BEING "ROLLER/DERBY GIRL":
SUBCULTURAL FEMININITY, EMPOWERMENT,
AND THIRD WAVE PRAXIS

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This thesis is presented as part of the requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Communications with Honours in Communications and Media at Murdoch University.

29 October, 2012.
DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at a University or other Tertiary Institution.

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"If only they could see us now
in leather bra and plastic shorts
like some ridiculous new team uniform
for some ridiculous new sport"

Ani DiFranco, ‘Little Plastic Castle’

"... that’s what I truly feel roller derby is. It’s the biggest ‘fuck you’ to the status quo (sports status quo, male-dominated-anything status quo, corporate-Satans-running-everything status quo, etc.). To be a guy involved in a revolution run by women is a special privilege"

Randy Pan the Goat Boy (announcer), quoted in
Down and Derby: The Insider’s Guide to Roller Derby

1 DiFranco.
2 Barbee and Cohen 179.
PREFACE

It’s 4pm on a Saturday afternoon in suburbia. Twenty women and men, some in brightly coloured uniforms and stockings, some in regular ‘civilian’ clothes, are rolling bags and boxes into a recreation centre, waiting for the basketball games to finish. As soon as the last buzzer goes off, they begin taking over the space, setting out chairs around the outside of an oval track upon which a crew in striped ref uniforms – “Team Zebra” – are taping down raised rope to mark the boundary. The group load consignment beer into the bar area, set up sound equipment borrowed from friends, organize scores of volunteers to staff the door and ‘merch’ booth. One woman, lanyard denoting her “Attila – Head Boutting Wench” flapping around her neck, is rushing around, briefing the hired security staff on the liquor licensing, making sure the trackside floor seating – the “suicide zone” – is the correctly insurable distance from the track, and overseeing the placement of chairs to ensure adherence to council guidelines on fire exits and wheelchair accessibility. In another room, a family are preparing for their daughter’s wedding.

By 6pm the crowd has lined up out the door, the music is pumping, the beer is chilled, and there are 28 uniformed women on old-fashioned quad rollerskates slowly skating circles around the track. They chat casually to one another, stretch out their muscles, practice moves on one another. As the spectators slowly file in – families gathered together in the seating, over 18’s only in the suicide zone, young men with beers in the licensed stands – the atmosphere builds with the crowd eagerly anticipating the night’s
smashes and crashes. An announcer’s voice booms out over the PA: “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to rolllllllllllerrer derrrrrrrrrrrbyyyyyyyyy!” The first lineup gather on the starting line – five in red, five in black – and when the whistle blows, they begin the strategic and physical manoeuvring of heavy blocks and quick agility that will help them win the game. They use their hips, bottoms and shoulders to throw each other off-balance; falls and pile-ups are common and by the end of the game many are sporting rips in their stockings and bruises on areas not covered by their safety equipment. After the game, skaters cross the floor to hug members of the other team, and all line up to high five one another as each team do a victory lap for a bout well-fought. Brave members of the crowd line up to talk to their favourite player, and after all the spectators have left, the skaters begin the process of restoring the venue to its usual state before heading to the requisite after party. The neighbouring wedding has concluded and the party which has dwindled to ten curiously peer in the doors of the now-deserted stadium.

The sport of flat track roller derby is complicated, with two half-hour periods broken into jams which last a maximum of two minutes. Each team fields a lineup of five skaters in each jam – one jammer who scores the points, three blockers who hit other skaters and play both offense and defence, and one pivot who plays as a blocker while communicating strategy. In a jam, the first whistle allows the blockers to start skating and the two whistles shortly after allow the jammers to sprint towards the pack; the first jammer through the pack without a penalty is the lead jammer, and has the power to end the jam at any point before the two minutes is up. On each following pass, jammers
score one point by passing each opposing player’s hips; the blockers use their bodies to legally knock the opposing jammer down or out of bounds while trying to help their jammer past the opposing blockers unscathed. It’s fast-paced, physically aggressive, and wildly entertaining.

Roller derby started as a profitable spectator sport in 1930s America, the brainchild of businessman and promoter Leo Seltzer. The rules evolved over the course of the twentieth century and the various incarnations of the sport from the original endurance races to include co-ed teams, staged fights, and pre-written WWF-style storylines. With the advent of television, broadcasting bouts brought a greater audience, but eventually the live immediacy of the sport was choked and it waned in popularity in the 1970s. The current revival grew out of the alternative music and punk communities of the West coast of America, and Austin, Texas is widely regarded as the birthplace of modern roller derby, starting the first team in the early noughties and continuing to be the headquarters of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) today. It has evolved from a burlesque- and punk-inspired performance to a legitimate sport boasting over 1000 leagues and is being considered for inclusion in the 2020 Olympic Games.

Most modern roller derby leagues operate with a grassroots, do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic where members participate in all aspects of management and production. This is embodied in the WFTDA’s central governing philosophy of “for the skater, by the

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1 For a more detailed history of the evolution of roller derby, see Barbee and Cohen; Mabe; Storms. 2 Grohmann.
skater"\textsuperscript{3}, which means that "female skaters are primary owners, managers, and/or operators of each member league and of the association"\textsuperscript{4}. Aside from bouts – the publicly-spectated events described above – the women spend between two and five times a week training together, as well as fundraisers, league meetings, informal social events and countless hours spent behind the scenes in organizational roles. League members participate in every aspect of management and event production, including financial planning, media relations, coaching, writing policy, and so on. In his study of the importance of do-it-yourself (DIY) in the roller derby revival Beaver states "the DIY ethic is about nonalienated self-activity"\textsuperscript{5}, and this can be seen in both the on- and off-track interactions of roller derby participants. They physically work together on the track, and off the track collaborate in the running of the league. The collectivity of the roller derby community leads Beaver to assert that "rollergirls subscribe to a ‘do-it-ourselves ethos’"\textsuperscript{6}, and this networking and formation of friendships are central motivators for participating in roller derby. Thus, derby is both an ‘alternative’ sport, and a subculture dominated and defined by women.

Within the subculture, the physicality of sporting elements combined with the gendered dimensions of a female-dominated space allow for experimentation with "doing gender"\textsuperscript{7}, and the participants engage with this on several levels. Firstly, they adopt pseudonyms, which are often word plays and puns playing on sexual, aggressive and/or

\textsuperscript{3} WFTDA.
\textsuperscript{4} WFTDA.
\textsuperscript{5} Beaver 6.
\textsuperscript{6} Beaver 17.
\textsuperscript{7} West and Zimmerman 125.
 ironic themes, such as ‘Storm in a D-Cup’ or ‘Lawrence of a Labia’. In addition, the
standards of dress and presentation within the roller derby space – both boutting and
training spaces, those in which participants are on skates – embrace an aesthetic which
draws on punk, vintage, pinup, rockabilly, camp, and sexual subcultures. While this is
partly a function of wearing protective gear including knee and elbow pads, wrist
guards, helmets and mouthguards, it is also a conscious and public engagement with
gendered identities and the creation of what Finley deems an “alternative femininity”\(^8\),
one which takes elements of marginalized femininities and reappropriates them as
sources of empowerment. These outward signifiers of resistance are an important
element in the self-promotion of leagues as well as the interpretation of roller derby by
the mainstream media and the wider community.

Despite elements of empowerment and collective action, roller derby is not immune to
the discourses and cultural values of the wider socio-political landscape in which it
exists. Internal political differences and personal disagreements certainly occur within
the community and in extreme cases cause members to leave the subculture or split
leagues. The internal dynamics of roller derby leagues highlight the tensions between a
mainstream culture in which women are not often offered routes to collective action and
diverse support networks, and a subculture that encourages agency, participatory
democracy, and collaborative decision-making. Many, if not all leagues, struggle with
balancing off-track politics in a tight-knit community and a competitive on-track sport
which has to fight to maintain its credibility; however, the continued exponential growth

\(^8\) Finley 365.
of the sport stands testament to the abilities of participants to overcome such obstacles through their passion and dedication to the subculture, the athletics, the 'revolution'.
INTRODUCTION

The modern incarnation of roller derby has occurred within the era of post-feminism. This period is characterized by a "taken into accountness" of feminist politics in everyday Western life through the idea of "feminist success"; that is, the idea that gender equality is something that has already been achieved and "the politics of feminist struggles are no longer needed". From within this milieu the ‘third wave’ of feminism has come to prominence, differentiating itself from the ‘second wave’ through an explicit embracing of diversity, and an emphasis on individual experience and expression, aided by democratic technologies and participatory ethics.

Roller derby is an example of a subculture that responds to the post-feminist context of the new millennium, taking elements of this and third-wave feminism in creating a subcultural space, which is empowering for participants in ways that other subcultures may not allow. Derby is a sporting spectacle which forces the audience to confront the performance of gender in this cultural moment and appropriates and re-presents the often masculinized dimensions of both mainstream and subcultural sporting practice in a theatrical and ironic way. Thus, any examination of roller derby must be bipartite, taking into account the politics of both a publicly entertaining sport spectacle and a grassroots, DIY, female-dominated space. These two elements are necessarily related, and the ‘final product’ – roller derby as a spectator sport – is fundamentally related to the functioning of the off-track community. Participants shape these internal dynamics and just as no

1 McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture” 256.
2 Ibid. 256.
3 McRobbie, “Young Women and Consumer Culture” 533.
subculture is entirely removed from its context, members implicitly incorporate dominant discourses of women’s agency and collectivity into the workings of the subculture.

Through analysis of their various resistances and appropriation of cultural values, theorists often tie subcultures’ function and dynamics to the wider social-political landscape in which they occur. Subcultures’ codes of behaviour serve to legitimate authentic membership, and in turn, can marginalize and consolidate the participants’ identities. For instance, roller derby uses the public ‘queering’ of gender display to experiment with identity categories as a form of resistance to a hegemonic gender order. Simultaneously and parallel to this, the empowerment implicit in the participatory collective action behind-the-scenes adds another dimension to the ways participants may engage with resistive activity within the subculture. Resistance is complex and multifarious. “[W]hat is perceived to be resistance in one context may at the same time be oppression in another as people, despite their resistant intent, may not be able to recognize their complicity in the reproduction of oppression”5. Thus, while participation in elements of roller derby may outwardly appear resistive, there is potential to reproduce various oppressions.

This thesis speaks into the space opened up by other work specifically focused on roller

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4 Queer theory developed from post-structuralist approaches to gender and sexuality, which questioned essentialist claims to gendered ‘natures’ and heteronormativity, and destabilized the links between gender and sex, performance and selfhood. A ‘queer’ gender performance is one which visually disrupts the culturally accepted ideas of ideal gendered display. For further explanation of queer theory, see Butler.

5 Raby 161.
derby, such as Finley’s assertion that “[f]urther research should examine whether internal dynamics have a salient place in studies of ‘undoing gender’”\(^6\), and Beaver’s call for “additional research that focuses on the day-to-day operations of DIY sport organizations, including the types of conflict that occur within them”\(^7\). Both of these important articles, on different aspects of roller derby, recognise that there are particular internal elements of the subculture, which warrant further investigation. In examining several of these internal elements through the lenses of feminist politics, and subcultural theory and participation, and personal involvement in the roller derby community, I unpack and examine some of these dynamics.

In Chapter One, I consider the cultural and temporal specificity of the post-feminist moment in Western culture and its impact on white, middle-class women and girls’ psychological development\(^8\), taking into account the backlash against the ‘second wave’ of feminism, contemporary ideas of commodity feminism and the emergence of the ‘third wave’ of feminist politics. Intrinsic in this is an examination of gender identity and identity production in the context of post-feminism and commodity (post-) feminism, and the activities which may constitute feminist theory, practice and space in this context. Using McRobbie’s studies of young women, subcultures, and post-feminism as a basis, I consider the ways a post-feminist context may promote different types of subcultural engagement and formations, particularly amongst women, and the

\(^6\) Finley 383, quoting Deutsch 106.
\(^7\) Beaver 22.
\(^8\) This thesis is limited to examining the effects of hegemonic femininity within a subcultural context, which is itself bound by ideas of race and class. Roller derby participants are predominantly (although not exclusively) white working- and middle-class women, and while derby may offer some alternative ways of ‘doing’ differently raced and classed genders, a specific exploration of these elements is beyond the scope of this work.
ways in which attitudes towards feminism and feminist practice may influence the limitations and boundaries of membership. I use the example of Riot Grrrl as a female-dominated DIY subculture formed in similar circumstances to roller derby, and discuss the presence of explicitly feminist politics in its functioning.

