“...Or are you just pleased to see me?” The role of the boutfit in men’s roller derby

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Abstract

The emerging literature on the sport of roller derby focuses primarily on the potential of the women’s game to offer a site for participants to explore both masculine and feminine behaviours and appearances in the female body, often through flamboyant or sexualised clothing, referred to as ‘boutfits’. Occurring throughout the literature is the notion that ‘performances’ of gender by roller derby participants act to disrupt or challenge the gender binary (mainstream ideals of femininity and gender expectations), whilst simultaneously embracing or supporting the traditional gender order. Such studies use a range of qualitative methods to explore the experiences of women engaging in a masculine, aggressive, full-contact sport, whilst emphasising their femininity through physical appearance.

The lack of research into men’s roller derby is striking, and the growth in popularity of both men’s and mixed gender games support further exploration into male skaters’ experiences. Audience responses suggest that “boutfits are only transformative for women” (Murray, 2012, p.140), and, if male roller derby players engage in ‘doing gender’, they risk public ridicule and loss of masculinity. Using Lyng’s (1990) concept of edgework, and Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of capital, this paper discusses the use of ‘boutfits’ (outfits worn for playing in ‘bouts’ or games) by male roller derby skaters, and, using photographs and written commentaries from a selection of skaters, explores the meanings men attach to their clothing choices, and how far the decision to transgress...
gender norms can be seen as edgework, in that such activity risks an individual’s loss of symbolic capital.

**Keywords**: masculinities, risk, social capital, roller derby

**Case Study**

Meet John Doe. A shy young man, lacking in confidence, hiding in the background. He rarely played sports in his youth, and does not think of himself as particularly masculine or athletic. He joins a roller derby team. When he begins to play in games, he wears plain, unremarkable clothes, which allow him to stay in the background. But, as times goes on, he wants more than this. Choosing the name Phallic Baldwin, his humorous and subversive comment on mainstream sports and the expectations on men to be hypermasculine, the first time he wears hot pants, with a zombie hand cupping his crotch, for a roller derby game, he is so nervous that he is visibly shaking. Fast forward a short time, and he is no longer in the background. Confident, skilful, encouraging — no, *demanding* a response from the crowd; this is a different Phally to the one we saw before. He is challenging expectations of what a male athlete should be, and how they should dress. I am not suggesting the simple act of wearing hot pants is solely responsible for this change, but being able to express his identity through clothing choices has given Phally a confidence he didn’t have before; a confidence that shows in other aspects of his life. Phallic Baldwin is just one man, but his story reflects the experiences of other men in roller derby, and their experiences – the experiences of men who play sports away from the centre – need bringing to the fore.
Introduction: This is Men’s Roller Derby

Roller derby is a full-contact team sport, played on quad roller skates. Invented by sports promoter Leo Seltzer in 1935 as a co-ed game (i.e. played by men and women), it lived through several incarnations prior to 2001, when it was reimagined as a women-only game. A ‘boutfit’ is the outfit worn for a roller derby ‘bout’, or game. Throughout its resurgence, female skaters have worn flamboyant and often skimpy boutfits, considered in academic research to be a form of challenge to traditional gender expectations – female skaters are sexualised, but engaged in an active, contact sport, displaying traditionally masculine traits. Despite its popular image as a women-only game, men have always been involved, as referees, non-skating officials, event staffers, and, since 2006, as players. Men, too, experiment with boutfits. Yet the emerging literature on roller derby focuses on the women’s game, and if the presence of men is acknowledged, discussion is limited to their involvement as supporters (Fleming, 2016). The few references to the men’s game are dismissive and demonstrate that it is often seen as a threat, or a joke (Murray, 2012), in the same way as men in ‘feminine’ modes of dress often continue to be in popular culture (Singer, 2014).

