

**‘You do act differently when you're in it’: lingerie and femininity**

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**Published version**

WOOD, Rachel (2016). ‘You do act differently when you're in it’: lingerie and femininity. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 25 (1), 10-23.

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## **‘You do act differently when you’re in it’: Lingerie and Femininity**

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines British women’s accounts of buying and wearing lingerie taken from in depth interviews exploring experiences of shopping in sex shops. Lingerie forms one part of a sexual consumer culture that is positioned within a neo-liberal discourse of postfeminism. Women’s engagement with the representation of lingerie, the way they enact lingerie buying and wearing in their everyday lives, and the ways they speak about these practises, show complex and often incongruous strategies of accommodation and negotiation. Such strategies can make lingerie pleasurable and liveable whilst at the same time expressing forms of anxiety, ambivalence or laughter directed towards the performance of femininity and feminine sexuality required and represented by lingerie. I contend that it is precisely through this often contradictory engagement with lingerie that strategic counter discourses emerge, by which women can resist some of the respectable norms of female sexuality. Women position themselves in ambivalent ways in relation to the visual imperative of feminine sexuality represented by lingerie, particularly through an embodied discourse of comfort and discomfort, or through the playful and pleasurable performance of non-naturalised gender roles.

**Keywords:** femininity, consumption, the body, postfeminism, pleasure, resistance

I think the first time I actually bought something was, awfully, from an Ann Summers party... So there were kind of things in the catalogue, it starts off with the lingerie, and then as you go through it gets sort of dirtier or sluttier, or whatever, um, and sort of the hardcore stuff is nearer the back and so you, everyone’s kind of ordering furtively from the front pages.  
(Florence, in interview)

This paper examines British women’s experiences and accounts of buying and wearing lingerie, taken from interviews about shopping in stores that sell erotic or sexual products. As the quote above demonstrates, lingerie is often positioned as a safe ‘way in’, or as a more socially acceptable form of this kind of shopping, set against the purchase of ‘dirtier or sluttier’ products such as bondage items, dildos or vibrators. As Florence notes, the Ann Summers catalogue reproduces this distinction. Similarly, Ann Summers stores position lingerie towards the front of the store, with sex toys concealed within circular display partitions or down stairs. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (1982), which requires licenced sex shops to conceal interiors with doors and blacked out windows, has contributed to this ‘successful targeting of female consumers’ by high street shops like Ann Summers (Smith, 2007, 169). Because only 10% of Ann Summers’ stock is explicitly designed for sexual use, with lingerie and novelty items forming the main product base, the shop can retain an unlicensed and open high street presence (Coulmount

and Hubbard, 2010). As a result, Ann Summers' layout draws both spatial and moral boundaries regarding what is safe and acceptable and what should be hidden or private with regard to heterosexual sexual expression. The desire to display the female body is constructed as an appropriate *public* act, whilst toys and products that speak to genital or other bodily pleasures need to be private, concealed and discreet. This reproduces normative constructions in which the sexual display of the lingerie clad female body is, particularly in heterosexual relationships, an often expected component of both female and male sexuality.

This paper addresses the 'everyday significance' of lingerie in women's lives (Juffer, 1998, 8). Women's engagement with the representation of lingerie and the ways that they enact and speak about lingerie buying and wearing in their everyday lives show complex and often incongruous strategies of accommodation and negotiation. These strategies make buying and wearing lingerie gratifying for women in a number of ways, whilst at the same time potentially critiquing and even resisting some of the norms of femininity that lingerie represents. Lingerie is made pleasurable through the use of 'nice' lingerie to construct respectable classed gender identities, to work on relationships and bodies, and to gain sexual pleasure in being the object of visual desire. In talking about these pleasures women often express forms of anxiety, ambivalence or laughter. I contend that it is precisely through this contradictory engagement that strategic counter discourses emerge, by which women can resist respectable norms of female sexuality represented by lingerie. In particular, a discourse of (dis)comfort opens up ways in which women can explore the embodied experience and feelings of wearing lingerie. This discourse has the potential to circumvent the dominant *visual* code of the female body as an object as pleasure, replacing it with a more ambivalent embodied narrative. Women can also use laughter as a strategy to distance themselves and refuse to take seriously the gender performance produced by 'dressing up' in lingerie, enacting that performance in pleasurably playful and potentially non-normative ways.

