

# Men's Underwear and its Relation to Masculinity?

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## **i. introduction**

I was sitting in one of the stations the mass transit railway (mtr) in Hong Kong one day, reading a book by a Japanese feminist writer on women's lingerie while waiting for time to pass. My mother had asked me to cover the cover with a newspaper, because she did not want me to be seen with this book. I personally did not mind. And while I was reading, there was a woman in her fifties probably, who came to sit down next to me, and exclaimed that "everything is changing today." I looked at her in amusement and said "yes, indeed." She did not see the contents of my book.

"You know, there are a lot of things that is wrong in our society today. Young people today are having such a hard time."

"Our society is a little crazy," I reply.

And out of nowhere, she exclaimed, "you know...homosexuals are very wrong! It's against the word of God." I do not know why she brought up this topic. Whatever was the cause of her anguish, I excused myself at that point, and left her with her thoughts on what she thought of homosexual persons.

I never liked the concept of masculinity because in a patriarchy I lived as a woman. And I did not like what masculinity had made of homosexual men, because I have a very dear friend who identifies as a gay man and finds it difficult to come out to people about his orientation because in our society, a gay man is not a real man. Therefore, after talking to the strange woman at the station, I decided to do this study on gay men and underwear in Hong Kong to understand how masculinity is constructed into a piece of intimate clothing. During my study however, it became obvious that I could not only focus on gay men if I were to understand masculinity and consequently included straight men in my study. This study

therefore, aims to explore how masculinity intersects with the constructions of the understanding of men's underwear among Hong Kong men.

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### **masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, and fashion**

Hegemonic masculinity, a term coined by Connell (see Connell 1987), has been used to refer to an ideal form of masculinity in society and employed as a tool of analysis of patriarchy which subordinates women and marginalizes men. Like femininity and its impact on women, masculinity has had considerable influence on the self-perceptions of men and how they perceive other men. "Within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men" (Kimmel 1994:125). Those who deviate from such standards face different levels of oppression, and the man must constantly prove himself worthy as *a real man* to other men throughout their lives (Kimmel 1994:126). While the understanding of hegemonic masculinity may vary within the particular cultural context and the concept itself is often debated among scholars (see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), hegemonic masculinity has nevertheless been important in understanding both gender and identity construction for men and women alike. Gay men in particular, have to negotiate their "lack of masculinity" since their masculinity is contrasted with the dominant discourse of hegemonic masculinity, which is constructed around the heterosexual image of the man engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse (Connell 1992; Scott 2011:150).

Masculinity is therefore, a performance; and consumption is an extension of the performance of gender, as goods (i.e. clothing) are "expressive equipment" used to display oneself (Goffman 1969, Butler 1990, Cole 2000). The body therefore, "is a site not only for the performance or enactment of masculinity, but also for its profound and intimate regulation" (Gill, Henwood, and Mclean 2005:58). Goffman (1969) compares the

presentation of ourselves in everyday life to the theatrical performances on stage, in which we are constantly constructing a self to express to others. Thus, consumption “should not be reduced to the level of individual ‘lifestyle’ choice but related to wider structures of social interaction” (Jackson 1999:36). It is in this social interaction through goods, that culture, from which masculinity stems from, is (re)produced and (re)affirmed (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:57).

Goods then, are important in understanding how the social interaction of masculinity results. Traditionally, the gay man has been associated with a “better” fashion awareness, that is, by their explicit choice of goods that distinguishes them from the straight man (Cole 2000; Kates 1998). Fashion goods mediate that tension between hegemonic masculinity and gay masculinity as it “attempt[s] to solve, amplify, or rewrite conflicts between [the] subcultural and [the] dominant” (Scott 2011:149). Fashion goods are also ambiguous: it is up to the those who consume the products to produce particular meanings associated with the product (Scott 2011:146). Consumption, within the gay community, is a way in which gay men navigate their social worlds after “coming out” (Kates 1998:25). However, as Cole (2000:2) cautions:

It would be incorrect to assume that all gay men have shown a developed interest in what they wear and have made efforts to define their dress choices through, or as a marker of, their sexual orientation. However, there have been a considerable number of gay men who have made conscious efforts to utilize their clothing to express this important facet of their identity.

In a study of how gay men engages the sneakers in the construction of masculinity in the United States, Scott (2011) argues that sneakers were associated with the dominant feminine gay stereotype (since they were primarily worn when men were on their knees during sex—meaning that men were taking the passive role as the recipient of the penis). The butch

subcultures of gay men in mid-twentieth century hence resisted sneakers and turned to boots (Scott 2011:151). This process of “disconnecting gay sexuality and stereotypical femininity” by butch cultures through the rejection of sneakers is a negotiation of masculinity to become *a real man* through the explicit consumption of boots over sneakers. However, Scott (ibid) points out that other subcultures within the gay community, like the clones of the straight men, embraced sneakers by “connecting gay sexuality and mainstream sexuality” because sneakers became popular with straight men, meaning that *real man wears sneakers*. Thus, by wearing sneakers, the men of clone subculture within the gay community were pursuing a masculinity that they saw in sneakers which the butch subculture did not see. Sneakers are thus an example of a commodity that manifests the ambivalence of meanings and masculinity produced through a good. As Scott (2011:149) explains,

rather than an exclusively symbolic or linguistic model that reads an item as a text expressing a meaning or identity, the item is examined more as an actor or tool used to connect, disconnect, or leverage other actors, ideals, or institutions within larger social formations or assemblages.

Like with the sneakers, there is also constant swapping of fashion commodity back and forth between the dominant heterosexual community and the gay subculture, but there is “one important element [that] is *not* exchanged...: the original subcultural meanings invested in the good” (Kates 1998:69). When the gay man uses certain products, the meanings they associate with the product are different from the meanings that are constructed among the heterosexual men (Kates 1998:52). With that in mind, the underwear is also a fashion good that has its own set of meanings and masculinity in two different social worlds in that of the straight man's, and that of the gay man's.

### **the development of the men's underwear and changes**

Most of us in Hong Kong wear the underwear, but we very rarely talk about the underwear. While the underwear is supposedly a “private” matter, the underwear is also subject to the regulation of society in terms of whether or not it conforms to the ideal form of sexuality (Rubin 1984:154). “When the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” (Goffman 1969:31), and therefore, like any other social good, the underwear for the man, is a means of display of one's masculinity, simultaneously reflecting society's understanding of masculinity. Harris (1997:161) argues that it was not until the 1960s that underwear was considered as a fashion accessory in the United States. The underwear catalogues were the first forms of available pornography for gay men, which had considerable impact on the underwear revolution in the 1960s as the underwear was a product originally oriented to gay men (Harris 1997:163). Since then, the men's underwear has become, what Harris (1997:164) calls, the “sculptor of flesh” for both straight and gay men: from its practical use, the underwear assumed its role to redress the man.

The underwear, as a piece of garment, seeks to conceal and highlight the genitals (Ueno 1989:12). The men's underwear highlights the penis, where the underwear “conceal[s] the phallic power of the male subject, and [serves] as a form of protection from his own (potential) unveiling and castration” (Jobling 2005:129). Yet the underwear is changing the relationship of men to their bodies. In recent history, the anus of the man was considered as a private matter, but underwear advertisements have made the anus more visible and associated the “private parts” with “fetishtic desirability and spectatorial pleasure” (Jobling 2005:132). The brand labels on the waistbands that we see on Calvin Klein and other forms of underwear today, illustrates how the underwear has transgressed the “intimate space...[through] economic imperialism” (Harris 1997:172), because the underwear is now no longer simply

kept hidden. The man's "private part" is therefore, is increasingly exposed to the public sphere.

It is important too, though, to recognize how other fashion commodities have impacted the ways in which the men's underwear developed. The swimwear influenced the development of men's underwear in Britain as gay men resisted the modesty that had been once expected of them, and sexualized the swimwear (and therefore the underwear) in the process of revealing their bodies at the beaches (Cole 2000:132). This resistance against modesty was subsequently followed by the introduction of Y-fronts (also known as briefs) in 1939 that highlighted the men's genitals which, according to Cole (2000:134), was "revolutionary." Other clothing trends too, like men's tight pants, affected the underwear styles because a loose underwear could potentially ruin the aesthetics of pair of tight pants (Cole 2000:135). Changing fashion trends of underwear illustrate changes to traditional masculinity and highlights a tension between consumption and masculinity as men, at some point in history, were not meant to care too much about how they look like (Bordo 1999:202).

The increased use of photography and the production of magazines at a cheaper cost after the Second World War shaped the ideas of the new man's body (Cole 2000:119). In contrast with the pre-Stonewall liberation of the "harmless and sexless" gay men, post-liberation gay men became associated with muscular man (ibid). Advertisements on men's underwear in the States also indicates a shift in gay masculinity: compared to the effeminate image of the men in underwear advertisements in the 1960s, the men in underwear advertisements in the 1970s has been masculinized and heterosexualized as to integrate the men's underwear into the wider market for heterosexual men (Harris 1997:174, Cole 2000:136). Harris (1997) and Cole (2000) see this process primarily as a marketing strategy, but this heterosexualization of the underwear, like the boots of the butch subcultures,

illustrates the shift of masculinity (within the gay community in particular) to aspire to one that resonated with the ideal of the straight and non-effeminate man. Harris (1997:178) uses the transformation of men's portrayal from the effeminate to the masculine in the underwear advertisement to explain gay culture's ultimate assimilation into the heterosexual mainstream "which is willing to accept the homosexual only when he is stripped of his subversive, erotic identity, and remade in the wholesome image of the straight man."