Chapter Two examines subcultural participation and inclusion and whether and in what ways subcultural practice may be considered resistive to cultural hegemony. In particular, I focus on women’s participation in subcultural practice and the production and reproduction of mainstream cultural norms within subcultural contexts, particularly within sporting (sub)cultures, and female-dominated subcultural spaces. I discuss previous work by Leblanc and Schippers on the effects of subcultural participation on the formation of gendered identities amongst young women and such participation as a source of potential empowerment or marginalization. I also examine the construction of various femininities within mainstream and ‘alternative’ sporting spaces.

Chapter Three, draws on theories of feminist praxis and female participation in subculture to analyse the modern roller derby movement as a female-dominated, but not necessarily explicitly feminist space. I examine modes of participation, which govern inclusion and subcultural norms, in the context of post-feminism and third wave politics, and analyse this specificity through the community of roller derby. I argue that the function of subcultural participation, and specifically participation in the complexity of roller derby, can be seen as a crucial mode of expression, empowerment, and identity articulation for participants, particularly in the context of post-feminism in the new
millennium. Participation in roller derby as a sporting subculture can be seen as implicitly third wave feminist praxis; however, the lack of specific feminist intentionality in the space creates flaws within it, which allow for the reproduction of certain mainstream gendered discourses.
CHAPTER ONE: POST-FEMINISM

1.1 Introduction
In this Chapter, I argue that post-feminism represents a context in which a post-modern and ironic reworking of feminism and femininity is present in media and cultural presentation of gender and sexuality which is used to position viewers and consumers. This context and its cultural products shape contemporary attitudes towards feminist labelling and overt critical engagement with feminist politics, as well as invoking generational differences so as to portray feminism as out of date. However, the lived politics of the post-feminist generation implicitly embody some elements of ‘second wave’ feminism whilst avoiding subscription to the identity, and third wave feminism attempts to negotiate this cultural milieu.

The time of post-feminism is now. The 1960s and 1970s ‘second wave’ of feminism has been and gone, leaving in its wake access to birth control, women in the workforce, progressive ideas of sexual freedom and critical understandings of objectification and gender. We have also survived the backlash against the ‘second wave’ through the 1980s and early 90s, which stigmatised signs of women’s progress and contributed to conceptions of feminists as “shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting, selfish, hairy, extremist, deliberately unattractive women with absolutely no sense of humor who see sexism at every turn”\(^1\). Post-colonial feminists and women of colour critiqued the ‘second wave’ and it has now “become a truism that the second wave was racist...

\(^{1}\) Douglas 7.
women's experience as universal"\(^2\). This was influenced by the development of post-modern and post-structuralist theory which discusses contemporary individuals' identity politics as complex, fractured, and multifarious. Post-feminism as a term emerged in the 1980s "to refer to a new generation of women who took for granted the victories secured by their elders, presuming the right to equal treatment both in the work-place and at home, while shunning the label of feminism"\(^3\). Rather than referring to a theoretical framework, it describes a particular cultural milieu, or a "distinctive sensibility"\(^4\), influenced by structuralist theories of gender relations and identity formation, and taking into account social constructions of fluid identities and active subjectivity in this creation.

The post-feminist era is characterized by a "taken into accountness"\(^5\) of feminist politics in everyday life through the concept of "feminist success"\(^6\), the idea that gender equality is something that has been achieved and "the politics of feminist struggles are no longer needed"\(^7\). In addition, "one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicised and generationalised and thus easily rendered out of date"\(^8\). This is achieved in various ways, including the crossing over of feminist ideas into everyday circulation through the mainstream media. However, as McRobbie points out, "just because feminism finds a place in the everyday vocabularies of popular culture, does not mean that the ideological force of these forms is somehow depleted, or that the power

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2 Hogeland 118.
3 Goldman, Heath, and Smith 334.
4 Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" 147.
5 McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture" 256.
6 Ibid. 256.
7 McRobbie, "Young Women and Consumer Culture" 533.
8 McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture" 258.
relations inscribed... melt away”. In fact, “postfeminism constructs an articulation or suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideals”. While feminist ideals of gender equality and social justice are now part of mainstream discourse, they are distanced from conceptualisations of feminism and the analysis of structural power relations which it entails, which is perceived as a thing of the past.

Specifically, the use of irony in post-feminist media culture is “a way of establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs”, and this operates on an individual and collective scale. As Gill asserts, “in postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of... expressing sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually ‘mean’”. This leads to a media and wider culture which essentially “tak[es] feminism into account by showing it to be a thing of the past, by provocatively ‘enacting sexism’”. The central idea here is that the contemporary cultural climate is so far ‘post’ feminism that we can re-inscribe misogyny through the guise of irony, and through the provocation of “feminist condemnation... generational differences are also generated”, as “[a]ny attempt to offer a critique is dismissed by references to the critic’s presumed ugliness, stupidity or membership of the ‘feminist thought police’”. Meanwhile “the younger female viewer... educated in irony and visually literate... appreciates its layers of

9 McRobbie, “Young Women and Consumer Culture” 543.
10 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 162.
11 Ibid. 159.
12 Ibid. 159.
13 McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture” 258.
14 Ibid. 259.
15 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 161.
meaning; she gets the joke. Thus in the context of post-feminist culture the "the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom." It is no surprise then, that in Olson et. al.'s work, many young people in the time of post-feminism are found to "live feminist lives and promote feminist ideals but refuse to use the label feminist," indicating that it is the current discursive constructions of feminism rather than actual feminist politics which are objectionable. By differentiating between the constructs of "label", which "refers only to the word feminist and its application by young adults", "ideals", which "denotes the values and principles of feminism", and "identity", referring to "a projection of perceived and/or desired self image", the study examines the space between post-feminist constructions of feminism and the results of feminist progress, which we (and the study's participants) now take for granted in everyday life but are uncoupled from ideas of feminism. Overall, Olson et. al.'s findings suggest that "because of the baggage associated with the label, one cannot publicly endorse a feminist ideology... the only way to support a feminist agenda is to do so privately; however, this support cannot be communicated publicly." This further indicates, "specifically how the dominant, patriarchal culture has marginalized feminist identities," which is one of the effects of a post-feminist media culture.

16 McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture" 259.
17 Ibid. 260.
18 Olson et. al. 105.
19 Ibid. 116.
20 Ibid. 126.
21 Ibid. 129.
1.2 Commodity Feminism, Contemporary Media, And Marketing to a Post-Feminist Audience

The central elements of post-feminism are present in a mainstream media and advertising industry, which is aware of the media literacy of their audience. Advertisers acknowledge the need to respond to their feminist critiques, which reject the objectification and commodification of women's bodies and promotion of unrealistic beauty ideals. Such materials use post-modern techniques such as exaggeration and irony to appeal to a knowing viewer, well-versed in the feminist goals of egalitarianism, empowerment, and diversity, in order to present the idea of a modern woman empowered by choice, particularly choice in consumption, as a way of affirming gender identities. The term commodity feminism was first introduced by Goldman, Heath, and Smith to describe "the appropriation and reframing of feminist discourse in women's advertisements"²², involving a complex negotiation of presentations of femininity imbued with discourses of feminism to create "an aesthetically depoliticized feminism"²³. It represents a specific conflation of femininity and feminism, or the signifiers of such, in order to promote products to the media literate post-feminist female consumer market who are familiar with the 'second wave' feminist critiques of media portrayals of women, and the language and cultural economy of advertising and consumer culture. Commodity feminism uses the "visual lexicon"²⁴ of both femininity — composed of subjectified imagery of visually dissected women's bodies, so familiar that even small elements can constitute signifiers — and feminism, symbolised by images "which connote independence, participation in the work force, individual freedom, and

²² Goldman, Heath, and Smith 333.
²³ Ibid. 334.
²⁴ Ibid. 337.
self-control"\textsuperscript{25}. In doing this, commodity feminism as enacted by advertisers and the mass media involves “joining, mixing and juxtaposing the meanings of feminism and femininity as referent systems”\textsuperscript{26}. The process of commodity feminism combines the difference between “binary semiotic oppositions”\textsuperscript{27} established by commodity culture such as “\{feminism/not femininity\} and \{femininity/not feminism\} in order to establish different commodity signs\textsuperscript{28}, and thus it “presents feminism as a style – a semiotic abstraction”\textsuperscript{29}. This simultaneous engagement of feminism and femininity as a conflated binary is further clouded by what McRobbie describes as the “double entanglement”\textsuperscript{30} of post-feminism. By this she means the “co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life... with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations”\textsuperscript{31} and the taken into accountness of feminism while at the same time being “fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated”\textsuperscript{32}. In the time of post-feminism, “[f]eminist ideas are at the same time articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed”\textsuperscript{33}, thus indicating that post-feminism is, rather than a period of black and white either/or binaries, a grey period of both/and simultaneities.

Commodity feminism itself takes place at the time of post-feminism. While “advertisers in the past structured ads to conceal the appearance of ideological contradictions”, in the

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. 337.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 337.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 336.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. 337.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 337.
\textsuperscript{30} McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture” 255.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. 255-6.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. 256.
\textsuperscript{33} Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 163.
new context they "now actively encourage multiple readings as they try to recapture the attention of alienated viewers by encoding messages that are ambiguous, incomplete or polyvalent". They thus present images that reflect and come to represent post-modern and post-feminist constructions of self and identity. Various explorations of this have developed over time, and one of the most important elements is the conflation of empowered subjectivities (whether represented as such or enacted by the viewer/consumer) with heteronormative sexual and bodily representations. Kearney distinguishes between commodity feminism and "commodity post-feminism", which promotes "female empowerment today without loss of femininity, particularly (hetero)sexual attractiveness", subtly hinting at a shift from early commodity feminism in the late 1980s and 1990s which presented women's empowerment as consisting of "access to traditionally masculine traits, such as strength and confidence", whereas the further developed model has progressed to a more complex enacting of empowered, embodied femininity. Commodity feminism thus functions within the context of post-feminism to reduce and stigmatise feminist critiques while simultaneously packaging the benefits of feminism within a framework geared towards consumption.

1.3 'Doing Gender', Femininity, And Women's Psychological Development In The Context Of Post-Feminism

Following the 'second wave' and development of women's and gender studies as academic fields, conceptualisations of gender and sexuality have undergone radical

34 Goldman, Heath, and Smith 341.
35 For a more in-depth examination of some tropes of commodity feminism, see Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism"; Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture".
36 Kearney 288.
37 Ibid. 288.
changes. Some gender theorists and feminists have come to view gender as performative and interactive, rather than essential and/or biological, “moving away from depicting gender as an attribute and emphasize its relational quality, which involves a focus upon gendering as a social process”\textsuperscript{38}, and this informs women and girls’ psychological development and sense of self and identity. Such a theorisation “facilitates an understanding of gender identities as a set of fluid, active processes, which sustain gender relations”\textsuperscript{39}. A key work here is West and Zimmerman’s “Doing Gender”, in which they argue that “[d]oing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’”\textsuperscript{40}. They argue that gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment”\textsuperscript{41} undertaken by individuals; however, it is “a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production”\textsuperscript{42}. Thus, it is subject to contextual shifts and interpretations as well as subjecting oneself to the discourse of accountability, which accompanies gender performance; to “do gender” is “to engage in behaviour at the risk of gender assessment”\textsuperscript{43}. They differentiate between sex – that is, “the socially agreed upon biological criteria for classification”\textsuperscript{44} as a member of a binary (male/female) sexual categorisation system – sex category, the ascription by individuals to a particular “categorical status”\textsuperscript{45}, and gender as an “accomplishment” defined by “configurations of

\textsuperscript{38} Green 174.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. 175.
\textsuperscript{40} West and Zimmerman 126.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 126.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. 126.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. 136, italics in original.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. 131.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. 132.
behaviour that would be seen by others as normative gender behaviour\textsuperscript{46}. Biological ideas of sex category are uncoupled from identification as a particular sex or gender, and such identity is formed through performance that is informed by \textquotedblleft [s]ocial processes which can be challenged and transformed in their daily reproduction, but \textquoteleft work\textquoteright to produce and perpetuate inequalities and social hierarchies\textsuperscript{47}. This separation of sex and gender has now become central to contemporary feminist conceptualizations of power, sex and gender, undermining claims of biological essentialism and leading to examination of the ways in which such gender \textquoteleft doings\textquoteright may be resisted or \textquoteleft undone\textsuperscript{48}.