### **'Lingerie'**

The broad definition of 'lingerie' that I am employing in this paper relates primarily to items of underwear purchased and worn for use in a sexual context. Often, underwear worn in this setting involves the addition of other garments beyond the practical everyday bra and knickers. These items might include suspender belts, stockings, corsets, waspies, bodies, babydoll dresses, body stockings, and so on. It may also include 'dress up' costumes such as a 'naughty nurse' or 'French maid', burlesque items including nipple tassels and gloves, or bondage accessories like blindfolds and cuffs. However, for some women 'lingerie' may be as simple as a matching bra and knicker set from M&S. As Tsaousi argues, women use different kinds of underwear to construct different aspects of the self at different times: from worker, to sports player, mother or sexual partner (2011). This paper focuses on underwear worn for a sexual purpose, defined here as lingerie.

Because the interviews were about 'sex shopping' in general, women did tend to focus on underwear for sexual use as defined above. From Ann Summers to independent sex boutiques, all erotic shops aimed at women stock some form of lingerie. However, women also purchase a range of products that could be described as lingerie from more 'ordinary' high street department stores including M&S, BHS, and Debenhams, underwear stockists such as La Senza and Bravissimo, or more expensive designer outlets such as Agent Provocateur. All these stores are discursively constructed as feminine, reproducing a normative version of the 'sexy' female body through their range and display of lingerie (Morrison, 2007).

Women's practice of and talk about lingerie purchase is 'relationally constituted' then (Gregson et al., 2002), built upon an awareness of a range of different retail environments and kinds of shopping with different sexual and taste connotations. I explore some of these connotations further below, but note here that the women interviewed were aware and often critical of the distinctions they perceived between 'sexy' and 'everyday' lingerie. Some women, including Clara and Jade, were keen to assert that 'lingerie' such as stockings and suspender belts was something they liked to wear every day, and not just when they anticipated wearing it with a sexual partner. In contrast, Florence was critical of the way in which 'uncomfortable' styles with sexual connotations, such as lace and revealing cuts, have become ubiquitous and almost unavoidable in more 'everyday' underwear designs and stores. So whilst I am working with the definition of lingerie outlined above, there is clearly a degree of negotiation with, and slippage between, the categories of 'everyday underwear' and 'sexual lingerie'.

### **The study**

The data drawn on for this paper is taken from sixteen interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013. In seeking participants I aimed to speak to a broad range of women, from those who shop for sexual products regularly to those who have never done so. Individual interviews were conducted in person, with participants recruited through a range of 'snowball' sampling methods, making use of my own existing networks both online and off. As Kath Browne has demonstrated (2005), snowball recruitment means that the researcher is more likely to be trusted by the participant and conversation may be more open and 'natural' as a result. At the same time, snowball sampling inevitably leads to a degree of 'sameness' between the cultural identity of the researcher and that of the interviewees.

A large proportion of the participants whose interviews I am drawing on here, then, are in their 20s or 30s, white, heterosexual and living in the South of England. Most of the women interviewed are university educated and work in professional jobs. However, I do not wish to normalise the experiences of these women as being representative. The significant number of women amongst my participants who do not fit into one or more of these socially privileged categories, though they are in a minority, do show the range of women who engage with this culture, and in some

cases their experiences of sex shopping highlight to some of the taken for granted privileges of women in the majority categories. Both Margaret and Alice, for example, spoke about how they preferred to shop online as they felt that the language used by sex shop assistants, the products and the shop layout only anticipated heterosexual consumers; and Simone described how she felt sex shops assumed a whiteness to female sexuality that did not account for her experience and made her feel unwelcome.

I do not understand these interviews to represent revelations of the participants' 'true' feelings about sex shopping: like all knowledge the accounts produced in interview are constructed and 'not "out there" for the researcher to "capture"' (Tsaousi, 2011, 111). The interview is a social encounter in which meanings and researcher/participant subjectivities are actively co-created and shaped (Etherington, 2004, 33). Talking about lingerie often involved an embodied construction of meaning that can be somewhat difficult to capture in written form. For example, Claire explained that: 'the sexier the underwear the less comfortable it tends to be, and the more you go [pushes breasts up] with your tits, and you've got whalebones in here [pushes fingers under arms] y'know, digging in'. Participants frequently touched parts of their bodies or used their body language and posture to convey the feelings of wearing lingerie that they were describing. As I argue below, embodied talk about and experiences of wearing lingerie can allow women to express forms of sexual pleasure or potential critique that exceed the dominant visual code of the 'sexy body' in lingerie representation. Critics of postfeminist culture have outlined the way that this feminine sexual body is constructed, and also offered ways of understanding women's potential resistance to this culture.