My interest in this topic arose as a result of working with a men’s roller derby team as a ‘line-up manager’ (the person who decides which skaters are on track, and when). Being closely involved with the team, and men’s roller derby in general, I knew men who enjoyed skating in leggings, hot pants, face paint, etc., just like women roller derby players had done for years. But I also saw many negative reactions to this, ranging from horror and disgust (whether genuine or manufactured for effect was not always clear), to ridicule. I wanted to account for why men continued to wear clothes that attracted such responses. I also wanted to give these men a space to discuss what they wore and why, and to foster an awareness that discussing men and men’s appearances
in such derogatory ways was not okay. This paper is concerned, then, with two central questions:

1. What conscious choices do male roller derby players make regarding boutfits?
2. Can (and do) these choices challenge gender expectations in a meaningful way?

The field of masculinities studies offers an increasingly nuanced theorisation of masculinity as more variable, diverse, and fluid. It is no longer appropriate (if it ever was) to speak of a monolithic or ‘hegemonic’ masculinity (Connell, 2005); instead, researchers explore pluralised ‘masculinities’ in ways which demonstrate they can be more inclusive (Anderson, 2008), and hybridised (Bridges, 2014). Roller derby attracts a wide range of people, and as such, offers fruitful ground for an exploration of the diverse ways men challenge gender identities and demonstrate different types of masculinities.

There have so far been five annual Men’s European Championships, and two biannual Men’s Roller Derby World Cups, with the third scheduled for April 2018 in Barcelona (all of which are organised by the skaters, and volunteers and members of the leagues to which they belong, themselves). In this wider context, it is clear that to these athletes, men’s roller derby is no joke: it represents both a risk, and a sport to be taken seriously, and it will not be so easily dismissed.

**Risk and the Possibilities for Transformation**

Academic interest in the sport has grown. Roller derby has been linked to the concepts of edgework (risk-taking) and jamming (non-disclosive, action-oriented relationships, see Eisenberg, 1990) in sports sociology (Pavlidis, 2012; Cotterill, 2010; Finley, 2010) and to studies of gender performance and manoeuvring within feminist literature (Donnelly, 2012; Gieseler, 2012; Beaver, 2010; Becker, 2009). In both areas, the all-
female nature of the sport is highlighted, along with the women-owned/women-operated structure of many roller derby leagues. Becker (2010), for example, discusses how the sport offers a unique cultural space to subvert gender norms, and suggests this can be achieved through appearance; that skaters are both sexualized (read: feminine) and athletic (read: masculine), which she argues is non-mainstream. Cotterill (2010) explores ‘doing gender’ as a form of edgework; an escape from gender expectations, and a way to negotiate the boundaries of gender. Lyng (1990) introduced the term ‘edgework’ to discuss voluntary risk-taking, suggesting the ‘edge’, or boundary line, could be defined in a variety of ways, which included sanity versus insanity, and an ordered versus disordered sense of self and environment. He argued that the experience of risk-taking was necessary for the well-being of some edgeworkers, desire for it arising as a response to feelings of alienation, and allowing for the possibility of self-actualisation.

Focusing on the skill and control aspects of edgework, Cotterill concluded that, for women, the sport is about escaping constraints; experiencing “events outside the safety of ordinary social spheres and...the expectations of the gendered social relationships” (2010, p.11). Peluso agrees that skaters challenge gender norms through bodily practices (including dress), and, referencing Butler (1990), points to “performative opportunities for women to transgress cultural norms” (2010b, p.5), adding that there is an acceptance of all bodies, though it is clear that this means all female bodies. Few roller derby studies have considered male, trans*, or non-binary skaters.

Gieseler argues sport is “always already masculine” (2012, iv), but roller derby, conversely, is always already feminine. Men’s roller derby, therefore, can also be theorised in terms of edgework and risk. Roller derby allows men to escape the
expectations of gendered social relationships, and by expressing feminine aspects of their identity, by skating on the edge of masculinity and femininity, arguably, the ‘performative’ opportunities for men to challenge gender norms in this arena are even greater. Entering such a female-dominated space, which is therefore often coded as ‘feminine’, despite playing a ‘masculine’ sport (Donnelly, 2012), it could be argued that men risk the social and symbolic capital they have within a homosocial society each time they play.

