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(54) **ARTICLE FOR STRAPS OF CLOTHING ITEMS**

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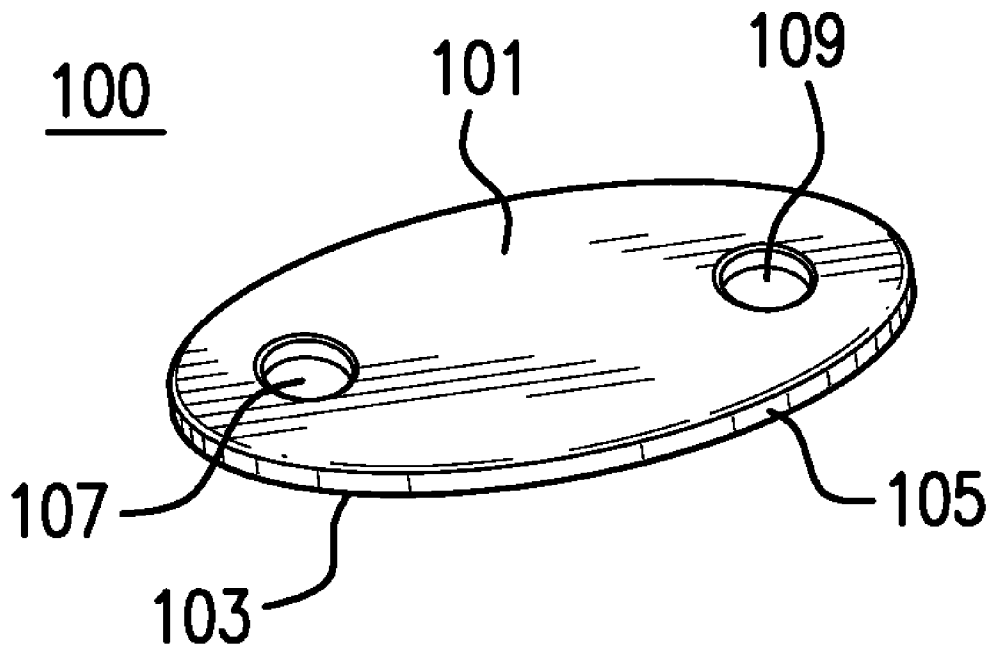
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

The present invention relates to a resiliently flexible article and method for receiving and coupling two straps, etc., of a clothing item while providing support and comfort for the person wearing the clothing item. The article has generally planar dimensions with a thickness between top and bottom surfaces of the article and has only two holes for receiving the two straps, etc. The article when viewed at its top or bottom surface has an oblong shape with a major axis and a minor axis. The length of the article in the major axis direction is greater than its width in the minor axis direction. The two straps, etc., of the clothing item may be received through the two holes from the bottom side of the article and coupled together above the top surface of the article to rest on the top surface of the article between the two holes.