### **Postfeminism, agency and contradiction**

Lingerie forms one part of a sexual consumer culture that I position broadly within a discourse of postfeminism. Critics have identified postfeminism as a shift from 'passive' to 'active' representations of femininity in mainstream media and culture: women are shown as being empowered to 'choose' to present themselves as sexually autonomous individuals (Gill, 2003, McRobbie, 2001, 2004). This individualisation of women is made culturally visible through the 'manipulation of appropriate consumer goods' (Attwood, 2005, 401). Postfeminist representations of female sexuality situate femininity primarily within the feminine 'sexy body', which is portrayed as both a site of empowerment and as requiring constant surveillance and improvement (Gill, 2007b).

One of the primary debates within scholarship on postfeminist culture has been around the degree of agency that young women in particular are perceived to have (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006, 2007, Gill, 2007a). These debates leave us with a need for a more nuanced definition for what female 'agency' means and how it operates in contemporary postfeminist culture. Evans et al. focus their attention on the contradictions inherent within a lived postfeminist identity (2010). They

emphasise the possibility for 'unpredictable subversions, slippages, resistances and multiple readings' in the ambivalent ways by which women take up sexualised culture (119). . This allows for the critique to be levelled at the 'regimes of power operating within neo-liberal and postfeminist rhetoric', rather than at the women negotiating these regimes. The focus is shifted to the continual reproductions of the female self through culturally available discourses that can often occur in potentially resistant ways (127).

It is this more ambivalent, contextual and shifting form of 'agency' that is apparent in my conversations with women about lingerie. As I will show, the negotiations and reproductions of femininity that take place through lingerie use are often expressed on and through the body and spoken about through an embodied discourse of pleasures, sensations and discomforts. Theorisations of the body as docile and at the same time potentially resistant or agentic further illuminate the processural and ambivalent understandings of agency that I am employing here.

### **The body and femininity**

Susan Bordo's feminist theorisation of the role that the body plays in accommodating and resisting regimes of power draws heavily on the Foucauldian idea of the 'docile body' (1993). She argues that homogenous mass culture images of the female body act as normalising forces against which women measure and modify themselves. Through every day practises of embodied self-regulation the body becomes disciplined, 'less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification' (166) These everyday body modification and maintenance practises are very often experienced as being pleasurable and freely chosen (27). Bordo contends that these willing reproductions of normative femininity necessitate an analysis of power 'from below', drawing on Foucault (167). For Foucault power operates through the shaping and proliferation as well as the repression of desire. Bordo contends that this framework allows scholars to be alert to the ways in which 'local and minute' forms of resistance might emerge gradually, paradoxically, and through those very acts that seemingly conform to 'prevailing norms' (28). It is precisely because gender power relations are sustained through embodied practises that they are so unstable and can be perpetually disrupted or resisted in unpredictable ways (262).

Shelley Budgeon's analysis of her interviews with young women about their relationships to their bodies develops Bordo's approach (2003). Budgeon argues that women do not simply internalise and discipline themselves in relation to mass media representations of the female body. Instead, she contends, women enter into complex and contradictory strategies of negotiation with norms 'in ways that suggest that the body is best theorized as a borderline' (43):

Bodies then can be thought not as *objects*, upon which culture writes meanings, but as *events* that are continually in the process of becoming – as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade (50)

By situating the body as a temporal event in continual movement and flux we can account for the ways in which embodied practises are constantly negotiated on the borderline of the flesh, allowing for minute shifts in the distribution of power. The idea of the body 'as becoming' draws on a Deleuzian approach that theorises bodies in terms of what they do and how they are lived, asking what 'capacities, capabilities, and transformations' may be possible (Coffey, 2012, 4). As Grimshaw contends, women can make active interventions into bodily practices and habits that impact upon their ways of being in important and often positive ways that exceed an understanding of the female body as docile and conforming to 'ideological pressures' (1999, 115). Female bodies 'become' through the continual negotiation of the relationship between the body and femininity: a negotiation that is can be experienced as constrained, anxious or alienating at the same time as it can be playful, pleasurable or empowering (Frost, 2005, 83). Buying and wearing lingerie represents one aspect of everyday life through which women make and remake processural and embodied feminine identities.