On a similar theme, Robinson theorised men’s footwear choices in terms of ‘risky practices’, suggesting that “risk is evident…should they ‘get masculinity wrong’ through their choice of shoes” (2014, p.152). The same notion of risk can be applied to men’s boutfit choices in roller derby. Robinson suggests footwear can present “challenges to traditional forms of masculine identity” (2014, p.159), in the same way that I suggest boutfits do. Robinson also suggests:

fitting in versus being ‘original’ are…two positions that men…negotiate [which] reveal how masculinity is displayed in relation to men’s risk of lack of face, or peer disapproval…but also admiration for those other men who push the boundaries of accepted masculine ways of dressing (2014, p.162).

Similar positions, and the existence of both disapproval and admiration, are apparent in my participants’ responses.

Murray’s exploration of roller derby raises an interesting point, suggesting that “boutfits are only transformative for women” (2012, p.140), and that men who play with gender are viewed as ridiculous, since “unlike masculine attributes in women's sports, femininity in men's sports was indicative of less skill and value as a ‘real sport’.” (2012, p.137). Murray argues that feminine dress in men contributes to loss of status or capital, and is “more silly than serious” (2012, p.136-7). I disagree, I think boutfits
certainly were transformative for Phallic Baldwin, as outlined above. According to Fletcher, “in engaging with a particular sports field, individuals become subject to and assimilate the particular habitus characteristic of the field” (2008, p.317). The social dimensions of edgework include an escape from, and resistance to conventional forces, and neoliberal values. In terms of this analysis, men’s roller derby outfits could be considered ‘edgework’, but I question whether the expression of a fluid identity constitutes a risk, or whether it can actually confer capital, depending on whose identity is being expressed, and in what environment. Roller derby is an unconventional sport in many ways, and the habitus characteristic of this particular field is very different to that of other sports. Breeze, however, explains that the “claims for serious recognition disrupts the precedents set” (2014, p.201) for framing discussion around the sport’s potential to challenge the traditional gender order. Female skaters now feel pressure to dress like ‘serious athletes’. Male skaters are also beginning to experience a similar pressure, which in turn impact on the ‘risks’ associated with resistance to this pressure.

In even playing the sport, not simply dressing for the sport, the men in roller derby have opportunities to challenge the gender hegemony, and explore alternative and pariah femininities (Finley, 2010) and masculinities, more effectively than the women. In roller derby,

these women are still doing gender, as participating in sports or leisure activities for comradery, exercise, to empower women, and for self-fulfilment, are all considered gender appropriate behaviours. These four reasons for participating in roller derby fit into the traditional doing gender framework (Cotterill, 2010, pp.36-37).

Male skaters are not necessarily participating in traditionally gendered ways. Men in sports are traditionally seen in other ways. They are:
active, aggressive, competitive, strong, challenging, forceful, courageous, and of course, heterosexual. In short, sports delivers a strong message about what manhood should be. Messner (2002) refers to this as the televised sports manhood formula (p.124), with these characteristics forming a collection of themes that codify what it means to be a man (Becker, 2009, p.3).

Beaver (2009) outlines the failure of research to find examples of men’s sports which provide alternatives for expressions of gender, but roller derby provides just such an example, which this paper will explore using the views and experiences of male skaters themselves.

**Methodology**

For my thesis, I gathered empirical data in the form of a year-long ethnographic study of a men’s roller derby league based in Northern England, interviewing both team members and volunteer members of the wider roller derby community. The small study this article discusses was conducted prior to the ethnographic study, and represents an exploratory ‘pilot’ to establish what importance the boutfit holds to male skaters; to understand some of the reasons men have for making the clothing choices they make, and to foreground men’s experiences and views on roller derby boutfits in a way that has not been done before.