 Particularly important in the context of post-feminism is West and Zimmerman\textquoteright s extension of Goffman\textquoteright s point that \textquoteleft gender is a socially scripted dramatization of the culture\textquoteright s idealization of feminine and masculine natures, played for an audience that is well schooled in the presentational idiom\textsuperscript{49}. When we consider this in the context of post-feminism and the cultural economy of commodity feminism and its effects on conceptualizations of agency and subjectivity, the ideal performance of femininity becomes a murky area, coloured by Goldman et. al.\textquoteright s \textquoteleft visual lexicon\textquoteright which combines femininity and feminism in the particular ways described above. The idealisation of feminine nature in a post-feminist context can be seen represented in media images and cultural products which are confections of objective and subjective empowered sexuality, that maintain a hegemonic gender order in which femininity and females are subordinate. Gill states that \textquoteleft monitoring and surveying the self have long been

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. 134.
\textsuperscript{47} Green 175.
\textsuperscript{48} Deutsch 106.
\textsuperscript{49} West and Zimmerman 130, italics in original.
requirements of the performance of successful femininity"\textsuperscript{50}; however, the post-feminist context promotes this in particular ways: "the dramatically increased intensity of self surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women... the extensiveness of surveillance over entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct... [and] the focus on the psychological – the requirement to transform oneself and remodel one’s interior life."\textsuperscript{51} This leads us to explore the possibilities for alternative models of femininity, and the development of female subjectivity and identity in a contemporary context.

R.W. Connell further refined West and Zimmerman’s theories of gender performativity, arguing that not only does patriarchy enforce a gender order which privileges masculinity, there are nuances in particular types of masculinity. The dominant hegemonic masculinity represents "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women,"\textsuperscript{52} including the "qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity."\textsuperscript{53} Other performances of different masculinities are situated in various relations to the service of this hegemony. Following this, there are femininities that maintain gender hierarchy; however, they are differently affected by discourses of ‘correct’ gender behaviour. A parallel definition of hegemonic femininity describes it consisting of "the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to

\textsuperscript{50} Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" 155.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. 155.
\textsuperscript{52} Connell 77.
\textsuperscript{53} Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other" 94, italics in original.
hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women\(^\text{54}\). The possibility of a “hegemonic femininity” is contested, as the central underpinning of hegemony is power, and “women have limited institutionalized power relationships over other women”\(^\text{55}\); it is alternatively called “emphasized femininity”. Nevertheless, the point here is that there is a cultural ideal of femininity which supports a patriarchal gender hegemony. When women engage practices deemed outside this construction, they are stigmatised and deemed deviant, enacting what Schippers calls “pariah femininities”\(^\text{56}\); these characteristics and practices become “master statuses” such as “a lesbian, a ‘slut’, a shrew or ‘cockteaser’, a bitch”\(^\text{57}\). Schippers also identifies the potential for “alternative femininities”\(^\text{58}\) which represents a deconstruction of gender hegemony through creating a space in which “the proliferation of an alternative set of meanings”\(^\text{59}\) for traditionally gendered positions is undone and “alternative femininities and masculinities are discursively valued traits and practices in women and men”\(^\text{60}\), and which do not uphold a gender hierarchy. Thus, the post-feminist era offers a wide variety of options for girls and women – “what might appear on the surface to be a rich array of choices” – but in actual fact, “the same old gender dichotomies hold sway... while the parameters have widened and shifted a bit, the general structure hasn’t changed”\(^\text{61}\).

The construction of femininity is evidently not as clear-cut as it has perhaps been in the

\(^{54}\) Ibid. 94, italics in original.

\(^{55}\) Finley 360.

\(^{56}\) Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other” 95.

\(^{57}\) Ibid. 95.

\(^{58}\) Ibid. 97.

\(^{59}\) Ibid. 98.

\(^{60}\) Ibid. 98.

\(^{61}\) Brown 29.
past, and thus the development of women’s gendered subjectivities in the post-feminist era is important, taking into account that “the pathways begun in childhood all too often consolidate and crystallize in ways that divide women and work against collective effort toward social change”\textsuperscript{62}. In Brown’s work on girls’ psychological development and conflicts, she identifies “two seemingly contradictory terms”: that "girls depend on close, intimate friendships... [t]he trust and support of these relationships provide girls with emotional and psychological safety nets”\textsuperscript{63} and that this is the “public story girls are more than willing to tell and endorse – a nice story of support and safety and pleasure”\textsuperscript{64}. Indeed, throughout contemporary culture, “[g]irls and women are interpellated as the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships”\textsuperscript{65}. Simultaneously for Brown, “girls can be excruciatingly tough on other girls... [t]hey can promote a strict conformity to the norms and rules of idealized femininity [and] threaten rejection and inclusion... in their search for power and visibility”\textsuperscript{66}, and herein lies the contradiction. Both the coding of the female role as one of emotional responsibility, and the policing of one another is not solely confined to the rules of idealised femininity, as I explain in the section on subcultural gender identity.

Thus, while girls and women value and find support in their emotional bonds, the politics of such relationships are fraught with threats of exclusion and rejection. These threats are all the more powerful because of the importance of such relationships; they thus “unwittingly participate in and maintain our society’s largely negative view of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid. 32.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Ibid. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 151.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Brown 5.
\end{itemize}
girls’ and women’s relationships as untrustworthy, deceitful, and manipulative.\(^67\)

Through internalising oppression – “when those victimized by oppression and stereotypes assimilate the dominant views and ‘freely’ control themselves and others like them”\(^68\) – the effects of wider cultural discourses about gender and power are ‘naturalised’; when girls and women use them against one another, “they perpetuate their own subordination, consolidate their secondary status, become complicit in their own oppression”\(^69\). In contemporary culture, “girls and women – by their association with conventional understandings of femininity – have less power and garner less respect”\(^70\), but they also “need and want to be visible, which means competing for the scarcity of resources available... and the scarcity of direct and transparent avenues to power”\(^71\). Because “it is not ‘feminine’ to openly want or claim power”\(^72\), this negotiation of forms of power from within a subordinate social status while also desiring to be seen as a ‘good girl’ who is ‘nice’ and emotionally supportive to those around them, can result in forms of “relational aggression... [which] is characterized by such behaviours as gossiping or spreading rumors about someone or threatening to exclude or reject them... [and] is often indirect”\(^73\). In addition, “complaints about other girls are laced with the derogatory – girls are too, well, girly, too feminine, too wussy, weak, deceitful, catty, critical... to have power and to be taken seriously, girls are encouraged not to like or want to be ‘those’ kinds of girls”\(^74\). Thus the identification of hegemonic and pariah femininities – or even specific characteristics of them – is policed through

\(^{67}\) Ibid. 5.
\(^{68}\) Ibid. 32.
\(^{69}\) Ibid. 33.
\(^{70}\) Ibid. 32.
\(^{71}\) Ibid. 191-2.
\(^{72}\) Ibid. 31.
\(^{73}\) Ibid. 16.
\(^{74}\) Ibid. 185.
distancing oneself from traits of ‘femininity’. Indeed, “[w]e live in a culture that requires a woman to decontaminate herself from femininity in order to be taken seriously”\textsuperscript{75}, and this plays out in both mainstream and subcultural settings in the overt and covert discourses surrounding constructions of femininities, whether hegemonic or otherwise.

1.4 Third Wave Feministing and Femininity
Some read third wave feminism as “a response to the strength of postfeminism and its effective depoliticizing of feminist discourse”\textsuperscript{76} – it is borne of the same cultural milieu. However, a third wave perspective “does not deny systemic and widespread pressures on girls and women to embody hegemonic forms of femininity”\textsuperscript{77} as commodity feminism and post-feminist media products do. Third wavers have grown up with “the deliberate articulation of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, that signifies a postfeminist sensibility”\textsuperscript{78}, and despite living feminist lives in some sense and understanding the history and central ideals of feminist struggle, young people “often don’t have... a sense of how to be a feminist”\textsuperscript{79}. This is further confused by the fact that “[t]hey live feminism in constant tension with postfeminism, though the tension often goes unnoticed as such”\textsuperscript{80}. Third wavers “practice feminism in a schizophrenic cultural milieu”\textsuperscript{81} where they experience the benefits of second wave feminism in the form of increased opportunities and freedom while being stigmatised for laying claim to such things, and

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. 191.
\textsuperscript{76} Kinser 135.
\textsuperscript{77} Schippers and Sapp 30.
\textsuperscript{78} Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 162.
\textsuperscript{79} Baumgardner and Richards, “Feminism and Femininity” 66.
\textsuperscript{80} Kinser 133.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. 133.
they “embrace pluralistic thinking within feminism”\textsuperscript{82}. “[T]heir modes of resistance are specifically tailored to what they identify as their struggles”\textsuperscript{83}, indicating that the third wave is “a movement culture that is disparate, unlikely, multiple, polymorphous”\textsuperscript{84}.

The third wave is characterised by an embracing of diversity, an emphasis on individual experience and expression, aided by democratic technologies and participatory ethics, and often an explicit distancing from the ‘second wave’\textsuperscript{85}, a denunciation it has in common with post-feminism. This differentiation is extremely important to the self-articulation of third-wavers, who “haven’t gone through Second Wave feminism themselves... [r]ather, they experience and are affected by it in the historicized, narrativized form”\textsuperscript{86}, and who may live with the benefits of progress made by the second wave without necessarily recognizing the continuities between feminist projects, particularly given that the third wave is less focused on specific goals as previous movements have been. Those claiming a feminist label in a post-feminist context often define a generational divide between themselves and previous feminist incarnations, and “[t]he contradiction between identifying as a feminist and advocating for women’s rights appears to be more pronounced in third wave feminists than in their predecessors and may be indicative of an identity dilemma for third wav[ers]”\textsuperscript{87}.

Taking into account discourses of gender and femininity as “a set of available bodily

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. 133.
\textsuperscript{83} Fixmer and Wood 247.
\textsuperscript{84} Garrison 149.
\textsuperscript{85} Garrison; Hogeland; Olson ct. al..
\textsuperscript{86} Garrison 142.
\textsuperscript{87} Olson ct. al. 110.
and relational performances that, theoretically, can be embodied by (are available to) anyone and will be contextually variant\textsuperscript{88}, third wave politics reject the denigration of the typically feminine because “believing that feminine things are weak means that we’re believing our own bad press”\textsuperscript{89}. For this generation, who “grew up in a feminist-influenced time... not just with feminism, but also with critiques of feminism – from within and without”\textsuperscript{90}, to embrace feminism means to negotiate the dominant cultural binary of feminism/femininity, and third wavers attempt to dismantle this, setting one of their central goals as “to present a range from which feminists can feel comfortable to express themselves”\textsuperscript{91}. Baumgardner and Richards describe “Girlies”, “girls in their twenties or thirties who are reacting to an antifeminine, antijoy emphasis that they perceive as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness. Girlies have reclaimed girl culture”\textsuperscript{92}, and this form of Girlie culture “isn’t the same as cultural feminism... it’s just feminism for a culture-driven generation”\textsuperscript{93}. Girlie culture represents a challenge to the devaluing of femininity in postfeminist culture, as well as “rebelling against their mothers”\textsuperscript{94}, which in some sense buys into the denigration of feminism. Baumgardner and Richards argue however, that such rebellion is “natural – and the result leads to greater diversity and, in turn, produces a stronger feminist movement”\textsuperscript{95}. Similarly, Schippers recognises the transformative potential of alternative modes of femininity when she states that “[t]o the extent that femininity is collectively reworked to undermine hegemonic ideals or hierarchies, it can be subversive to male dominance and

\textsuperscript{88} Schippers and Sapp 30.
\textsuperscript{89} Baumgardner and Richards, ManifestA 134-5.
\textsuperscript{90} Baumgardner and Richards, “Feminism and Femininity” 63.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid. 63.
\textsuperscript{92} Baumgardner and Richards, ManifestA 80.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. 134.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid. 137.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. 137.
gender inequality and thus, a source of power". 96

One notable example and early incarnation of third wave feminist politics is Riot Grrrl, which was a response to both the feminist backlash in mainstream media and cultural discourse, as well as the sexism of punk subculture. Although the punk scene had "contained feminist-style discourse for years" 97, in actuality it is defined by masculine practices and more generally, males 98, and the proponents of Riot Grrrl wanted to realise "punk’s aesthetics, politics and style" 99 in conjunction with feminist consciousness. Riot Grrrl "rewrote the word ‘girl’ to incorporate an angry growl: grrrl". 100 It encouraged self-expression through music and enacting agency and active engagement with third wave feminism through organising shows and other events, as well as DIY practice in the production of zines, "a do-it-yourself project that teaches girls how to be cultural producers... rather than consumers of empty girl-power products" 101. Indeed, "the third wave has been widely described but untertheorized" 102 but zine culture continues today as a fundamental method of disseminating third wave politics in "unexpected, nonacademic sites" 103. In addition, "[o]ne of third-wave feminism’s key principles is individual expression through the sharing of narratives" 104, many of which are shared amongst communities of zine makers. Thus, it can be understood as a response to commodity feminism and promotion of feminist ideals packaged for consumption by the

96 Schippers and Sapp 31.
97 Williams 61.
98 LeBlanc; Roman; Williams.
99 Garrison 142.
100 Piepmeier 5.
101 Schilt 79.
102 Piepmeier 11.
103 Ibid. 11.
104 Channerie-Hill, Waldron and Umsted 43.
‘empowered modern woman’. Riot Grrrl “encouraged young women to see themselves as producers and creators of knowledge, as verbal and expressive dissenters, rather than as passive consumers”\textsuperscript{105}, and this is enshrined in the group’s own manifesto when they say “BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings”\textsuperscript{106}. Riot Grrrl is notable here as it represents both a specific feminist movement within the context of post-feminism, as well as a significant subculture, which incorporated a DIY ethic and participatory practices as crucial to their function in empowering members, particularly women. The links between Riot Grrrl and roller derby have been discussed throughout the literature\textsuperscript{107}, and will be drawn upon in Chapter Three.

