

When it comes to **UNDERWEAR** men and women are as different as night and day

For women,
undies are power
and sexuality.
Men just want
comfort.

By Don Mayhew
The Fresno Bee

Having the right underwear is so essential to actress Malinda Williams that she designed her own line called Modern Goddess.

"Lingerie is where I start my day," she says. "If I feel good in my underwear before I put anything else on, I'm going to feel good no matter what else I put on."

When Williams, best known for her role in the Showtime television series "Soul Food," is asked whether she ever considered putting out a companion line for men, she laughs politely.

"No, that never crossed my mind," she says. She chooses her next words carefully. "Initially, when you set out to do something, you have to stay focused. Because we're so new, the main focus is just ladies."

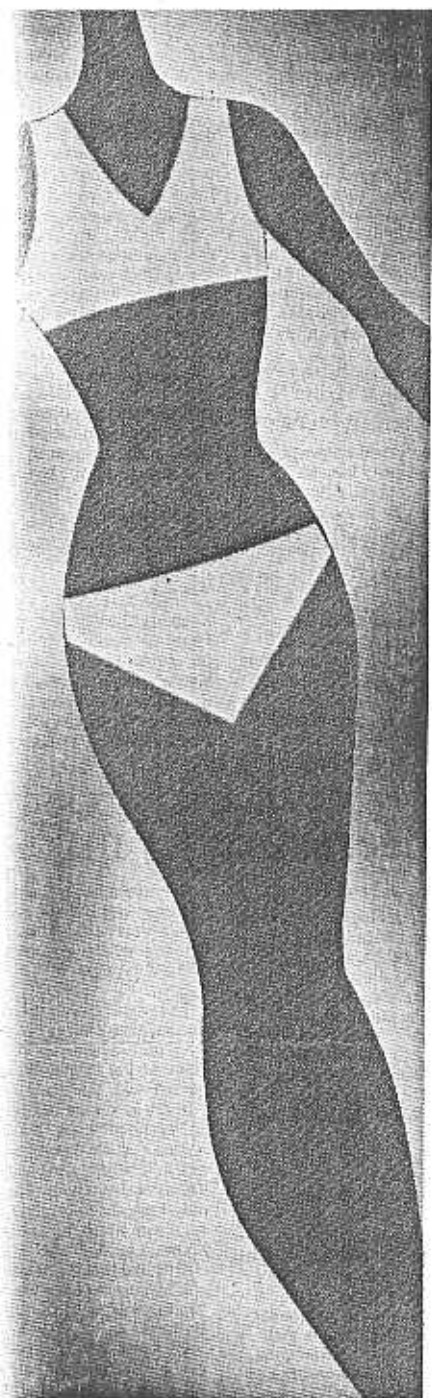
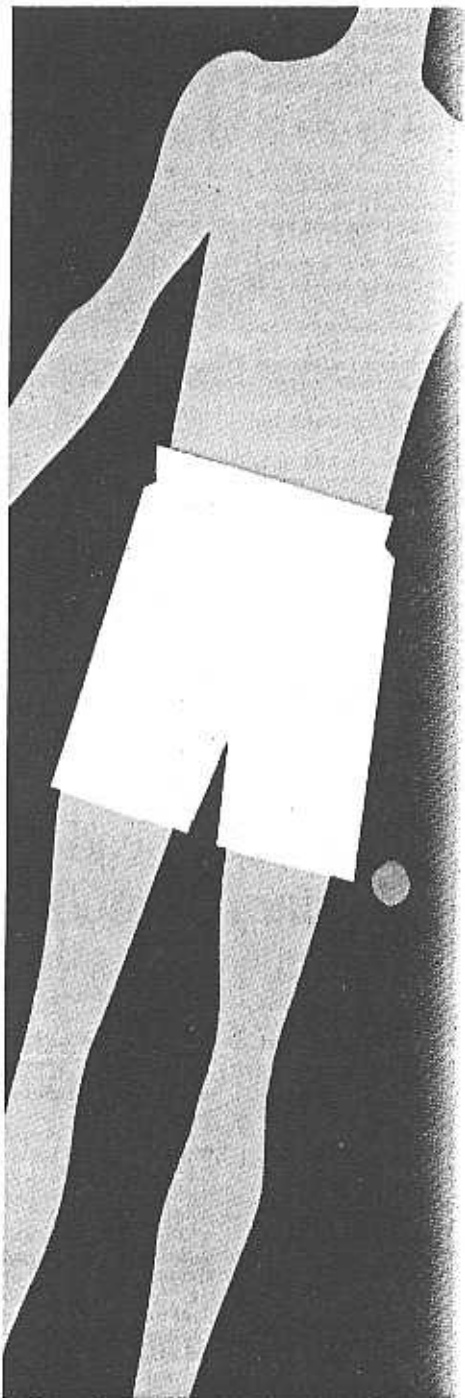
But the truth is, when it comes to underwear, the money isn't with men. In any given year, Victoria's Secret alone is likely to generate more revenue than all the underwear sold to men.

Women's intimate apparel grossed \$9.6 billion in the United States last year, according to the market research firm NPD Group. Men's sales were about a third of that. Victoria's Secret's take was about \$4.2 billion.

