

Virility, Enhancement and Men's Underwear

Dr. Shaun Cole

Programme Director Curation and Culture Course

Director MA History & Culture of Fashion

Graduate School

London College of Fashion

The early twenty-first century has seen a fascination with notions of virility expressed through the design and promotion of men's underwear. In 2007 Australian swim and underwear brand aussieBum introduced the 'Wonderjock,' which, founder Sean Ashby said, developed from requests from customers who 'expressed an interest in looking bigger, just like women using the Wonderbra'.ⁱ To achieve this effect the Wonderjock used seams around the pouch and an additional pocket within the pouch front to 'push up' the genitals. The Wonderjock was advertised with images of enhanced thrusting crotches, accompanied by text that noted 'When size matters'.

The emphasis on the crotch and male virility in underwear was not new in the early 2000s. Up until the 1930s men's underwear had primarily been loose fitting, with the exception of the French 'slip', reputedly invented by French brand Petit Bateau (originally founded in 1893). The slip was first advertised in the 20 September 1913 edition of *L'Illustration*, where it was described as 'for athletes in fine cotton jersey, with elastic belt and thighs' and providing 'support without hindering any movement'. Inspired by a photographic image of similar style French 'slip' swimwear American underwear company Cooper's Inc. introduced 'Model 1001' briefs in 1935 which provided 'masculine support' for the wearer's genitals, through a double layer of soft rib-knit fabric in the centre front. The waistband and leg opening bands were made from Lastex, which helped the garment sit securely against the body. This support had previously only been available in an athletic supporter or 'jock strap.'ⁱⁱ In order to reinforce the idea that this new underwear would provide support it was discretely called the Jockey (JOCK-ey). An advertisement that featured in the *Saturday Evening Post* on June 15, 1935 stated that 'only "jockey" gives you this 5-point comfort'. Model 1001 was adapted with the addition of an overlapping inverted Y-shaped seamed fly opening. Cooper's unique patented Y-front was revolutionary in that, owing to the way the fly was angled for modesty when urinating in public, the seams drew attention to the male genitals.

Throughout the second part of the twentieth century a number of adverts made references to the crotch through their description of the styling of the pouch front of their briefs. A 1948 advert for Cooper's Jockey shorts shows the cropped body of a man from mid-thigh to armpits. A banner below his crotch level stating '5 Comfort "Vitamins" Have Youth Appeal' draws attention to the 'Y' of the fly opening and the crotch. Even though the crotch is smooth in this illustration there is a sense of the genitals contained within created by the shading at the lowest point of crotch between the legs. The same year saw an advert for French underwear brand Kangarou's 'Slip Masculin' which announced 'Enfin un Slip Viril!' (At last a virile brief). Similarly, adverts for 'Reiss Scandals' briefs from 1943 ran with the banner headlines of 'New Crotch Comfort' and 'New Comfort – plus support.' In 1965-66 Munsingwear ran adverts for "Slimu" briefs, with "Two way stretch abdominal band" and "Exclusive Male Pouch design", which featured four photographic close-ups of these features, in which the crotch is evident.

Bikini-style brief, such as Jockey's 'new! daring!' Skants briefs, that became popular for men in the 1960s marked a significant advance in 'erotic' design as they functioned primarily as the scantiest permissible cache-sexe. They promoted an new intense crotch-consciousness and English journalist, Rodney Bennett-Smith noted, 'once again, we have a codpiece, albeit a concealed one, to give a fellow self-assurance (should he need it)'.ⁱⁱⁱ The male crotch was on display, in a way that it had not been within western male fashion since the demise of the codpiece in the fifteenth century. The main purpose of the codpiece was not a sexual invitation to women, but an aggressive and eye-catching warning to men. Its importance was concerned with social, temporal and territorial power rather than just sexual prowess. Historian, Thomas Alan King, noted that the elimination of the codpiece as a fashionable garment 'did not so much veil the penis as produce the phallus, that sign of privacy vested in the natural group of masculinity and registering a man's autonomy from any incitement to display.'^{iv}

