

“The Rise of Skirt Culture”:  
A Multi-Faceted Analysis of Running Skirts and the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series

DISSERTATION

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By

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## Abstract

On a training run in 2004, elite level tri-athlete Nicole DeBoom caught her reflection in a store window and thought: “I feel like a boy; I look like a boy; I want to feel more feminine.” Searching for a fitness wear alternative, DeBoom subsequently started SkirtSports sportswear so that women would not have to sacrifice femininity for performance in their workout clothing. SkirtSports’ signature item is a skirt made for running which major sportswear companies also now manufacture. As a brand extension, SkirtSports started the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series in 2007 in numerous locations across the United States (US). The race features women wearing SkirtSports running skirts starting first in a “Catch Me” wave followed three minutes later by men in a “Skirt Chaser” wave; the first person to cross the finish line, male or female, wins. After the race, celebratory events include a block party, awards presentation, fashion show, live music, and dating games.

In a series of three stand alone chapters, bookended with introductory and concluding chapters, I employ a multi-sited ethnographic approach, including such “sites” as marketing materials, race reviews, open-ended surveys, interviews, and participant-observation, to analyze the recent popularity of running skirts and the emergence of Skirt Chaser events as a marketing strategy. In “The Skirting Issue: Why

Now?,” I situate running skirts in an historical context. I use a three-pronged analysis of the various functions of running skirts to argue that while women who own and wear running skirts may have varied reasons for doing so, none are immune from historical and contemporary concerns that women participating in sport jeopardize their femininity and that donning running skirts appeases this fear. In addition, the selling and buying of running skirts is embedded in post-feminist narratives that equate consumption and bodily discipline with power.

In “Marketing the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series: ‘Combing Fun, Fitness, and Entertainment All-in-One’,” I use the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series as a case study through which to conduct a traditional sports marketing analysis, specifically related to product, price, place, product distribution, and promotion. At the end, I provide recommendations for improving the association between Skirt Chaser events and SkirtSports, the intended beneficiary of the events. And in “Buying What’s For Sale?: Running, Flirting, and Fashion,” I use a socio-cultural lens to investigate the nexus between sport as business (SkirtSports’ revenue-related goals) and sport as culture (the ways in which participants experience and make meaning of the events). In particular, I analyze the methods through which the Skirt Chaser organizers use running, flirting, and fashion to market their event and the ways participants buy into and resist its premise.

Implicit throughout this research are questions pertaining not only to gender and sexuality, but also to race, class, and sexual orientation. In particular, this project is an analysis of female runners and their presentation of gender and sexuality through

sportswear, as well as the marketing strategies used to feed desires of consumption through products and brands.

This project is dedicated to  
Monica Elizabeth Jarman and the many  
skirt chasing women in my life who have been extraordinary  
athletic, academic, professional, and personal role models.

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## Fields of Study

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## Chapter 1 – “The Rise of Skirt Culture” & the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series

### “The Rise of Skirt Culture: Why (Some) Women Love the Swish”

The cover of the August 2008 issue of the popular *Runner's World* magazine featured a tanned woman running along the beach. She had blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, toned muscles, and wore a white sports bra and yellow running skirt. The headline next to her image reads: “The rise of skirt culture: Why (some) women love the swish.” The accompanying article was a first person narrative written by Kristin Armstrong—ex-wife of Lance Armstrong—an occasional contributor to the magazine on topics related to balancing family, work, and running (e.g., Armstrong, 2004; Armstrong, 2007). In particular, here she wrote about her initial anxiety about wearing a running skirt and the intimidating hemlines (Armstrong, 2008). She concluded, though, that running skirts are practical because they reflect women’s multi-tasking lives: “it performs on the track and looks presentable when you roll directly into the supermarket or elementary school” (Armstrong, 2008, p. 72), and that she had earned the right to “show some leg” after dedicating much of her time to running and exercising. Finally, she wrote, “whether we are in the boardroom, on the home front, or on the starting line, we can bring it on like a man, but it doesn’t mean we have to look like one” (Armstrong,



2008, p. 73). Armstrong stands solidly with the women who have described running skirts as functional, fashionable, and feminine (Shea, 2008).

