particularly important for this research, and hence the choice of focus groups as one of the methods. As Seale (2004:194) argues

...focus 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.

The synergy and dynamism of a focus group co-constructs participants' 'reality' and their practices and experiences are assigned meanings that emerge from this interaction; in this case to participants' experiences with underwear. Another argument of why social interaction was an important component of this research's design is that underwear is also part of the cultural field of fashion. Fashion by definition is a "particular set of arrangements for the production and distribution of clothing" (Entwistle, 2001: 45); 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. I am of course aware of the limitations of focus groups, particularly the group dynamics and the emergence of consensus rather than individual's view (Smithson and Diaz, 1996) or the issues of power in co-constructing meaning collectively (Wilkinson, 1988). However, I acknowledge that all research methods have limitations, that data collected are not claimed as 'natural data' and that the methods affect the way that data are

analysed – especially when combining focus groups with one-to-one interviews. I agree with Wilkinson (1988: 123) that focus group data,

...can offer insights into the relational aspects of self, the processes by which meanings and knowledges are constructed through interactions with others, and the ways in which social inequalities are produced and perpetuated through talk.

Indeed focus groups can make visible or obscure inequalities and distinctions, however that made it possible for me to capture ‘live distinctions’ in line with Bourdieu’s argument. Even though social class was neither a premise for the selection of my participants nor part of my interview schedules, since my participants were all middle class, heterosexual women, those ‘live distinctions’ were based on the differences between their aesthetic judgements and their taste as the manifestation of their middle class habitus.

The selection of the women participants was based on my overall research design, which assumes that women continuously exemplify a particular aspect of their female identity according to the context, field or, in the case of my participants, stage of life they are in at the time the research took place. This idea is what I have called elsewhere identity *opseis*, from the Greek word *ὀψη* which means ‘a side of’ or ‘an aspect of’ (Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013). The term was coined and used with the purpose of emphasising or ‘hailing’ those different versions of a self which can be presented according to different situations Gillen (2001). It is important here to reiterate that this term was used extensively in my doctoral thesis, from which the data of this paper had

arrived. The methodological design was based on my assumption of a socially constructed self and identity. Thus I argued that as part of the ongoing project of female identity, different situations, such as stages of life, contexts and activities, can emphasise different versions of female identity. These include colleague, mother, friend or lover (see also Elliott, 2001). My emphasis here is on the female identity project as variegated, and one which shows the multiplicity of the different ways of being a woman. 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. The aim behind these choices was to 'hail' different aspects of women's identity, and understand how women mobilise underwear to support them in the identity they were trying to exemplify.¹

Focus group one (F1) comprised women who work as university English tutors. Focus group two (F2) was also university staff who worked as administrators. The third group (F3) comprised of new mums who had given birth 4–5 months prior to the data collection. Focus group four (F4) comprised of players from the University of Leicester Women's rugby team. And finally, the fifth group (F5) were women from a Widows and Divorcees group (WADs), and who were all above the age of 66. Two of the interviews conducted were with women gym clients (I1 and I2) and the third interview (I3) was with a gym instructor. Table 1 gives biographical data for the participants. Interviews lasted on average an hour long and focus groups between an hour and a half and two hours. For both focus groups and interviews, a similar interview schedule was

followed, with exceptions of questions relating to the particular identity *opseis* the participants were exemplifying, and all were recorded after the consent of the participants and then transcribed. The similar interview guide enabled me to discuss similar topics in both the interviews and focus groups and data were analysed according to emerging themes. The data that follow are chosen specifically to demonstrate the relatedness of Bourdieu's notions of habitus, capital and taste with how these women make assumptions about the underwear they choose to buy and wear, and how these assumptions affect how they discursively construct their selves as women.