The 1993 Calvin Klein advert featuring rap musician, Marky Mark grabbing his genitals clearly drew the viewers attention to his crotch, reinforcing Wolfgang Fritz Haug's 1986 assertion that the "purchase of underwear is provoked by emphasising the penis."^v In his 1937 polemic *Trousers and the Most Precious Ornament*, artist Eric Gill had written in his that "any protuberance by which his sex might be known is carefully and shamefully suppressed... no longer the virile member and man's most precious ornament."^{vi} Now man's 'precious ornament' was visibly on display as a marker of a new virility. Three years after Marky Mark publicly grabbed his crotch to sell Klein's underwear, Britain's Advertising Standards Authority

(ASA) requested that underwear brand Brass Monkeys withdraw two of their advertisements with the slogans 'Full Metal Packet' and 'The Loin King' as they were deemed unsuitable due to the size of the models crotch. Speaking for the ASA Graham Fowler stated 'This ad focuses on the man's groin area, treating the male body like a lump of meat.'^{vii} Before producing a new advert featuring the underpants hanging off a bare lightbulb, Brass Monkey's managing director Kevin Higgs said 'We are selling underwear. What are we supposed to do - put the underpants on the model's head?'^{viii}

Despite some underwear brands attempts to promote genital enhancement through advertisement, other campaigns, such as Klein's 1993 Marky Mark and those for Emporio Armani featuring David Beckham (2007) were accused of using digital manipulation to alter the crotch size. Following a series of complaints to ASA that the commercial for David Beckham's range of underwear for high street retailer H&M was 'unsuitable for children to see' and that the images had been enhanced, Beckham announced that he had never 'padded out my pants, or shoved socks down there though... let's just say I've been told I don't need any help in that department'.^{ix}

However, it does seem that some men want or require help in enhancing the appearance of what is contained in their underpants. Like AussieBum's Wonderjock, British brand Shreddies used seam positioning and a variation in fabric weave in their 'package enhancing boxers' to create a strip which ran under the genitals, pushing them upwards and outwards. Indeed, one of their 2009 advertisements directly referenced the controversial 1996 Wonderbra advert with the text "Hello Girls." While it does not advertise itself necessarily as an enhancement garment, Calvin Klein Underwear's low-rise X Micro Hip Brief has seams at the centre front and to the side of crotch area creating a pouch in which the genitals can sit. In other twenty-first century attempts to enhance the appearance of genital size and perceptions of male virility, some brands created garments with padding built in to the pouch front of the underwear, to give the appearance of a greater size, for example Canadian brand Gregg Homme's 'Push-Up' range of briefs, trunks and jockstraps from 2009. American company Andrew Christian's 'Shock Jock Flirt Brief' similarly features a foam insert that adds up to two inches to the wearer's bulge size whilst keeping a 'natural' shape.

Some styles rather than using padding or carefully considered seam placement use an integrated ring of fabric attached to the waistband that encircles the genitals to offer 'lift'. Andrew Christian and American brand C-In2 both included this type of ring in garments known

respectively as 'Show-It' and 'Sling-Support'. Initially all Andrew Christian's underwear included the Show-It technology but this was discontinued a few months after its launch, because it "seems like [Show-It] freaked out some people who are a little more conservative"^x. Rather than include design elements to push up and out or pad out, Swiss fashion designer Athos de Oliveira used a trompe l'oeil effect on his flesh coloured range of trunks, which were printed with images of a sizable penis (erect or flaccid).