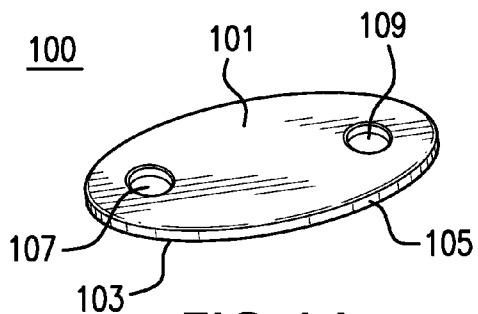


FIG. 1A

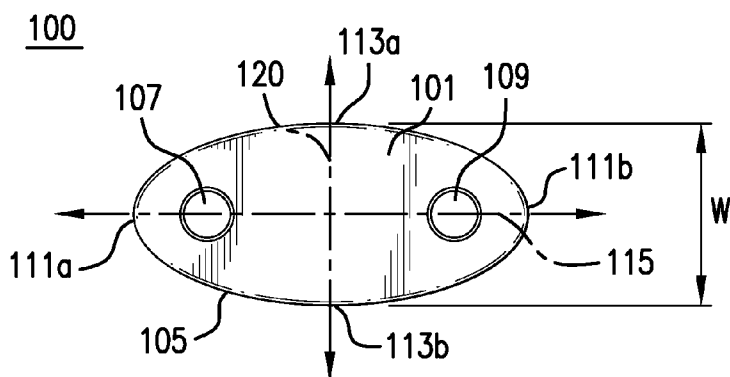


FIG. 1B

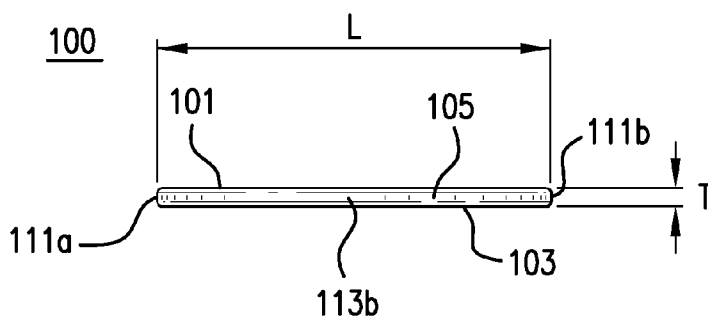


FIG. 1C

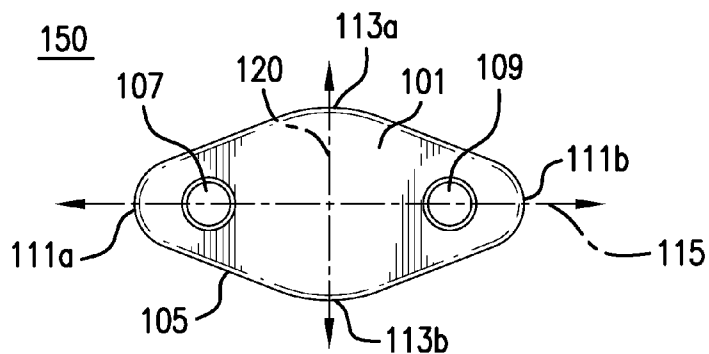


FIG. 1D

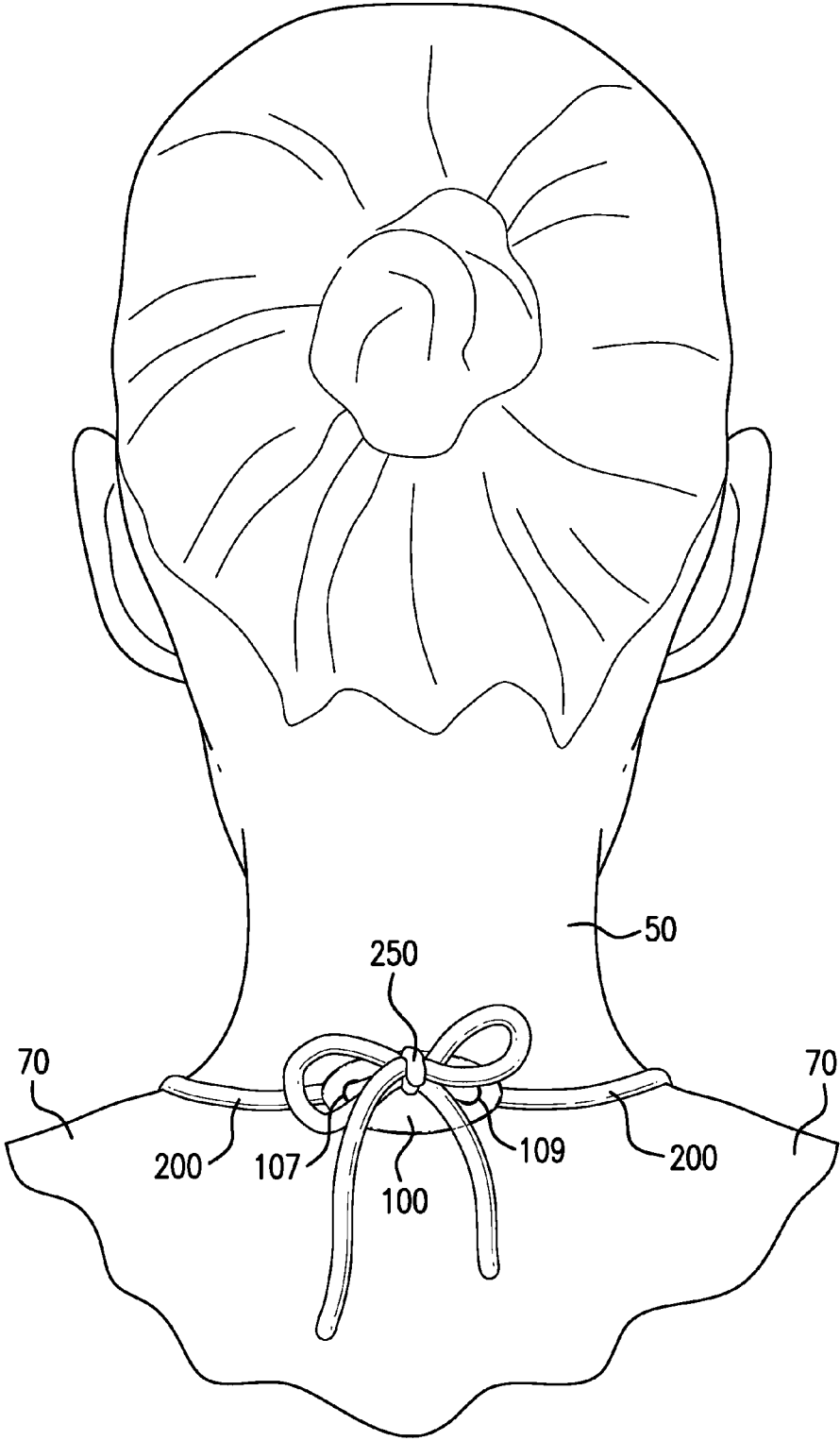


FIG.2

ARTICLE FOR STRAPS OF CLOTHING ITEMS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 61/589,498 filed on Jan. 23, 2011, the entire contents and disclosure of which are incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention relates to an article for use with tying or securing straps of clothing together that increases comfort and/or style for the person wearing the clothing.

[0004] 2. Related Art

[0005] There are many examples of clothing items that have two or more straps, ties, cords, strings, etc., that must be tied together to hold or secure the item of clothing to the person wearing it. For example, neck or shoulder straps are common for some types of clothing items such as bikinis, etc. However, these ties can create uncomfortable pressure points and possible injury with prolonged use for the person wearing them, particularly at locations on the person's body where the item is being supported. This problem can be exacerbated by a knot that may create a finer pressure point that further increases the discomfort and/or injury.

[0006] What is needed in the art is an improved article for use with an item of clothing that reduces pressure points created where two or more counterpart straps, etc., of the item of clothing are tied together to thereby increase comfort for the person wearing the item that is simpler and less costly or expensive to produce than any existing product. What is also needed are new articles for stylishly coupling two or more counterpart straps, etc., of an item of clothing.

SUMMARY

[0007] According to a first broad aspect of the present invention, an article is provided for use with an item of clothing, the article having generally planar dimensions with a top surface, a bottom surface and a side edge, the side edge being around the perimeter of the article, wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article are separated by a thickness of the article, wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article have a major axis and a minor axis, wherein the length of the article in the direction of the major axis is greater than the width of the article in the direction of the minor axis, wherein the article consists of two holes from the top surface to the bottom surface of the article, the two holes including a first hole and a second hole, and wherein the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole are positioned closer to a respective major lateral edge than to the center of the article.

[0008] According to another aspect of the present invention, an article for use with an item of clothing, the article having generally planar dimensions with a top surface, a bottom surface and a side edge, the side edge being around the perimeter of the article, wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article are separated by a thickness of the article, wherein the article has a major axis and a minor axis when viewed at the top or bottom surface of the article, wherein the length of the article in the direction of the major

axis is greater than the width of the article in the direction of the minor axis, and wherein the article has only two holes spanning the thickness of the article, the two holes including a first hole and a second hole, the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole being positioned approximately equidistantly from the center of the article.