### **Lingerie and representation**

Buying and wearing lingerie necessitates some level of engagement with the popular visual representations of lingerie that are promoted to women through branding, catalogues and advertising. A number of scholars have undertaken analysis of the representation of femininity in the visual culture of lingerie. British scholarship has explored the norms promoted through lingerie advertising, which reflects the postfeminist cultural shift towards representing women as 'active' sexual agents (Gill, 2003). Since at least the 1990s, advertising has sold back to women the figure of 'the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is for ever "up for it."' (Gill, 2009), with the 1994 Wonderbra campaign being a notable example (Winship, 2000). There is a homogeneity to the kinds of female bodies that are visible in such representations (Amy-Chinn, 2006). Narrow visual representations of women in lingerie were on occasion brought into conversation by participants in interview, demonstrating what Budgeon describes as a 'clear awareness of the mediation of their own relationship to their bodies' (2003, 40). One example of this was from Florence, who spoke about a recent Marks and Spencer's lingerie campaign featuring a 'size 6', 'beautiful', 'buxom' model:

And you're like oh *God* – *that's* what he's expecting when I take off my clothes, that's what *I'm* expecting [laughing]. And yet when I wear this underwear I do *not* look like that! I think, somehow I thought lingerie was like this magical cure and everything would just, "poof!" into perfection.

In this quote Florence laughs at the way in which she feels the visual norms of female beauty in lingerie advertising have shaped her impression of her body and her expectations of lingerie. Although it is clear that representations of women's bodies and sexualities in lingerie advertising have had an impact on her body image, Florence is also very much aware and critical of this mediation of the relationship to

her body. Women's consumption of and response to lingerie advertising is not my primary focus in this paper. However, I am arguing that an ambivalent and critical process of negotiation, shown here by Florence in response to advertising imagery, is one that women also undertake through the practises of buying and wearing lingerie in their everyday lives.

As Bordo's Foucauldian framework shows (1993), power constitutes women within regulatory regimes, but it also actively shapes our desires and pleasures, so that such regimes can be lived and felt by women as something done 'of and for themselves' (Frost, 2005, 73). Women use a number of discursive strategies through which lingerie wearing is shown to be not only liveable but actively pleasurable. In the following sections, I examine how pleasure is constructed through discourses of authenticity, 'niceness', and looking/feeling good. I then explore the more ambivalent themes of relationship and body work and anxiety, before focusing on the strategic counter discourses of (dis)comfort and laughter.

### **Taste and Authenticity**

Class identifications frequently intersect with gender in women's lingerie choices and uses. Merl Storr's ethnography of Ann Summers parties (2002, 2003) provides an insight into the ways in which lingerie buying constructs classed gender identities. Storr shows that judgements of different lingerie products as 'tarty' 'tacky' 'vulgar' or 'classy' are deeply embedded in ideas of respectable femininity (2003). Ann Summers itself, as a brand, is particularly 'freighted with connotations of taste and class' (2002, 25). General discussion of Ann Summers stores with my interview participants commonly evoked negative comments such as those below:

Yeah, just a bit kind of a porn-y sexuality rather than something that was actually, I dunno, something I could enjoy... I don't think that's sexy you know, like PVC, like um, pants made out of edible candy. (Agatha)

I think the role play outfits are just the tackiest thing in there... PVC nurses, and stuff like that is just so cringe-y and so tacky and I think it's such a stereotype now that a lot of women actually, women that are like me would just be like no, that's ridiculous. (Claire)

Like if I was gonna dress up for someone I'd quite like the authenticity rather than sort of a cheap Ann Summers imitation of a waitress... cause it's always really cheap and really tiny and just has no authenticity about it (Florence)

Although it often transpired in interviews that women had recently purchased lingerie or other products from Ann Summers, the idea of the store as an overall brand was used as a way of Othering and distancing themselves from an inferior form of classed femininity. As these quotes show, the sexuality attached to Ann Summers is seen as inauthentic, 'porny', 'stereotypy' or, as Clara described, a 'man's idea of



what's sexy'. The performance of femininity that rejects this inauthentic display is therefore positioned as more feminine, more tasteful, and above all more authentic; as tasteful lingerie is constructed as a more genuine reflection of the woman who wears it.

### **'Nice' Lingerie**

One word that was used overwhelmingly in descriptions of lingerie that women liked was 'nice', with frequent descriptions of 'nice underwear', or 'nice things' in 'nice colours'. 'Nice' underwear was primarily defined through what it was described as *not* being: it was often contrasted with bright colours and 'cheap' designs, such as when Claire expressed her dislike for 'Barbie pink', Agatha felt that nice bras were not 'cheap ones from Primark', and Clara spoke about the red underwear she had bought in her twenties and now thought was tacky and horrible. It is also not too revealing: Florence described nice underwear as not too 'tiny', Agatha disliked thongs, and both Shelly and Karin expressed their distaste for unflattering, exposing peephole bras. Beyond this definition of what 'nice' lingerie was not like, descriptions were often rather vague, with women mentioning 'nice materials' (Agatha), 'nice subdued colours' (Beatrice), or 'something that fits nicely' (Clara). This 'niceness', particularly when opposed to other words that might have been chosen such as 'sexy' or 'gorgeous', seems to sum up a pretty, tasteful, feminine style of lingerie that is safe and respectable, valued primarily for its *in*offensiveness.