An accompanying column found on the same page sits in stark contrast to Armstrong's account and conclusion. Instead, Ginny Graves described her first experience wearing a running skirt: "my 'nice outfit' made me more aware of my appearance—the last thing I want to be distracted by when running" (2008, p. 73). Instead, she wrote: "I prefer to forget my outward appearance as much as possible so I can give myself over to something much more important: what's going on inside" (Graves, 2008, p. 73). Although Nicole DeBoom, the self-proclaimed inventor of running skirts, first wore a skirt prototype in 2004 and fitness skirts had been mentioned in various publications in the intervening years (e.g., Gorin, 2005; Lee, 2006; "Who wears short skirts," 2007), 2008 marked the explosion of running skirts into the mainstream sportswear market (Running Insight, 2009). The group of recreational adult runners whom I join for weekly marathon training could talk of little else after that August issue of *Runner's World* arrived in our mailboxes.

In addition to running skirts, Armstrong (2008) also described the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series, which DeBoom started in 2007 as the primary marketing arm of her fitness skirt specialty company, SkirtSports sportswear. The first iteration of the race was a Convert to Skirt women-only event intended to convince women to exchange their shorts for running skirts. After only one event, though, DeBoom re-conceptualized the event to include both men and women. Specifically, in the race, women wearing running skirts start first followed three minutes later by men who chase them to the finish. Whoever

crosses the finish line first, whether it is a “Skirt” or “Skirt Chaser,” wins. Of the races with published results, women have won 14 while men have won only three (“Results,” 2010). Post-race activities feature a block-party atmosphere, including alcoholic beverages, awards ceremony, fashion show, live entertainment, and dating games. DeBoom describes the event as a “sexy spin on a running classic by mixing racing, flirting and entertainment in an innovative social fitness event” (“Skirt Chaser,” 2010, para. 1).

As a sport studies scholar specifically interested in issues of gender and sexuality, the growing popularity of running skirts as well as the unique character of Skirt Chaser races caught my attention as topics worthy of in-depth scholarly inquiry. As a runner myself, I noticed increasing numbers of women throughout the summer of 2008 wearing running skirts. The sight of women running along Columbus’ Olentangy River Bike Path in skirts rather than shorts was oddly curious. On the one hand, women running outside in public spaces subtly, yet powerfully, re-claim that space from past decades’ cultural norms which suggested that a woman’s place was in the home. And on the other hand, the running skirt, although much shorter, harkens back to the turn of the twentieth-century when middle- and upper-middle class women were only permitted to participate in physical activity that accommodated the long and cumbersome skirts of the era (Warner, 2006). Additionally, and perhaps contributing to my initial interest in them, running skirts invite a certain amount of voyeurism with regards to the question of “what’s underneath.” DeBoom confirmed this curiosity in a 2007 interview: “And it makes you wonder what is under the skirt, doesn’t it? That’s part of the fun...” (Ritter,

2007, p. 11). Finally, I found particularly compelling the seemingly heteronormative orientation and marketing of Skirt Chaser races and its assertion that desire singularly flows from athletically superior men to athletically inferior women looking to be caught by a man.

Intrigued by the topic, I conducted initial ethnographic fieldwork at a local running store by trying on a few different running skirt styles. My first impression was that none of the skirts seemed quite long enough to cover much of my legs. In addition, my not-so-recently-shaven, muscular legs seemed quite out of place sandwiched between the running skirt and my dirty running shoes. Instead of feeling sassy or sexy, two words marketers of fitness skirts have used to describe them (e.g., Shea, 2008; SkirtSports, 2010), I felt silly and slightly horrified with the prospect of running anywhere other than back to my well-worn, modestly cut running shorts. Since my initial fieldwork and through my subsequent involvement researching and volunteering with the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series, I have acquired three running skirts, one of which I have worn running on various occasions. While my initial squeamishness regarding my own running skirt wearing has abated to a certain degree, I continue to find their emergence fascinating and hope that what follows does justice to the many and varied reactions they inspire.

### Research Questions

This project is a multi-faceted examination of modern running skirts and the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series and seeks to add to the literature on women's experiences in sports and physical activity, and to the literature on the nexus between sport as a business and sport as a cultural institution. Questions of central importance to this project include:

What historical and market forces have led to the adoption and popularity of running skirts? Can running skirts be read as a facet of the feminine apologetic? In what ways do gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect with running skirts? How and why (if any reason beyond pure capitalism) are Skirt Chaser events marketed? Does the event reify male athletic superiority and heteronormativity? If so, how? Finally, is there any transgression of normative gender expectations at Skirt Chaser events, or resistance to the event's structure?