Table 1. Participants' Biographical Data *

Pseudoname	Age Range	Marital Status	Occupation	Ethnicity
<i>Focus group 1 (F1): University Tutors</i>				
Abby	36-45	Married	English tutor	White British
Kate	46-55	Divorced	English tutor	White British
Paulette	26-35	Single	English tutor	White British
Wendy	36-45	Married	P.T. English tutor and secretary	Asian
<i>Focus group 2 (F2): University Administrators</i>				
Caitlyn	26-35	Married	International Officer	White British
Julie	26-35	Co-habiting	International Officer	White British
Karen	26-35	Single	International Officer	White British
Samantha	26-35	Married	P.T study abroad adviser	White British
<i>Focus group 3 (F3): Mothers</i>				
Jen	26-35	Married	Events manager	White British
Kayla	26-35	Married	Sports manager	White British
Kelly	26-35	Married	Charity marketing officer	White British
Kerry	26-35	Married	Laboratory manager	White British
Laney	26-35	Married	Sales development manager	White British
Liz	26-35	Married	Campaign coordinator	White British
Tara	26-35	Married	Chartered accountant	White British
<i>Focus group 4 (F4): University of Leicester Women's rugby team</i>				
Becky	18-25	Single	Student	White British
Denise	18-25	Single	Student	White British
Ellie	18-25	Single	Student	White British
Helen	18-25	Single	Student	White British
Sam	18-25	Single	Student	White British

Sharon	18-25	Single	Student	White British
Vicky	18-25	Single	Student	White British
<i>Focus group 5 (F5): Widows and Divorcees</i>				
Claire	66+	Widowed	Retired (still working)	White British
Jane	66+	Divorced	Retired	White British
Marcy	66+	Divorced	Retired	White British
Mary	66+	Divorced	Retired	White British
Lauren	66+	Widowed	Retired	White British
Louise	66+	Divorced	Retired (still working)	White British
Phyllis	66+	Widowed	Retired	White British
Ruth	66+	Widowed	Retired	White British
Suzan	66+	Widowed	Retired	White British
<i>Interview 1 (I1): Gym instructor</i>				
Amy	26-35	Single	Gym Instructor	White British
<i>Interview 2 (I2): Gym client</i>				
Erica	46-55	Divorced	University Administrator	White British
<i>Interview 3 (I3): Gym client</i>				
Christie	26-35	Single	P.T. Sales Assistant	White Mediterranean

* Adapted from Tsaousi, 2011.

Judgements and taste in underwear

My participants' likes and dislikes in underwear was an important theme in my focus groups and interviews. The word taste was hardly mentioned; however, in a Bourdieusian sense, taste was discussed in many different ways; for example, as the judgements they receive from or make about others, how they classify their selves or how they classify others, their sense of style or their overall sense of what they like in underwear, i.e. different types of underwear, including its colours or materials. Their taste in underwear allowed them to interpret the different meaning of the various types of underwear, and to mobilise them accordingly in their female identity project.

Visible underwear and cultural competence

When it comes to classifications and judgements, my participants seemed to worry mostly about how they would appear to others if or when they saw them with their underwear.² This translated in many cases as worrying about their cultural capital and hence their cultural competences; that is, being able to know what type of underwear is appropriate for different occasions and the field they were in when this is visible. They even worried about this source of cultural capital when the ‘classifiers’ were not known to them. Thus we could speculate that these women are concerned about asserting their ‘taste’, and most of all about being considered ‘tasteful’ in their fields, displaying thus their cultural capital which here functions also as their symbolic capital and as legitimate knowledge/competence of what is required of them in that field.

For example, Erica (I2), one of the gym clients, mentioned during her interview that she always pays attention to her underwear and therefore always feels confident and presentable in her underwear, even if it will inevitably be seen by other people, like in the gym’s changing room. Erica reported that she tries to buy expensive underwear from specialist shops like Rigby & Peller because she is then certain that her underwear properly fits her and looks respectable even in the presence of others:

Erica (I2): I try not to look at other people and I think we're all doing the same thing, we all getting changed [...] I'm not conscious of whether it looks pretty or glamorous or anything like that. I am conscious of whether it's clean, comfortable and it looks acceptable. I wouldn't, for instance, you know... if something had a hole in it, I wouldn't wear it at the gym. I'm not there to show off my underwear, but I wouldn't go there having a hole in my knickers.