[0009] According to a second broad aspect of the present invention, a method is provided comprising the following steps: (a) threading or pulling a first elongated coupling portion of a clothing item through a first hole of an article from the bottom side of the article; (b) threading or pulling a second elongated coupling portion of the clothing item through a second hole of the article from the bottom side of the article; and (c) coupling the first and second elongated coupling portions of the clothing item together above the top surface of the article, wherein the article has generally planar dimensions with a top surface, a bottom surface and a side edge, the side edge being around the perimeter of the article, and the top surface and the bottom surface of the article being separated by a thickness of the article, wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article have a major axis and a minor axis, the length of the article in the direction of the major axis being greater than the width of the article in the direction of the minor axis, and wherein the article consists of two holes through the article from the top surface to the bottom surface of the article, the two holes including the first hole and the second hole, wherein the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole are positioned closer to a respective major lateral edge than to the center of the article.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] FIG. 1A is a perspective view of an article of the present invention for use with straps, etc., of an item of clothing;

[0011] FIG. 1B is a top view of an article of the present invention;

[0012] FIG. 1C is a side view of an article of the present invention;

[0013] FIG. 1D is a top view of another article of the present invention; and

[0014] FIG. 2 shows an article of the present invention used with shoulder straps of a swimsuit according to an example embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0015] The present invention may generally provide an article having a relatively soft and pliable or flexible material having two holes or bores therein that are configured to receive elongated coupling portions, such as straps, ties, cords, strings, etc., of an item of clothing. The top surface of the article may also provide a surface on which the coupling or knot of the straps, etc., may rest. The straps, etc., may be coupled together by tying, knotting or by using an additional fastener. The article itself may also function to secure the two straps, etc., together. The article of the present invention may relieve, distribute and/or dissipate any pressure points produced by the straps, etc., that are coupled or tied together to improve comfort and/or reduce injury when the clothing item is donned and worn by an individual. These pressure points may be especially pronounced where the coupling, tying, knotting, etc., of the straps, etc., support or hold the item of clothing in place against, or counter to, forces of stretching, tension and/or the force of gravity. For example, straps over

the shoulder or behind the neck may have greater pressure points due to their support of the article.

[0016] As mentioned above, the improved comfort of the present article may be achieved mainly by distributing and/or dissipating the forces away from a single point of pressure created, for example, at the point of coupling, tying, or knotting. The improved comfort with the article of the present invention may be due in part to the relatively soft, pliable, and/or flexible material of the article that conforms to some extent to the anatomical shape, contour or curvature of the person wearing the item at the location where the straps, etc., of the article come together. The article of the present invention may also provide comfort by conforming to the shape of the knot or coupling where it meets and rests on the article.

[0017] Although the article of the present invention may have a benefit of relieving pressure points on the body, it is envisioned that the article of the present invention may be used anywhere that two or more straps, ties, cords, strings, etc., are coupled together, including the shoulder, neck, hips, waist, etc. For example, the article of the present invention may also be used in tying together various kinds of belts, sashes, bikinis, sarongs, maternity tops, scrub tops, scarves, etc. In addition to providing pressure relief, the article of the present invention may also keep the straps, etc., from slipping by frictionally gripping them. The flexible material used to make the article may grip the straps, etc., when they are threaded through the article due to stretching, tension and friction depending on the sizes of the holes. By helping to hold the straps, etc., in place by gripping, the article may also reduce the chance that the straps, etc., will become undone. The bottom surface or side of the article of the present invention may also grip the body or skin of the person to help maintain the placement of the clothing item on the person. Moreover, the article of the present invention may have the benefit of providing an aesthetic embellishment and adding style, flare or a fashion statement to one's attire.

[0018] FIG. 1A shows a perspective view of an article of the present invention according to some embodiments. FIG. 1B shows a top surface or top side view of the article, and FIG. 1C shows a side view of the article. The article **100** of the present invention may generally be a flat or planar material having a thickness such that the article has a top or upper surface **101** and a bottom or lower surface **103** of approximately equal shape and area and a side edge **105** around the periphery or perimeter of the article **100**. The top and bottom surfaces **101**, **103** of the article **100** may also be referred to as the top side and the bottom side, respectively. The article may have an oval or elliptical shape when viewed at the top or bottom surface of the article, although other shapes, such as rectangular, diamond, football-shaped, lemon-shaped, star-shaped, etc., are also envisioned.