In the following chapter, I discuss the gendered dynamics and practices of ‘doing gender’ within subcultural spaces, how elements of resistance can be conceptualised and enacted within such spaces, and the potential for subcultures as the sites of transformation of gendered hegemony and performance which may translate beyond their confines.

\textsuperscript{105} Garrison 156.  
\textsuperscript{106} Riot Grrrl 178, emphasis in original.  
\textsuperscript{107} Beaver; Finley; Pavlidis; Storms.
CHAPTER TWO: SUBCULTURE

2.1 Subcultural Definition and Practice
Subcultural participation involves a wide variety of activities and practices; the implications of such practice vary depending on context and interpretation, within both the subculture and wider society. Specifically, the discourses around women’s roles and behaviours and ideas of hegemonic femininity discussed in Chapter One shape understandings of subcultural meaning, the demonstration of and possibilities for resistive activity, and the ways participants may engage with different elements of subculture. Female involvement in subculture wasn’t a focus within subcultural studies until feminist theory became a tool to interrogate patriarchy, and there is still little information on women’s involvement, even if studies of ‘youth subcultures’ now at least includes girls’ participation. This chapter examines subculture, asking how the activities of participants in a subculture may be viewed as resistive and what the implications of such resistance may be. It specifically considers the gendered dimensions of sporting culture and subculture to analyse the embedding of hegemonic gender ideology within even ‘alternative’ sporting spaces.

The study of subcultures began in the early twentieth century, with the Chicago School’s descriptions of what they defined as ‘deviant’ social activity, examinations of ethnic minority groups in the local population, and social control and moral order in the urban environment1. In the 1970s, the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) further developed the field by exploring the subcultures

1 Cohen A. K.; Cressey; Park.
developing in post-World War II Britain, including skinheads, punks, hippies, mods, and motorcycle gangs. Their work is rooted in Marxist theory and analysis of subcultures as rebellion against class oppression, and generally focuses on young men, such as the collection of working papers in *Resistance through Rituals*² and Hebdige’s seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*³. Since then, various attempts to delimit and define subcultural activity has broadened the field and the general consensus is that subcultures are groupings of people who share alternative views, patterns of behaviour, and cultural practices⁴. They are “groupings of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it”⁵. Abramson and Modzelewski draw a distinction between “membership in a social subsystem that one belongs to by birth or social location *a priori*, and the ones that people choose to participate in given the sets of structural constraints that delimit their lines of possible action”⁶. It is this latter form of subcultural membership, a type which “requires an initial agentic moment of association, and subsequent active identity management by members”⁷, which is most helpful in considering women’s engagement with subcultural activity, particularly as a response to a post-feminist context.

It is important to note that “[s]ubcultures may be non-normative, but they are not ‘normless’”⁸, and subcultural groups produce internal formal and informal codes of

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³ Hebdige, *Subculture*.
⁴ Abramson and Modzelewski; Dowd and Dowd; Gelder; Williams.
⁵ Gelder 1.
⁶ Abramson and Modzelewski 147, italics in original.
⁷ Ibid. 147.
⁸ Gelder 6.
behaviour – idiocultures\(^9\) – which are not necessarily removed from the dominant culture in which the subculture forms. In fact, "[s]ubcultures open up spaces where dominant ideology is contested and counter-hegemonic culture is created, however these contestations and symbolic victories can often remain locked in culture"\(^10\), and it is this dichotomy which plays out and can serve to govern inclusion and authenticity of membership, here specifically women.

\section{Subculture and Resistance}

Implicit in the Oxford Dictionary’s definition of subculture is an element of resistance, which is broadly defined as “the refusal to accept or comply with something”\(^11\), and when translated into a cultural context, it represents a troubling of the confines of particular hegemonic discourses. Resistance can be expressed in a variety of ways – collective and individual, overt and covert – and target anything from micro- to macro-level incarnations of structures of oppression, often engaging multiplicities of these simultaneously. Williams theorizes resistance “in terms of three dimensions: passive ↔ active, micro ↔ macro, and overt ↔ covert”\(^12\), and this is useful in considering the nature and effects of subcultural involvement. The passive ↔ active continuum concerns the participants’ intentions in subcultural activity, which for Williams is defined by their self-articulation and discussions of their activities, rather than the material effects of such participation. The micro ↔ macro scale can be used to analyse the levels at which resistive activity is directed, whether it is personal satisfaction or

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\(^9\) Dowd and Dowd 27.
\(^10\) Duncome 497.
\(^12\) Williams 94, italics in original.
wider socio-political change. The overt ↔ covert axis concerns the recognition of
behaviours as resistive by the objects of action and outsiders, and the inverse individual
resistances, which may go unnoticed by their targets but can be recognized as such by
other observers. It is important to note that “what is perceived to be resistance in one
context may at the same time be oppression in another as people, despite their resistant
intent, may not be able to recognise their complicity in the reproduction of
oppression”¹³, indicating that one action may engage all three of Williams’ axes at the
same time. As well as this, resistance “is conceptualised as collective as well as
individual... [t]hus individual acts have collective implications, and potential impacts
beyond the individual”¹⁴, further demonstrating the importance of and difference
between micro- and macro-level resistance. Different forms of resistance can be
interpreted with this in mind within both a subcultural and wider context. Overall, a
subculture may be resistive to forms of hegemonic power (macro structures), however
within the idioculture there may be tension concerning what constitutes resistive
behaviour, and this may challenge or enforce the discourses which uphold subcultural
membership or define the dimensions of subculture as an ‘alternative’ (the micro scale).
In other words, “resistance may be just another means by which new ideas and actions
are bound back into the status quo of the old”¹⁵.

Duncombe draws on Gramsci’s work on hegemony and asserts that in order to create
communities of resistance, “the revolutionary must discover the progressive
potentialities that reside within popular consciousness and from this fashion a culture of

¹³ Raby 161.
¹⁴ Shaw 189.
¹⁵ Duncombe 494, italics in original.
resistance”\textsuperscript{16}, thus aiming to “create counter-hegemonic culture behind enemy lines”\textsuperscript{17}. To add to this, Raby defines two subcultural approaches to resistance – “resistance as deviance and resistance as appropriation”\textsuperscript{18} – and examining these in the context of post-feminism and commodity feminism reveals a conflation of the two. Commodity feminism promotes the possibilities of choice through consumption, often undergirded by hegemonic beauty ideals; the symbolic elements of these ideals are familiar currency for members of contemporary Western societies, and thus are easily accessible as signifiers of deviance or appropriation. The process of disidentification, which is defined as “a taking of dominant signs, roles, discourses, or interpellations and then redeploying them in new ways that disrupt the dominant message, creating something previously unthinkable”\textsuperscript{19} roughly parallels the creation of alternative femininities. Using the cultural economy of post-feminism and familiarity with gendered epistemology, resistance – and thus deviance from mainstream culture – can be engaged and represented through utilization of common and accessible symbols.

Resistance can be indicated through such appropriation of symbols and signifiers, or through resistive acts and behaviours, which may or may not be part of an idioculture. Research on resistance has revealed that “theories of resistance tend to focus on overt challenges, rather than more subtle challenges including humour or passivity”\textsuperscript{20}, and this unintentionally excludes some forms of covert resistive activity from analysis or legitimacy because the effects may be unnoticeable outside the confines of the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 493.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 493.
\textsuperscript{18} Raby 155.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 165.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 159.
interaction or the space. Particularly pertinent here is Shaw’s observation that “women often use humor to subvert sexist imagery, and this can lead to empowerment and to resistance to gendered stereotypes”\textsuperscript{21}, indicating that covert forms of resistance may be more accessible for those disadvantaged by hegemonic power relations, such as girls and women. Indeed “[t]o resist, girls need to find a balance between secret and open resistance... a sort of c/overt resistance”\textsuperscript{22}, and this is explored in unconventional spaces such as leisure\textsuperscript{23} or the creation of underground networks through activities like zine publications\textsuperscript{24} and utilisation of the Internet. For Schilt, the subculture of, and covert act of zine-making creates a “safe space for resistance [which] can lead girls to adopt more overt forms of resistance as they mature”\textsuperscript{25}, and the act of DIY zine production can “lead them to feel more empowered to express their own ideas and opinions”\textsuperscript{26}. Likewise for adult women, the leisure space can act as a conduit for subtle resistances, such as “participation in particular types of leisure activities that do not conform to traditional gender roles”\textsuperscript{27}, and “the relative freedom of leisure settings may make them prime locations for resistance activities as a result of increased opportunities to exercise personal power”\textsuperscript{28}. In both cases, the resistance of women, although covert and perhaps unrecognizable as such, becomes a method of empowerment and self-actualization. When resistive behaviour becomes entrenched in the idioculture of a subculture, it can be seen as an element of a resistive community.

\textsuperscript{21} Shaw 189.
\textsuperscript{22} Schilt 81.
\textsuperscript{23} For more detailed analysis of women’s leisure space as resistive, see Shaw.
\textsuperscript{24} Work on zine making places underground circulation of zines and digital technologies such as the Internet at the centre of Riot Grrrl’s networking and creation of a geographically diverse community. For more information on zine culture and Riot Grrrl, see Garrison; Piepmeier; Schilt.
\textsuperscript{25} Schilt 83.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 79.
\textsuperscript{27} Shaw 192.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. 187.
The representation of resistance is not necessarily the aim of such activities, and the outward recognition of resistance does not always correlate to the empowerment experienced by those enacting it. Resistance is a response to hegemonic power relations, and “[a]gency, manifesting as resistance, may thus emerge through the experiences of the oppressed... and their reaction to that oppression” 29. Resistance takes many forms, and what may appear as resistance may in fact maintain a form of hegemony; symbols of subcultural participation may outwardly be signifiers of resistance while the actual sources of empowerment are not necessarily linked to the symbols themselves. Pertinent to the context of third wave feminism, “post-structuralist theorizing suggests that resistance for women is linked to the personal deployment of power, and the freedom to develop new identities and new freedoms that are not subject to someone else’s control” 30. This is evidenced in the constructions of various femininities within subcultural spaces, discussed in the next section.

2.3 Women and Subculture
Subcultures as sites of potential resistance allow members to engage in specific ways; and, the construction of new identity politics, which have the potential to translate into a wider societal context. This is particularly important in the context of mainstream hierarchical gender hegemony where maleness and masculinity is privileged over femaleness and femininity. This section examines the ways in which women articulate and express gender identity in the context of mostly male-dominated spaces, and the effects of such subcultural resistances and challenges outside of a subcultural space.