Having dirty or scrappy underwear on, e.g. with a hole on it, would be seen as inappropriate by others, and Erica feels she could not get away with it. When underwear is publicly visible then, women may lose the advantage of ‘getting away with it’, i.e. not wearing matching or even particularly attractive underwear (Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013). Erica assumes that other people would judge an inappropriate performance like her having scrappy underwear on in the changing rooms which renders underwear part of the same scrutiny and monitoring by others as women’s outerwear and bodies are more generally (Budgeon 2003; Fine and Macpherson, 1994). In this sense the same assumption then adheres, others would judge us just as we may judge others, or in Bourdieu’s words, ‘taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (1984: 6).

Erica also expressed 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 & 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.

Erica asserts her taste as she acknowledges that her underwear, being expensive, should serve the purpose of appearing presentable and presumably tasteful to other women around her. She refers to the customers' assistants not even needing a tape measure to find the appropriate bra, highlighting the store's expertise in high quality service and products, and asserting thus her sense of distinction. She also affirms her knowledge of what is appropriate to wear in the field of fitness, demonstrating thus how underwear can be seen as part of her cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Crossley, 2001). Cultural capital in this sense is depicted as 'knowing' how to dress appropriately in the gym changing rooms, where underwear is visible and which take on a similar role as outerwear when being judged by others. There seems to be a relationship between taste and social norms here, showing a link between Bourdieu's (1984) notion of taste as a manifestation of habitus and societal expectations, and values being internalised in individuals (Foucault, 1978), especially regarding expectations about what is appropriate for women to wear (see for example Fine and Macpherson, 1994; Tischner and Malson, 2008).

Underwear in various fields: cultural capital 'in action'

While Erica persisted that in order for underwear to fit well and feel comfortable while also being feminine it had to be expensive, other participants, like the rugby girls, who

were all students at the time of data collection, felt that they did not care so much about it being expensive as how it looked. In Erica's case, expensive underwear was a way of demonstrating her social position and cognitive structures. Thus her taste in underwear was a mechanism by which she 'distributed' her symbolic resources (Bourdieu, 1984), i.e. her cultural capital. It is precisely that cultural competence that Murdock (2000) refers to as demonstrating the ability of this woman to demonstrate or deploy her cultural capital in the field of fitness in order to appear 'appropriate' and presentable. In the case of the rugby girls, their preferences in underwear – for example, which shops they bought their underwear from – are indicative of the different modes of thinking (habitus, taste, economic capital and cultural capital) regarding the perceived purpose of underwear for them:

Int: But what about your sports bra?

Vicky (F4): Primark.

Denise (F4): Primark.

Becky (F4): I buy mine from a sports shop, or TK Maxx. As I like mine to be professionally made for sports, but I want them to be cheaper and TK Maxx 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 these girls also talked about special or sexy underwear elsewhere in the data, or whether or not they felt comfortable in their underwear when playing rugby, they still consider underwear as something not worth spending much money on because nice looking underwear is available in the market quite cheap. They buy their underwear from cheap retailing shops, in contrast to other women, like Erica or some of the ladies of the WADs group, who go to specialist shops. Even in the case of Becky, who likes to wear better quality or ‘professionally made for sports’ bras, as she says, she still buys these in discount stores like TK Maxx. Of course, since all of them were students at the time of our conversations, their low economic capital was also an important reason for not wanting to spend it on expensive underwear. Nevertheless, they still considered that the underwear they could afford had its significance depending on the aspect of their identity they were exemplifying.

