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Funderwear: How to Get Over Your Hang-Ups and Buy What I'm Selling.

It may appear terribly disingenuous to claim that I found myself working at a men's underwear store for the sake of experimental investigation. But after five years of employment, it feels like an honest thing to say. Sometimes. Sort of.

At age 18, I caught my first glimpse of UnderU4Men by accident; it was a storefront that I'd hurriedly and carelessly passed as I schlepped deliveries from my father's liquor store to the neighboring downtown bars and restaurants. Unexpectedly, that changed: I caught a greyscale wink from a bulbously ovoid, shaggily overgrown—but tastefully sculpted—pectoral and I seized up. My hands slipped across the dolly—up and down again—slick with sweat; I flinched and stared at this exposed chest face-to-face. And on the printed metal sign, these words appear: “my name is UnderU4Men, look upon my designer men's underwear, ye mighty and despair,” also “live models appearing”—something like that. I gazed at the marvels of this foreign bazaar, the once-familiar surroundings that I knew and encountered in all its pedestrian glory suddenly dissolved into sand as I gawked. I sheepishly glanced into the store, a surreal monument of colorful trinkets, encased in a glassy storefront exhibition, inaccessible to touch, an impossible threshold to cross as I hastily decided to finish my deliveries.

I was not yet ready to face the experience of shopping for men's underwear. It's an overwhelming thought, at first. Certainly, it was too much for my sheepish, shy, newly eighteen-year-old self to handle. My teenage anxiety, like all teenage anxiety, was somehow extremely subjective and yet boringly universal: I wore the same corduroy jacket every day for a year, I dyed my hair black during sophomore year, listened to an arrogant amount of Nirvana, Elliott Smith and—later—Gwen Stefani, I was on the newspaper staff, I was an art student, and I sporadically dated, or attempted to date my lady-peers. And when I say “dated,” I use this term very, very loosely since there was lots of hand-holding, hugging, and a deeply platonic sense of companionship; however, I had yet to kiss anyone on the lips until I finally got naughty and drunk after senior prom<sup>1</sup>. I was a sexual milquetoast, despite the numerous suspicions of my overprotective, paranoid mother. I was way straightedge, probably because I just wasn't popular or unpopular enough to be otherwise. Until the very end of senior year, I neither drank, smoked, nor fornicated in high school.<sup>2</sup> I was decidedly happy with my status in social limbo, comfortably content to lay within the mean. And all this is to say, sexuality wasn't an identity-defining factor within my life at the time; my hands and the internet got along fine and the rest I assumed I'd investigate further during college.

So now, to put it into context, the first time I walked past UnderU4Men's busy a-frame sign, I was in an unexpected moment of personal flux and viscerally unstable sexual fluidity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The events of the evening earned me my first—and last—hicky!

<sup>2</sup> Now I do all three. Look how far I've come.

<sup>3</sup> Fluidity is a word that's employed by gender theorists to describe a flexible, malleable approach to aspects of sexuality. Rigidity is a word used to describe a sexuality that is inflexible. A man in his freshman year of college may experience a period of fluidity by experimenting with oral sex with men, but he may remain rigid by not wanting to kiss or have anal intercourse with other men. And he may still rigidly identify himself heterosexual, and if that's how he feels, I'm comfortable agreeing with him. He'd be a boring playmate, anyway.

Earlier that day, I talked with a new friend who had also just been accepted into Whittier College's Freshman class and I experienced feelings and inclinations that were never really at the forefront of my mind. I soon dated Thomas, my new classmate, had sex with him often, and come out to friends and family as a gay man.<sup>4</sup> But I'd refrain from calling these snap-shot moments a "sexual awakening"—there's a pleasure and nuance to sexuality that's best left confusingly and puzzlingly unspoken. It's an awkward, mystifying experience to reflect upon. While I identify as gay—I am gay and yet strive to be gay at the same time—I am, as we all are, more than the sum of our chosen and ascribed labels.