Despite several companies' efforts to lure men into fancier underduds, it's an uphill battle. While the average Jane spends time every morning considering her choices, industry observers agree, the average Joe grabs whatever's on top of the underwear drawer — and hopes it's clean.

Their habits are almost as different as a \$200 bra and three tighty-whiteys for \$5.99. The explanations for this discrepancy rely on both stereotypical gender differences and practical matters of taste and fashion.

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Lingerie: No joy in 15-year-old boxers

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"Men tend to find something that they like, and they stick with it," Williams says.

Author Sandra Beckwith of Fairport, N.Y., couldn't agree more. She didn't write specifically about underwear in "Why Can't a Man Be More Like a Woman?" But after talking to dozens of men, she came away with a clear idea of why they wear what they wear.

"They get attached to certain items because they're comfortable," she says. "You'll see a 37-year-old shooting hoops in the college T-shirt he bought during freshmen orientation week.

"Men wear old underwear in spite of waistbands with little elastic strings popping out all over like fireworks on the Fourth of July."

Stephanie Pedersen, the New York author of "Bra: A Thousand Years of Style, Support & Seduction," says many men don't care about underwear because they don't have to.

"Historically, they have not been the seducers," she says. "They've been the chasers. They have to worry about being good providers and good protectors. Women have looked at them for those roles. If he was nice-looking, that was a nice bonus."

Peter Klaus, who tracks pop culture trends for the public relations firm Fleishman-Hillard in Washington, D.C., agrees that our patriarchal society plays a role in what we wear underneath it all.

"Men, in general, don't gain more power by looking great in a pair of briefs," he says. "Women, on the other hand, can gain much power and attention by wielding their sex appeal. By investing in their undergarments, women are actually buying perceived power rather than just a few swaths of comfortable fabric."

Pedersen says feminists busy with work and family don't like to admit that they spend time worrying about how they look to the opposite sex. But "that's just the way it is. We don't put on a pair of jeans that make our butt look big. We don't wear shoes that make us look dowdy."

Because the fabrics for their fashions often are lighter and thinner than men's, women worry more about matching colors and making sure everything's covered up that should be.

"All these things make

underwear a really big deal," Pedersen says. "You have to have a wardrobe of underwear to match whatever you've decided to put on that morning."

The payoff is that many women get a charge out of their undergarments that a guy wearing 15-year-old boxers never could.

Years ago, a mentor reminded Fresno attorney Charlotte Hylton that she was going into a field in which she needed to dress conservatively. But that didn't mean she couldn't spice things up where no one would know.

"It's like this silent added confidence you have, because you know what's underneath," Hylton says.

Beckwith says it's true: "If you're having a bad hair day, which is like the end of the world for a woman, but you have on your prettiest, sexiest undergarments, you're still feeling a little bit better about yourself than if you were wearing the old, boring stuff."

Pedersen likes the way things are.

"It's enough that we're spending all this time and money and energy on this," she says. To have a guy casting a critical eye would be too much: "I want a guy who just doesn't care."

Beckwith says men typically look at shopping as modern-day hunting and gathering, happiest when they can get everything they need in one place "and duck out the door before anything bad happens."

But some women find lingerie shopping a good excuse for a party with a few close friends.

"You pop out of the little dressing room and say, 'Hey, how hot do I look like this?'" she says. "Then they give you a little wolf whistle, you giggle, then you go back into your little changing room."

"Have you ever seen a couple of guys do that? I don't think so."

That gender divide applies to the kind of get-togethers presented by Fresno-based Scandals Lingerie Home Parties. Debbie Henderson, who's run the Scandals business the past 14 years, says she presents a dozen women-only parties for every one attended by both men and women.

"Men are embarrassed to go into stores and look at underwear," she says. "I think that's why there's not a whole lot to choose from."

Eadie Kelly, the vice president for merchandising at Undergear, has been working hard to change all that. The company specializes in colorful men's underwear designed to appeal to a man who appreciates the whimsy of wearing something imprinted with bright colors, stars or a fire truck.

"Fashion and skin care has crossed over to men," she says. It's not just young men, either. "If a person is 40 or 50 and fit and working out, he's going to want to show it off."

Even Kelly, however, has a hard time imagining a men's specialty store that could rival Victoria's Secret. She admits that men are skittish about being seen buying certain types of underwear.

"I never met a male who admitted to wearing a thong," she says. "Yet it's 20% of my business."

But to hear Kelly and other women tell it, it might behoove men to take a minute or two when they open that underwear drawer.

"A splash of color makes women think you're adventurous, independent, free-spirited," she says.

Hylton says when she goes out with friends, "It's not an uncommon conversation for single women to say to each other, 'What do you think he's wearing under that?'"

Beckwith believes "underwear says a lot about the person who's wearing it."

But Williams, who hopes to get her Modern Goddess lingerie into stores this summer, says she doesn't worry too much about what's going on with the opposite sex.

"I don't think we women pay much attention to that," she says. "I don't think we're worried as much about the packaging."

"If it's clean, that's all we want to know."

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