Underwear for them was more about how it looked; if it was patterned, cute with pink bows (as Ellie admitted while the others were teasing her) more than if it accentuated their female body. Underwear forms part of their embodied cultural capital in the fields they are located in and according to their age, demonstrating their ability to mobilise the right underwear to fit in these fields. What they defined as cute underwear was important for the youth femaleness they try to exemplify. Denise and Vicky for example said that a flowery bra with a pink bow or anything that did not look like a sports bra was feminine enough for them. Indeed all of these girls agreed that any

underwear that did not look like their sports underwear – which according to them is ugly and because it will get muddy it always needs to be white – was feminine and special. The same assumption was also evident in how some chose to wear their normal bras under the sports bra not only to have more support (as this was crucial when playing rugby), but also because of how they saw sports bras as ugly and boring, insisting they did so because they wanted to still feel ‘like girls’. It was important for them to still feel feminine while playing a masculine sport like rugby. Thus underwear for these girls is used as a tool of constructing their female identity while moving in and out of different personas they are called to play, like rugby players, students etcetera. It also speaks to what Skeggs (2004) and Huppatz (2009) called ‘feminine capital’ when discussing femininity as a set of learnt dispositions that take the form of cultural capital. Indeed, Huppatz argues that ‘feminine capital is the gender advantage that is derived from a disposition or skill set learned via socialization, or from simply being hailed as feminine (this occurs when one’s body is recognized as feminine)’ (2009: 50). Thus these women’s ‘cute’ underwear acts as a marker of femininity in their effort to construct their female identity.

Erica’s cultural capital was also demonstrated in terms of her assertion of what underwear’s role is. For her underwear is an important element of a woman’s dress as it can accentuate her bodily dispositions towards showing off her ‘assets’, i.e. her breasts. She was particularly affirmative that underwear needs to support a woman’s body according to the aspect of identity she is performing. Thus when being at the gym it was

important for her to feel that her underwear was supporting her body through exercising, while when going out with a male friend it was important that she felt feminine – thus underwear's role in this case was to accentuate parts of her body. This self-evident understanding of how different fields and structures necessitate the appropriate underwear to support the female identity is indicative of what Bourdieu (1990) calls *doxa*: the illusion of immediate, or indeed self-evident, understanding of various structures, practices, norms and beliefs that govern an individual's actions within a particular social field. Erica is highly influenced by her middle class habitus in interpreting underwear's function; 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.

Meanings and connotations

Another motif in my data was these women's different opinions about underwear's meanings and connotations. For example, issues like what is pretty or sexy underwear were part of these conversations, as well as how different colours might mean different things. The similarities and differences in opinions are interesting here since taste is one link between how these women experience themselves and their social environment, how they feel about themselves and how they want others to feel about them:

Christie (I3): 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 exemplifies how taste is a manifestation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) since she makes connections about her aesthetic judgments – her sense of style – and her habitus. Christie classifies herself as someone with no great sense of style, but while she is making a judgment about herself it seems that she is also worried about how others would judge her based on the underwear she wears. As Featherstone suggests: 'Consumption and lifestyle preferences involve discriminatory judgements which at the same time identify and render classifiable our own particular judgement of taste to others' (2007: 19). Interestingly, Christie here seems to be aware that she could be wearing many different types of underwear if she had a better sense of style or, as she admits at the end, she had more money to buy more expensive underwear. For Christie, choosing the underwear she wears now is a consequence of her low economic capital at that stage in her life. Influenced by her middle class habitus she asserts that pretty or more exciting underwear should be expensive. This was in contrast with other participants' views, like the rugby girls, who thought that there is indeed special underwear in the market which can also be cheap. Thus these women's interpretation of what purpose underwear serves is a habitus-specific process; it is what differentiates their judgements and taste when it comes to selecting the 'right' underwear for them. In