This sense of awkward and slippery sexual subjectivity is something that I keep in mind as customers bewilderingly stumble or creep into the front door. I try not to assume much about each person—which is a challenge in retail since the whole point of salesmanship is making a connection and people approach connection in myriad ways—so I'm always trying to navigate the interaction and find a comfortable starting point before initiating. One safe assumption: shopping at UnderU4Men is an intimidating experience for first timers. Another: most people don't mind being asked if they've been in the store before. Additionally: those who march assuredly in, are often regulars. Therefore: if I don't recognize their confident swagger or their presence seems tenuous, I greet them kindly and gently, try and make a joke about how daunting it can be to navigate this exciting new world of colors, fits, fabrics and selection, I mandate that they never hesitate to ask any questions, and let them roam for a while before continuing to inform their shopping process.

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<sup>4</sup>I would not consider this a moment in which I had a profound revelation about a latent same-sex desire that I suppressed until now—this form of latency implies that desire and sexuality is a singular thing. However, many people have numerous sexual partners throughout their lives and therefore numerous sexualities. And so instead, I consider this a moment during which I enriched and shifted my sexuality that is both always already there and yet was never so embodied or experienced so sharply up to this point.

The sensation of awe and confusion is—somewhat—purposeful on the part of UnderU4Men, a store that I like to divulge to first-timers, “is the largest men’s underwear store in the nation, filled with 40 brands of Underwear, Swimwear, Gymwear and a newly expanded selection of Skin and Body Care—all for dudes.” In the same way that the Cathedrals of old Europe are supposed to evoke an allegorical heaven, the store is a pretty literal evocation of how different and dynamic men’s retail, fashion, and sexuality have become in the past few decades.

Importantly, UnderU4Men is a store geared towards, and targeted at, Women who couple with Men.<sup>5</sup> This demographic spends the majority of money in retail—and while this statistic is dynamically shifting, it’s still holds true by an impressive margin. That said, it’s a store owned by a gay man, staffed predominately by other gay men; until very recently we’ve had a remarkable variety of sales associates from disparate identifications and backgrounds—it ebbs and flows. But we definitely get all sorts of customers in the store. While gay-identified men are a necessary, foundational demographic for UnderU4Men, we cater to mothers, brothers, fathers, sisters, sons, and daughters—all of which could be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, trans<sup>6</sup>, cis-gendered<sup>7</sup> women who wear men’s underwear, trans women who wear men’s underwear, trans men who wear men’s underwear, cis-men who wear men’s underwear, those who identify with no sex or gender at all, and any yet unspoken for or forgotten. All of the categories that seek to inform or signify identity help to inform and signify people’s notions

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<sup>5</sup> AKA: Heterosexual Women

<sup>6</sup> Transgender: A person who does not self-relate their gender identity to the sex they were assigned at birth.

<sup>7</sup> Cisgender: A person who self-relates their gender identity to the sex assigned to them at birth.

about whether or not they should shop at UnderU4Men. But I'm not giving you the hard sell when I say that there's absolutely something for everyone.<sup>8</sup>

So, after a brief greeting, we talk about what the guy<sup>9</sup> (present or not) likes, or what he wants to be seen in, or what his partner wants to see him in. Are we looking for boxers, briefs, boxer-briefs, trunks? We discuss how substantial the underwear's coverage should be, how tight it fits, how long the legs are, if there's any leg at all. I usually don't mention jock straps or thongs but those are options too! Then there's fabric: do they want to stick to cotton? There's 100% cotton, there's cotton/spandex blends, nylon/spandex blends, polyester/spandex blends. There's the "natural fabrics": merino wool, modal—made from beech wood trees, tencel—made from eucalyptus, bamboo—made from bamboo. All are splinter free. Or your money back.

We get to talking about a lot before we start to talk about anything specific.

Many customers are already gracefully adept at negotiating the ever-changing landscape of men's underwear. And most of my best moments, as a sales associate, are with people who can converse in the shared language of the store—those who understand, or have come to understand, what they like to wear, hope to wear, and want others to wear. But, I have a special place in my heart for the skeptics, those folks who are unindoctrinated, who assume that they cannot share or bask in the fun of shopping for men's underwear. As mentioned, there's varying degrees of openness to the experience and I shift my angle for each. Often, a "main street"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Are you interested in looking at a unique wallet made from Tyvek, Rubber Polymer, or Stainless Steel? Or perhaps a belt made from locally recycled bicycle tires? NO? What about sunglasses made from oak and granite? Not every person can—or—should find something that they *have to have*, all I'm saying is that if absolutely nothing seems interesting or appealing to touch and look-at in this store, you probably hate fun.

