

Motivations for Lingerie Sewing among Contemporary Seamstresses

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The home sewing industry is experiencing a major boom in participation (Hall & Jayne, 2016; Martindale & McKinney, 2020), especially since the Covid-19 pandemic started. The Covid-19 pandemic and shutdown caused a 200% increase in online sales of craft supplies since 2020 (The Guardian, 2020). Additionally, there has been more interest among home sewers in making lingerie, in particular bras (Redfern, 2020; Ryan, 2021). There are numerous blogs and websites selling lingerie sewing patterns, supplies, and even offering workshops (Ryan, 2021).

Many crafters, including home sewers, enjoy wearing their homemade items to receive compliments and praise from others (Martindale & McKinney, 2020; Stannard & Sanders, 2015). However, since home-sewn lingerie is not visible to most people, sewers cannot receive the same positive affirmations when wearing it. This begs the question, what are the motivations for home sewers to make their lingerie?

Methods and Procedures

To explore the purpose statement, a sample of 16 participants was recruited for inclusion in this research. Participants were recruited through Facebook™ and Instagram™ forums dedicated to lingerie sewing. The participants were seamstresses who actively make lingerie (ex. sports bras, slips/chemises, underwear, bras, corsets, and swimwear). These individuals identified as women, lived in the US, and over the age of 18. Data were gathered in three ways. Initially, an online questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics™ to determine the sewing skill level, lingerie sewing experience, and some basic demographics of the various participants. Then a virtual interview was conducted via Zoom™ with each participant and a transcript was generated. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the conversation. Finally, the researchers offered participants the opportunity to share photos of their home-sewn lingerie.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to generate frequencies. The interview data were analyzed using a thematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, data were read and re-read. Then, initial codes were defined in a codebook. Next, the coded data were collapsed into themes. The themes were compared against each other and refined into finalized themes and subthemes.

Results and Discussion

Following IRB approval, sixteen interviews were conducted in early 2022 vis Zoom™ with participants who sewed lingerie and identified as women. All interviews were automatically transcribed using the software. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 60 minutes.

The average age of the participants was 46 and most (n=11, 68.8%) were married or living with a partner. Most of the participants had been sewing for over 15 years (n=13, 81.3%), another two (12.5%) had between 6-15 years of sewing experience, and one participant (6.3%) was new to sewing with only 1-2 years of experience. When ranking their skill level most felt they were advanced (n=11, 68.8%) or intermediate (n=4, 25%). The lingerie items that they typically sewed included: bras or bralettes, underwear, and corsets.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three major themes were present. The first theme was related to *motivations*. Within this theme, several participants discussed how they felt lingerie sewing was the ultimate challenge. Participant 6 stated, “it’s definitely challenging trying to make a very structured garment out of very fluid fabrics and stretching fabrics.” Many described lingerie sewing as the peak of sewing skills and some felt that this type of sewing was inappropriate for those who were not precise in their construction. Martindale and McKinney (2020) found similar feelings among sewers who wanted to progress to bra sewing once they were more confident in their garment construction abilities.

Interestingly, there were also several comments related to the fact that sewing lingerie was not always to look sexy. Participant 1 claimed, “I don't spend a lot of time wearing these to look sexier. I just wear them because I like them and knowing that I’m wearing matching things that are attractive and they fit and they're comfortable.”

Design inspiration was another motivating component for the participants to sew lingerie. Inspiration was sourced from all over. Some participants were inspired by the fabric offerings of various retailers. Others ventured into high-end stores like La Perla to find ideas for their sewing. Social media also provided a wonderful gateway to design inspiration for the participants. In general, there was great joy in playing with the colors and textures used to sew lingerie. Sewing has long been identified as a creative outlet for participants (Martindale & McKinney, 2020).

The next theme was *perfecting the fit*. Several participants had encountered fit issues with commercial lingerie, especially bra offerings. These occurred due to irregular breast size, two breasts that were different sizes, a very large cup size, and more. One participant said, “whenever I do find like the boob twin on Instagram or whatever like I follow everything they do like. There's a woman, Holly, with the Twisted Poppy, we are very similar like a bra size she sews it's usually very similar” (P2). This participant was able to use similar-sized women (boob twins) to determine which patterns would fit. Some participants had attended workshops or even paid for private fitting lessons to perfect their bra patterns for their bodies. Other researchers found sewing allowed women to, “gain control over how their garments fit ensuring that their clothing flattered their varied body types” (Martindale & McKinney, 2020, p. 571).

A third theme related to *support and community*. Many of the participants discussed the growing online community of lingerie sewing enthusiasts. For instance, Participant 6 commented, “especially during quarantine when people had a lot of time to kind of learn skills.... a lot of people are really happy and helpful in sharing information and resources that they have, posting tutorials or things, or if they post something that's like hey look what I made.” Researchers suggested that home sewers need additional help with fit issues and subsequent pattern adjustments to prolong enjoyment and involvement in sewing (LaBat et al., 2007).

Other participants discussed the role of social media in sharing results and receiving positive feedback. This finding aligns with Bain (2016) who asserted that, “one of the striking features of the digital dressmaking community appears to be its positivity and inclusivity” (p. 63). Finally, advice, tutorials, sewing contests like #Bragust, and even virtual or in-person workshops, were mentioned as being other important support activities for lingerie sewing.

Conclusions

Participants demonstrated similar motivations for sewing lingerie as past research findings, enjoyment of the activity, creativity, community support, and ability to properly fit their bodies. Surprisingly, some were quick to point out that being “sexy” was not part of their motivation for sewing lingerie and should be further investigated. Additionally, fit and teaching how to fit bra sewing patterns should be further investigated as it is a major barrier for sewers.

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