this sense these women's cultural capital, here, functions as symbolic capital which in according to Bourdieu is recognised as legitimate competence (1986). The connections between economic capital and how women use various resources to 'take care' of their bodies and selves was also investigated by Dumas et al. (2005), whose data suggest that there is a linear relationship between economic capital and the use of practices for looking after the female body. Moreover, and as Holt (1998) indicates, women who have higher cultural capital resources tend to pay more attention to how they appear and their overall self-fashioning. However, here Christie also assumes that the accumulation of different forms of capital, such as economic capital, once she is in a different professional field will adjust her habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Lury, 1996) to the different requirements and lifestyle that the new field will require. Christie's urge to argue that she does not think she would continue wearing the same 'boring' underwear suggests how habitus is not static, and how it entails a dialogical relation between the objective structures of a field and an individual's cognitive construction (McNay, 2000). Indeed Bourdieu has emphasised how a change in circumstances can often lead to a transformation of life and identity: 'A habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities' (1999: 511).

A mother's underwear 'hang ups'...

Cultural capital is shaped by two major types of variables: economic resources (e.g. income, class) and cultural resources (e.g. parental cultural capital, education). In fact, and as discussed before, cultural capital – i.e. types of dispositions, meanings, behaviours and qualities of style – are primarily transmitted through the family (Reay, 2000). Even though dressing styles (particularly underwear choices) are less obvious aspects of embodied cultural capital, they are imbedded into our dispositions, and of course our cultural background and family trajectories (Rafferty, 2011). Indeed, my findings suggest that parental cultural capital, and specifically mother's cultural capital, has been imperative in the choices my participants make regarding their underwear:

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.

Christie acknowledges that her mother's sense of style has influenced the meanings she asserts to her dressing and, consequently, her underwear. In fact, Christie has previously mentioned that her sense of style in dress overall is 'boring'. Once again, 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, as well as taste as a

manifestation of habitus. Christie suggests that her lack of style, which meant not choosing colourful clothing or underwear, is a result of how she grew up and the contextual 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 now affirms that her sense of style is a result of her upbringing. Christie's sense of style, her way of thinking and other dispositions work here as both her cultural capital and symbolic capital, influenced of course by her habitus. This echoes Reay's (2000) reference 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 (e.g. body dispositions, ease or discomfort with their body, etc.). As Featherstone asserts, 'culture is incorporated [...] [i.e.] it is not just a question of what clothes are worn, but how they are worn' (2007: 21).

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

Samantha (F2): [...] 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' [All laugh]. Yeah, she's funny. But I think I get a lot of my mum's... erm... sort of underwear erm ... what's the word?

Karen (F2): Hang-ups?

Samantha (F2): Yeah, from my mum. Yeah, I probably have a lot of those from my mum.

Caitlyn (F2): Why?

Samantha (F2): 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 [...].

In the above extract, Samantha, similarly to Christie, also seems to think her taste in underwear has been influenced by her mother's taste. Samantha believes that growing up with a mother who's sense of style in underwear was, as she put it, 'underwear serves purpose', has influenced her own sets of meanings when it comes to what underwear is. Elsewhere in the data, Samantha also indicates that her sense of style in underwear is also influenced by her low self-esteem, which was again something she carries on from her mother. She indicated that because her mother was quite busty, her dress was always quite boring and in a particular fashion, and so her mother's sense of low self-esteem has been passed on to her. This is evident in how she dresses, and especially when it comes to her choices in underwear, firstly because she never shows it

to anyone, not even to her husband; secondly, and most importantly, its proximity to the body means that it is closer to what she ‘hates’ most about herself: her own body image.

In a similar vein, the WADs women refer to their mother and how they have been influenced by them in their choices of underwear not so much now, but mostly when they were younger:

Claire (F5): I don’t know, I think it bothered me years ago. It doesn’t bother me so much now.

Because in my mother’s era they were all more measured and all wearing tighter garments.

Susan (F5): Yeah, it was this thing about pulling up at the back with all the bones and everything.

Claire (F5): So when she was alive I was more aware of what I was wearing, but now as long as I’m comfortable, it doesn’t really bother me that much.