<sup>9</sup> To avoid the painstaking qualification of pronouns each time, "guy" will simply refer to the person who we are shopping for.

<sup>10</sup> My boss' press-release code word for "breeder" AKA "heterosexual".

couple will walk into the store and I give my greeting and allow a minute or two of wandering, I check-in and ask what they think of the store: are they overwhelmed, excited, navigating things ok? And occasionally, the response is a haughty, “Well, it’s pretty clear that there’s nothing for me in this store” from the male-end of the couple. And I shoot a quick smirk to the female end of the couple and quip, “Oh, you don’t wear underwear?” And my smirk is returned from the female half. This is a (sometimes) effective strategy and less snarky and more playful than it may sound. It’s an attempt to cut through the discomfort with humorous shears and force the man to divulge that, yes in fact, he does wear underwear: he most often wears [these], or likes to wear [those], or is specifically looking to wear [this]. And we get to talking.

Sometimes, it is not as challenging to distill the specifics of a newcomer’s preferences. Some guys are happy to compromise or cede to their partner’s choices. Some guys bought a pair of Calvin Klein in 1998 that they have been combing the known world to find again—there’s not much I can do for them, unfortunately. Fashions change and so does fashion underwear.<sup>11</sup>

There’s an occasional request for fly-front underwear and this is particularly complicated. In his book, *Gaga Feminism*, gender-queer theorist Jack Halberstam reports an exchange about men’s underwear flies that he had with a writer from *New York Magazine*—whom he cheekily calls “Mr. Journalism”—and it illustrates the perplexities of this flighty conversation nicely. Mr. Journalism asks, “I go into the bathroom the other day in my new briefs that my girlfriend has bought me and I realize . . . is this OK?” Jack responds, “Yeah, sure . . . your new briefs, you are in the bathroom . . . go on.” And Mr. Journalism hesitates, “Well . . . I get up to the urinal and I

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<sup>11</sup> This is not always easy to explain. Even plain-Jane “basics,” your everyday cotton briefs are subject to the whims of market forces. Brands alter, sometimes only slightly, sometimes very significantly, their “basics” line. The elastic band can change, they blend their cotton with a little spandex, and/or they shorten the leg on their boxer brief, et cetera. This can justify a price-increase, compensate for an inferior product by making it obsolete, accommodate shifting demands and/or tastes, or be just for shits and giggles to cure the underwear designer’s boredom.

realize the briefs have no opening and so I cannot really get myself in the position to pee without pulling everything down so I have to use the stall, which is, you know, embarrassing . . .” (88-89). It needs to be said that *both of these people are saints*. Mr. Journalism is gingerly confiding a confusion and Jack is responding in a playful, curious, and respectful manner. Very adult.

When I discuss fly-front underwear with customers who are accustomed to using the fly in their underwear, the idea that it does not exist in all men’s underwear is baffling, angering, humiliating, and/or unintelligible to them. Not always. Certainly often enough to make it noteworthy. In my experience, this conversation often manifests in apoplectic anger or dismissive pissiness towards me and I respond in-kind. The moment that panic sets in takes uncountable forms but here’s a few: “Where’s the pee hole?” “Where’s the slit thing?” “How am I supposed to piss while wearing this underwear?” There are many, many things that I’m willing and able to answer as a sales associate but I regularly fail to provide an answer that is satisfactory to this line of questioning. I again, default to humor, “no one goes through the gate anymore; they just hop over the fence,” I joke.<sup>12</sup> That tends to fall flatter than I’d like since it still doesn’t really address the customer’s concerns. And they tend not to trust me as I continue, telling them that “eighty percent of men no longer use their fly.”<sup>13</sup> And so their reaction, still sounds a lot like Mr. Journalism’s: “So I just pull my pants and underwear down and show the entire restroom my ass or use a stall and sit down?” They ask.