[0019] The article of the present invention may be made of a durable but flexible material, such as silicone, etc., that can be compressed and revert to its original shape. The article must be soft enough for comfort and conformity to the body when worn, but hard enough to withstand and distribute the forces exerted by the straps, etc., against the body of the individual wearing it. The material used should also be resilient enough to revert to its original shape when pressure or force against it is removed. Especially for use with swimwear, the material may also be water resistant. The article may generally be made of a single continuous material. However, it is also envisioned that the article may be made of a combination of integrally formed materials comprising a coating

material or surface covering that surrounds a core material. The article may be made in different colors and fanciful shapes as well as with other embellishments, such as glitter, shimmer, or other visual effects, for added appearance and appeal. In addition, graphical representations, logos or names may also be printed onto the surface of the article.

[0020] The article of the present invention will have generally planar dimensions (with a thickness) and have only two holes or bores **107**, **109** through it for receiving the straps, etc., of the clothing item (i.e., the article consists of two holes). For the purposes of the present invention, the phrases "consists of" or "consisting of" in reference to the two holes or bores of the article means that the article has only two holes (i.e., no more than two holes) for receiving the straps, etc., of the item of clothing. The generally planar shape or dimensions of the article will define two flat surfaces (i.e., a top surface **101** and a bottom surface **103** separated by the thickness of the article) and a continuous edge **105** around the perimeter of the article, the edge **105** defining the shape of the article as a whole when viewed at its top or bottom surface. The phrases "generally planar shape" or "generally planar dimensions" mean that the article is predominantly planar although there will be a thickness between the top and bottom surfaces. In other words, the phrases "generally planar shape" or "generally planar dimensions" mean that the length and width of the article along the major and minor axes, respectively, are much greater than the thickness of the article. The two holes **107**, **109** through the article will span from the top surface **101** to the bottom surface **103** of the article **100**. The top and bottom surfaces **101**, **103** of the article **100** may be generally parallel with each other although slight deviations are also contemplated. The top and bottom surfaces may be generally flat or smooth, although some texturing or contour of these surfaces is also envisioned. The side edge may be generally perpendicular to the top and bottom surfaces, although some tapering is possible, and the corners where the side edges meet the top and bottom surfaces may be squared or rounded. For example, these corners may have a rounding of about 0.05 inch in radius.

[0021] The size and shape of the article as well as the positioning of the two holes may vary to some extent. According to some embodiments, at least two different sizes may be provided for different purposes and/or for differently sized people (e.g., children versus adults). FIG. 1A depicts an example of an elliptically shaped article of the present invention. The size of the article as a whole, as well as the sizes or diameters of the holes may vary for different applications. For example, a larger size may be used for straps around the back of the neck or in the front of a swimsuit, whereas a smaller size may be used with the side straps of a swimsuit.

[0022] Regardless of the exact shape, the article of the present invention will generally have a planar and oblong shape with a longer (major) axis **115** and a shorter (minor) axis **120**. The major axis is generally defined as the greatest length dimension of the top or bottom surface of the article, whereas the minor axis is generally defined as the greatest width dimension of the top or bottom surface of the article, the length being greater than the width of the article due to its oblong shape. Likewise, the length of the article refers to the greatest length of the article, whereas the width of the article refers to the greatest width of the article. The major axis **115** and minor axis **120** of the article **100** may be generally perpendicular to each other and intersect at the center of the article **100**. Although some slight deviation is possible, each

of the two holes will generally be located on a longitudinal center line aligned with the major axis of the article and spaced equidistantly from the center of the article (perhaps closer to the edge **105** of the article than its center). As shown in FIG. 1 with an elliptically shaped article, the two holes **107**, **109** may each be located on a longitudinal center line along the major axis **115** of the article **100** and spaced equidistantly from a transverse center line along the minor axis **120** of the article **100** that is perpendicular to the major axis **115**.