The underwear then, illustrates the masculine tensions between being the real man and not. While the man in advertisements had become "resexualized...as a hairless muscular object of desire," he, unlike the women, is only partially eroticized (Cole 2000:136, Harris 1997:176). Advertisements of men in the underwear staring straight back at the viewer are "always frozen in genitally centered images so that the model can look back at the viewer" (Harris 1997:176), indicating that the heterosexual man, unlike the homosexual man, cannot be the passive object of desire because it contradicts with the hegemonic masculine understanding of the man, whose role is to penetrate—not to be penetrated. "It is feminine to be on display" (Bordo 1999) and therefore, homosexual men, who are desired by other men, must also negotiate their masculinity within the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, and straight men, who are not used to being desired, must find ways to secure their masculinity in the face of increasing exposure to advertisements and consumption practices.

Women too, are involved in the policing of masculinity through men's underwear as there are women who voice their *discomfort* with their heterosexual partner who exhibit consumptions of male lingerie typical of that of the woman (Ourahmoune 2012:328). A woman's consumption for the man is also an indication of the woman's status in the romantic relationship or in a mother-son relationship (Ueno 1989, Ourahmoune 2012). Therefore, when men are engaged in underwear consumption, women's role as the primary caretaker is

threatened. While men police themselves and others in their performance of masculinity, so do women participate in the enforcement of the established gender order.

### **research questions + methodology**

This study aims to understand men's underwear and its relation to masculinity in Hong Kong among men in their twenties. To understand Hong Kong men, I have only chosen those who are born and raised in Hong Kong. I have employed semi-structured interviews with fourteen men, out of which seven identifies as (presently) gay, and seven as straight. All of them are with a tertiary education background. Most of them are undergraduate students at the few biggest and well-known universities in Hong Kong. As for those who are working, Sheldon (gay, 28) and Lukas (straight, 29), are working in a relatively stable work environment, as compared to Ivan (straight, 21) and Henry (straight, 25), who have just graduated university and are ambivalent about the future of their work. Nat and George, who identifies as bisexual, has been in relationships with a woman at some point in high school, but since then has primarily been in same-sex relationships. Most of the informants are living at home, with a few of the undergraduates living in the dormitories. All of my gay informants and most of my straight informants were found through snowball sampling with the help of a few friends. Interviews were conducted in quiet places on campus or off-campus, depending on whether or not the informants were from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Attached with appendix is the set of interview questions I had asked my gay informants, with a few minor changes to the interview questions with straight men informants.

Hong Kong is a fascinating site of field study as it is an embodiment of homophobia. Lagging behind a number of social reforms on the LGBTQi community, Hong Kong had only decriminalized sodomy in 1991 and still does not recognize same-sex marriage as the discourse settles around that of the traditional nuclear family (Tung et al. 2016, Kong 2012).

In such a homophobic environment, men's negotiation of masculinity becomes of primary importance: how do Hong Kong men, both straight and gay, understand their manhood when it comes to choosing (or not choosing) something as intimate as a piece of underwear?

The three main research questions are therefore as follows: (1) How do men negotiate their masculinity through one's underwear pattern and colors? (2) How do consumer culture (including mass media and pornography) shape men's understanding of different underwear and their meanings? (3) How do men manage their penis and their sexuality through their

choice of underwear? Each of these questions serves to understand how masculinity relates to the informant's choice (and non-choice) of their underwear. Below is a table of the informants' names, ages, occupation, ages.

George	21, gay/bisexual, undergraduate
Theo	21, gay, undergraduate
Kris	21, gay, undergraduate
Robert	21, gay, undergraduate
Nat	21, gay/bisexual, undergraduate
Mark	21, gay, undergraduate
Sheldon	28, gay, working

Michael	19, straight, undergraduate
Casper	21, straight, undergraduate
Ethan	21, straight, undergraduate
Andrew	21, straight, undergraduate
Ivan	21, straight, working
Henry	21, straight, working

Lukas	28, straight, working
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## ii. masculinity and homophobia

### the departure from white briefs and mothers

In Hong Kong the white brief is the standard underwear among boys in their childhood. It is therefore difficult for many informants to imagine the white brief as something particularly sexy. Most informants indicated that the white brief symbolizes immaturity, a perception that is deeply embedded in most informants, as they themselves went through the transition from their childhood underwear to the underwear they wear

today. For all of the informants, their mothers or their grandmother (depending on who they lived with) purchased their white briefs when they were still children. The women's role in the consumption of men's underwear is significant in the informants' childhood years. The mother controls the sexuality of her children and her spouse through choosing and washing their underwear (Ueno 1989).<sup>1</sup> The women, who are the "launderers" of men's underwear (Jobling 2000:129; Ueno 1989), may check for semen stains on the underwear to see if their sons and husbands have been masturbating in them. In addition, the son who desires a different kind of underwear will ultimately have to pass through the surveillance of the mother if he wants to wash his underwear in the washing machine, since many of these women as mothers possess the main access to the washing machine (Ueno 1989).<sup>2</sup>

Straight informants, more often than gay informants, are likely to report that the transition from the white brief to their underwear today was of a practical matter, because white briefs would easily get dirty, thus resulting in their choices of darker colored underwear. For example, Ethan, a straight man in his early twenties, recalled that one of the first conscious memory of the underwear was him not being able to wait for the bathroom when he was in art class, resulting in defecating in his white brief with cartoons and ultimately having to throw it out before returning to class. Other straight men's underwear transition can be a product of a less deliberate decision making: for Michael, who is almost turning twenty, his parents stopped getting white briefs for him because the family friend's store they go to no longer had the size that of white briefs that Michael could wear. In fact, the departure from the white brief is institutionalized in the market, as common department stores sell very few white briefs, meaning that at some age, it is expected that men no longer

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<sup>1</sup> Another point worth noting is that even with informants whose families employ domestic helpers, the helpers have not bought the informant's underwear. This may highlight how the underwear is often seen as something that is an intimate clothing that can be only purchased by those of the "insider" of the family.

<sup>2</sup> Only one or two informants mentioned that their fathers are also involved in doing the laundry.

wear white briefs. From the sexless boyhood they are expected to grow into men—men with sexual desires. Ivan, a straight man in his early twenties, hypothesizes that men's masturbation tendencies are hidden by the dark colors of their underwear.

Yet for a majority of gay men, their departure from the white brief was about recognizing the potential unattractiveness of their childhood underwear or wanting to “try something different.” Often, this involved the process of examining other people's underwear in the changing room right before Physical Education class in early middle school, and becoming increasingly self-conscious about their plain

white brief. That is not to say however, that *all* gay men have observed other people's underwear and *all* straight men haven't. Ethan and Lukas for example, both identify as straight, and had observed other people's underwear in the changing rooms while going through puberty and had decided that they needed something different. But the other straight men I have interviewed strongly denies that



they had wanted to explore other men's underwear. To this day, the straight men in their early twenties who claim that they had not looked into other men's underwear have their mothers buying underwear for them. For those men (both gay and straight) who purchase their own underwear though, their departure from the white brief is a significant moment in their lives. Gay men and straight men (and their mothers) were more likely to choose *darker* colored trunks<sup>3</sup> at their departure from the white brief, of which only a very few wore briefs or boxers. Their departure however, for the gay man in particular, is nevertheless still within the constraints of the control of the mother as most of my gay informants lives at home. For

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<sup>3</sup> There is only a slight difference between trunks and boxer briefs, with trunks being a little bit longer than that of boxer briefs. For the purposes of this paper, boxer briefs and trunks would simply be referred to as trunks.

instance, Kris, a gay man in his early twenties, hand-washes his jockstrap, a piece of underwear for sexual entertainment that resembles somewhat of a T-back. He does so because he does not want his mother to see this pair of underwear. Mark, also a gay man, used to have many pairs of underwear he bought while he was living overseas on his own, many of which he says he cannot wear anymore because he lives with his family at home and his mother will ask him too many questions, like why his underwear is so fancy.

Goods are therefore “ritual adjuncts” that makes sense of a particular rite of passage (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 65). The departure from the white brief then, highlights the ritual of becoming a *real* man. For the man, masculinity is a “relentless test” of proving to other men of one’s masculinity (Kimmel 1994:126). To be a man means not to be like a woman, and man who has the same desires as the woman who loves the man, fails the standards of the real man (Kimmel 1994). Homophobia therefore, results from a kind of fear that one is mistaken as gay, and thus, not a *real* man.

This chapter explores how men, both straight and gay, after their departure from the white brief, negotiate masculinity through underwear colors and patterns, with an explicit anxiety of the failure of their own manhood.