29 Raby 155.
30 Shaw 190.
McRobbie and Garber's early work on girls' involvement in subcultures\textsuperscript{31} questions the marginality of girls in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) studies of subcultures and represents one of the first feminist enquiries into women's participation in subcultural formations. Subsequent explorations of female participation in subcultures have built upon this\textsuperscript{32}. With the exception of Riot Grrrl, subcultures are largely male-dominated, and thus "the prospect of constructing stylistic, behavioural, and discursive challenges to femininity is indeed one of the factors that attracts young women to male-dominated youth subcultures"\textsuperscript{33}. The ways women experiment with constructions of femininity within subcultural settings represent a negotiation of subcultural and mainstream gender ideology and the creation of different ways of 'doing gender'\textsuperscript{34}. This can serve to empower participants, for "studies have empirically shown how girls and women who participate in subcultures often do so under pressure to conform to 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasised femininity'"\textsuperscript{35} finding them an effective way to collectivise resistance to such a gender order. One way they do this is through 'gender manoeuvring'\textsuperscript{36}, or "individual action or patterns of action developed by a group that manipulate the relationship between masculinity and femininity in ways that impact the larger process of gender structuration"\textsuperscript{37}. Gender manoeuvring does not aim to "reproduce the patterns of structuration that keep the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity in tact"\textsuperscript{38}. The creation of alternative femininities is not necessarily always successful in destabilising this however, which can be analysed

\textsuperscript{31} McRobbie and Garber.
\textsuperscript{32} Beal; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie; Laurendeau and Sharara; Piano; Williams.
\textsuperscript{33} LeBlanc 142.
\textsuperscript{34} See West and Zimmerman.
\textsuperscript{35} Williams 58.
\textsuperscript{36} Finley; Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other"; Schippers, Rockin' Out of the Box.
\textsuperscript{37} Schippers, Rockin' Out of the Box 37.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. 119, emphasis mine.
through the various femininities of girls and women in the male-dominated subcultures of punk, hard rock, and goth, as well as alternative sporting cultures, discussed in the next section.

Punk has been a focus of subcultural studies since its birth in the 1970s. As it developed, feminist scholars analysed women’s involvement, with Angela McRobbie stating as early as 1980 that there are “overlaps between the nuances of punk style and feminist style which are more than just coincidental... both punk girls and feminists want to overturn accepted ideas about what constitutes femininity”39. Indeed, for all members, “[w]hat the punk identity offered was status within its own subculture for those who could not or would not achieve it in conventional society”40. For women the creation of the identity of “punk girl”41 represents a bipartite resistance through style and behaviour, as “[i]n constructing style, punk girls subvert the norms of the mainstream culture, the feminine norms of both culture and subculture, and the norms of the punk subculture as well, creating a feminine style outside the confines of mainstream or punk subculture”42. Girls who participate in moshing and slamming in the pit (the area in front of the stage at a punk performance) “embody a rejection of emphasised femininity... [while they simultaneously] conform to the expectations that male participants have for proper subcultural behaviour, thereby reproducing hegemonic masculinity”43, in that they must abide by the largely masculinised behaviours which rule the subcultural space, or they risk being excluded or marginalised. In Roman’s study of the gendered nature of slam

39 McRobbie, “Settling Accounts with Subcultures” 79.
40 Fox 360.
41 For a complete account of the creation of “punk girl”, see LeBlanc.
42 LeBlanc 156.
43 Williams 60.
dancing, she notes that “crowded out of space, a few female Punks slammed together on the periphery,” and they articulated this as a “safe space,” indicating that the subcultural norms of some punk spaces are experienced as dangerous or threatening through such masculinised practices. This can be seen to parallel the meritocratic aspects of the sporting subcultures discussed below, where women’s lack of participation is not viewed as specifically relating to the dynamics of the space, but their ‘natural’ disinterest in such activities. Williams points out that in the punk subculture, “[a]ndrocentric definitions of what counts as valued audience participation directly affect women’s status within the scene.” While punk espouses the ethic of DIY and “contained feminist-style discourse for years,” in actuality “young men dominate the stage, as well as most of the area in front of it, with female musicians often tokenized by scene members.” Women are thus spatially marginalised, rendering punk another subcultural space in which hegemonic gender discourses and relationships with the majority male membership governed their behaviour.

Simultaneous to this, girls participating in the punk subculture “used the masculinity and reflexivity (or social critique) of the subculture as resources to construct their critiques of mainstream femininity,” both by rejecting images of stereotypical mainstream femininity and creating new expressions of femininity for themselves. In LeBlanc’s study, girls “discursively constructed stereotyped images of femininity, deemed them to

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44 Roman 152.
46 Williams 58-9.
47 Ibid. 61.
48 Ibid. 58.
49 LeBlanc 143.
be negative, and then denied their participation in them”\textsuperscript{50}. For example, they “described cattiness, whining and gossip as typically feminine forms of communication, and chose not to play that game”\textsuperscript{51}, thus distancing themselves from what are, in their view, typically feminine behaviours. They also focused on “female competitiveness for male attention as a central reason for their rejection of femininity and female relationships”\textsuperscript{52}, including when this was expressed by their peers within the male-dominated subculture.

They position themselves as rejecting particular elements of femininity or what they perceive to be feminine behaviours while taking on others in a subculture which is specifically masculine; thus, “they negotiate between the expectations of culture and subculture”\textsuperscript{53}. Particularly important in the girls’ construction of an alternative femininity is “juxtaposing modes of dress with radically unexpected modes of behaviour, playing off the expectations of femininity against those of punk”\textsuperscript{54}, indicating that the symbols of resistance (dress or appearance) and the resistive acts (behaviour) are configured in particular ways within specific subcultures. Central to LeBlanc’s study is the idea that “symbolic resistance to a semiotic system, which is itself constituted of symbols, can change that system”\textsuperscript{55}, and this complex relationship is central to constructions of femininity within subcultural spaces. The problem here is that features considered traditionally feminine are continually denigrated and maintained as secondary to those of masculinity, and the women work around and maintain a subcultural gender order, which maintains femininity as subordinate.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. 143.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. 144.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. 145
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. 148.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 158.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. 140.
The alternative hard rock subculture in Mimi Schippers' study works on a different understanding of gender dynamics and "explicitly looked to feminism to develop a new genre of rock music"\textsuperscript{56}, one which "took the cultural criticism of punk, the gender criticism of feminism, and tried to create a world that was different\textsuperscript{57}. Members of this scene recognized that the violence of moshpits "drives women away from the front of the stage\textsuperscript{58}, and sought to create performance spaces and music which were resistive to the hegemonic and hierarchical gender norms of both mainstream rock and the wider culture. Through their on-stage performances and face-to-face interactions, which included queer gender performances, anti-groupie culture and a conflation of the often-gendered fan/performer dichotomy, the alternative hard rockers "\textit{construct[ed] sexism as uncool and feminism as cool within the context of rock culture, [and] the meaning frame is a strong incentive for newcomers to 'get with the program'}\textsuperscript{59}. However, they also viewed gender as an interactive and performative process, and for them, "\textit{[F]eminist politics are not about writing politicized lyrics or explicitly speaking out about gender inequality; they are about how one behaves}\textsuperscript{60}, indicating that they "\textit{emphasized individual behaviour as a remedy for sexism in rock}\textsuperscript{61}. In addition, there was a "\textit{subcultural proscription against identifying gender-group membership as having significance in any context}\textsuperscript{62}, and as a subcultural norm, this inattention to structural oppression creates a "silence" in which "\textit{certain forms and manifestations of male...}"

\textsuperscript{56} Schippers, \textit{Rockin' Out of the Box} 14, italics in original.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 54.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. 71.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 163.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. 181.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. 169.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. 168.
dominance go unchallenged and are thus reproduced." While they openly discussed issues of gender equality and protested the sexism of mainstream rock culture, "most alternative hard rockers balk at any suggestion that they are feminist activists" indicating that the politics of the subculture are firmly rooted in the post-feminist context and third wave philosophy.

Similarly, the participants in goth subculture negotiate between the expectations of mainstream femininity and sexual practice, and the subcultural norms which allow them particular types of freedom while also enforcing some structural limitations. The goths in Amy Wilkins' study "use the confines of the subcultural scene, where they are relatively safe from outsider views, and the scene's celebration of active sexuality as resources to resist mainstream notions of passive femininity". This "reflects the substantive turn of postfeminism... a focus on women's right to active sexuality rather than on broader issues of gender equality". The presentation of feminine sexuality within the subculture is recognised as performative through the physical presentation of members' bodies and dress, which often "fetishizes the whore, combining corsets with short skirts and fishnet stockings" while also taking elements of bondage, and this "ability to participate in sexy self-presentation is pleasurable" for members. However, the "process of experimenting with femininity is an open one: Anyone, woman or man, can participate", and of the women, "many... may not be able to access sexual

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63 Ibid. 172.
64 Ibid. 181.
65 Wilkins 328.
66 Ibid. 329.
67 Ibid. 337.
68 Ibid. 337.
69 Ibid. 338.
attractiveness in conventional contexts where sexy femininity is defined according to narrow beauty standards that emphasize thin, disciplined bodies70, demonstrating that there are clearly elements of queer and alternative gender performance. Within the subculture such experimentation “does not signal a rejection of heterosexuality... rather, it is heterosexually validated in the context... where women report their attraction to androgynous men and to men in women’s clothing”71 indicating that although the subcultural gender performances offer an alternative to the mainstream, they are still defined by a heteronormative framework. In addition, as well as presentation of ‘sexiness’, participants also engage in queer sexual practices, in the forms of bisexuality (which is practised by, and assumed of, the female participants more than the males72) and polyamory, and these too are found to benefit the male participants more than the females. As one participant commented, “there seems to be a double standard – girls in heterosexual relationships can date other women but not other men”73, supporting Wilkins’ claim that “[t]he predominantly heterosexual relationships within the Goth community often restrict women’s sexual freedoms but not men’s”74. Women are also expected to uphold the emotional bonds, which are used to differentiate polyamory as unconventional practice from free sex, and thus the gendered responsibilities of maintaining heterosexual romance and relationships referenced earlier as a production of post-feminist media texts, remain intact. It is also important to note that, like other subcultures which negotiate different constructions of gender, taking on elements of both mainstream and feminist discourse, Wilkins asserts that “[a]lthough the

70 Ibid. 337.
71 Ibid. 338.
72 Ibid. 341.
73 Ibid. 343.
74 Ibid. 341.
women I encountered do not frequently use the term ‘feminist’, they draw on the
language of feminism to describe the benefits of being a Goth\textsuperscript{75}, once again observing a
purposeful distancing of subcultural participants from the label of feminist.

\textit{2.4 Women and Alternative Sports}

Like the music-based and male-dominated subcultures described above, “[s]port
represents another traditionally male domain that women now enter and must
\textit{negotiate}\textsuperscript{76}. Even in mainstream sports, gender divisions dictate participation modes
and coverage, as well as the ways participants engage with gender performance. Deutsch
cites the examples of soccer, where “although soccer playing may seem the same for
men and women, they do gender by adopting different approaches to the development
and display of their bodies”\textsuperscript{77}, and golf, in which “women golfers continue to play a
‘male’ sport by accommodating and limiting their play to women-friendly situations,
women partners, and courses with fewer holes”\textsuperscript{78}. Aside from mainstream sports,
different forms of ‘alternative’ sports, generally defined by their newness or marginality,
have been the sites of various exploration of identity construction and lifestyle\textsuperscript{79},
however “[d]espite their potential as alternative sport spaces, research on [a variety of
alternative sports] reveals that these sport subcultures fail to provide an alternative
structure of gender relations: Like the traditional sports they are often defined against,

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. 329.
\textsuperscript{76} Deutsch 111.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. 111.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. 111.
\textsuperscript{79} Abramson and Modzelewski; Beal; Donnelly, “Studying Extreme Sports”; Kelly, Pomerantz, and
Currie; Laurendeau and Sharara; Rinehart.
these ‘alternative’ sports are also male dominated. This section explores some work on alternative sporting subcultures and the effects of participation on female members.

In Becky Beal’s study of gender relations in the skateboarding subculture, the interviewees described their rejection of the common values of hegemonic masculinity in mainstream sport – specifically aggression, dominance, competition and sexism – in favour of more creative, expressive and cooperative models of social and sporting activity. At the same time, however, all the interviewees, including the young women, described the lack of female involvement in and the sex-segregation of the subculture as part of natural differences between genders, and “justified [this] as a reflection of feminine and masculine behaviours”. None of the participants sought to actively exclude women, however the gendered assumptions carried over into the subculture from the participants’ place within a wider gendered hegemonic power structure, and predicated different involvement by females and males; thus, “it is only when females prove their masculinity (one of the guys) that they are accepted within the subculture of skateboarding”. Women’s entrance into skateboarding is an overtly resistive activity in terms of the dominant gendered expectations of girls’ behaviours, however the idioculture serves to uphold hegemonic ideas about gender roles, even while an alternative model of masculinity is explored. Male participants may be unaware of their complicity in reproducing oppression, and the women are not actively participating in the development of the subcultural community, and thus, according to Beal, uneasily

80 Beaver 4.
81 Beal 213.
82 Ibid. 217.
conform to an oppressive gender ideology which has unconsciously been translated to a
subcultural context. The empowerment women may derive from involvement in the
subculture is always contingent on their ability to fit into the masculinist idea of what it
means to be a member.