'Nice' was also sometimes set against dull, everyday, practical underwear. Wearing something 'nice' in this sense was a treat for yourself, making women feel better about themselves and their bodies, as Jade described: 'I know I'm sort of wearing something nice, I don't know, it just makes me feel quite like confident in a way, I don't know, it just makes me feel better'. Overall 'nice' appears to connote a pretty, soft version of femininity which is special and different from the everyday, but at the same time carries no risk of appearing to be distasteful.

### **Looking good, feeling good**

'Nice' clearly means more than simply a choice of product, it is also a feeling associated with lingerie. As Agatha told me: 'it's nice cause it just makes you feel nice when you dress nice... It's just nice I think, it's nice feeling wanted and being looked at'. The emotional investment in the respectable classed feminine identification produced through buying and wearing the 'right' underwear can create a feeling of confidence, a boost through doing something 'nice' for yourself, or a pleasurable feeling of 'being wanted'.

Wearing lingerie was often described by the women interviewed as making them feel more confident about their bodies: this was expressed in terms of both how bodies appear and what they do. As Shelly said: "You want to look nice when you start to take your clothes off. I think it's partly about wanting to feel good about yourself as well'. Looking good translates to feeling good, which can translate to feeling more

self-assured when performing sexually: Jade described the feeling that she looked good in lingerie whilst having sex with her partner as making her feel 'more confident in the things I'm doing'. Indeed, lingerie played a complex role within intimate relationships for all the women interviewed, providing a source of pleasure but also one of conflict and anxiety.

### **'Making the effort': lingerie and relationships**

Particularly for some women with male partners, a tension between lingerie something worn 'for me' or 'for' a partner emerged as a site of struggle. As discussed above, the discourses of confidence and doing something 'nice' for yourself were used to explain how buying and wearing lingerie is something done 'for me'. Doing something 'for' a partner was also individualised through its expression as a practise of loving and caring for that person, with many women describing buying something special for an occasion like a birthday or Valentine's Day:

I dunno like maybe Valentine's Day? So I wanted to get something new for that, yeah, I don't know yeah I wanted to make it a bit more special maybe or to make it like, to make it a bit different maybe. (Jade)

Lingerie buying and wearing can be seen as something that makes an evening special and that enhances a loving sexual relationship. Claire in particular spoke about the effort she put into choosing colours and designs her partner would like, and how she felt she was doing something 'good for the relationship' when she wore lingerie:

If I buy stockings and suspenders I'm not really concerned about what I like... I mean y'know you get kind of like a nice night out of it, but I'm buying it for him and with something I think he'll like in mind. (Claire)

The emotional work involved in this kind of relationship improvement is coded as feminine. Even Jade, who spoke about buying lingerie for Valentine's Day with her female partner, was aware that buying lingerie to make an occasion special was something she did, and her partner did not: 'it's more likely to be me that does that to be honest. Um, also she's not very good at keeping surprises so I don't think she'd be able to do the same'. The work involved in 'keeping the surprise' is a feminised form of emotional and embodied labour. The actual labour involved in this is doubly obscured, both in its expression through an affective discourse of love and care, and through the 'surprise' element, which reveals only the perfected image of the lingerie clad body to the unknowing spectator. As Jade described: 'not that I made a big deal but it was just like, when I got undressed or whatever it was there'.

The moment of being 'looked at' in lingerie was absolutely pivotal to many women as a form of validation for the invisible work they had put in. A number of women expressed the importance of looking good and being looked at and wanted. Claire

explained this in detail, making explicit the emotional risk involved in revealing the surprise:

I do actually find it quite daunting like, once you kind of get going it's alright because, you get a good reaction and sort of confirms what you've done is good, and it's nice and you feel sexy, and y'know, you can forget about your hang-ups and you don't worry about it...but, but, the whole leading up to it, even if you think they'll like it, there's always a bit in the back of my mind that goes 'he's just going to laugh at you anyway'

The moment of validation provided by the desiring gaze is seen by Claire here as removing the feelings of insecurity, anxiety and pressure. Being looked at and desired provides a moment of forgetting, where 'hang-ups' melt away. It is the contingency of this deferred moment of being looked at, and its role in confirming success, that is implicated as the source of the pressure and anxiety that it promises to remove.