Photo 1: a jockstrap. According to Kris, the jockstrap was originally used by athletes, but was adapted into the gay community as a form of sexual entertainment, quite frequently used in gay pornography. Image courtesy to bibofashion.eu

**straight + gay men x homophobia: underwear as too “gay”**

As mentioned in the introduction, Hong Kong is characterized by a strong degree of homophobia. Both straight and gay men internalize homophobia as a means of proving their



Photo 2: Trunks that most of my straight and gay informants wear after departing from white briefs. Color and brands usually vary. Image courtesy to macys.com

status as a real man, and such is evident in their discussion of their underwear. Black is probably the “favorite” color of many of my straight informants.

Dark blue, grey, are the two other default choices.

Sam and Harry, for example, refers to these colors as the colors they “inherently” prefer. While no

preference is ever independent of cultural influences

(see Douglas 1996), my informants are very much

convinced that all of their choices are innately theirs.

Yet the deliberate choice of darker colored

underwear is one that results from what it means to

be a man, meaning choosing monotone colors that

indicates one's indifference towards a piece of undergarment. Darker colors also don't easily become dirty and practicality comes as a priority with straight men in particular.

The anti-gay attitude applies for the perceptions of colors of the underwear, as the word *lar* (𨮒) comes into use in many conversations with both straight and gay informants. In Cantonese, there is a term called *lar* (𨮒) that refers to men who are not very masculine and exhibits feminine traits—referring to a combination of gay and feminine that cannot be separated from each another. Both straight and gay informants talk about some colors particularly associated with being *lar*, like bright/neon/flashy colors (i.e. pink, light green, purple, baby blue, yellow). Nat, a gay man in his early twenties, dislikes flashy colors, and he sounded quite serious when he said that he wouldn't want his boyfriend wearing such colors. Red is a debatable color, because it is also a color that is associated with good luck charms in

Hong Kong. For instance, Robert, a gay man in his early twenties, wore red underwear for a period of time when he was a small child. “Some superstition” his mother had, was his reply to my fascination. In fact, Ivan, a straight man in his early twenties, still wears red underwear, which his girlfriend makes fun of and he explains:

...the impression I have of red is like for Chinese New Year, for some big festival or time, or like hoping that you would pass through exams—those are the times you would wear them...it's praying for good luck [求福]...like the idea is when there's some special time or festival, you have to ask for good charms, like testing DSE, people would really actually wear a pair of red underwear, like it's a superstition...have you not heard about this before?

There are indeed gay men who don't really mind wearing flashy colors<sup>4</sup>, and even a straight man like Lukas chooses pink colors without being too worried<sup>5</sup>. But this denial and rejection of bright colors goes to an extreme for some straight men, as Casper, a straight man in his early twenties, says:

Oh for boys' underwear to be more feminine? More lighter colors I guess. I have never seen a guy wear red, or pink. Ehm. Like those with flowers. I have never seen them, and I don't want to see them. I don't know. *I don't want to see this kind.* (emphasis mine)

Michael, a straight man almost twenty, also says “I had never seen these, and even if I see them, I would pretend like I can't see.” It is as though they are very afraid of seeing such colors. To choose colors that are too bright and flashy attracts one's attention to the penis is just not “right.” As Ivan puts it:

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<sup>4</sup> Particularly during sexual encounters, but not so much for everyday use.

<sup>5</sup> But in the case of Lukas, it might had to do more with age than it did with other factors because he's relatively older and he has established the kind of person he is at that age.

What kind of feeling is this? Why? Why? I don't really know how to answer this, maybe because, it's the so-called private part, so you would think that if someone is wearing something that is very flowery, you are trying to make me look at you. Maybe it's because of this, or other, like simply don't like this, or it's that when I wear clothes I don't really like flowery stuff.

Flashy colors attract attention, and for these straight men, men's "private" parts are not supposed to attract attention. In reality though, not many gay informants wear these *la* colors or styles. Many of my gay informants, in fact, choose to wear darker colored trunks, which are perceived to be a "straight man's choice." This is surprising to many straight men informants, who think they know what the gay man wears, and therefore, what colors to avoid. This "straight-acting" behavior, or clones among gay men are in fact, instead of assimilating into mainstream heterosexuality, rebelling against mainstream heterosexuality. These gay men's underwear choices appear same as that of the heterosexual, and development of the clone is "both a self-conscious, almost parodying reference to traditional stereotypical images of masculinity and a self-conscious embracing of that stereotype" (Cole 2000:99). A parody of masculinity to attract other men—that's where gay men triumphs as the straight man is oblivious that the man who seems to be wearing an underwear that looks relatively straight is actually a gay man.

My straight informants, are very eager to emphasize to me that they don't care about their underwear. But many of them *do* care. Ivan in his early twenties and Lukas in his late twenties, despite the indifference they claim for the underwear, indicates that they have a *favorite pair* of underwear: for Ivan it is his dark blue brief, and for Lukas, it is his green checkered Uniqlo boxers. It is not indifference towards underwear when they have a certain favorite pair, but men must constantly reassert their indifference when it comes to such

intimate pieces of clothing. One can be easily mistaken as gay if he cares too much. Casper, whose mother buys his underwear to this day, says:

Yeah, stripes. I don't like stripes. It's too flowery. Like I mean nobody sees it but the feeling I get while I wear it isn't that great. It's not really that big of an impact to be honest, like if you give me [a striped underwear] I won't hate it to the point I need to go buy another pair on my own. If my mom buys it then I would still wear it. It just has patterns. I don't like patterns. I like simple, formal.

The underwear is constructed into the masculine identity, *regardless* of the conscious decision making of the person. As above, even though his mother buys his underwear, Casper doesn't like the *feeling* of wearing an underwear that is too flowery that gives him feminine overtones. The underwear doesn't necessarily have to be *seen* for him to feel ashamed or disgust. But the idea of one's underwear exposed at any point in time is a prominent theme for both my straight and gay men informants, indicating a vulnerability yet also a power to change what others may think of them. Sheldon, a gay man in his late twenties, in discussing the potential visibility of his underwear, talks about the U.S. TV show *Queer as Folk* that he watched when he was in his high school years when he was around sixteen in one scene when all the men had to strip only to their underwear. Ethan, a straight man in his early twenties, summarizes this visibility perfectly:

Yeah, it's [the underwear is] not for other people to look at, it's for myself to look at. But also feel like, even if someone pulls my pants off, I'm not scared. Maybe guys have these imaginations in which people out of nowhere take your pants off.

This fear is not so much just about the increasing visibility of the man's body in recent years. Rather, this fear comes from the nature of masculinity, one that comes with the risk of being



Photo 3: notice the hyper-masculine body that compensates for the feminine association with laces.

Image courtesy to  
joesnydereurope.eu

constantly being judged by *other men* of their own manhood (Kimmel 1994:131). Therefore, they have “imagination in which people out of nowhere” takes their pants off. And if their underwear is revealed to other men, it *must not be gay or feminine*. The anti-gay, anti-feminine nature of masculinity prevails in the ways informants, both gay and straight, also outright reject laced men's underwear. Laces was a fashionable item (as was silk) for gentlemen to wear in the seventeenth century in public (Bordo 1999:202). However, laces today are considered feminine as menswear shifted to a more utilitarian wear during the Industrial Revolution (ibid). When I asked Sheldon, a gay man in his late 20s, what he thought of laced male underwear, he said that he didn't even consider them as men's underwear. Laces and flowers are for the women in Hong Kong. Briefs are also mentioned by few straight informants as being particularly gay. That idea comes from their associations with briefs being for women, and therefore, men who wear underwear are perceived to be gay (but there are straight informants who wears briefs, like Ivan). While there is no clear agreement to which what patterns constitute as feminine (some thinks polka dots are feminine, other men do not), there is a clear hierarchy drawn between what kind of underwear patterns and colors which are considered suitable and not within both the straight and gay men community alike.

### **the maturity discourse among gay men**

If you like a man who is very girly, what is the difference from liking a woman except for the genitals?

-Nat, gay man in his early twenties

With the prominent anti-gay and anti-feminine discourse even within the gay community, it is the gay men who are more likely to voice their dislike for other gay men who are “immature.” Immature underwear by definition, are those which are composed of flashy colors that draw attention to their genitals (the *la* colors or the flashy/feminine patterns). Reflecting on his first underwear purchase, Theo, a gay man in his early twenties, doesn't understand why he bought them from American Eagles, which he now sees as “stupid.” He discusses his underwear choices today:

I'm very plain now. Like dark coloured. Like plain boxer briefs. I don't do the shiny ones. I don't really do that. I do that on the outside. Like I mean in terms of what I wear on the outside. Inside, is more normal, because it's like, I don't like the funny ones. It's so stupid. I don't like the bow tie ones, I'm like ugh, oh my god, keep it normal. It's either plain or a simple print it's fine. I don't really...it's not that I don't care. It's just that it has to look mature. And I'm like a mature business person.