To reach as wide an audience as possible, I shared a survey on three closed Facebook groups, which were roller derby focused, and my own Facebook ‘wall’, asking users to share with me a couple of photographs of themselves in roller derby clothes; their views on both their own boutfits, and boutfits in general. The sample was, therefore, self-selecting. There were twenty-three responses in total: six from my league, fourteen from other parts of the UK, two from the USA, and one from Argentina. Each participant’s responses were coded into broad themes, arising from
close reading of the responses. Using the theories of edgework and capital as ‘sensitizing concepts’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I have tried to ensure the analysis remained open to further theories that are grounded in the data. Whilst not ‘grounded theory’ in its full sense, I have used these techniques to strengthen the thematic analysis undertaken, allowing themes to arise from the data, rather than forcing the data to fit a predetermined theme.

The roller derby community is small, and it is impossible to guarantee a participant will remain entirely anonymous. Participants were given the option of granting consent for me to use the photographs they sent in my thesis, or for analysis only. Although the majority of participants gave consent to share the photographs in my research, due to difficulties in identifying and obtaining permission to use the images from the original photographers, they have not been included in this paper. Given that skaters usually invent an alternative name, referred to as a ‘skate name’ or ‘derby name’ for use within the roller derby community, and these can be sources of great pride and meaning to individual, I gave participants the option of consenting to the use of their derby name, or the use of an alternative pseudonym. The majority of participants wanted me to use their derby name, in which case, it is reproduced here, otherwise, the respondent is represented by initials only.

I made a conscious choice to share my positive feelings about boutfits with my respondents (many of whom are members of the team I worked with), in order to encourage them to be as open as possible with their responses, like Ang (1985) explaining to participants how much she enjoyed watching Dallas in her study of the US TV show, and in line with Haraway’s (1988) argument for the importance of situated knowledges, Again, like Ang, it is important to acknowledge that participant responses are only snapshots, and “when something is put into words there are always
things which remain unexpressed and implicit” (Ang, 1985, p.14). One has to assume that the responses are “truthful, yet always partial accounts” (Taylor, 2011, p.4), in the same way that my analysis of those responses can only be partial. Nevertheless, this partial account, and my attempt to fairly represent the views and experiences of my participants, adds a new focus to the body of work on ways in which roller derby can subvert gendered norms, not least in that it is the first time male roller derby players have been given the opportunity to talk about why they wear boutfits.

**Challenging Normative Masculinities**

Analysis of responses suggests the concept of ‘risk’ is a helpful way to look at boutfit choices. Several skaters see boutfits as requiring ‘courage’ and potentially offering a ‘thrill’. Some respondents said they would like to wear a boutfit, or a more outlandish boutfit than they currently wear, but they lacked the confidence, which is often discussed in terms of body confidence. One respondent, Boon, expressed a negative view of boutfits in general, but added “I probably would wear a boutfit for a friendly scrim if I plucked up the courage!” Comments like this suggest that, at times, negative responses do themselves stem from a lack of comfort with one’s body. Others suggest that wearing a boutfit can give a skater confidence; boutfits are ‘freeing’ and, wearing them, skaters experience ‘acceptance’ of who they are. Rather than ‘edgework’, the ability to express aspects of their identity otherwise kept hidden is more important:

> My boutfit is the expression of my personality that I have to keep toned down during most of my public life. I came to terms with my more feminine personality a long time ago and so I relish the opportunity to wear more feminine clothes in public. (Prof. Chaos)

> Several respondents discuss the importance of wearing clothing they see as feminine, and explain that this is not always possible in day-to-day life. Roller derby
does then offer these men a space to experiment and express themselves. It is important
to note that not all participants in men’s roller derby are cisgender, heterosexual men,
and therefore this space also allows marginalised and less privileged identities to be
expressed too:

I wear a boutfit that would be described as feminine because my
gender is non-binary and this allows me to express that. They simply
allow me to feel more normal within myself in a context that won’t
ridicule me for doing so. (Professor Killa Hertz)

This non-binary skater values places to express themselves fully, in a way not possible
in wider society. For them, roller derby is an accepting, inclusive community, they
enjoy experimenting with femininity, and their experience is positive. The choice of
whether or not to wear a boutfit represents what Robinson refers to as a “repertoire of
possibilities”, which can “resist and challenge normative masculinities” (2014, p.164).