Buying and wearing lingerie was sometimes spoken about using the phrase 'making the effort', which does serve to make the work behind this performance more tangible: 'I think it's just making the effort isn't it? And it's just doing something for someone else as well' (Agatha). Making the effort describes the work of maintaining a performance of femininity. Clara used this phrase to describe a time in her twenties where she wore lingerie for male partner, showing her ambivalent feelings towards this: 'My partner at the time liked the fact that I had made a bit of an effort for him. But I did sort of start questioning who was I doing it for as well - was it for him or for me?'. When the labour behind the buying and wearing of lingerie is made visible, there is potential for a greater degree of ambivalence or even a critique to emerge. Another key way of speaking about the labour behind lingerie was through speaking about the multiple, connected forms of body work involved in creating the 'surprise'.

### **Body work**

Coffey defines body work as 'the embodied everyday work that individuals undertake to modify or 'improve' their bodies' (2012, 2). Scholarly approaches to body work attend to the ways in which these practises can be situated within the 'body project' of self-improvement required by modern Western neo-liberal culture. Wearing lingerie is, in itself, clearly a form of body work. It is also deeply concomitant with other body improvement practises. The transformation of the female body into a desirable 'surprise' for a partner involves multiple connected acts of body work.

Dieting and weight loss was often mentioned by women who sometimes felt 'too fat' for certain lingerie styles. As Shelly explained: 'nice lingerie is uncomfortable when you're fat, it really is... and if I put on 4 or 5 pounds the thongs are not so comfortable'. Monitoring her diet to make sure her weight did not increase is linked to the image she wants to create through lingerie. For Agatha, hair removal was part of the surprise to prepare for a sexual partner: 'Like I would wax everything sometimes,

and that is the surprise element, cause I think that's like you get down and touch and it's all gone, that's like quite good shock for them'. Lingerie provides an impetus to carry out related body work as it is so often positioned as something 'special': an occasion for which the body must be prepared and perfected.

Claire spoke in more detail about the micro bodily modifications, such as gesture, posture and dress, that went into wearing lingerie for her:

You do have to plan a *lot*, like what you wear over the top... if you put anything on that shows any kind of lines... if you want it to be a surprise, and you're out with your boyfriend, you don't want him like, feeling anywhere [laughs]... Like round your thighs or anything, so you get into this like, weird, and y'know, you sit differently, you do act differently when you're in it because, just physically because you don't want the lines to show and you don't want anyone to touch it and feel it.

Claire makes clear the multiple forms of body work that are associated with lingerie. These physical and emotional labours are invisible to her male partner, indeed, the reason behind them is to maintain his lack of knowledge of the work she has put in, and on which the success of the final spectacle is contingent. The work of creating the spectacle is inextricable from the work of concealing that labour, as Ferreday argues; 'the feminine subject must constantly work to conceal the labour and anxiety involved in its production' (2008, 56). However, I do not wish to obscure the pleasure that can be gained from this work; Claire's description does suggest that an embodied sense of (sexual) anticipation and excitement is involved preparing and presenting one's body as a 'surprise'. Feminine body work certainly involves a range of pleasurable feelings alongside anxious ones.

### **Anxiety**

Comments about body size were the primary form through which the anxieties related to lingerie were expressed. This anxiety was felt when wearing lingerie but also when browsing in shops and looking at different designs. Karin highlighted tight fitting and revealing items as being amongst those that made her feel this way: 'now that I've got a bit more weight on, you feel a bit more self-conscious when you look at some of these things'. Florence spoke about the range of images of women in lingerie 'looking really hot' that are displayed in the stores and indicated that her own body was lacking in comparison: 'there's me, with bits rolling out all over the sides'.

Feelings of inadequacy and shame, with the body seen as failing to perform femininity as well as required, were common too when speaking about wearing lingerie. Claire spoke about failing to perform the much anticipated 'surprise' reveal because of anxieties that were attributed in part to feeling 'too fat': 'I've wimped out before, y'know if I'm feeling particularly fat on a day or something I've wimped out. I've wimped out literally before we get in bed before, like, pulled it all off and hidden it under the bed'. These feelings reflect what Bordo describes as the effects of

continual body work practises: 'we continue to memorise on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough' (1993, 166). However, in the following section I want to complicate this by exploring how a discourse of discomfort, whilst anxiously positioning the body as failed, can at the same time suggest an ambivalent form of critique, where 'discomfort' with the performance of visually desirable femininity represented by wearing lingerie can be expressed.