Theo, who was wearing Zara women shoes on the day I met him, doesn't mind wearing feminine clothing. Rather than a desire for appearing simply “masculine,” the underwear is supposed to highlight a manly maturity that he wants to present. He also mentions that he is affected by the choice of his boyfriend's underwear, who has turned thirty and who he perceives as “mature.” The gay man's standards, in other words, are aligned against that of the straight man's. The straight man is not meant to care about what he looks like (Bordo 1999:202), and therefore will choose the simplest underwear that is within his reach. To have flashy underwear then, is an indication of a lack of masculinity, which implies a lack of maturity. Thus, the gay man who wears flashy underwear, is considered immature. Similarly,

Sheldon, who in his late 20s, has only identical black trunks that he buys from Marks & Spencers, recounts his underwear in university:

Like, some of them, you get it for gag jokey effects, like one of those really cliché boxers with very flashy patterns like, little red hearts, just the whole boxers, you know, like white background with red little hearts, that was fun, and I had some pairs that was glow in the dark—those were fun. It's like little kind of humorous, funny, it's little dinosaurs, that would glow in the dark. That was kind of fun. But it was all over the place. Like not coordinated, it was just random, you just walk past and thought, oh that was fun, and then why not?

Towards the later of the interview though, Sheldon expresses regret that he chose such immature underwear. He looks back at them and believes they were unnecessary. He dislikes people who tries to prove themselves with their clothing and maintains that “you shouldn't let your underwear speak for yourself, you should let your own person speak for yourself.” Nat, a gay man in his early twenties, also expresses similar sentiment:

Yeah, because I don't like the really flowery and bright ones. I think for one, the underwear you wear it in the inside, so I think it's very stupid that there's some design on the underwear but nobody can see it, and I really don't think it looks nice—I think it really draws the attention.

Colors too bright, too flowery then, fall into the other end of the spectrum: immaturity and “stupid” and probably too “gay.” Colors and non-exaggerated patterns are ways in which gay men negotiate what it means to be masculine mature man, compared to that of the “stupid” choices that other flashy gay men may choose. Simple underwear (which informants call the formal underwear—an underwear that is one color), in particular, are associated with

maturity and/or “being straight.” In a society where being a man is equated with being straight, the gay man sets their own understanding of masculinity with that of the straight man. The maturity discourse within the gay men community then, is only an extension of the homophobic discourse.

There are however, exceptions. The day I interviewed Kris, for example, he was wearing a purple underwear, one that he was very proud of having on. In fact, he makes his female friends guess the color of his underwear every now and then, and laughed as he told me that they can never get it right because his underwear are mostly multi-colored.

### **conclusion**

Men, both straight and gay, has a clear hierarchy to which underwear colors and patterns are considered feminine and which are not, and are constantly afraid of being labeled less of a man through internalizing homophobia. The man's underwear is thus constructed into masculine identity, whether or not that underwear is seen. Gay men, on the other hand, has a particular maturity discourse concerned with the underwear, as gay men try to become more straight in a process of trying to define themselves as men. This maturity discourse is thus an extension of the homophobic discourse.

### **iii. consumer identity and masculinity**

#### **advertisements and aesthetics**

Consumption is a both a conscious and unconscious space in which both gay and straight men negotiate their masculine identities. Traditional masculinity tells men that fashion is not of their business, and “men's interest in fashion and appearance at the very best

'suspect' of effeminacy or...of homosexuality" (Gupta and Gentry 2016:252). Many straight informants therefore stress throughout the interview that the underwear is only a piece of garment that should not have any significance in their everyday lives. Yet men's beauty standards today are defined by half-naked muscular men (Strelan and Hargreaves 2005:496). Lukas, a straight man in his late twenties, insists that the underwear only looks nice on fit people and puts very blatantly that "being fat is a sin," and discriminates explicitly who do not exercise to conform to a certain body ideal. The same idea is echoed by a majority of gay and straight informants, who feels a lack of muscularity and body build makes one less appealing. This new kind of masculinity that has emerged with the "New Man" since the 1980s encourages men to spend more on their appearance, and the man is increasingly expected to take good care of their bodies and their looks (Bordo 1999; Gupta and Gentry 2016). There is a strong tension therefore, between the consumerist identity and masculinity, particularly among straight men who are not used to being *seen*.

Underwear advertising agencies seemed to have realized many decades ago that the appeal to aesthetics don't work so much on the straight men. British underwear advertisement agencies had "to transcend the apathy or resistance of the male customer, and...to combat the idea that men don't care what underwear looks like as long as it keeps them comfortable" (Jobling 2005:125). Therefore, by appealing to the practical use of men's underwear through a variety of materials and for underwear in different occasions, underwear brands found appeals to their (straight) male customers. Uncomfortable underwear pushes the straight men to reconsider their choices of underwear, for very practical reasons. However, in Hong Kong, limited advertisements on men's underwear don't necessarily induce the straight man to change his underwear style; neither do these advertisements inform the male customer of the many kinds of underwear and the straight man doesn't make the effort to explore the diversity of underwear functions that he is not exposed to. Ivan, a straight man in his early

twenties, wears the underwear his mother buys him. In commenting on the comfortability of the underwear he says that he went running:

It's just that I always wanted something that won't create so much friction, but I never bothered. I always never bothered but it's always after something happens [like the uncomfortable feeling] that I know [that I should buy a different pair].

Henry, a straight man in his mid-twenties, also has similar problems with his boxers, when he wears tight jeans that makes his underwear uncomfortable because his groin gets stuck between his underwear. Like Ivan, however, he hasn't thought about changing his underwear styles. "Maybe one day" was Henry's very ambiguous answer to his future exploration of underwear. To deliberately choose one's clothing, especially an intimate clothing like the underwear, highlights the tensions of masculinity for many straight men. For Ivan and Henry, both straight men in their twenties, their conscious lack of choice of underwear is a way of reasserting their masculinity as to say that they do not care about the ways their bodies look, despite the underwear advertisements that says otherwise about their bodies. Casper, a straight man in his early twenties, believes that "the models look really cool in the photoshoot, and because they don't wear clothes on the top and then I just think they look really cool" but he won't buy a pair of Calvin Klein underwear because it is too expensive. Michael, a straight man not yet twenty, does not see a difference with clothed advertisements from underwear advertisements.

A majority of Hong Kong straight men informants then, chooses instead not to choose at all. Despite all kinds of criteria they have for men's underwear in the previous chapter, only three out of the seven straight men I interviewed purchased their own underwear. For those who do not purchase their own underwear, their mothers buy theirs. The underwear serves the practical, utilitarian purpose, and it cannot be nothing more than that. Over-

exaggeration is unnecessary for the man's underwear as Ethan, a straight man in his early twenties, illustrates:

I would think some people, in high school maybe, like they might wear, how do I say this, I didn't exactly think that their underwear were cool, if they wear too much flowery stuff or very trendy, I would think, you don't need to be like that, it's only the underwear. I put practicality as priority. So I've never envied that people's underwear looks nice but I have thought whether or not mine is too outdated [老土]. Like this period was when I was wearing briefs, and seeing people wear the boxer briefs is okay too, and it sounds like it feels quite comfortable, so why not try it. So since then...I guess that it was one of the reasons [for buying his own underwear].

While aesthetics did participate in one of his considerations in choosing a fancier underwear that wasn't from the street markets, Ethan nevertheless argues that he puts the underwear function as priority. However, while utility is at its first priority, appearance of the underwear as a concern is subtly mentioned among the straight men informants (Ethan included). For example, to have holes in the underwear or to have an underwear sag—these are two qualities that have very little to do with the utilitarian function of the underwear (unless of course, there is a large hole or tear). While having holes or a sagging underwear has to do with the degree of comfortability, straight informants like Ethan, Michael, and Ivan put these as important factors to the quality of their underwear. In other words, aesthetics is important, because it is one of the criteria for the straight men that distinguishes the good underwear from the bad underwear. For the straight men, despite their denial, the underwear is not just about comfortability and utility. Underwear that rips and sags are also embodiments of aesthetics that many straight men informants deny of having anything to do with.

In terms of the underwear, Calvin Klein advertisements play a particular importance in the increasingly visible male body, as Calvin Klein was mentioned in *every* interview I had

with both straight and gay men, even with straight men who did not buy their own underwear and proclaimed their obliviousness to fashion trends in underwear. Calvin Klein was revolutionary as the founder Klein saw “the phallic body, as much as any female figure, is an enduring sex object within Western culture” (Bordo 1999:180). In doing so, he caught the attention of straight men in appealing to their muscular aesthetics, and gay men who lingered on the advertisements which presented almost nude men. While most of my straight men informants desire to become the Calvin Klein models, other gay men desire the Calvin Klein models as potential partners (except for George, a gay man in his early twenties, who wants his partner to be more of a neutral gender, and instead desires to become the muscular man in the picture). Ethan, a straight man in his early twenties, bought his underwear from H&M because he had remembered that Beckham was a spokesperson:

Not really, but by using some famous person, it allowed me to remember in my brain that H&M sells underwear too, and that I could try it out. But I didn't think Beckham wearing the underwear was especially cool, no, not really. Like Beckham wears these too, why not try it too.