Internally, my response is “sure, that’s one way to do it. I mean, I do it differently.” I could (and sometimes attempt to) describe how the market trend towards a lower rise in men’s

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<sup>12</sup> It’s a joke someone told me at some point, attributing it to Seinfeld, and I liked it so much that I’ve adopted it into my selling technique. So, if asked, I attribute this wisecrack to Seinfeld. But I’ve only watched two episodes of Seinfeld and I’ve never watched his standup; Google offers no evidence that anyone has ever said it.

<sup>13</sup> Probably because it’s a factoid that my boss throws around and is impossible to find source data on. It just feels true though doesn’t it?

underwear increases the band's proximity to male genitalia and therefore makes it easy to just pull down what little fabric there is to accommodate urination instead of pulling said male genitalia through a complicated fabric labyrinth. But this is very often a conversation ender—an almost certain exercise in futility. It's just absolutely ass-backwards awkward to try and verbally convince a 50 year-old man that how he pees is outdated. Essentially, no one ends up a winner in this conversation; we all lose because we all fail to understand one another.

It's important to mention that flies have largely been replaced by pouches—supportive, enhancing pouches, to put it gently. Ball bras, to put it bluntly. Not all pouches on men's underwear today are “enhancing” in such obvious ways and not all pouchy underwear lack a fly. Some are designed for comfort, some are designed for support, some are for sports-performance. Some just say “pouch front underwear” on their boxes. Others have more ostentatious names like “Trophy Shelf,” “Trophy Boy,” “Almost Naked,” “WonderJock,” “Show-It Technology,” “Saxx,” “Shock Jock” and the list goes on. The “Almost Naked” remains the highest selling pair of underwear at UnderU4Men, the bamboo soft fabric is one selling point but the hang-free pouch is another. “It's supposed to feel like you're not wearing anything” I tell customers.<sup>14</sup> The idea that it feels like the underwear and pouch are not there is appealing to men. They want to feel free and unbridled; to let it all hang out. Comfort is still king in men's wear. But the “Almost Naked” also foregrounds the penis; it's front-and-center in the apparatus.

Halberstam's Mr. Journalism—the archetype of journalistic curiosity, restraint, and balance that he is—finds a perfect center in this dichotomous, divisive conversation when he sums up that “men's briefs do have a logic, but now the logic of use has been replaced with a

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<sup>14</sup> As if they couldn't figure that out on their own.



logic of size” (89). And this “logic” is key. Well reported, sir. But, with that said, the idea of what “a logic” might mean requires some deconstruction. Grammatically, saying something has “a logic” seems clumsy—it interrupts common usage and obfuscates the integrity of the usually rational word “logic”. However, I’d venture to say that this inelegance is productive and informative since it makes us pause on it and consider its tricky queerness. A Logic: a rationale, a reason for being, a purpose. “A logic of use” suggests that the underwear is worn to be used, to be penetrated before peeing, and to serve the man wearing it. But “a logic of size” suggests something less self-serving, something that is put on display for others. It steals underwear’s purpose away from the man—singular, the one wearing it—and offers it up to other men, women, and anyone who wants a look.

This is what I’m selling, ultimately—I want men to recognize how unstable their deep-seated concepts and notions of self and masculinity are. We are all commoditized and packaged in ways that seem unpleasant—but men—men aren’t as often forced to reflect upon those internal and external pressures. There are widening fissures in the façades and veneers of masculinity that are not dismantling masculinity necessarily but changing what it means at a pace that is (at times) reckless and (at others) sluggish. There are uncountable and unaccountable intersections between gender, economies, markets, masculinity, femininity, queerness, fluidity, rigidity, fluctuations and I cannot begin to understand them in their entirety. I am confused. And I want to interrupt “a logic of use” not to necessarily replace it with “a logic of size” but to inform a privileged population that they should feel as confused and mystified as I do. And I want them to be better for it. Because I feel better for it, even when I am weighed down by crippling doubt and uncertainty, I manage to believe that I am who I am in all my myriad, escaping forms and ideals. I love what I sell.