For Claire, and in contrast with Samantha from the administrators group, she had to put more effort into having the ‘right’ underwear on when her mother was alive and when she was younger than now. Indeed the WADs women in general thought that they had to pay attention to what underwear they wore to show their cultural competence of choosing the right underwear; for example, when they were younger and were employed, or even when they had a partner in their lives, instead of now in their sixties or seventies and definitely with no man in their lives. They emphasised that now it was all about feeling comfortable – an important theme in my thesis, but which has been explored elsewhere (Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013).

Importantly, and in closing of this section, my participants seem to be relating their mother's influence on the underwear they wore with their overall sense of taste and, because of underwear's attachment to the body, with their overall body image. Indeed the women who did elaborate on how their choices in underwear, and what they consider underwear's function to be, were those that have admitted to low self-confidence and body image. Such findings of course can be conceptualised in many different ways, but for the purpose of this paper I argue it demonstrates clearly how a mother's embodied cultural capital and dispositions, such as modes of thinking (body image), can take the form of emotional capital (Rafferty, 2011; Reay, 2000, 2004a, 2005) and also be transmitted to the daughter. Rafferty indicates that 'emotional investments [from the family] are highly likely to have a significant impact upon the child's psycho-affective development, and specifically in terms of self-worth' (2011: 246).

'Does my bra show?'

Choosing the 'right' underwear for the right occasion seems almost a 'learnt' skill or ability for these women, and one of the important factors for the 'correct' consumption choices was the outerwear-underwear relationship. Wearing the proper underwear underneath meant that they could be either presented properly or feel appropriate to the situation or the field they were in. For example, Tara from the mother's group mentioned that she has a blue bra to match a light blue blouse she wears at work. She

felt that any other colour, for example black or white, would attract more attention than having a similar colour as her blouse. She also felt that it was the 'right' colour in terms of demonstrating her ability to match her clothes, especially when at work. Evident in an opposite case was that if a woman wears 'inappropriate' underwear then it immediately becomes a topic of discussion and criticism. Indicative was the case of Ruth from the WADs group about when she was employed:

Ruth (F5): I sometimes used to wear a red underskirt when I went to work, and if I was sitting and it was showing then all would go 'oh she's got a red underskirt!'

This demonstrates how these women have mastered this skill of utilising their cultural competences; how they have learnt to mobilise mundane aspects of their dressing, such as underwear, for the 'proper' presentation of their identity at various fields, such as their professional identity; and how, in this case, underwear becomes part of their embodied cultural capital. This would also speak to McDowell's (1997) work on gendered bodies and personal appearance, where she found that backstage work such as styling and dressing, in this case matching outerwear with underwear, becomes workers' cultural capital, and is also seen as an integral part of workplace success (see also Gimlin 2002; 2007). Wearing the 'right' underwear at work has already been discussed as an important element of how these women perform their professional identity (Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013) with implications for how professional they look and feel. Importantly from these data we see that, the support of the 'right' underwear

can help these women turn their overall cultural capital into other forms of capital, especially economic capital from their jobs. Thus underwear works as embodied cultural capital in these women's efforts, expressed in the body competences and dispositions that allow them to construct their professional identity. Relatedly, 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, 2000a: 38, emphasis removed). Abby from group 1, for example, mentioned that she needs to feel as asexual as possible when being at work, and especially when she is teaching, and she emphasises that this affects her outerwear as well:

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 more plain underwear, so I think I wear very boring clothes to work because of my underwear.

Abby's choice of wearing plain underwear and 'boring' clothes at work also reminds us of Tarvis's (1992) assertion that women who want to be perceived as competent must look less feminine. Indeed, referring to how women dress at their workplace, Trethewey (1999: 425) argues that,

learning to navigate one's body through these complex, ambiguous, and precarious 'in-betweens' (e.g. masculinity/femininity, revealing/hiding one's body, conservative/ fashionable dress, social conformity/individual creativity, and sexuality/asexuality) becomes of paramount concern for women in their professional lives.

Kate from the same group 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 all laugh].