In their study of participants in two ‘action’ sports – snowboarding and skydiving –
Laurendeau and Sharara use Dworkin and Messner’s ideas of “resistant agency” and
“reproductive agency” to examine the female participants’ place within the subculture,
and their articulations of how they must respond to particular gender ideologies which
are reproduced within the confines of their respective sporting subcultures. Resistant
agency “involves building or transforming institutions so that they speak to the
emancipatory needs and interests of women... [r]eproductive agency, on the other hand,
is when women simply insert themselves into dominant institutions”\(^{83}\), maintaining the
oppressive force of such things as a hegemonic gender order. As with Beal’s
skateboarders, the reasoning given for female participants’ absence in the most
challenging areas of snowboarding is articulated by both male and female interviewees
as “a product of women’s unwillingness to take risks in comparison to men”\(^{84}\). Despite
the female respondents’ admitting that they felt unwelcome and judged as female
snowboarders in these contexts, they “recognize the assumption that women are poorly
skilled boarders, but refrain from casting this as an issue of gender discrimination,
instead framing it in terms of skill and expertise”\(^{85}\). Hence, it becomes a personal
attribute, and this is a classic strategy of reproductive agency, where the women change

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83 Laurendeau and Sharara 28.
84 Ibid. 33.
85 Ibid. 35.
their behaviour by avoiding certain activities (demonstrating agency), but these acts do not combat the underlying gender assumptions. This is a micro-level resistance, where activity is oriented towards their personal placement within the subculture, rather than changing the gender dynamics of the subculture or culture more broadly.

Laurendeau and Sharara noted resistive agency amongst the skydivers in the organisation of all-women jumps and a Women’s World Record, which serves to provide a supportive network for female skydivers in a male-dominated subculture. However, there were also women who adamantly rejected the idea of sex-segregation, arguing that jumps should be based on skill and hard work rather than gender, and “resist[ed] the idea of mobilizing around the concept of ‘women’”\(^{86}\), demonstrating an uneasiness in relation to collective action which parallels similar problems amongst women within mainstream post-feminist culture. The snowboarders demonstrate overt, resistive agency in their efforts to emphasise their femininity while demonstrating snowboarding skills, through wearing different clothing and showing their hair; they make a clear distinction between this and “attempting to draw attention to [their] sexuality”\(^{87}\) or actively appear attractive, which they feel would undermine any efforts to legitimate their place within the subculture. Thus, the women in the snowboarding subculture are marginalised and negotiate a fine line between recognising their female-ness and being objectified, which they recognise would exclude them from ‘authentic’ subcultural membership. This demonstrates the extent to which internalised gendered hegemonic power discourses have come to shape the norms of subcultural sporting

\(^{86}\) Ibid. 42.
\(^{87}\) Ibid. 39.
spaces, in which participatory processes are not emphasised and female participants are sidelined and forced to modify their behaviour. Their authenticity is measured by their ability to participate according the pre-established masculine ideals of correct membership, and they often must do this ‘in spite of’ their gender.
CHAPTER THREE: ROLLER DERBY

3.1 Introduction
In this chapter, I map out the current roller derby revival within the confines of the current post-feminist and third wave contexts, using understandings of gender performance, women's strategies for negotiating and constructing femininities, and subcultural theory and participation, particularly that of women. I explicate the location of roller derby within a complicated relationship between third wave praxis, feminist theory, and the post-feminist milieu, and the effects of this on participants. I unpack and contextualize the notion of the enactment of “derby girl” as an alternative femininity\(^1\) to examine its shifting meanings and potentialities for individual empowerment within and outside the subcultural space. I discuss the importance of roller derby as a female-dominated space and the centrality and function of the DIY, participatory ethic. This chapter is thus divided into several separate but interrelated sections on the representation of roller derby both by communities of participants and mainstream media and the relationship of this to the function and method of commodity feminism and post-feminist sensibilities discussed in Chapter One; the modes in which participants may experience empowerment through involvement with roller derby as both a subculture and sporting practice and the contextual constructions of femininity within roller derby as a subculture; and understandings of this as third wave praxis.

3.2 (Re)Presenting Roller Derby
Roller derby is a subculture which exists within the cultural context of post-feminism.

\(^1\) Finley.
As “[a] counterculture’s expression occurs in response to the specific conditions of modern society, or the culture in particular of which it is critical”\(^2\), the fundamental elements and function of these are also incorporated into modern roller derby as a spectator sport and participatory community. Specifically, this is presented through the enactment of “stealth feminism”\(^3\) in creating a female-dominated sporting space which emphasises women’s “onlyness”\(^4\), in conjunction with the dynamics of “derby girl” as an alternative femininity\(^5\). The focus of much academic work on roller derby is on the performance of roller derby and the balancing of sexuality and sporting practice\(^6\). It is through the analysis of the attire, which is unusual for women’s sports, and the status of roller derby as a full-contact women’s sport that elements of both third wave and post-feminist sensibilities become clear. Drawing on this, I situate roller derby within this historical context and examine the appeal of such a subculture and the possible parallels between subcultural femininities.

The mainstream representation of roller derby is often preoccupied with the daily ordinariness of the female participants and their ‘transformation’ into derby girls within the context of public derby events; indeed “[r]oller derby players are portrayed as having a split personality, one where they function as normal women by day, who overwhelmingly have a feminised career, and derby girl by night”\(^7\). Such representations speak to the difficulties of representing traditional feminine roles such as mother and

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2 Fox 366.
3 Chananie-Hill and Umsted 33.
4 Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” iii.
5 Finley 359.
6 Cohen J. H.; Finley; Kearney; Murray; Pavlidis.
7 Murray 27.
wife in unconventional ways or outside the understood contexts for enacting identities, such as the home. While actual derby players don’t necessarily view these identities as separate or incompatible – indeed they often incorporate this into their derby personas through adopting reflective names – the representation of it reflects the prevalence of a gender binary, and is not necessarily reflective of the reality of DIY subculture. As The Notorious E.V.E. puts it, “[t]he basic problem for depictions of derby is that what looks good for the camera isn’t really how derby girls know their sport is played”\textsuperscript{8}.

Aside from the mainstream representations of roller derby, the Internet has allowed “a space for creative articulations of the sport through ‘cultural artefacts’... that evoke the corporeality of the sport”\textsuperscript{9}, and these are “dedicated to supporting, producing and circulating roller derby identities that are both individual and collective”\textsuperscript{10}. Thus, self-representation by both collectives (in the form of the online presence of, and media products created by leagues, coalitions, teams etc.) and individuals (through user-generated content such as blogs and social networking) allows for a greater definition of what derby as a community is, and what “derby girl” may mean. This intersection of construction and embodiment is fundamental to the DIY aspects of roller derby discussed further on; the focus here is on the representation of roller derby by the community itself. Just as mainstream depictions in media are often fixated on the transformative aspects of roller derby players, so too do “[o]fficial league sites make visible only the ‘empowering’ affects (the pleasure of overcoming pain or gendered limits)”, which forms a “static official derby narrative of empowerment and

\textsuperscript{8} Berrick 42.
\textsuperscript{9} Pavlidis and Fullagar 2.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. 2.
belonging\textsuperscript{11}, and this is the public identity of roller derby as a whole and derby girls as individuals which is promoted and seized upon by mainstream media. Parallel to this are “[web]sites produced by disaffected players who make visible the complex affective economies that are intertwined with the power relations of women’s sport”\textsuperscript{12}, more often than not outside of “official” self-representations of derby, indicating that “the dark side of derby culture”\textsuperscript{13} is more underground and invisible, but certainly present. That the internal dynamics of such online representations may be symptomatic are discussed further on; the central point here is that “multiple roller derby identities are contested and made ‘real’ via virtual space”\textsuperscript{14} and that both official (mainstream and self-produced) and unofficial depictions of what roller derby and “derby girl” are, form part of the subculture. The extensive online roller derby community serves to both represent and create what roller derby is, and “women who play and post images or text are always becoming-derby grrrl as they produce affects (as distinct from static representations of meaning)”\textsuperscript{15}. The multiple meanings attached to “derby girl” as an identity category are limited only by participation in the sport, rather than proscriptive ideas based on either mainstream or self-representations.

The actual event of roller derby engages the tropes of post-feminism such as women’s agency, power, and sexual subjectification, however it simultaneously queers and reconstructs them through the status of derby as ‘performance’ and the physical embodiment implicit in action (rather than image). In addition to different

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. 9.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 10.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. 11.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 11.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 6.
configurations of the commodity (post-) feminist cultural economy, roller derby as a whole, but particularly the participants within the boutting space, is not promoting consumption, as is the purpose of commodity feminist imagery. Rather, derby girls are actively engaging with a physical, embodied activity and the celebration of this is shared with the audience, undermining the purposes of commodity feminism and engaging the spectator to collectively create alternative meanings of gender and sexuality. Whether this representation and understanding of public roller derby events is constructive in terms of feminist goals or alternatively ‘doing gender’ is discussed further on. For now, I argue that the event of roller derby can and is represented and interpreted in the context of a post-feminist cultural economy, by both mainstream and self-generated media and images, as well as in the actual act of playing roller derby in a public setting.

3.3 Constructing and Contextualising “Roller/Derby Girl” as Empowering Subcultural Femininity

Roller derby is represented as an empowering space for women, both in mainstream depictions and self-representations by leagues, collectives and individuals in print and online, and this is correct in the sense that it allows a space for reconfiguration of gendered norms and performance of alternative femininity and embodied empowerment, through a sporting endeavour which is untraditionally unmasculinised. The roller derby community is one that exists in various formations, from leagues, “geographically-based organizations that practice and promote roller derby”\textsuperscript{16}, teams, social groups, online communities, and wider organizational structures such as WFTDA and regional coalitions, all of which interact to varying levels. Overall, these form the subculture of

\textsuperscript{16} Wehrman 72.
roller derby and represent various spaces in which the enactment of “derby girl” as an alternative femininity can be explored, and offer several routes to empowerment through this. Participation in roller derby is not confined to skating; rather, for most participants it becomes a lifestyle, it ‘takes over’ our lives\textsuperscript{17} and becomes “an all-consuming hobby”\textsuperscript{18}. However, “the representation of roller derby through a discourse of empowerment can render invisible the complexity and diversity of women’s affective experiences”.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, my aim here is not to portray all derby activities and contexts as empowering; rather, it is to unpack the routes to empowerment which derby may offer, the effects of this on participants, and the contextual shifts in dynamics and resistance within and outside of the roller derby subculture.

The portrayal in media of roller derby and its participants described above is the reproduction and presentation of “derby girl” as an “alternative femininity”\textsuperscript{20} in a way which references the post-feminist context. However, because “derby girl” is an enacted, embodied identity, it is more complex than a simple representation; it requires maintenance and negotiation, and is subject to contextual shifts just as all gender performances are contingent. For Finley, “derby girl” as an alternative femininity describes the transportation of Schippers’ “pariah femininities”, discussed in Chapter One, into “local settings” such as subcultures, in which they are “appropriated and reconfigured into an ‘alternative’ femininity that is not seen as contaminating but rather

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\textsuperscript{17} Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” 71; Peluso 76.
\textsuperscript{18} Barbee and Coher 110.
\textsuperscript{19} Pavlidis and Fullagar 12.
\textsuperscript{20} Finley 359.
is honored in that setting"21. The enactment of “derby girl” as alternative femininity also describes a wide variety of behaviours with varying relationship to “emphasised femininity”; even within mainstream culture, “[n]egotiations about femininity provide a type of intragender power and status and produce ‘nondominant’ cultural capital”22. Brown reveals this in her examination of competition and relationships with femininity amongst girls and young women, and this also plays out through women’s engagement in subcultural constructions of femininity. In fact, “[n]onconventional subcultures... are settings in which women often challenge conventional femininities”23, however they often do this by denigrating and distancing themselves from traditional femininity, and for rollergirls, “[s]ometimes their attitudes toward femininity manifest in a scorn of the women they see as guardians of the hegemonic femininity”24. This is an observed theme in work on gender construction within derby25, and is also present in the subcultural constructions of femininity amongst LeBlanc’s punk girls discussed in Chapter Two, and speaks to a hegemonic gender order in which femininity, and therefore women, are subordinate.