In other words, Ethan bought into a masculinity that the underwear advertisement offers: Beckham is not cool, but his body and his character are of masculine ideal, implied because in earlier parts of the interview, he had just mentioned how a traditional story of a Chinese hero inspired him when he was younger, teaching him what kind of man he wants to be. By wearing a certain underwear, the man can become part of the masculine picture that is offered through the advertisement. The body in the advertisement is not simply an *object* of desire; rather the body speaks to the audience in a way that invites the audience to engage with its meanings (Bordo 1999:186). Other straight men like Ivan in his early twenties thinks Calvin Klein underwear advertisements are ridiculous:

I would feel very it's very unimportant [無謂], like using Beckham as a spokesperson, and also appearing very man and strong, but I think it's only a pair of underwear. Like it's not to show people, so far I wouldn't think that you would feel very comfortable after wearing that underwear. Like maybe you can attract women, but I don't think so. [Laughs]. I don't think so.

In the earlier parts of the interview, Ivan holds very contradictory ideas towards masculinity, as he struggles to explain what masculinity is, because for him, he isn't a very masculine man: he sees himself as someone who feels an excess of emotions and is not very reliable. His insecurity about his own masculinity, along with the confusion of just having graduated university, are expressed into his helpless response to the underwear advertisement that perpetuates masculine norms that he tried to avoid thinking about—he just wants to be a “good person” regardless of masculine expectations.

Underwear advertisements therefore are changing the ways men understand their bodies and their underwear. Once upon a time, the man in the advertisement was “never...the passive recipient of someone else's gaze...[and was] always frozen in genitally centered images so the model can look back at the viewer” (Harris 1997:176). Yet today, the visibility of half-naked men in advertisements is probably partly why men, in the previous chapter, are so paranoid that someone would take off their pants and judge their pair of underwear. They would avoid colors and patterns that makes them appear feminine/gay or both, because they are in the spotlight in ways they had never been before.

### **the gay man in the advertisement + gay men and consumption**

For the gay man, advertisements not only produce masculine ideals of the body; it also defines for them the ideal partners they want in a relationship. The gay man wants him as a boyfriend, as a sexual partner, but the straight man desires to be the body. The underwear

advertisement therefore, targets the gay men and straight men simultaneously despite the “heterosexual nature” of Calvin Klein models that makes the men look “not gay” according to my straight informants. Sheldon, for instance, argues that advertisements reveal a gay nature, as he analyses who the market is targeted towards:

Gay. Yeah. I think it's probably 50/50, 50% might be my own projection, and just like private irrational wishes, and the other half might be just thinking about who they are targeting, the demographics, because, I guess I don't have the data for this, I'm guessing, gay men probably spend more on underwear than straight men, and it's called the pink market right? In marketing. So...yeah. Pink spending, so I think they probably pander to the gay demographics. I think underwear advertisements probably either target girlfriends or gay men.

The straight men are often “clueless” to the cues that the advertisements are sending to gay men as the advertisements “speak to gays ‘in a way that the straight customer will not notice’” (Bordo 1999:182). Unlike the straight man's tension with consumption however, the gay man's status in Hong Kong is defined by their consumption (Kong 2004). To most of my gay informants in Hong Kong, wearing something that doesn't highlight one's body shape is considered careless, and therefore, unpolished of a man. Underwear purchased from the street markets is undesired, and sagging and broken underwear is out of the question.

Yet these deliberate choices of underwear are affected by one's social class. Both abroad and in Hong Kong, social class is related to one's hierarchical position (therefore appeal) within the gay community (Kong 2004; Barrett and Pollack 2005; Kong 2012). At the level of the expression of one's sexual orientation as gay is “shaped by the resources associated with a social class” (Barrett and Pollack 2005:438), and to indulge in consumerist behavior is one that characterizes the modern gay identity (Valocchi 1999; Kong 2012). As Kong (2012:9) proposes:

Extending Bourdieu's (1986, 1989) notion of class, I use the term 'embodied cultural capital' to refer to gay men's possession of cultural capital... The extent to which they acquire the capital greatly affects their position within the overall straight and gay social space. Sexual identity should therefore be understood in terms of this 'politics of difference'; and our identities embody, through various forms and meanings, a vast and rambling multiple positioning and re-positioning of the self.

Underwear consumption is one of the ways in which gay men are involved in the positioning of themselves within the hierarchy they are subject to. Most of my gay informants are from the middle-class and above, and among them, a general consensus towards an aspiration of middle-class ideals, which means a *no* to street-market underwear. In Hong Kong, where underwear can be sold next to the local shop that sells vegetable, it is not unusual to purchase one's underwear from the local street markets, like a few straight men informants do. While straight men's mothers are just as likely to not buy the underwear from the street markets<sup>6</sup>, the gay man's informant's conscious and deliberate choice of underwear that *is not* from the street markets, illustrate a larger class phenomenon. For example, Mark, a gay man in his early twenties, sets his criteria for his sexual partners/boyfriend:

**Mark:** And just now I was talking about education background, like after knowing more, like you read some stuff and you get deeper understandings of things, like you no longer just talk about where to get dinner tonight, maybe talk about some deeper conversation topics, like talking about... art, and culture, talking about stuff that is deeper at another level, but the partner has to be really able to talk to you. Like your partner, if they don't know about anything, I think there's not much to say I would think.

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<sup>6</sup> It is however, also likely that mothers are trying to project a certain social class of their children by deliberate choice of not purchasing from the street markets.

**M:** Do you have a lot of interest in art and culture?

**Mark:** Not a lot of interest but I will take note. I will appreciate—I may not really know how to but at least I would look at it and get in contact with it.

Here, Mark obviously tries to set himself apart from the people who do not know of art and culture, and his underwear too, reflects the social class standards he has set for himself and others, as he takes pride in knowing and purchasing underwear brands that are not in Hong Kong (i.e. Private Structure, Aussie Bum, etc.), all of which are not cheap brands. One's status within the gay community, and therefore his masculinity, is defined by consumption. It is the Marketplace Manhood that has emerged from the 1830s: "a manhood that required proof, and that required the acquisition of tangible goods as evidence of success" whose success was defined "in the capitalist marketplace, as he accumulated wealth, power, and status" (Kimmel 1994:123-124). Consumption is a double-edged sword. In the previous chapter I mention that gay men dislike those who wear flashy underwear colors and patterns and therefore, those who excessively consumes, but not to indulge in consumption also threatens the gay man's position within the gay community. Robert, a gay man in his early twenties, buys Jack Wills and Calvin Klein underwear that can cost up to 300hkd to 400hkd a pair. He explains:

Maybe...maybe myself I...how should I say this. I don't really want to feel too normal. Maybe. So towards the underwear there has to be a little...branded. That's a very important thing. Yeah. Like I don't really want people to see—maybe when I was young I never wore any branded underwear so maybe...so maybe a little won't be very awkward: like if you are dressed really nicely on the outside but you have a really normal underwear then it makes people think that this person is very careless.

For gay men like Theo who buys luxurious clothes, already at a higher social class at birth, his underwear costs only fifty to sixty Hong Kong dollars. It isn't necessary for him to prove himself anything with his underwear—his leather jacket that he was wearing on the day he met me, costed 30 thousand Hong Kong dollars: it already highlights the family background he is from. The gay man's consumption of the underwear then, can backlash on the gay man, but can also prove his masculinity and appeal within the gay community.

### **pornography and masculinity**

Before there had been any real form of pornography for gay men, men's underwear catalogues were a source of gay men's fantasy in the United States (Harris 1997:162). Pornography "is already framed as a sort of fantasy about how things might be or ought to be in a sexual way" (Buchbinder 1998:106), and it is from pornography that many of my informants learn about the underwear. Yet for the straight and gay man, they look at different underwear. For the straight men, their focus is on the women's underwear. When I had asked Ethan, a straight man in his early twenties, how pornography affected his understanding of the underwear, he tells me he wishes that women would choose underwear with little cloth, and drew me a picture, but quickly erased it in embarrassment. Henry, a straight man in his mid-twenties, says he doesn't notice the underwear for men in pornography, but learns the kind of underwear that women should wear, with laces and less cloth. Buchbinder (1998) argues that through pornography, men compare themselves to how *other men* are having sex. The "two desiring subjects *are bonded in homosocial desire by means of and through the stated object of desire*" (emphasis in original), in which the woman of the heterosexual porn becomes the object of desire, as a "means of identifying and then confirming their own masculinity vis-à-vis that of other men" (Buchbinder 1998:112). Therefore, by sharing a

similar taste with other men in their attitude towards women's underwear, straight men are in fact, bonding with other straight men in their own reconfirmation of their masculinity.

However, for the gay men, they have a different understanding of pornography. In the previous chapter, we have seen how the white brief is associated with the sexless boyhood that many informants want to depart from. However, Nat, a gay man in his early twenties, was the only one who ever mentioned white briefs in a positive light:

Looks nice. When other people wear it looks really nice. But [they are] models. Those are for Calvin Klein models. That's the kind of image. I never bought it. Why didn't I buy it? I don't know. Yeah the models look really nice in them. Like white and black looks nice.