Kate's conceived embarrassment demonstrates her cultural competence of knowing not only what is appropriate to wear in her workplace – in this case 'invisible' underwear – but also what is appropriate to wear at her age. On the first hand, it reaffirms the argument that the female body needs to be asexual at the workplace in order not to draw attention to the 'otherness of the femaleness', to appear disciplined and appropriate 'in the masculine, public sphere of work' (Trethewey, 1999: 438) and on the other hand it reveals how thoroughly has Erica absorbed western cultural imperatives around what constitutes appropriate to wear according to age or size (Tischner and Malson, 2008).

In the same vein, Amy (the gym instructor) chooses underwear that provides physical support, but which correspond with the sports clothes she wears at work: her body moves and sweats quite a lot in a gym class so her underwear needs firstly to be invisible under her work outfit (thus she mostly wears thongs), and to hold her body while it moves. She also mentioned that it has to be the right underwear in terms of material, as it is important that it absorbs her sweat so that she looks appropriate while

teaching fitness classes. Nevertheless, her underwear had to also be as invisible as possible because what she wears is quite tight fitting. As she explains ‘I don’t like to be able to see any underwear myself, let alone my clients’. Amy clearly demonstrates here her feel for the game in the field of fitness, but also this commentary allows us to see underwear as part of her embodied cultural capital, similar to the tutors’ group, since it supports her fitness dress and her body throughout exercising. At the same time, she acknowledges that the right underwear should not be visible as it would distract her clients from the professional identity as a fitness instructor.

Concluding this section, underwear’s connections with outerwear is important to my participants in terms of supporting their overall appearance in the particular settings or fields they move in and out of during their everyday life. Thus, and in relation to Entwistle’s point earlier in this section, these women’s choices in underwear when hidden under the outerwear means situating these women’s bodies in the contextual structures of their daily lives, and their interpretations of what these structures require from them in order to look ‘appropriate’. This alludes to Erica’s comment about her age and her underwear being at some point visible to her students, and societal expectations of what is age appropriate (Tischner and Malson, 2008). It also suggests how the ‘right’ underwear while at work, for example, can be seen as women’s embodied cultural capital since it demonstrates their bodily competences when performing their jobs and thus their habitus dispositions and feel for the game, which in this case is knowing what body work is required for their professional fields.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper presented data collected from an empirical research that sought to understand women's experiences of choosing the right underwear, and what sociocultural factors affect these choices. A Bourdieusian framework was used to find something about my participants' choices in terms of habitus-specific factors, such as displaying their (embodied) cultural capital and their taste in underwear. The three themes discussed in this paper include the degree to which these women make aesthetic judgements and display their sense of taste about the underwear they buy, and how they distinguish between the underwear that they need to wear in particular fields; the transmission of their mothers' cultural capital and taste when it comes to their choices in underwear; and the relationship between underwear and outerwear, and how they use the former to support their dress within specific fields or contexts they move in and out of in their daily lives, such as their workplace.

On the whole, these data suggest that different habitus produce different assumptions about underwear's role and function, and hence influence these women's consumption choices. For example, Erica and Christie's different views about which underwear they buy and its role was a result of their different taste and the volumes of capital (mostly cultural capital) they possess. Christie alluded to her temporary low economic capital as the reason for not buying what she thought to be 'not so boring' underwear (not black or white underwear) and of a higher quality, which also meant a

more expensive price. However, she also suggested that her consumption choices are also part of her overall 'poor' sense of style compared to what is marketed as beautiful, special or sexy underwear. These women's taste in terms of what they consider as boring underwear was in accordance to Bourdieu's notion of taste as mostly a sense of distaste. By defining their underwear as boring or 'just to serve its purpose', they then acknowledge that any other type of underwear is thus more 'tasteful' in terms of shape, material or colour. 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 – that is, modes of thinking or quality of style – determines many of these women's choices, as it legitimises social differences.