### **(Dis)comfort**

Comfort was something that was regularly raised when discussing what lingerie styles women would or wouldn't choose. Descriptions of items as 'uncomfortable' often seemed to stand in for some of the issues I have explored, including bodily anxieties, such as when Shelly described how thongs are 'uncomfortable when you're fat'; or taste distinctions, when 'cheap' lingerie was described as nasty and scratchy. The offered solution to these forms of discomfort might be to alter the body, or to become a 'better' consumer and choose more comfortable products.

Florence was one interviewee who spoke about this issue at greater length, and I explore her narrative in some detail here in order to show how discomfort can be discursively deployed as a form of critique of some of the gender norms circulated around lingerie. Florence implied that the practicalities of having sex wearing lingerie are awkward and uncomfortable for her. While initially she suggested that a better, more well-fitting product would solve these feelings, as she continued her 'discomfort' with lingerie was constructed as more complex. In particular, she spoke about her discomfort with the pressure to 'appear' as the perfect visual object for the gaze of a male partner, something that she had tried unsuccessfully to do in the past:

I just felt very uncomfortable... wearing lingerie and knowing that I'd have to take my clothes off and they'd have to see it. And then you have to prance around a bit cause you feel that there's, 'I'm wearing it, therefore you have to see it for a bit'... I think when you wear lingerie you're almost advertising it, so therefore you have to be *in* it for a while, and therefore you have to just be in your pants and bra for a bit, and that just makes me feel uncomfortable.

The memory of the feelings of awkwardness and discomfort were visibly performed by Florence during this section of the interview. She was physically squirming, displaying the embodied sensations she described, and even laughed and asked: 'am I portraying my awkwardness?'. The physical feelings that are being remembered, felt and spoken about here are clearly unpleasant, but they also form the foundation of a critique of the expectations produced by lingerie. She describes wearing lingerie as 'advertising' the body. Her discomfort is directed towards what she perceives as the pressure to perform a particular version of femininity, and with the requirement 'be seen' and appreciated visually as an object of sexual desire:

I think lingerie offers that *tease*. So you're kind of like 'hey look at me, I'm wearing something sexy' and you're like 'oh no can't take it off yet', but I just find that I - can't really do that tease, I think lingerie sets up this expectation of sort of what it is to be female, and what it is to have sex, and, sort of like, quite, almost empowering, I think it is quite an empowering thing. Because if you hold it the right way, you can kind of be like, 'oh yeah, you really wanna have sex with me, but I'm just looking hot in my pants and you can't'. Whereas, I just felt like, so worried about the situation, and so *un-* turned on by the situation, that it didn't work that way.

Her feelings about lingerie are expressed here through contradiction. On the one hand she reiterates a postfeminist discourse of lingerie as 'empowering' for women, giving them ownership and control of their sexuality. This empowering performance is seen as being out of her reach however: 'I can't do that'; 'it didn't work that way'. This contradictory engagement with the practise of lingerie wearing is self-berating and self-liberating at the same time: she constructs her femininity as failed (she can't inhabit the empowered sexiness expected of her), and at the same time sets up this norm as unrealistic and unfairly pressurising, an impossible 'expectation' of what it is to be female. Florence's engagement with lingerie here is an example of negotiation with postfeminist culture through contradiction, expressed in this case through a discourse of discomfort with the performance of femininity required by lingerie. It is precisely the *embodied* nature of her narrative that allows Florence to express her ambivalence towards the pressure to appear and be looked at in lingerie, offering a temporary moment of resistance to the visual imperative of normative femininity.

In their study of young women speaking about their bodies and sexual practises, Maxwell and Aggleton (2011) argue that the female body can be experienced as an 'agentic force'. They demonstrate that feelings of pleasure and/or discomfort are experienced as originating in the body can subsequently (re)direct practise in sexual relationships, allowing young women to assert agency: 'physical and emotional sensations and residues (be they pleasurable, painful or unarticulated) experienced through sexual and intimate relationships may provide the stimulus for potentially new modes of thinking and doing' (310). Florence's articulation of embodied discomfort, her physical feelings of being ill at ease and 'so *un-*turned on' by wearing lingerie, not only redirect her sexual practise but also form the basis of a critique of the imperative to visually perform femininity that lingerie reproduces.

### **Laughter in (gender) play**

The descriptions of pleasure, anxiety and critique analysed so far in this paper show women taking lingerie and its related practises seriously. Indeed, when Claire described her anxiety building up to the moment of surprise reveal, the idea of her partner's humiliating laughter was what was feared. But this was not always the case when participants spoke about wearing lingerie, and indeed some women explicitly

valued lingerie precisely for its ability to produce sexual pleasure out of a different kind of laughter, that of performance and play.