While Nat had never bought white briefs for himself since the time his mother bought them for him, his idea on the white brief is different because he later admits he had seen pornography models wear white briefs which look very sexy and manly. Theo, another gay man who is about the same age insists that "the white briefs only look good on the models: they highlight the thighs of the really big men." Maybe because the gay men I have met do not have very thick thighs, many gay (and straight) informants do not perceive the white brief as particularly attractive for themselves to wear, but pornography models with their well-shaped bodies, define the standards for the gay man's masculine identity, and the underwear that is associated with such masculinity appeals to gay men like Nat.

In addition, while very few straight informants ever talk about looking sexy in a pair of underwear, my gay men informants are more likely to discuss looking aesthetically pleasing with their underwear choices. That too, is affected by pornography. As Mark, a gay man in his early twenties, discusses the underwear in pornography:

**Mark:** Ehm...will...I think it is one of the things that will make me notice the underwear, because when you watch this kind of thing you would think that oh? This person looks pretty good wearing it [the underwear] and you want to do this too, or he, he also wears, maybe before sex he would wear this kind of underwear, and I would want to do so too. I would think that you have been studying this, so if you think that this person looks nice wearing them, you would want to wear it too. I think it's a form of advertisement, I would think.

**M:** You would learn about the kinds of underwear to wear?

**Mark:** Yeah, or what brands, what cutting, does it look good, that stuff.

In other words, pornography is a space where gay men learn about sexiness on the man, and what kind of underwear is associated with the sexy body. Robert, a gay man in his early twenties, similarly learned about the jockstrap through pornography, which is otherwise not often known to the ordinary (straight) man. Kris, gay man in his early twenties, learns about recent gay underwear trends through pornography, like being introduced to the brand TOOT that he was wearing on the day I interviewed him. However, older gay men like Sheldon in his late twenties, is not very convinced that there is much about the underwear to learn from pornography:

**M:** A lot of people told me that they learn about underwear trends from pornography.

**Sheldon:** I think that doesn't make much sense, because pornography is only a parody of real life, it's...it's like farthest removed thing from real life that you want. I think if you want underwear knowledge, read a fashion magazine.

Another idea that is reinforced in pornography is the dichotomy between the top and the bottom in the homosexual man's relationship. In pornography profiles of men, tops are often described to be more masculine, and bottoms are associated with feminine stereotypes<sup>7</sup> (Brennan 2017:16), and whether that stereotype holds true is debatable among my gay informants, but the heterosexual sexual script is imposed onto the homosexual's sexual lives as the bottom is associated with the submissive/feminine, and the top with the dominant/masculine (Cole 2000:32). Through pornography, George, a gay man in his early

twenties, learned about the underwear styles of non-submissive man, as in "what kind of styles to avoid. I don't like them, I don't want to be like that. Like if I really don't want to be submissive, I really don't want to [get]



submissive underwear." Submissive underwear can be those with openings

Photo 4: underwear with holes in the back as mentioned by George  
Image courtesy to ebay.com

in the back of the underwear (that highlights one who is penetrated, rather than doing the penetration), or those that are predominantly associated with bottoms in pornography.

George, in earlier conversation, says he does not appreciate his feminine qualities that he has, including his small hand gestures that he thinks is feminine; therefore, he strongly rejects "submissive underwear" that pornography associates the bottoms with. Kris compares the Western and Asian pornography but recognizes that bottoms wear similar underwear in both forms of pornography:

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<sup>7</sup> In particular to Hong Kong (and in some parts of Asia), is the numbering system, where tops=1, bottom=0, and versatile=0.5.

[The Western pornography underwear] will emphasize, the front U-shaped, and that isn't really fit for the Asian size. Asian pornography is more about both front and back and carrying it [the buttocks] in a good shape. But the Western u-shaped underwear is about showing off the size of the penis, like how to make the bulge bigger. Yeah...because in pornography the bottom usually wears the kind of underwear that I just showed you, because it's very efficient, and then I would classify this kind of underwear for make out, or for fun, yeah. And also, in both Western or Asian pornography, there's a kind of underwear only the bottom wears, and there's possibly an implication that those who wears this kind of underwear are bottoms.

Therefore, pornography teaches gay men like George what kind of underwear he should wear as a top in his sexual relationship and puts him in a certain masculine dichotomy that juxtaposes the bottom and the top. Kris, as a bottom, learns about the kind of underwear he can choose from and what kind of underwear to expect for from his boyfriend. In other words, the clear distinction between the underwear as portrayed in pornography between that of the bottom and the top reinforces a masculine dichotomy of top and the bottom, of what it means to be a real masculine man.

### **conclusion**

While straight men try to avoid consumption of the underwear for the appeal of aesthetics, they are nevertheless engaged in such consumption practices as they are exposed to underwear advertisements that not only contradicts them in terms of their own understanding of masculinity but also in terms of how they look at their own bodies. For gay men, pornography is a space where they learn about different kinds of masculinity as the top and the bottom in the same-sex relationship between men, and which underwear they

associate with the particular position they identify with, where meanings of being masculine/feminine is juxtaposed and redefined with different underwear styles.

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#### iv. penis and masculinity

The phallus...has become a potent symbol in the ways in which the culture constructs masculinity. The discourse of masculinity is therefore also the discourse of phallic power. Another way of saying this is that masculinity is *phallogentric*, or centered on the phallus as a symbolic sign of power...The greater the penis then, the closer its owner comes apparently to appropriating the symbolic phallus and its power for himself—and the greater the threat, consequently, to other men.

—Buchbinder (1998:49)

The discussion of the penis and the phallus has been an important part in the conversation about the social underwear. The phallus traditionally “stands, not for the superior fitness of an individual male over other men, but for generic male superiority—not only over females also over other species” (Bordo 1999:89). The phallus is a symbol, the penis is the anatomy (Bordo 1999, Buchbinder 1998). The erect penis is a threat as it resembles the phallus and the power it symbolizes, and as a result, the penis is kept hidden (Buchbinder 1998:52). The phallic power, therefore “that derives from the possession of a penis depends, precisely, on the *hiddenness* of the penis itself.” (Buchbinder 1998:52). The man's underwear then, is an important cloth that conceals the potential threat to the phallus, that is, the (erect) penis. At the same time, the underwear that hides the penis accentuates the penis's existence (Ueno 1989:12, Bordo 1999:95). It is no wonder why that many informants are very concerned about the penis when I ask them about their underwear.

One of the functions of the underwear that a both gay and straight informants mention is the “protective” function of the underwear, although most of them do so mention it in a fleeting manner like Ivan, a straight man in his early twenties mentions:

I always think that underwear is to protect—it's not protecting, but it's so that the penis doesn't have to fling around, I think this is the only purpose the underwear has, and it has not much use.

It is common for my men informants to not wear their underwear at home or in their dormitories, but many put their underwear back on when leaving the private space to venture into the public space. George, a gay man in his early twenties, usually wears his underwear outdoors because “if it [the penis] becomes hard, it will be pretty annoying...[but] I won't feel particularly uncomfortable.” Yet when it comes to tightly wrapped briefs swimwear exposed to the public stranger, my informants, both gay and straight, becomes a little uneasy. Lukas, a straight informant in his late twenties, thinks briefs swimwear are gross, because they tend to accentuate the penis. George, a gay man in his early twenties, also found them “embarrassing.”

The underwear serves as a barrier to another man's access to the insecurity of one's own penis—in an extension of the argument that men are always in the quest to prove to other men that they are men, penis size is particularly important in this comparison for phallic power (Kimmel 1994, Buchbinder 1998). The penis, and the phallus's potential exposure, is thus mediated by the underwear. Straight men were more likely to be insecure about their penis than my gay men informants. Ivan, a straight man in his early twenties, for instance, makes fun of his friend's small penis, while not particularly commenting on his friend's underwear. Ethan, also a straight man in his early twenties, said he wouldn't mind being the underwear model, but he doesn't want people to focus on his “private part.” Henry, a straight man in his mid-twenties, says that it is fine if people wants to evaluate his underwear, but it is not okay when they are in a serious discussion about his penis. In other words, the underwear hides the penis, which is a vulnerable part of discussion. The penis as an embodiment of masculinity is fascinating: “the discourse of masculinity is also the discourse of phallic power” (Buchbinder 1998:49). One of the recurring discussion during my conversation with a few straight informants' is that Justin Bieber's penis was photo-shopped many years ago for a

Calvin Klein advertisement. For a general lack of awareness of underwear trends, my straight informants are strangely very aware of Justin Bieber's photo-shopped penis.

