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Exploring personal identities through constructions of footwear

EPCA Conference
Belgrade, 2010

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Background

Shoes and personal identity

Pilot study- role construct repertory tests and interviews with four women

Revealed important identity issues
Method

Women worked in pairs as co-investigators
Used 12 images of shoes

Asked to choose 6 liked and 6 disliked to work with

In second workshop, women also supplied some of their own shoes as potential elements
Method

Used triads and dyads to elicit constructs

Completed grid using ticks (preferred) and crosses (non-preferred)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred pole</th>
<th>Unpreferred pole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality:</td>
<td>Ethnic origin:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liked 1</td>
<td>Disliked 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liked 2</td>
<td>Disliked 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liked 3</td>
<td>Disliked 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman I am</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman I fear I may be</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman I'd like to be</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Method

the woman I am
the woman I fear I might be
the woman I’d like to be (ref)
Participants

31 women from the UK, Italy, Australia, USA, Cyprus and Sri Lanka.

age range: 26 to 64,
Findings

The women produced 215 constructs in total. Most women produced between 4 and 10. The average was 6 to 7. Content analysis of construct dimensions resulted in 14 categories, accounting for 162 (75%) of the constructs.
Findings

Comfortable (14)  
Practical (13)  
Elegance and class (14)  
Femininity (9)  
Boring and plain (26)  
Age (4)  
Sexuality (14)  
Conformity and individuality (13)  
Fashionable (9)  
Exhibitionism and being noticed (15)  
Aesthetics (15)  
Safety (7)  
Freedom and constraint (5)  
Fun and frivolity (10)
Findings

Comfortable vs uncomfortable

For what do women feel they sacrifice comfort?
Findings

Elegance and class

non-preferred, contrast poles:
Vulgar
Common
Cheap
Trashy
Findings

Femininity

Contrast poles:

Sexless
Aggressive
Masculine
Butch
Neutral
All-rounder
pretending to play a role
Practical
Brazen/predatory
Findings

Practical

Contrast poles included:

Impractical
Flimsy
Frivolous
Entertaining
Feminine

Psycho-logic vs formal logic
Findings

Boring and Plain

Contrast poles suggest a desire for fun and frivolity, glamour and excitement, creativity and expressiveness, interest and vibrancy.
Findings

Sexuality

Preferred pole included:

Sexy vs missionary
Sexy vs frumpy
Seductive vs off-putting
Proud to be a sexy woman vs conservative
Findings

Outgoing vs loose morals
Individual personality vs stereotype woman of the street
Free spirit vs sexualised (empty headed)
Wonderfully ridiculous vs tarty
Stylish vs tarty
Someone whose sexuality is more refined vs tarty, letting men know they’re up for it!
Findings

The narrow path?:

Classically sexy vs slutty
Findings

The woman I am
and the woman I’d like to be
common vs elegant
all-rounder vs feminine
unfashionable vs trendy
elegant vs comfortable
Drab vs sexy
Boring vs interesting
Exploring personal identities through constructions of footwear

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The woman I am</th>
<th>The woman I’d like to be</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accommodating</td>
<td>hard work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>normal</td>
<td>wacky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fashion victim</td>
<td>in style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unprotected</td>
<td>safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trendy</td>
<td>overly girly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unchanging</td>
<td>ephemeral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Bipolarity

Serious vs bad taste
Sporty vs identity-driven
Outgoing vs loose morals
Frivolous vs aggressive
Bouncy vs mincey
Lively vs self-confident
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lively vs self confident might become:

Lively vs lacks energy
Self-confident vs timid
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Range of convenience

Heels vs flat
Uniform neutral colour vs not harmonious in colour
Delicate vs sturdy
Soft vs hard (give blisters)
Summer (no socks) vs covered up, enclosed
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Feeling in control vs not having my own mind
Happy vs sad
Open mind vs closed mind
Who is liked vs scared
Serious vs stupid
Benign vs dangerous
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Summary

- Using shoes seems to be an engaging and productive way of enquiring about sense of self.
- Sometimes further probing is needed to tease out ‘nests’ of constructs.
- Issues prominent for women include comfort and practicality, but also a desire for elegance and the ability to express sexuality and femininity.
- What women want is not straightforward. There is a narrow path to walk between being sexy and being a tart.
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What can you say about your experiences today?