Despite a number of brands producing crotch enhancing garments, the one area that Ruth Stevens, European marketing manager for Jockey, believed was almost taboo is that of universal sizing for the crotch pouch. In 2008 she noted that 'there are no actual pouch sizes, as there are with women's bra cup sizes... Men are a bit shyer than women. Can you imagine having to ask for a double-A size?'^{xi} However, over the last few years the shape and size of the pouch has been an area where underwear brands have experimented to allow for a bulge profile enhancement. Commonly known as a contour pouch, this design feature differs from traditional flat fronted underwear as it designed specifically to allow the genitals to sit away from rather than pressing them against the body. They most usually have a centre seam that provides support as well as creating the illusion of a fuller pouch. There are variations with basic styles, such as the Andrew Christian Almost Naked brief being cut like a standard pouch but with extra room for the genitals to hang naturally. Australian brand Obviously's 'Retro Low Rise Brief' and 'Naked Brief' have anatomically shaped pouches that are angled downwards or are cut to allow for the penis to hang into a specially shaped tube, giving the illusion under trousers that no underwear is being worn. The C-in2 'Fit Factor Grower Brief' has narrow pleats either side of the pouch to allow the pouch to alter size for each individual wearer and the 'suspensor pouch' made by Colombian company Mundo Unico has elastic around the sides and bottom of the pouch to increase support and lift. Aware of the variety of options available Lucio De Carvalho, vice president of design for American niche underwear brand Papi notes that some 'enhancing underwear out there have padding and complicated designs' but 'we just want to give [our customers] support and comfort in a sexy cut with ... with a little extra spandex that holds you in place while pushing you forward.'^{xii}

While men's underwear was initially created to offer protection and enhance personal cleanliness, historically it was not considered to be erotic or sexually alluring in the same way as women's underwear. Fashion historian Valerie Steele has, however, identified that male sexuality was centred on the genitals^{xiii} and so men's underwear can be seen to reflect and enhance sexuality and sensuousness, especially when considered alongside the idea that

concealment plays a part in the eroticism of clothing: calling attention to what is beneath those clothes.

ⁱ quoted in Freya Petersen “Aussiebum: Down Under designs in more ways than one” *International Herald Tribune*, January 21, 2008

ⁱⁱ The original athletic supporter was invented in 1874 by C.F. Bennett of Chicago sporting goods company Sharp and Smith and patented in 1887 by Bennett’s newly formed Bike Web Company. The garment, which was designed to give support to bicycle jockeys who had to navigate the heavily cobbled streets of Boston, was formed of a protective cup of fabric with a waistband and straps that ran across the buttocks. It was initially called the Bike jock strap, but the name soon became colloquially abbreviated to “jock strap”.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rodney Bennett-England, *Dress Optional: The Revolution in Menswear*, Peter Owen, London, 1967, pp.44-5

^{iv} Thomas Alan King, *The gendering of men, 1600-1750*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2004, p174

^v Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986; 84

^{vi} Eric Gill. *Trousers and the most precious ornament*. Faber and Faber, London, 1937, p.1

^{vii} <http://www.brassmonkeys.co.uk/press/default.html>. Accessed 13 June 2006.

^{viii} <http://www.brassmonkeys.co.uk/press/default.html>. Accessed 13 June 2006.

^{ix} Harmsworth, Andrei (2012), ‘David Beckham: I’ve come this far without any lucky pants’ <http://www.metro.co.uk/showbiz/889250-david-beckham-i-ve-come-this-far-without-any-lucky-pants#ixzz201VAmcRv>. Accessed 26 July 2012.

^x Andrew Christian quoted in Michael A. Knipp “Andrew Christian: From rags to britches” *Gay & Lesbian Times* No. 1043, 20 December 2007

^{xi} Quoted in Susie Rushton “A brief history of pants: Why men's smalls have always been a subject of concern”. *The Independent* 22 January 2008; 4

^{xii} cited on <http://www.underwearexpert.com/2012/11/papi-sexy/>. Accessed 10 December 2014.

^{xiii} Valerie Steele “Clothing and Sexuality” in Claudia B. Kidwell and Valerie Steele (eds), *Men and Women: dressing the part* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989; 44