[0023] With an elliptical shape as shown in FIG. 1, the longitudinal center line and the transverse center line will each span the widest dimensions of the article along the major and minor axes **115**, **120** of the article, respectively, and intersect at the center of the elliptical article **100**. In this arrangement, the longitudinal center line will intersect with the edge **105** of the article at opposing major lateral edges **111a**, **111b**, whereas the transverse center line will intersect with the edge **105** of the article **100** at opposing minor side edges **113a**, **113b**. Each of the two holes **107**, **109** may be about equal in size, diameter or radius. The major lateral edges **111a**, **111b** will generally be at or near where the major axis **115** (or longitudinal center line) meets the edge **105** of the article **100**, whereas the minor side edges **113a**, **113b** will generally be at or near where the minor axis **120** (or transverse center line) meets the edge **105** of the article **100**. These two holes **107**, **109** may generally be symmetrically spaced and located closer to the opposing major lateral edges **111a**, **111b** of the article **100** than the transverse center line along the minor axis **120** of the article. In other words, the two holes **107**, **109** may be generally located closer to the opposing major lateral edges **111a**, **111b** than the center of the article **100**. By locating the holes **107**, **109** closer to their respective major lateral edges **111a**, **111b** than to the center of the article **100**, space or area is provided for the coupling or knot of the straps, etc., to rest on the top surface of the article.

[0024] According to embodiments of the present invention, the dimensions of the article may vary while still achieving its purpose. As mentioned above, the article may be a variety of shapes when viewed at the top or bottom surface of the article. In general, the length (e.g., L in FIG. 1) of the article along the major axis may vary from about 1¾ inches and about 4 inches, or alternatively between about 2 inches and about 3 inches. For example, the length may be about 2⅝ inches for a larger size or about 2 inches for a smaller size. The width (e.g., W in FIG. 1) of the article along the minor axis may generally vary from about ¾ inch and about 1½ inches. For example, the width may be about 1¼ inches for a larger size or about 1 inch for a smaller size. The thickness (e.g., T in FIG. 1) of the article may vary from about ⅙ inch to about ¼ inch, such as about ⅛ inch for a larger and smaller sized articles. As mentioned above, the article in FIG. 1 is resiliently flexible such that the article can bend, flex, twist, compress, conform its shape, etc., in response to pressure or force applied to it by the body of the person and/or the straps, etc., of the clothing item.

[0025] Each of the centers of the two holes may be from about ¼ inch to about ½ inch from the major lateral edges of the article. For example, the center of each of the holes may be about ⅙ inch from the respective major lateral edge for a larger sized article or about ⅜ inch from the respective major lateral edge for a smaller sized article. The placement of the holes may also be described in terms of their distance from the center or from the transverse center line perpendicular to the major axis that passes through the center of the article. Each of the centers of the two holes may be from about ½ inch to

about 1 inch from the center or transverse center line of the article. For example, the center of the holes may be about ⅞ inch from the center of the article for a larger article or about ⅜ inch from the center of the article for a smaller article. The shape of the holes may generally be circular, but other shapes, such as ovals, etc., are also contemplated. The two holes may also generally be about the same size and/or shape. The diameter of the holes may vary from about ⅙ inch to about ½ inch. For example, the diameter of the holes may be about ⅜ inch for a larger article or about ¼ inch for a smaller article.

[0026] As mentioned above, the shape of the article of the present invention when viewed at the top or bottom surface (i.e., the shape of the top or bottom surface) may vary. The shape of the article may be determined, for example, by selecting the shape of the mold used to make the article. FIG. 1D shows another embodiment of the present invention having portions near the edge **105** of the article cut-out or removed relative to an elliptical article, such that the article in FIG. 1D has a different shape. For example, relative to the elliptical article **100** in FIGS. 1A-1C, the article **150** in FIG. 1D has a “lemon shape” with intermediate portions of the edge **105** of the article **150** between each pair of a neighboring major lateral edge **111** and a minor side edge **113** is straight or inwardly curved in contrast to the outwardly curved portions at or near the major lateral edges **111** and minor side edges **113** of article **150**. Unlike the article **150** in FIG. 1D, the corresponding portions of the edge **105** of the elliptical article **100** in FIG. 1A-1C (i.e., between the major lateral edges **111** and minor side edges **113**) are instead outwardly curved. As a result, the article in FIG. 1D has a smaller top and bottom surface area (and a smaller overall volume) relative to the article **100** in FIGS. 1A-1C with the same length and width dimensions. Stated more broadly, these respective edge portions of an article of the present invention (i.e., between each of the major lateral edges and minor side edges) may be straight, inwardly curved or less outwardly curved relative to the elliptically shaped article of the present invention (e.g., the article shown in FIG. 1A-1C).