In contrast to the music- and sport-based subcultures described in Chapter Two, roller derby is “not only... female-generated and female-dominated, [it is] also female-owned and -operated”25. This is central to the construction and maintenance of different femininities under the descriptor “derby girl”. The participants are not negotiating

21 Ibid. 365.
22 Ibid. 363.
23 Ibid. 365.
24 Ibid. 378.
25 Finley; Murray; Peluso.
26 Peluso 18-9.
femininity in relation to hegemonic (or any other) masculinity as performed by male (or other female) members of the subculture, a relationship which is found to be damaging in various ways to women and girls’ participation in all of the above case studies. This plays out in different ways, whether it’s competition for space, as in punk27 and alternative sports28, a devaluation of all gender-group identifiers which renders structural inequality invisible and, in some cases, reproduced, as for alternative hard rock29, or inequitable ideas of sexuality and availability which maintain a gender hierarchy, such as the goths30. Because roller derby is a sport, there is also no way to ‘fake it’. By actively participating in skating the women are ‘doing’ “derby girl” as a femininity, in whatever ways that might be, and this is linked to the representation/embodiment concept. The construction of possible meanings attached to “derby girl” are continually shifting, and “[t]he women involved in roller derby are not imitating ‘being a roller derby grrrl’, nor is there such a thing as a ‘natural’ derby grrrl, an essential set of qualities that define what woman is”31; they are doing and representing simultaneously.

The current incarnation of derby has always been constructed and defined by women, and in fact one of the first skaters in modern derby was attracted “because, unlike other male-dominated sports, she notes ‘When I closed my eyes and thought about derby, I automatically pictured a girl’”32. This has continued through the sport’s development so

27 LeBlanc; Roman.
28 Beal; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie; LaRendehau and Sharara.
29 Schippers, Rockin’ Out of the Box.
30 Wilkins.
31 Pavlidis and Fullagar 6.
32 Barbee and Cohen 33.
that now, as Los Angeles Derby Dolls skater Gori Spelling states, “[w]e don’t have to say we play women’s roller derby, we just say we play roller derby”33. The maintenance and understanding of roller derby as a female-dominated space perhaps allows for more, or different types of freedoms for gender manoeuvring, as the participants’ “woman-ness” is never in question, by their very presence in the space34; as West and Zimmerman state, “[w]omen can be seen as unfeminine, but that does not make them ‘unfemale’”35. Pariah femininities are effectively “the quality content of hegemonic masculinity enacted by women”36; however, “[w]hen women move to subcultural settings that are intentionally resistive of established norms, cultural content (such as pariahs) can take on new meanings and utility”37. In a space in which such masculinity is not continuously presented (and therefore gender hegemony is not central to configurations of behaviour), the possibilities for re- or un-‘doing gender’ are widened. It is also important to note that the enactment of ‘derby girl’ is subject to contextual shifts and changes which effect the understanding of meanings attached to them, just as with all gender performances. Even within different derby spaces, ‘derby girl’ is embodied, enacted, and read differently; for example, “[t]hough we get dolled up for public bouts, practice is not a time for dressing to impress”38. Within a training space, observers will rarely find the fishnets and theatrical makeup which may be

33 King.
34 In 2011, WFTDA released a Gender Policy to attempt to address the needs of a growing number of transgender people interested in participating in roller derby. While not exhaustive or flawless, it at least addresses the presence of transgender people within the derby community and attempts to create guidelines based on inclusivity and recognition; there are transgender people participating in all levels of women’s flat track roller derby. For more information on WFTDA’s Gender Policy, see http://wftda.com/news/wftda-adopts-gender-policy/.
35 West and Zimmerman 134.
36 Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other” 95.
37 Finley 365.
38 Barbee and Cohen 152.
present at bouts, however that does not mean that participants are enacting a less valued or less authentic version of 'derby girl'. At after-parties, where the crowd is invited to mingle with the skaters, the on-track personas of derby girls, both as individual 'characters' and as a category or type of alternative femininity, are enacted differently from within a bout or game context, or within a derby-girl-only space such as training or meetings. On-track is different to off-track (public and private, league and team), social spaces differ from 'professional' (league meeting or representation) spaces, and the performances of 'derby girl' vary as do the women who perform them.

3.4 Embodied Empowerment, Women-only and Women’s Leisure Spaces
As well as ‘performing empowerment’ in the form of an alternative femininity in a boutting context, the act of playing roller derby is ‘embodied empowerment’ that is felt bodily through the conditioning and training of learning to play, and the changing attitudes towards individuals’ bodies. When Schippers first dressed as an alternative hard rocker, she noticed the change: “putting on a skintight miniskirt and big, clunky combat boots is not simply a visual contradiction; it is an embodied contradiction as well”39. Parallel to this, the appropriated symbols of empowerment readily represented in derby coverage, such as torn fishnets, booty shorts, and so on, function on more than simply a symbolic level. Aside from the functionality of derby attire, participants wear extensive protective gear, and their skates, which are heavy and parallel Schippers’ “big, clunky” boots, and this visually codes the sexuality of derby players differently as well as creating an “embodied contradiction” which is steeped in personal history and

39 Schippers, Rockin’ Out of the Box 122.
achievements, physical/embodied memory, agency, and enablement. Indeed, "many of
the derby skaters understand the 'sexy' that they do as being a different sort of 'sexy';
one that is less about looks, and more about physical, sexual, and female empowerment
through sport and athleticism. Murray's ethnographic research on derby skaters and
spectators suggests that this is reflected in understandings of derby girls' appearance as
representing reconfigured physical subjectivity. The presence of safety equipment in
some sense 'protects' derby girls from being conventionally objectified, as it is a symbol
of action and agency, and even outside of a skating context as a static image, it
references a reconfigured type of sexuality and physicality, both of which are enacted
simultaneously within the boutting space. In fact, "the femininity that is purportedly
displayed in roller derby... is not something that occurs at a distance from their
masculine behaviour, but simultaneously with it," and rather than becoming sexualised
"by appearing nude off the track... derby skaters display their sexual agency in an ironic
fashion during athletic competitions, thereby confounding attempts of patriarchal,
heteronormative recuperation. Roller derby exhibits a range of body types, all with
different uses and skills, and "body size in the context of roller derby generally tends to
be understood in instrumental terms, that is, with regard to use rather than
appearance," and all participants are encouraged to take up and own space. This
reflects a subculture in which women are empowered through engagement with and
presentation of their bodies as well as the subscription to and enactment of alternative
femininity.

40 Peluso 85, italics in original.
41 Murray 159-162.
42 Ibid, 49.
43 Kearney 286.
44 Carlson 435.
Women’s leisure spaces have been “seen to reproduce, but also sometimes to resist, dominant ideologies”\(^{45}\), and “it is often within women-only contexts that specific opportunities for resistance to gender stereotyped roles and images occur”\(^{46}\). The women’s “onlyness”\(^{47}\) of roller derby spaces is central to the social function of it as a subculture and in fact, “many rollergirls enjoy being a part of the roller derby community as much as, if not more than, playing the sport itself”\(^{18}\). This is partly because of the opportunity to bond with other women in a leisure setting. In many women’s lives, “time synchronization and time fragmentation dominate... which has led to them taking ‘snatched’ space for leisure and enjoyment, rather than planned activities”\(^{49}\), and commitment to roller derby requires a reorganization of this, leading Peluso to assert that “what is gender transgressive about roller derby is the way in which it allows and encourages women to reprioritize their lives around their own wants, needs, and desires”\(^{50}\). Within leisure settings, “women often use humour to subvert sexist imagery, and this can lead to empowerment and to resistance to gendered stereotypes”\(^{51}\). This is particularly pertinent to a post-feminist context in which both feminist ideology and sexism are the subjects of derision, as roller derby seizes on both of these elements with the naming of skaters, teams, and events which all play on sexism, power and hegemonic femininity. For Green, “shared laughter and humour generate positive sentiments among ‘insiders’, which bonds the group and reduces

\(^{45}\) Shaw 189.
\(^{46}\) Green 176.
\(^{47}\) Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” iii.
\(^{48}\) Beaver 16.
\(^{49}\) Green 171-2.
\(^{50}\) Peluso 75.
\(^{51}\) Shaw 189.
external threats, often at the expense of excluded ‘others’\textsuperscript{52}. However, in the public context of roller derby bouts, such humour and irony is on display and spectators are encouraged to participate in making meaning from it, which is crucial in the potential transference of the subcultural gender construction to spaces outside of it. Green also advocates for analysis of “women’s talk”, seeing it as “at the heart of women’s leisure experiences” as well as having a role in “the construction and maintenance of gender identities which sustain gender relations” despite often being dismissed as “gossip”\textsuperscript{53}. Within roller derby, “though we spend a lot of our time discussing roller derby (a consistent feature of any conversation among derby girls), we also discuss family, work, school, and everything else that is discussed among groups of friends”\textsuperscript{54}. Such derby talk forms a discourse which is effectively subcultural capital; knowledge of roller derby is the currency of the subcultural economy, bonding diverse women through mutual interest in a topic which is equally accessible to all. This is linked to the “democratization of expertise”\textsuperscript{55}, particular to roller derby as a DIY practice (discussed below), and is central to constructions of women’s “onlyness”, replacing a (sometimes gendered, particularly in sporting spaces) hierarchy with a participatory egalitarian model.

Thus, through various frames roller derby can be understood as empowering: as a woman-dominated subculture, which on some levels resists construction of hegemonic

\textsuperscript{52}Green 181.
\textsuperscript{53}Ibid. 183.
\textsuperscript{54}Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” 99.
\textsuperscript{55}Ibid. 305. Donnelly uses this term to refer to particular ways of sharing knowledge she found in the women-only spaces she studied. The women did this through downplaying and qualifying claims to expertise, recognizing development of skills, and emphasizing a non-authoritarian model of leadership.
femininity; as an example of a women’s leisure space which in themselves can be political and transgressive; as an embodied activity which the enactment of is continually contributing to shifting conceptions of what “derby girl” may mean as an alternative femininity; and through the engagement of a DIY ethic which empowers women to collectively learn and use skills to enable their continued involvement. The representation of roller derby is not entirely accurate, as it avoids exploration of less empowering aspects of the subculture, and the representation of empowerment within discourses on derby are not necessarily reflective or correlative to the actual empowering aspects of participation in the sport. While the fishnets and theatrics are easy signifiers of resistance and/or empowerment, elements such as participatory democracy, friendships, and the feelings of embodied empowerment are harder to depict and less valued currency in the contexts of post- and commodity feminism.

3.5 Third Wave Praxis and DIY Without Feminist Theory
Roller derby is an empowering activity in various ways. “[A]ll contemporary roller derby skaters have at least one thing in common: a vision of this sport as an alternative site for women’s athleticism and empowerment”56, however they often articulate this while distancing themselves from “feminism”57. I argue some of the historical specificity of post-feminist culture is translated to the subcultural context in the forms of attitudes towards feminist labels which are distanced from what could be defined as feminist practice, as was found in Olson et. al.’s study discussed in Chapter One, and thus this incarnation of derby “reflects policies and practices in line with feminism,

56 Kearney 285.
57 Beaver; Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness”; Finley.
while avoiding the f-word itself. The relationship between roller derby and feminism is convoluted. Previous academic work has presented various discussion of it, with Kearney asserting, “one might argue it is the third-wave feminist sport”. Chananie-Hill et. al. propose a “third-wave model of sport” in which they identify a combination of “two main strands of current feminist ideology”, the first of which is “social justice feminism”, which refers to “political ideologies of inclusiveness, multiculturalism, global awareness, economic justice, and intersectionality, often centred on gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality” and parallels the liberal values and individual subjectivity of third wavers and Riot Grrrl. The second strand they call “(post)feminism”, using the term to “encompass postmodern and poststructuralist feminism and the kind of postfeminism that views second-wave feminism as passé, too restrictive, objectionable, or irrelevant” while recognizing a “do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to political and personal feminist expression”. This addresses the modes of circulating feminist ideas in the third wave (such as blogs, zines, music etc.) while also describing the context of post-feminism as described in Chapter One. Through their study of derby league websites, they “consider the contradictory ambiguity of espousing what can be viewed as feminist ideologies and activities, while carefully avoiding the feminist label, to be rather robust indicators of third-wave stealth feminism” in the practices of and discourse surrounding derby. Thus, on both a collective and individual

58 Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 34.
59 Beaver; Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted; Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness”; Finley; Kearney; Murray.
60 Kearney 286, italics in original.
61 Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 33.
62 Ibid. 34.
63 Ibid. 34.
64 Ibid. 34.
65 Ibid. 35.
66 Ibid. 41.
level, derby engages third wave feminist praxis while avoiding ascription to the label. Such distancing "may be a purposeful strategy based on promoters’ and players’ desire not to alienate segments of their target audience". I suggest that this is indicative of a post-feminist cultural context and may be an element in attracting participants. After all, "derby, as we know it today, is a distinctly twenty-first-century phenomenon".