The man's body represents the penis, which signifies the phallus (Potts 2000:87). It therefore explains why straight men are so unwilling to engage in consumption of underwear: by doing so, they are very close to feminizing their body; in particular, *feminizing their phallus*. The man already "struggles" when buying his own underwear in public space. Gupta and Gentry (2016:257) indicates that men indulge in fast fashion shopping, which is the New Man's attempt to "deemphasize his consumption behavior and further communicate that he is not too careful with his appearance but at the same time is concerned about it." Unlike the woman who exhibits behaviors like hoarding an item and spending more time in the clothing store, men are quicker to get their item and leave (ibid). This tension is especially true for my straight men informants, who insists that the times they bought their underwear "happened" to be when they "coincidentally" walked past some store when they were out with their friends or mother, or because they were traveling and was desperate, like Ivan, a straight man in his early twenties, who bought his underwear when he was very ill and could not be bothered to handwash his underwear. It also explains why some of them "choose" not buy their own underwear and leaves that job to their mothers. If they had taken their time to choose their underwear, it could possibly threaten their masculine self that should not think of clothing as one's mode of expression, because men traditionally act, not appear (Bordo 1999:200). Therefore, Ethan and Ivan, both straight man in their early twenties, voice a similar opinion that woman's underwear is communicative of her personality but the man's is not. Casper, a straight man in his early twenties, however, mentions that boxers are perceived to be manlier:

**M:** Why do you think boxers are manlier?

**Casper:** It's related to my friends I guess, I don't know, maybe by coincidence the people who wear boxers are more lao (佬). Do you know which lao (佬)? Not old. More man. The way they talk, the things they do, yeah.

Yet while perceiving that other men are manlier in their boxers, Casper does not make the deliberate effort to buy boxers. Because straight men are more likely to insist that there is no communicative function of their underwear (like the woman's underwear which apparently reveals her personality), they are less likely to be involved in color-coding their underwear and wearing specific underwear for specific occasions. In other words, *they do not want to be involved in the feminization of their phallus*. Within their social lives, they claim to choose whatever pair that comes in hand and would happily tell you that the woman's underwear tells you more about her character than the man's underwear does of the man's character, because *the real man doesn't care* about his underwear. And even if they do, it's for practical reasons. I won't be surprised though, if my straight men informants do pick out their lucky underwear for the day if it were a special event, only that they don't want to admit they do so.

### **moving between social worlds: gay men playing with their penis?**

While the penis size still matters, for the gay man, whose relationship is based on a mutual evaluation of the underwear, the penis being on display is less mentioned as a threat. For example, Mark, a gay man in his early twenties, prefers the white underwear more than black underwear, because it is difficult to tell one's "shape" (bulge) when his partner is wearing a black underwear. Kris also mentions that there are underwear that emphasizes the penis (i.e. u-shaped underwear), making the partner particularly sexy. Unlike the straight man who is merely repelled by the penis which can resemble the phallus, the gay man is attracted to the penis and the phallus, the phallus being a representation and embodiment of

masculinity (Potts 2000). As in the previous chapter, pornography affects the way in which they understand masculine representations of the man and what kind of underwear matches that of the top and the bottom. For a few gay informants, underwear that emphasizes the penis are associated with the tops, although they tend to disagree on which types and colors accentuate the penis. My gay informants also discuss which underwear are manly and sexy, as Robert, a gay man in his early twenties, says:

**M:** What does the underwear usually tell you about somebody else?

**Robert:** Well, we have a theory that the top wears boxers and bottom would wear briefs. Yeah. Because boxers would...uh...how do I put this. Yeah. Like they would wear things that would exaggerate their...sexuality [penis]...but--

**M:** Boxers exaggerate?

**Robert:** Depends. Yeah it usually is the case. The bottom though, likes to wear more tight [underwear]. So yeah, there's a bit of a different style. Or more likely to look for more colorful.

While this was disclaimed by my many other gay informants, who had their own ideas of what constituted as a more masculine underwear and what tops and bottoms would wear, in the conversations with my gay informants, it is a recurring theme that one's masculinity/boldness is reflected in the emphasis of their penis constructed by the shape and cutting of the underwear. The phallic discourse hence, cannot be separated from the masculine discourse (Buchbinder 1998:49). Meanings however, can vary: the jockstrap, which is the man's underwear that resembles a T-back, was seen as a bold underwear for Robert, a gay man in his early twenties, but Sheldon, a gay man in his late twenties, saw it as a feminine undergarment for men.

Edwards (2006:80) proposes that for the gay man, the desire for the masculine man and to be a masculine man are somewhat less distinct. Therefore, while there is still a similar embarrassment that gay men have of their penile sizes, their attraction to the penis and the phallus allows them to subvert the phallic discourse<sup>8</sup> prominent among straight men that is characterized by a degree of fear that the other man's penis resembles the phallus (Buchbinder 1998:53). The gay man does so by consciously choosing the underwear that hides his penis and his potential phallus, conveying different meanings through the underwear he wears, and therefore, imparting different meanings of the penis. He is thus capable of moving between different social settings: one with the straight men, and the other with the gay man. The "setting" is important in the display of oneself:

...those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it. (Goffman 1969:19)

In particular settings then, there is a different kind of presentation of oneself: with straight men, the gay man appears more straight; with gay men, he appears more gay. Mark, a gay man in his early twenties, consumes different gay branded underwear but maintains his emphasis on straight-acting behavior:

Like you know that day you have to get off your clothes, and to get off your pants, like maybe I need to change, change for basketball, you would choose, for example, I need to be with some straight friends, or some people who don't know I'm gay, to go play basketball or to swim and thus change clothes, then, I probably will choose more straight-acting brand and

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<sup>8</sup> They are only able to subvert the phallic discourse partially, however, as they are still men whose penises highlights "the individual man's access to the power of the symbolic phallus" (Buchbinder 1998:52).

cutting. Like simple Levi's, Superdry, Amani, Calvin Klein, these are probably, they would think are straight-acting. Like these are just a desire to look good, and the brands are nothing much. But if I am going home with someone, then if that day I'm having some sexual encounter, I might choose something that's more sexy, more pretty, the brands—that stuff I would choose. So it depends on the occasion.

In other words, Mark uses different brands very deliberately to convey different ideas of his penis that indicates his sexuality. He plays with the underwear's symbolic representations of the penis as he moves between two distinctive social settings. According to most informants, both gay and straight, it is difficult to tell the sexual orientation of the man who wears the underwear, but underwear brands can provide hints. As Sheldon, a gay man in his late twenties, when answering whether or not the underwear reflects one's sexual orientation:

No, like by definition, no. You can get a strong hint, right? There are certain boutique brands that you just kind of guess, but then, yeah. At most I would say, it gives a strong clue, but I wouldn't think that can definitively tell someone's [sexual] orientation. I think Aussie Bum is the biggest one, that's the one that people talk about. I think so. Uh, I would say that it would make me think, if you went all the trouble to find out Aussie Bum and then to specifically order it and then yeah, that probably says something about your sexuality, or at least, what you want to project sexually.

Boutique brands that Sheldon mentions are in reference to brands like Aussie Bum, TOOT, and Private Structure, just a few of the gay underwear brands that my gay informants speak of. Most straight men are oblivious to these brands. Brands, therefore, can be a performance of social class (as mentioned in the previous chapter) as it also can be the performance of one's sexual orientation. Underwear brands have the ability to control the presentation of the penis, as brands change the meaning of the penis in the face of different social settings.

George, a gay man in his early twenties for instance, as mentioned in the previous chapter, has a strong dislike in the feminine characteristics that he feels he exhibits. His underwear choices thus reflect a preference for appearing straight, as those that he had purchased were from the brand Giordano, and he laughed when I asked him why he bought his underwear from Giordano: "it's very straight" was his reply. And George is not an exception: many of my gay informants are involved in the performance of being a straight man. Theo, a gay man in his early twenties, also similarly conforms to his business undergraduate student underwear when he goes to the gym with his classmates, whom he observes also wears black underwear in general. Robert, a gay man in his early twenties, identifies with brands like Jack Wills because that is a brand that undergraduate students at his university favors. In other words, "the objects are coded, and to know the coding is a claim to membership" (Douglas 1996:121). For the gay men, their underwear is coded in ways they assimilate into the heterosexual and homosexual worlds, and their penis, and potential phallus, changes meanings within the two social worlds. Therefore, as long as the gay man's underwear indicates and highlights his own personality to perform to someone else and also embodies the penis, their choice of the underwear is important. George would not wear an old underwear on the day he meets his boyfriend, Robert would wear a special underwear on his first date, Kris would color-code his outwear and his underwear to a blue-tone outfit, and so on, all of which sounds absolutely ridiculous to the straight man informant. But the penis changes meanings when it comes to a sexual encounter between two gay men, as it comes to define attraction, as well as potential power hierarchies, defining one as the top, and the other as the bottom.

The underwear's intimacy to the penis, and potential phallus, explains why only the sexual partner buys underwear for his partner. George for instance, shares his underwear with Nat, which I found surprising:

**M:** Do you ever give people underwear?

**George:** Have I? I would exchange wear.

**M:** With Nat?

**George:** Yeah.

**M:** Would you share your underwear with previous boyfriends?

**George:** Yeah but less.

**M:** Why would you exchange more with your boyfriend now?

**George:** Because it feels more comfortable. Like my relationship with him feels more comfortable. Like sometimes you would feel awkward when your relationship isn't that great.

In that way, sharing the underwear highlights an intimacy, a closeness that can be trusted. Not only is sharing the underwear about hygiene, it is also about a trust that is between two people that can allow the underwear to be shared, because it is an intimate clothing that wraps around the penis, the representation of men's power when it resembles the phallus (Potts 2000:89). In this way it highlights an intimacy that masculine men are not often allowed to depict with other men, as sharing the underwear transgresses the homosocial into the homoerotic and then into the homosexual (Buchbinder 1998:64).