[0027] For purposes of the present invention, the phrases “outwardly curved” or “outward curvature” mean a curved edge that is convex and has a radius of curvature that is toward or through the article, whereas the phrases “inwardly curved” or “inward curvature” mean a curved edge that is concave and has a radius of curvature that is away from or outside of the article. For purposes of the present invention, the phrase “neighboring pair” refers to a major lateral edge and a minor side edge of the article that are next to each other without an intervening major lateral edge or minor side edge between them (e.g., neighboring pairs would include **111a** and **113a**; **113a** and **111b**; **111b** and **113b**; or **113b** and **111a**). Thus, an “intermediate portion” of an edge or side edge of the article refers to the portion of the side edge of the article between a neighboring pair of a major lateral edge and a minor side edge.

[0028] This design in FIG. 1D provides a few advantages over an elliptical article. The portion of the edge **105** of an elliptical article (e.g., the article in FIGS. 1A-1C) between the major lateral edges **111** and minor side edges **113** is perhaps the least functional portion of the article since most of the tension and force exerted by the straps, etc., of the item of clothing will be exerted in the lengthwise direction of the article. Thus, these portions of the article may be removed without significantly impacting its function of providing support and comfort. By reducing or removing material from

only the portions of the article in this design of FIG. 1D, less material may be used, which reduces the costs of production. However, a larger area is needed in the center of the article for the larger coupling or knotting of the two joined straps, etc., to rest on the article. Another advantage of the design in FIG. 1D, especially for swimwear and other warm weather clothing, is that the size of any tan lines or untanned areas of the skin underneath the article is reduced. Moreover, the article can be made more discreet and hidden by conforming more to the shape of the linear straps, etc., of the item of clothing and the wider coupling or knotting portion. Accordingly, the article in FIG. 1D may be more hidden when worn and/or produce smaller and less visible tan lines or contrasting areas of skin color from sun exposure.

[0029] The article of the present invention may be used to receive two straps, etc., of an item of clothing through the holes of the article. When worn by an individual or person, the article will rest its bottom surface against the body or skin of the individual or person. The straps, etc., of the clothing item may be threaded through the holes from the under or bottom side or surface of the article (i.e., the side facing toward the body of the individual), such that the straps can be tied together above the top side or surface of the article (i.e., the side facing away from the body of the individual) near its center. As a result of any pulling or tension on the straps, the coupling or knot of the two straps will rest on, and/or press against, the top surface of the article. As shown in FIG. 2 for example, straps 200 going over the shoulder 70 of a person may be tied together near the base and back of the neck 50. The article 100 may receive the two straps 200 through the holes 107, 109 of article 100 from the underside of the article 100 and tied together into a knot 250 that rests against the top surface 101 of the article 100, thus relieving pressure on the back of the neck 50. FIG. 2 is provided only as an example for the use of an article of the present invention. As mentioned above, embodiments of the present invention may also be used elsewhere on the body of an individual in conjunction with a variety of different clothing items.

[0030] According to another broad aspect of the present invention, methods are provided for using the article of the present invention. As explained above, the ends of each of the two straps, etc., of an item of clothing may be threaded or pulled through a respective hole of the article from the underside or bottom surface side of the article, such that the ends of the straps, etc., emerge above the upper or top surface of the article. The straps, etc., of the item of clothing will generally approach and be aligned with the major axis dimension of the article. The two straps, etc., may then be tied or coupled or knotted together above the article such that the straps, etc., and the coupling or knotting of the straps, etc., may rest on the top surface of the article with the bottom surface of the article resting against the body of the individual or person.

