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SKINNY ON SKIVVIES: THEY'RE IMPORTANT

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"You wore tighty-whities to a wedding?!" exclaimed one female friend to a 20-something male dinner companion on a recent Friday night at a pizza place in Chicago.

Not a strategic fashion choice on an occasion that ended with mixed-company skivvy-dipping in the hotel pool, she scolded him.

His shame -- he did not offer his name to inquiring eavesdroppers from the next table -- points to the underwear awareness revolution that's under way for men.

"Boxers or briefs?" has become a quaint question in an era that brings style -- and comfort -- conscious men boxer briefs, G-strings, trunks (proportional to Burt Lancaster's sand attire in "From Here to Eternity") and even built-in condom pockets from a brand called basket.

Comfort, fit and outerwear are driving the underwear innovations.

Add such underwear-upgrades to the list of credits for Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." The makeover show has mentioned its subjects' unmentionables on more than one episode.

Brands such as 2(x)ist and basket, which began with mainly a gay following, are seeing a crossover effect.

"The (gay) demographic is better at accepting new product," said basket brand director Kelly Huegel. But since "Queer Eye," she said, "we've gotten a lot of e-mail from (other) men -- and women -- wanting to know where they can get it."

Lower-slung denim, a trend spreading to men's jeans, and other close-fitting clothing



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have inspired a switch to sleeker styles with narrower sides, such as the trunk and bikini brief, said Dan Leppo, men's divisional merchandise manager for Bloomingdale's.

"Imagine stuffing a pair of boxer shorts in a pair of Seven (men's) jeans," he said.

"It wouldn't be a great look."

For peekaboo fashion, Calvin Klein just added a men's underwear line called Pro Stretch with a red waistband. Diesel's new line includes a tricolor fitted brief.

This month, online retailer Freshpair.com went very public with its campaign to designate Aug. 13 as National Underwear Day. Twenty models -- 10 men -- walked the streets of New York City in nothing but underwear, collecting signatures. The goal is 500,000.

A TV station covering the event canvassed men about their preferences, said Freshpair spokesman Sean Evans. "The first guy they stopped was wearing a thong," Evans said. "He said he didn't want any panty lines."

FROM HIS DRAWERS TO HERS

Women's "boy briefs" are more literal than ever, borrowing the wide waistband and faux-pouch styling of men's.

A thong backlash, perhaps?

Brooke Timm, co-manager of Heartworks at 1704 N. Wells St., Chicago, suspects it's simpler than that.

The shop has sold scads of tank-and-brief sets from David & Goliath since introducing them about six months ago. The whimsical images and messages are the draw. "Some are silly, some are dirty," she says.

THE PAIR THAT CAN STAY THERE

Undyrugs are bathroom rugs whose motto -- "the pair that can stay there" -- says it all.

"No one's ever seen anything like them before," said Melinda Wolrab, design associate at Orange Skin, 1429 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago. "They're fun and original."



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Their designer, Lawrie Wenner of Chicago, offers them on her Web site, Triplebstudio.com, for \$26.

UNDERWEAR UNDERCOVER

Some answers to the age-old boxers-versus-briefs question and other mysteries of the male underworld, according to 7,000 responses to an online survey by Freshpair.com:

- * 30 percent of men prefer boxers.
- * 31 percent prefer briefs.
- * 21 percent prefer thongs.
- * 10 percent prefer to wear nothing.
- * 45 percent say they would like to wear G-strings but never have.
- * \$3.4 billion is what they spend annually on underwear.

A SUPERHERO AND MINIMALIST

The "Captain Underpants" series may seem like, well, potty humor. But these tales of offbeat superheroism are actually quite crafty, reaching reluctant-to-read 7- to 10-year-olds (and their parents). One Borders book specialist calls them a "Harry Potter" for the younger set, with more than 29 million of the books in print.

Two new titles arrive in the next month or two. Look for "Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy, Part 1: The Night of the Nasty Nostril Nuggets" (Blue Sky/Scholastic, \$4.99).

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