For Robert, giving the underwear to someone is too much of an "intimate" act, and he says that "I think the underwear is intimate, and I don't really want to buy it and [his partner] not liking it" illustrating a fear of rejection: a rejection of one's access to the phallus. Others like Mark and Sheldon, are very happy to give underwear to their friends: Mark gives underwear to his friends as a traveling gift, and Sheldon gives his sexual partners underwear just as "random presents." Because most of the brands that they purchase to give to friends or sexual partners are brands that are not in Hong Kong, it is a special gift. None of the straight men informants presented their friends with underwear—not their male counterparts in

particular, or it would seem too “gay” and transmitting the wrong message. Sheldon, a straight man in his late twenties for instance, gives his sexual partners special underwear brands that he knows they would not usually get, like underwear from brands like Aussie Bum, although his own underwear drawer is only composed of the same collection of black Marks & Spencers trunks. However, when asked why he didn't get underwear for his friends instead, he stuttered and said he gets his friends socks. The underwear is ultimately given to those who are the most physically intimate, because it embraces the penis, the potential phallus.

### **conclusion**

The penis and the phallic discourse is shaped into the masculine discourse through men's underwear, as straight men struggle with consumption as it threatens to feminize their phallus, and as gay men choose to move between different social worlds by associating different meanings to their penis. The gay man, therefore, plays with the understanding of the penis in ways that the straight man does not. The underwear is hence an intimate cloth that has the access to the penis, making it an important piece of clothing to comprehend men's understanding of masculinity.

**v. conclusion**

When I talked to people and said I was doing research on men's underwear, people often thought I was joking. But I hope I could get the point across that men's underwear and its masculinity isn't a joke when both straight and gay men recognize to the degree to which they play by masculinity, when masculinity is embedded through their deliberate (and non-deliberate) choice of underwear, and when they judge others as gay or feminine based on underwear colors and patterns. All of which is, as Kimmel (1994) argues, is a proof to other men of one's masculinity.

I have illustrated the ways in which the gay and straight men avoid colors that are associated with *lar* (世埤), i.e. colors that are too bright, too flashy, that draw attention to their penises, or flowery underwear that looks like that of the women's. Masculinity, whether or not the man chooses the underwear by himself, is constructed into the underwear that he wears. Straight men voice much more anxiety towards seeing underwear that are of these colors and patterns and would rather pretend like they do not see such underwear if someone is wearing them. Gay men, in contrast, particularly dislike the gay men who chooses flashy colors that indicates a lack of maturity, because the straight man does not flaunt his sexuality and so to flaunt one's sexuality indicates a lack of masculinity. Colors and pattern of the underwear, are therefore important discussions of what it means to be a man for men.

Consumption however, is changing the ways in which men understand their own masculinity and how they negotiate that masculinity as it is increasingly the case that men must spend more time to take care of their appearance. We see that tension as straight men constantly emphasize that they *cannot be bothered* by the idea of changing their underwear or

making themselves look attractive, but will define the underwear as good or bad depending on criteria which are based on the aesthetics of the underwear, including whether or not the underwear sags. On the other hand, for the gay man, consumption is a way of indicating one's status, and thus masculine appeal within the gay community, and there is an explicit awareness towards middle-class ideals that means spending more than one would on the underwear than purchasing at the street markets. In addition, pornography has had its own ways of impacting gay men's attitudes towards different kinds of underwear, significantly affecting the ways they understand what it means to be a bottom or the top in their sexual relationship, which also has to do with one's masculinity.

Penis and the phallus then, are important discussions to the underwear and masculinity. The phallic-centric man's body and its penis are protected by the underwear, one that hides the contradictions and power of the phallus. In that respect, the gay man who moves between different social worlds are in fact producing different understandings of the penis, one that is attracted to the penis rather than repelled by it, and the straight man who is afraid of his penis judged by others realizes his penis is always in competition with that of other men's penises, and thus, the penis must strive to live up to the phallus that symbolizes power. And within the phallic discourse of power, those who are involved in the gift-giving of underwear must be those who are the most physically intimate.

Men's bodies are changing and traditional masculinity does not seem to follow such changes. The men I have had a chance to interview, had a lot of difficulties in coming to terms with their own masculinity and what it means to be a real man. Ivan, a straight man in his early twenties, for instance, looked quite disturbed during some parts of the interview, as he did not understand why I was asking him about what he thought of masculinity. George, a gay man in his early twenties, could come up with a whole range of reasons as to why he did not feel like he was masculine enough, including how he did not think what he studies is

manly, or how he wishes he was more muscular. Men are constantly judged for their own masculinity, and men's underwear is really just one of the spaces that reveals the anxiety of failing as a man.

Some of the limitations of this study involved not being able to hear the voices of the women who had purchased underwear for their men, particularly the voices of the mothers and the girlfriends of the informants. In addition, my informants (particularly the gay men) were from a more well-off socioeconomic background, which means my study was centered around a certain class of people in Hong Kong. Class inevitably intersects with the consumption of underwear and the understanding of masculinity.

As a concluding note however, as a female anthropologist I would like to recognize that while the discourse of masculinity and its impact on men is significant and disturbing, gay men and straight men who are part of the marginalized community in a dominant discourse of masculinity, have power in ways that women, to this day, do not. Gay men and other marginalized men "are not definitively excluded from masculinity" (Connell 1992:737). The anti-gay, anti-feminine discourse voiced by gay men is not just internalized homophobia: it is, as Jane Ward (2001) argues, sexism towards women. Therefore, it is not possible to equate the struggle of the gay man to that of the struggle of the woman, as we continue to fight for gender equality to this day.

\*

Many months later since I had started my research on men's underwear, I was again on the mass transit railway (mtr) to Admiralty station. While standing, I lost my balance and almost fell over, but a woman behind me held me before I fell. I turned around to thank her, and realized she was the woman who (very unintentionally) inspired me to do this project. I told her I've met her before, she smiles and says she doesn't remember me. I almost want to say I have decided to do a study on gay men and straight men on the topic of underwear

because I met her in the mtr one day, but I kept my mouth shut. I said goodbye when she tried to start another conversation because I had reached my station.

## Appendix I: Interview Questions

### **About Childhood and at Home**

What was your first conscious memory of an underwear?  
Who bought your underwear when you were young?  
Did you share your underwear with siblings? Why or why not?  
Any particular childhood memories associated with the underwear?  
What was your favorite (style/color/etc) underwear in your childhood?  
Who does the laundry at home when you were young? And today?  
Do you remember shopping for underwear with someone else? Who did you buy the underwear with?  
When did you start buying your own underwear?

### **Sexual orientation**

How do you identify yourself sexually? Do you identify differently in different settings?  
Have you "come out"? If yes, to whom? What made you 'come out' of the closet?  
How open are you about your sexual orientation? To your friends/family?

### **Masculinity**

How do you define an ideal masculinity?  
Do you think you are a masculine man?  
What's the ideal gay man for you?

### **General Questions about Underwear**

What's your favorite underwear style?  
Where do you shop for underwear?  
Who do you go to buy underwear with?  
Have you tried not wearing the underwear in some occasions? How did that make you feel?  
Do you feel comfortable with showing people your underwear?  
Do you handwash your underwear? Why or why not?

### **The different styles of underwear**

Do you like y-fronts or boxers more?  
What do you think of white briefs?  
Do you wear certain clothing with certain types of underwear? Do you wear certain underwear for certain occasions?  
What do you think of the enlarged labels of underwear brands? And the overemphasis of certain underwear features?  
How often do you go to the beach? How is the beachwear different from the underwear?

### **Underwear Socialization**

Do you ever talk about the underwear with anyone? Like discussing the underwear?  
Has anyone ever commented on your underwear before?  
Is there such thing as a feminine underwear masculine underwear among men's underwear?  
Do you follow certain fashion trends of underwear? (or fashion trends in general)

### **On Underwear Brands**

What's the most appealing underwear brand?  
Do you think bigger underwear brands produce better underwear?  
What's the difference between good and bad underwear? Are these differences noticeable?  
What underwear material do you prefer? Why?

### **On Advertisements**

How do you perceive underwear advertisements?  
Do you see a gay or straight man staring back at you in underwear advertisements?  
Is there any impact that the body shape has on your underwear (other than the size of the underwear)?  
How do you feel about being someone's object of gaze/desire--or represented about being desired?  
Is there such thing as a gay code in Hong Kong? Gay code about sex? Or mutual acknowledgement (as part of the 'family')? Is that reflected in advertisements?

### **Relating to Relationships**

Do you ever judge your other people's underwear? Do you judge your partner's underwear? Does your partner's underwear tell you about his character, for instance?  
What kind of underwear is most sexy?  
Can you tell the sexual orientation of men by their choice of underwear?  
How has pornography affected the ways in which you interpret the underwear?

### **Do you think gay men in general have better fashion awareness?**

What is the gay men's underwear?

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