Cultural capital was also understood in this paper as something strongly transmitted by the family, especially the mother, as Bourdieu (1984) advocates. Indeed, as seen previously, my data suggested that early familiarisation, development and 'passing on' of cultural capital by the mother influence these women's choices in underwear. Some of my participants reported that their mother's 'boring' choices in underwear, or considering underwear as merely functional, had profoundly influenced their adult lives. 'Boring' underwear has been related in my data with low self-confidence and low body-image, which also speaks to how these women have internalised societal demands for specific body shapes and feminine ideals.

However, on the other hand, it was 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 indicates that the types and quality of underwear they would like to consume had they had higher economic capital might be different from what they consumed at the time of our conversation.

Finally, this paper contributes to a limited scholarly discussion around mundane forms of body work (such as buying and wearing the ‘right’ underwear), and the significance of such consumption practices in constructing and reconstructing female identity. Even though it was evident from my data that my participants have learnt to meet societal expectations and distinguish what is appropriate to wear when it comes to different fields or stages in life (e.g. age), they still choose from a myriad of choices in the market: from underwear sections in supermarkets to specialist underwear shops in high streets or online. Thus I argue that habitus-specific consumption practices that are underpinned by women’s taste and volumes of cultural capital can then become gender-specific practices as they ‘fashion’ female identity. Insofar that underwear is visible to others, these women select it according to the situation or field they are in. In this case they are ‘required’ to display their body competence, cultural competence and legitimate competence in the form of symbolic capital and feel for the game because it needs to fit into that context. Nevertheless, and to the extent to which underwear is hidden from view, other factors such as comfort come into play (see Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013). However, even in the case that underwear is hidden, it can work as a form of their embodied cultural capital as it supports their outerwear in the field or context they are in, which in many cases transforms into other forms of capital. All in

all, it is mobilised in many cases to support the role they are called to play or the identity they are called to exemplify in their daily lives, thus constructing their female identity in accordance to western expectations about what a woman should be like.

By suggesting that underwear can be seen as form of embodied cultural capital, I have thus contributed to an emerging literature where feminists and other social theorists appropriate Bourdieu's notion of capital in an attempt to revolutionise it and expand it into other subspecies: for example, the theorisation of emotional capital by Illouz (1997) and Reay (2004a); the expansion of embodied cultural capital to physical capital by Shilling (1991); and to gender capital by McCall (1992) and Huppatz (2012); and also the discussion around female and feminine capital as a form of embodied cultural capital by Huppatz (2009), Lovell (2000) and Skeggs (2004). Indeed, '[d]ifferentiating new forms of capital enables theorists to provide a deeper understanding of wealth and inequality and to account for both class and gender processes' (Huppatz, 2009: 46). Even though the data gathered for my doctoral thesis did not capture behaviours that would allow me to link class structures and gender practices as such, this could be rectified in research projects to come. I do acknowledge this is one of the limitations of my research, however, as mentioned also in the introduction of this paper, I have selected to concentrate on gender and how my participants construct elements of their female identity because I consider gender as the primary classificatory system when encountering others (Brewis, 2005; Gherardi, 1994) and *doing gender* in social situations as a social dynamic and a process of experiencing

the world. 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'.

The research design of this research and specifically the selection of participants on the methodological basis of identity *opseis* is arguably another limitation of this research as it excludes other groups of women or indeed other *opseis* that could say more about the factors affecting women's consumption of underwear. However, the *opseis* reflected in my focus groups and interviews were undeniably constrained from access negotiation and the usual 'conflict between the desirable and the possible' (Buchanan et al., cited in Saunders, et al., 2009: 71). Nevertheless, the data chosen and presented here allow for an analysis of my participants' experiences with mundane forms of consumption such as buying and wearing the 'right' underwear through a Bourdieusian lens, thus expanding the limited literature on underwear and its significance in terms of identity and consumption.

Notes

¹ For more information on the identity *opseis* and the rationale behind the choice of the particular *opseis* guiding this project, see Tsaousi (2011).

² Underwear being visible to others was an important issue for these women; however, it is a topic which has been explored elsewhere (see Tsaousi and Brewis, 2013).

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