[0031] While the present invention has been disclosed with reference to certain embodiments, it will be apparent that modifications and variations are possible without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined herein. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that all examples in the present disclosure, while illustrating embodiments of the invention, are provided as non-limiting examples and are, therefore, not to be taken as limiting the various aspects so illustrated. The present invention is intended to have its full scope consistent with the language of the claims and equivalents thereof. Accordingly, the description and drawings herein are to be regarded as illustrative and not as restrictive.

What is claimed is:

1. An article for use with an item of clothing, the article having generally planar dimensions with a top surface, a bottom surface and a side edge, the side edge being around the perimeter of the article, wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article are separated by a thickness of the article,

wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article have a major axis and a minor axis, wherein the length of the article in the direction of the major axis is greater than the width of the article in the direction of the minor axis,

wherein the article consists of two holes from the top surface to the bottom surface of the article, the two holes including a first hole and a second hole, and wherein the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole are positioned closer to a respective major lateral edge than to the center of the article.

2. The article of claim 1, wherein the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole are aligned on the major axis of the article

3. The article of claim 1, wherein the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole are equidistant to the center of the article.

4. The article of claim 1, wherein the article is made of a resiliently flexible material.

5. The article of claim 4, wherein the resiliently flexible material is silicone.

6. The article of claim 1, wherein the article is made of a resiliently flexible core material and an outer coating material.

7. The article of claim 1, wherein the article has an oval or elliptical shape.

8. The article of claim 1, wherein the major axis and the minor axis of the article are perpendicular.

9. The article of claim 1, wherein the length of the article is in a range from about 1¾ inches to about 4 inches, and wherein the width of the article is in a range from about ¾ inch to about 1½ inches.

10. The article of claim 1, wherein the length of the article is in a range from about 2 inches to about 3 inches.

11. The article of claim 1, wherein the thickness of the article is in a range from about 1/16 inch to about ¼ inch.

12. The article of claim 11, wherein the thickness of the article is about 1/8 inch.

13. The article of claim 1, wherein the distance from the respective center of each of the first and second holes to the nearest major lateral edge of the article is in a range from about ¼ inch to about ½ inch.

14. The article of claim 1, wherein the distance from the respective center of each of the first and second holes to the center of the article is in a range from about ½ inch to about 1 inch.

15. The article of claim 1, wherein the first and second holes are circular in shape.

16. The article of claim 1, wherein the first and second holes each have a diameter in a range from about 1/8 inch to about ½ inch.

17. The article of claim 1, wherein each intermediate portion of the side edge between a neighboring pair of a major lateral edge and a minor side edge is straight or inwardly curved.

18. An article for use with an item of clothing, the article having generally planar dimensions with a top surface, a

bottom surface and a side edge, the side edge being around the perimeter of the article, wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article are separated by a thickness of the article,

wherein the article has a major axis and a minor axis when viewed at the top or bottom surface of the article, wherein the length of the article in the direction of the major axis is greater than the width of the article in the direction of the minor axis, and

wherein the article has only two holes spanning the thickness of the article, the two holes including a first hole and a second hole, the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole being positioned approximately equidistantly from the center of the article.

19. A method comprising the following steps:

- (a) threading or pulling a first elongated coupling portion of a clothing item through a first hole of an article from the bottom side of the article;
- (b) threading or pulling a second elongated coupling portion of the clothing item through a second hole of the article from the bottom side of the article; and
- (c) coupling the first and second elongated coupling portions of the clothing item together above the top surface of the article,

wherein the article has generally planar dimensions with a top surface, a bottom surface and a side edge, the side edge being around the perimeter of the article, and the top surface and the bottom surface of the article being separated by a thickness of the article,

wherein the top surface and the bottom surface of the article have a major axis and a minor axis, the length of the article in the direction of the major axis being greater than the width of the article in the direction of the minor axis, and

wherein the article consists of two holes through the article from the top surface to the bottom surface of the article, the two holes including the first hole and the second hole, wherein the respective centers of the first hole and the second hole are positioned closer to a respective major lateral edge than to the center of the article.

20. The method of claim **19**, wherein the coupling step (c) comprises tying the first and second elongated coupling portions together into a knot or bow.

21. The method of claim **19**, wherein the first and second elongated coupling portions of the clothing item are situated on the top surface of the article between the first and second holes of the article after the coupling step (c).

* * * * *