The engagement of a grassroots, participatory, DIY ethos within roller derby "play[s] a crucial role in pushing women to carve out social spaces that they control while also creating bonds between the participants". It is strongly linked to the Riot Grrrl movement of third wave feminism. Beaver develops this idea further, stating that "rollergirls subscribe to a 'do-it-ourselves ethos' where the derby girls "create, and actively work to maintain, social bonds among skaters in local leagues and at the national level" through their collective labour. Not only does the physical element of roller derby allow "nonathletes to become athletes", "the do-it-ourselves ethos in women’s roller derby opens up access to positions of power within the sport’s organizations for working-class women who may lack the professional credentials or experience required to run existing sport organizations", transforming unskilled women into media representatives, coaches, event coordinators and so on. However, "derby’s much-lauded inclusiveness is not always backed by praxis... sisterhood and

67 Ibid. 40.
68 Barbee and Cohen 5.
69 Beaver 7.
70 Beaver; Finley; Pavlidis; Storms.
71 Beaver 17.
72 Ibid. 17.
73 Cohen J. H. 33.
74 Beaver 22.
inclusiveness are not necessarily ubiquitous in the new derby”\textsuperscript{75}, and Chananie-Hill et.
al. cite Finley’s respondents who distance themselves from hegemonic femininity as
eamples of those excluded by roller derby. This distancing from ‘girliness’ is arguably
a product of the rigours of the sport, but the principle that derby is perhaps not the
“picture of feminist utopia espoused in promotional materials”\textsuperscript{76} warrants further
attention.

Within roller derby literature, only passing mention is made of a stereotype of “women’s
‘cattiness’ and inability to work together”.\textsuperscript{77} It is important to note that when it is
mentioned, the participants “talked about this stereotype as if it was a truism”\textsuperscript{78}, or
“suggest that conflict among skaters in the league is inevitable, and explain, “‘[t]hat’s
what happens when you have so many girls together’”\textsuperscript{79}. Literature produced by
participants similarly portrays the politics as an inevitable part of the subculture, as
Barbee and Cohen ask “[a]fter all, how ludicrous is it to expect women in a sport that
regularly attracts hardheaded, empowered rebels to always play nice? There’s a phrase
for that in this industry. It’s called \textbf{derby drama} – and there’s plenty of it”\textsuperscript{80}. The focus
here is not on the fact that there are disagreements between individuals, but the ways in
which it plays out, which is not an area well-explored in the literature. Donnelly frames
this stereotype as part of an “‘ideal type’ women onlyness gender regime” she calls
“Mean girls”, “in which the absence of men is represented as promoting a focus on men,

\textsuperscript{75} Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 41.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. 41.
\textsuperscript{77} Beaver 17.
\textsuperscript{78} Beaver 17.
\textsuperscript{79} Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” 200.
\textsuperscript{80} Barbee and Coher 132.
and results in negative, ‘clique-y’, and competitive interactions among women.”81. This is similar to fighting for male attention as routes to power in Brown’s study of girls’ development82, and the construction of femininity tied to relationships with male subcultural participants, as with LeBlanc’s punk girls.83 The second of Donnelly’s ideal types is that of “Sisterhood, a gender regime in which the absence of men is represented as the solution to eliminating all negative interactions among women, resulting in a supportive, positive environment and experience for all women”84. This is intrinsic in the presentation of the official story of both roller derby and girls’ and women’s relationships, as discussed in Chapter One. While the absence of men may not necessarily be central to derby girls’ attraction to or enjoyment of the roller derby space, these tropes are “a product of the culture industries... [and] they are each included in the cultural resources on which women draw in their production of women onlyness”85.

Because the women involved in roller derby have grown up in the post-feminist media culture described earlier, these are the resources that are drawn on within the subcultural context; the competition for liminal forms of and routes to power is not diminished within the subcultural setting. In fact, it may be precisely because of the empowerment and resistance implicit (and sometimes explicit) within discourses surrounding, and representation of roller derby, as well as the experience of embodied empowerment (which tangibly shapes participants’ modes of being in the world), that situations occur which reproduce the coding of participants’ interactions. The involvement of all derby

81 Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” 14.
82 Brown 147.
83 LeBlanc 132.
84 Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” 14.
85 Ibid. 14.
skaters in all aspects of league management, combined with the aforementioned "democratization of expertise" means that there are no particular authorities in roller derby, there are only individuals in positions, such as heads of committees or organizations, coaches, and volunteer managers. When decisions are made which may be unfavourable to individuals, such as team selections, or voting on captain or board members, it is easy for women who have grown up with threats of exclusion from other girls to experience these as the same types of relational aggression, whether intentional or not, and as either perpetrator or victim. Similarly, relational aggression can unconsciously be reproduced as a response to various threats, although it may be coded differently in a subculture such as derby, which is understood as an empowering collective of 'alternative' women. While the intragender manoeuvring may be oriented around an alternative model of femininity, this does not necessarily equate to a reworking of the basic methods in which this occurs; the additional elements of the inevitable power dynamics of volunteer community group and competitive sport further complicate such interpersonal relations. The non-participation of many women in sports prior to uptake of roller derby combined with the ideas of what constitutes and can be provided by an ad-hoc subcultural community mean that sometimes on-track competition, skill and aggression can lead to off-track emotional turmoil and fraught relationships. It is important to note that such behaviour is often limited to local, intimate (league or team-based) relationships, rather than across the derby community as a whole. This serves as a further reminder that women, even derby girls, are still expected to "play nice" within the confines of the derby subculture, and this again references Brown's work in that it is girls' and women's relationships which are of both

86 Ibid. 305.
the most importance and support, and the most heartache when they are broken. In a recent post on derby website *Derbylife*, blogger, skater, and self-described “third wave feminist”\textsuperscript{87} Margie Ram described the lack of crowd support (“it pained me that everyone was booing them and wishing they would lose... [t]he hate was non-discriminating... they were obviously hurt\textsuperscript{88}”) for a team competing in a top-level competition because of their choices in rostering their players, relating the crowd to “the mean girls”\textsuperscript{89} and ending with a telling call to arms: “We derby girls, derby women, derby athletes must ride the fine line between bad girl and fucking bitch”\textsuperscript{90}. This indicates the presence of particular types of behaviour within the derby community, the representation of such behaviour by individuals rather than organisations through underground ‘unofficial’ means such as the Internet, and the post-feminist cultural tropes of female relationships which overlay understandings of such behaviour. “[M]ean girls”, “bitches”, “bad girls” are all elements of the cultural milieu from which derby takes shape as a women-dominated sporting space and subculture, from which “derby girl” is carved out as an alternative femininity, and from which the female participants are trying to escape being pigeon-holed within. The self-critique through individual narrativisation of derby stories online goes some way to producing alternative discourses around roller derby as an empowering (but not explicitly ‘feminist’) space. Without any explicit ideology through which to deconstruct power dynamics and relationships such critique can be relegated to the category of ‘gossip’ or ‘bitching’ which, as we have seen, women’s talk often is reduced to, and this coding is even taken

\textsuperscript{87} Ram.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
for granted by derby participants themselves. The individual accounts of hurt, betrayal and rejection referenced earlier which counter the official story of roller derby as empowering women-run revolution speak to this discourse and indicate the positive aspects of participation in the derby subculture, and the emotional investment and the pain when this falls through or when expectations are not met.
CONCLUSION

Roller derby is a subculture symptomatic of a post-feminist western context. The conflation of feminist and anti-feminist ideals is common currency in the new millennium, and roller derby seizes upon this in the creation of a women-dominated sporting subculture, which is athletic and ‘sexy’, aggressive and womanly, stealthily feminist and decidedly feminine. Roller derby engages these and other binaries as ‘both/and’, rather than ‘either/or’, a product of the “schizophrenic” post-modern and post-feminist cultural milieu which reflects an additive model of identity politics. Post-feminism promotes the idea of endless opportunities for empowerment for women, particularly through consumption, and the ‘pastness’ of feminist struggles, however when we ask the question “Why derby? Why now?”1, derby girls Kasey Bomber and Axles of Evil answer with “[w]e had accomplished so much, but we were still hungry for something more”2. Indeed, Vicious VaGenda recently blogged, “[m]y life wasn’t ‘missing’ anything by the cultural standard... I wanted something... I don’t know... powerful maybe... in my life. Not powerful in the way that you dominate others, but powerful in the way that you feel empowered and you want to empower others”3. It is this collectivity and mutual empowerment that is present within the roller derby boutting space and community, and is often inaccessible for women in the time of post-feminism.

Derby is an example of third wave feminist praxis without the theoretical baggage associated with the heavily stigmatised label, and this is part of the appeal for both

1 Barbee and Cohen 72.
2 Ibid. 72.
3 VaGenda.
spectators and participants. Such third wave praxis encourages the participation of
colorful communities of derby girls sharing their experiences, and claiming sexualised
expression and agency. Roller derby builds on the foundations of Riot Grrrl as a third
wave DIY, grassroots female-dominated subculture with a geographically diverse but
strong underground network facilitated by the growth of the Internet as a tool to
circulate knowledge and subcultural artefacts. Through the event of boutings, skaters can
enact different “alternative femininity” in a public setting, revealing the performative
elements of “doing gender” and encouraging the audience to participate in the making of
alternative meanings of gender.

All subcultures are inevitably bound to the wider culture in which they exist, and roller
derby is no different. Within post-feminism there operates a hegemonic gender order
which places females and traits culturally associated with femininity as subordinate to
those of maleness and masculinity, and this is reflected in subcultural formations where
women and girls enter as secondary members, such as punk and alternative sports. In
other subcultures such as alternative hard rock and goth clubs, gendered norms are
reproduced through inattention to structural inequality or unconscious expectations of
heteronormativity which places women in the position of responsibility for maintenance
of emotional relationships. Girls and women are socialised to compete for routes to
power and hide their ‘unfeminine’ emotions, which results in such feelings going
underground and perpetuating more subtle forms of relational aggression against one
another. Subcultures open up spaces for experimenting with alternatives to a hegemonic
gender order, however they often reproduce some inter- and intra-gender power relationships, often by stigmatising ‘girliness’ and what participants define as stereotypically feminine behaviour. The female members, despite their resistant intent, may create gender regimes which, while individually empowering and liberating from mainstream cultural gendered norms, actually reproduce certain types of oppression within the subcultural space as a whole and can function to marginalise some members.

Roller derby transforms individuals; it “isn’t something that you leave on the track. It grows on you, consumes you some days, and lingers on others. It makes you stronger and braver, both mentally and physically”⁴, and this embodied empowerment translates to participants’ everyday life in ways other subcultural participation may not. The physical conditioning and act of playing changes bodies and attitudes towards the utility of different body types, affecting participants on a fundamental psychological level. Aside from its status as sport, roller derby is a community dominated by women, and this creates some difficulties with managing on- and off-track conflicts within a purposefully non-hierarchical democratic space. Derby is a subcultural space like any other, one that liberates and delimits in different ways; it is not free from power dynamics, it is only free from particular types of gendered power which are present in other subcultures. The cultural tropes which often overlay women’s talk, conflict, and aggression, are taken for granted within roller derby, just as they are presented in the wider post-feminist context. The representation of roller derby by both mainstream media and official derby media play on the symbolism of alternative gender play, however “the appropriation of symbols of rebellion without the philosophical or

⁴ Ibid.
political focus makes derby both counter-cultural and concurrently mainstream\textsuperscript{5}. The lack of collective critical discussion of these power dynamics and structures, within the subculture, limit the transformational potentials of roller derby as a female-dominated subculture. A more overt engagement with feminist politics by participants may provide a stronger frame for derby girls to analyse the complexity of it as a subculture, and the function of their participation in it. Recently published work on roller derby has moved beyond the examination of gender identity and performance in the bout setting and media representation, to deeper understandings of the complex creation of diverse roller derby communities through online networks\textsuperscript{6}; the dynamics and intentionality of women-only spaces\textsuperscript{7}; and, the creation of a “third wave feminist model of sport”\textsuperscript{8}, indicating that the multifarious and continuously changing world of roller derby is ripe for deeper analysis and critique. Further ethnographic study can be done to explore derby girls’ expression of unappealing emotions, such as hurt, fear, anger, betrayal, and loneliness, the routes within the subculture to voicing these, and the ways this may conflict with the ‘official narratives’ of both roller derby as empowering collective and hegemonic femininity. Specific attention could be paid to the demographics of roller derby skaters, how they may experience and express variations such as race, class, and sexuality; what impact this has on their perception of the roller derby space; and, it’s transformative or empowering potential, and the cultural tropes which overlay their stories.

\textsuperscript{5} Cohen J. H, 31.
\textsuperscript{6} Pavlidis and Fullagar 1.
\textsuperscript{7} Donnelly, “The Production of Women Onlyness” iii.
\textsuperscript{8} Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 33.
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