One respondent, for example, discussed his boutfits choices as, in part, a reaction to
working in a masculine environment:

I ‘came out’ as a pansexual male at last year’s Clam Slam which is
a queer focused derby event held annually during pride week in
Toronto. Since then I’ve sported the Pan flag on my helmet and I
love it. I work in a very masculine male dominated industry and feel
that when I put on the tights and derby gear it's very freeing. I'm
happier that way. I like wearing boutfits so I feel they are a great
way to express yourself as you really are. (Papa Koopa)

Skaters in boutfits challenge normative ideas of masculinity and manhood, but
where women’s choices are celebrated within roller derby, skaters for men’s teams find
their choices open to criticism. Though skaters do not use the term risk, there is a clear
boundary between what is ‘okay’ and ‘not okay’. If skaters cross this line, they risk
censure from others, and this is often discussed as a result of the importance of ‘legitimising’ the sport. They are getting masculinity, even non-normative masculinity, wrong. Crossing the line, in this context, is commonly associated with clothing that is “too penisy” (Xavier Bacon).

Roller derby games are often advertised as family friendly, and so nakedness is unusual, although it is interesting to note that it is only the dress code for officials that states “private parts shall be both completely covered and concealed” (WFTDA, 2017), there is no such rule for skaters. Phallic Baldwin suggested in line with this that “as long as it's not crossing a line and bits are falling out people should be able to wear whatever they wish”. However, this doesn’t necessarily ensure a lack of censure. Sk8 Geek described how, “one of the team anonymously complained about ‘too much junk’ being visible. I was a little shocked by this, then amused, so for a short time wore shorts over lycra”. This type of complaint appears to be common. Nuke explained that he “often get[s] comments on the tight fit of the leggings leaving little to the imagination but I am comfortable with my body and so this doesn't bother me. I imagine it would upset others though”. Exactly why certain types of form fitting clothing are policed is unclear, but skaters can be forced to negotiate between expressing themselves and facing ridicule and criticism:

I went through a period of wearing Nike sprinter's shorts. They're black, mid-thigh and tight. They got some raised eyebrows. Many. Cherry Fury dubbed it ‘a strong look’. They served the purpose but a lot of people were a bit offended by them I think!!! I don't think they were that bad... (Xavier Bacon)

Is ‘tight’ associated with femininity, or homosexuality, and therefore seen as negative? Do visible genitals represent a threat? Is it prudery? In game play, tight-fitting athletic clothing can confer advantage as the skater has greater freedom of movement,
and yet, skaters are often discouraged from wearing these clothes. It is not just the ‘wacky’ boutfits that are criticised. Compression leggings and sport specific clothing often are too. Perhaps, in a sport that is always already feminine, such an obvious symbol of masculinity and maleness is as problematic as expressions of femininity are to traditional male sports.

**Skills Capital, Seriousness, and Professionalism**
Flamboyant or feminine dress appears to be more easily accepted when worn by higher performing skaters, with some respondents suggesting that a boutfit is “a testament to confidence of the individual’s ability on skates” (I Am Broot). This suggests a boutfit’s effect on symbolic capital depends on the skill of the skater. In a paper on skydivers, Laurendeau and Gibbs Van Brunschot (2006) suggest that experienced jumpers ignore attempts to police the edge from outsiders, demonstrating a lack of respect for those who do not have insider knowledge and skill. This same attitude can be observed in higher level roller derby skaters. Those respondents who play for national teams showed considerably less concern with attempts to set ‘appropriate’ boundaries. Chemic-Al, for example, believes that “roller derby is a hobby and hobbies are supposed to be fun, until [he gets] paid for playing roller derby, the kilt and face paint stay”. Arguably, one of the world’s most successful male roller derby skaters, Jonathan R. connects wearing a boutfit with fun and enjoyment: “putting on my ‘boutfit’ makes me feel great because I am excited to have fun and skate. I love how individual expression shines through in many boutfits”.