Karin was alone amongst respondents in favouring role play costumes above other forms of lingerie. She described costumes as fun and entertaining:

The costumes are quite entertaining... To be honest I don't think either of us particularly have a heavy fantasy sex kind of thing, I've never really dreamed of being carried off by a soldier or anything like that... I think it just makes it more playful... It just gives it more of a sense of fun.

Penny was another respondent who described a playful pleasure and laughter in the gender roles offered by lingerie. She enjoys dressing up primarily for the sense of fun and play it creates:

I just think it's more funny and makes me laugh sometimes, to get dressed up.

R: Oh really, how do you mean?

P: It's um, just like, playing and laughing and having a laugh or – pretending or sort of role playing. So going 'Oh, hello darling', y'know, sort of, um, I think it's fun... But I find it ridiculous at the same time!

R: Do you? So when you say you find it ridiculous, do you actually laugh -

P: - yeah, yeah -

R - or sort of ham it up a bit?

P: Yeah it's hammy, it's very Rocky Horror Show [laughs]

Penny's description here shows her playful attitude towards the performance of a glamorous, hyper sexualised femininity that 'dressing up' in lingerie can produce. Penny and Karin's role play calls to mind Debra Farreday's description of the performance of femininity within the practise of burlesque (2008). Drawing on Butler's concept of performativity (1990), Farreday argues that burlesque femininity, like drag, is a self-aware gender performance that reveals the constructedness of the gendered body. Burlesque performers she argues revel in flaunting the spectacle of their femininity and draw attention towards to the work involved in creating it (56). In contrast to the lingerie practises described earlier, where the success of the 'surprise' is predicated on the invisibility of forms of emotional and body work that are coded as feminine, the laughter of Karin and Penny draws attention to, and refuses to take seriously, the performance of femininity that wearing lingerie entails.

I conclude with a final example that demonstrates one way in which the feminine performance and play offered by lingerie can potentially be de-naturalised from the

female body. Shelly describes the way she and a male partner played with forms of feminine performance through lingerie:

I had a lover... he was very into the feminine, and he liked to cross dress. So we used lingerie for more than one person which I think is quite an interesting way of using lingerie as well. And he really liked really feminine women, and I wasn't, and that's when I started thinking about what I was wearing underneath, and we bought some lingerie together. Um, so that was really nice and now, yeah, yeah, I like nice things.

In this account, lingerie's naturalised mapping on to femininity and forms of feminine labour, and indeed the mapping of femininity onto the sexed female body, are troubled and disconnected. Shelly sees her male partner's performance of the feminine as allowing her to explore and play with her own femininity. This example shows that lingerie can be used playfully by heterosexual lovers in a non-heteronormative way that potentially disrupts the gendered norms of sexual practise. Along with Karin and Penny, Shelly's use of lingerie derives its pleasure from forms of performance, play and laughter that denaturalise and destabilise the connections between lingerie and normative femininity.

Whilst the majority of women interviewed for this study were in their 20s and early 30s, Karin, Penny and Shelly's ages range from late 30s to early 50s. Like all the other women interviewed, these three expressed some anxiety in response to the pressures of lingerie, yet they do also appear to have access to a more playful performance of femininity. Although this sample is too small to generalise, it does suggest that an analysis of women's engagement with lingerie in their 30s, 40s, 50s and older, and these women's responses to postfeminist sexual culture more generally, is worthy of further research. This is particularly important given much influential work in this field has focused on the articulations and experiences of young women and girls, who are the primary subjects of postfeminist culture's address (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006, Gill, 2007a, Lamb and Peterson, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Lingerie advertising emphasises creating a perfect desirable visual spectacle through the lingerie clad female body (Amy-Chinn, 2006). Women do accommodate this expectation, gaining pleasure from visually performing femininity as a form of love and care for a partner, to feel sexually 'wanted', to enhance feelings of confidence or to do something 'nice' for themselves. But women also have diverse ways of critiquing and negotiating this discourse. Through speaking about the tensions and anxieties caused by lingerie, the multiple forms of body work and 'effort' involved in creating a sexual spectacle, and the embodied feelings of discomfort caused, the ambivalences and contradictions involved in the everyday performance of femininity and female sexuality are exposed. Buying and wearing lingerie can be seen as part of the process of bodily 'becoming' (Budgeon, 2003), where meanings



are made and remade through a continuous everyday process of both resistance and compromise. Whether the lingerie clad body becomes feminine spectacle, becomes failure, or becomes playfully 'ridiculous', women's multiple, shifting and processural strategies of negotiation show that postfeminist sexual consumer culture will never be an easy fit.

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