British women say bottoms up to big pants

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Latest research from MINTEL shows that when it comes to knickers, bigger really is better, as British women turn their backs on thongs in favour of fuller maxi pants.

Women's spending on thongs has fallen 14% since 2003 to some ?89 million this year or just 23% of the pants market value, down from around 28% two years ago. By contrast, sales of maxi pants have ballooned by 36% over the same time period to just over ?100 million this year, with larger sized 'boy shorts' or 'French knickers' well and truly back in vogue. Indeed today, maxi pants account for the largest share of the market (26%), up from 20% in 2003. The control bottom pants sector also looks to be good shape, having grown 15% over the past two years, as women increasingly look to get a handle on unwanted sagging without going under the knife.

"The popularity of trousers was largely responsible for the dominance of the thong, which originally had the practical purpose of avoiding a visible panty line. But there has been something of a backlash against this style of pants, which is now often seen as uncomfortable, unflattering and for some, a bit on the brash side. What is more, this year skirts have experienced something of a renaissance and this is partly responsible for this trend towards larger 'boy shorts', which are more comfortable under skirts and leaves the wearer feeling less vulnerable than a thong," comments James McCoy consumer analyst at MINTEL.

Overall the 2005 pants market is expected to be worth some ?388 million, up 12% since the start of the millennium, with high leg (?93m), bikini (?58m) and control bottom (?47m) making up the remainder of the market.

British bras growing strong

Growth in the sales of bras have totally outstripped that of the pant sector, having increased by a substantial 36% since 2000 to some ?786 million. Underwired bras account for the vast majority of the bra market (70%) and have increased in value by 12% over the past two years alone.

"Undoubtedly the growth in the average British bust size over the last ten years from 34B to 36C or D has played a significant role in the increasing popularity of underwired bras, which tend to provide greater support. Another clear trend in the bra sector shows bras now being designed to be visible as outerwear and due to the engineering of bras, it is far easier to make underwired ones more flamboyant and intricate, so making them a more popular choice amongst British women today. Indeed, many women are choosing to show off their bra straps under skimpy vest tops, as popularised by Sarah Jessica Parker, and increasingly looking for bright and colourful bras to co-ordinate with the tops," explains James McCoy

Overall, sales of bras and pants combined are estimated to reach ?1.2 billion in 2005, having increased by 27% over the last five years. This is almost twice the rate of the underwear market as a whole, which grew 14% over the same five year period. Put in a different context, every female in the UK, aged 15 years and over, now spends ?46.20 a year on bras and pants.

Dreary drawers

Exclusive consumer research from MINTEL reveals that British women tend to be quite conservative and practical when it comes to reasons for buying underwear. The findings indicate the main reason for buying a new pair of pants or bra is to simply replace an old set. And while 60% of women buy for this reason, just one in four (26%) do so to treat themselves. What is more, only around one in six buy a new bra for a special occasion (16%) or to take on holiday (15%).

"It is true to say that some British women are already taking more of an interest in glamour or exotic underwear, which has led to increased competition to established companies like Ann Summers in this sector, from more recent entrants such as Coco de Mer. But this is by no means the norm.

Indeed, although 'Chuck out your chince' was IKEA's slogan, something similar could be adopted by the bras and pants market to encourage British women to take a long, hard look at their underwear drawers. There are so many great reasons to buy new underwear whether it is as a bit of a treat, a special occasion or a celebration, rather than just because the old ones are looking a bit tired," comments James McCoy

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