Such high-level skaters also respond positively to the notion of individual expression, and these skilled and confident skaters are more able to see the ‘show’ of roller derby as ‘fun’. Their accumulated capital allows them more freedom to wear boutfits without suggestions that they are not serious or professional. This offers a
contrast with often less experienced skaters who demonstrate strong preoccupations with ‘seriousness’ and ‘professionalism’.

Taking things seriously is a big concern. More than risk, being professional is key. Mid-level skaters are dismissive of boutfits, preferring instead a more regimented uniform. Respondents clearly distinguish between ‘uniform’ and ‘boutfit’. Uniforms are professional and serious, and engender team spirit. ‘Unprofessional’ dress, i.e. a boutfit, can be seen as detrimental and viewed negatively, as “a throw-back, unprofessional and an unnecessary distraction” (Veggie Kray). In contrast to the views of high-level skaters, skaters who have a negative view of boutfits have suggested that boutfits might physically “hinder performance” (Dead Hardy), although this view is more likely to be expressed towards new or low-level skaters. Phallic Baldwin explains that “there have been times where I have been accused of not taking things seriously because of the boutfits”. It is common for those who dislike them to associate boutfits with a lack of seriousness, and this can be seen as harmful to the growth of the sport:

I am not opposed to the idea of boutfits, however as roller derby pushes for recognition from the wider public I feel it is something that could be more harm than help. (T.F.).

There is a sense that boutfits are comical and should only be worn for ‘fun’ games, and also a fear on the part of those who enjoy wearing boutfits, that there will be moves towards banning them in the sport. Some teams have already gone down this route, with one skater explaining that “quite a few people have asked why I don’t wear leggings anymore. I am a team player, and this is the view my team has now taken” (Brawl Jukes).

These changes appear to be happening in the name of ‘professionalism’. There is a very specific notion of what ‘professional’ means. Whilst Chemic-Al refers to
‘getting paid’ as the indicator of becoming professional, several other participants suggest the important factor is outsider perception of the sport; that recognition is key to becoming professional – or being taken seriously. Being professional is equated with seriousness, which is taken to necessitate the absence of the ‘fun’ aspects that have made the sport of roller derby different to major sports. Seen through the lens of seriousness, boutfit choices are risky because they are seen to actively prevent the sport from becoming legitimized, serious, and professional. Many participants appear to take it as read that this is what skaters should strive for.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that boutfits can be transformative for men; the sense of acceptance many feel within the roller derby context is important. However, there seems to be a difference in how skaters experience boutfits. Cisgender skaters seem to suffer more criticism for wearing boutfits, whereas skaters who are not heterosexual or cisgender report a greater acceptance of the boutfit choices they make. On the one hand, this is encouraging; the roller derby community prides itself on being open and inclusive, and that non-normative expressions of identity and gender are accepted is a positive step. However, the lack of acceptance for all skaters’ free expression is troubling, and deserves further consideration.

Though beyond the scope of this article, it is also clear that non-cisgender, non-heterosexual men in roller derby feel comfortable expressing these aspects of their identity and sexuality in a way that is rare in mainstream sports. The experiences of such men should be explored further in an attempt to understand the extent of this difference and the potential for this freedom of expression to spread beyond the margins of sport.
Though explorations of risk and capital add context to the meanings male skaters associate with their clothing choices, and perhaps other ways of ‘doing gender’, the growing preoccupation with ‘legitimacy’ and ‘professionalism’ is key, and it is through the lens of seriousness that ideas around risk and capital can be more fruitfully discussed. Boutfit-wearing skaters challenge gender norms not only through the risky choices they make regarding clothing, but through their refusal to accept the dominant (masculine) narrative that roller derby should strive to be serious.

References