### Dissertation Outline

In order to best present my research questions and findings, I have elected to write a series of three articles. Each one has a different intended audience and publication location. Because of my interests in both sport studies-related questions and sport management-related questions, this format allows me to explore each separately, as well as one article that specifically integrates the two. These articles are bookended by an introductory chapter (here) and a concluding chapter in an effort to present one cohesive project. In what follows, I provide a brief outline of each chapter.

I. Chapter 1 – “The Rise of Skirt Culture” & the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series

- In this introduction, I address my reasons for selecting this topic, guiding research questions, dissertation outline, research methods and methodology, and how this research contributes to the field of sport studies.

II. Chapter 2 – The Skirting Issue: Why Now?

- In this article, I situate running skirts in an historical context. I use a three-pronged analysis of the various functions of running skirts to argue that while

women who own and wear running skirts may have varied reasons for doing so, none are immune from historical and contemporary concerns that women participating in sport jeopardize their femininity and that donning running skirts appeases this fear. In addition, the selling and buying of running skirts is embedded in post-feminist narratives that equate consumption and bodily discipline with power. The intended publication location for this article is the *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*.

III. Chapter 3 – Marketing the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series: “Combining Fun, Fitness and Entertainment All-in-One”

- In the second article, I use the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series as a case study through which to conduct a traditional sports marketing analysis, specifically related to product, price, place, product distribution, and promotion. At the end, I provide recommendations for improving the association between Skirt Chaser events and SkirtSports, the intended beneficiary of the events. The intended publication location for this article is *Sport Marketing Quarterly*.

IV. Chapter 4 – Buying What’s for Sale?: Running, Flirting, and Fashion

- For the third article, I use a socio-cultural lens to investigate the methods through which the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series is marketed and in what ways participants buy into and resist its premise. This article is organized around the selling and buying of running, flirting, and fashion. The intended publication location for this article is the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*.

## V. Chapter 5 – Conclusion

- In the conclusion, I provide a cumulative assessment of my project, its limitations, and numerous areas for future research.

### What's Underneath: The Details

#### *Nicole DeBoom & SkirtSports*

Nicole DeBoom, née Nicole Molzahn, grew-up in the suburbs of Chicago as an active and competitive youth sports participant. At the age of 16, she qualified for the 1988 Olympic swimming trials and then later attended Yale University, her father's Alma mater, where she swam and majored in sociology (Ritter, 2007). In her senior year, she wrote her thesis on athletes' body image as related to their sporting uniforms (N. DeBoom, personal communication, June, 12, 2009). After graduation, she began participating in triathlons and in 1999 made her professional debut placing at the top of numerous events ("Nicole DeBoom," 2010). In 1996, she and professional triathlete Tim DeBoom married ("SGB '40 Under Forty' Awards," 2009).

According to the SkirtSports origin story, DeBoom grew up "thinking she never looked feminine enough, giving her a lack of confidence" (Ritter, 2007, p. 10). On a training run in 2004, she caught a reflection of herself in a store window and thought: "I feel like a boy; I look like a boy; I want to feel more feminine" (DeBoom, 2006). Searching for a fitness wear alternative, DeBoom wore a hand-sewn prototype skirt at Ironman Wisconsin, which she won ("Our Story," 2010). Finding a welcome reception for her new product, she founded SkirtSports sportswear "mirroring her ideal that women should never have to sacrifice femininity for performance in their workout clothes"

(Donovan, 2009, para. 4). Originally, sales were conducted solely on-line through the SkirtSports website, but products can now be found in over 500 retail stores in the United States (US), and abroad in such countries as Australia, Canada, China, Ecuador, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Puerto Rico and Singapore (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010; “Store Locator,” 2010).

### *Running Skirts*

To the casual observer, running skirts closely resemble tennis skirts in appearance: they are usually made of a technical, sweat-wicking fabric; are roughly the length of running shorts; may feature slits for ease of movement; have reflective seams for safety purposes; or contain pockets for keys, music, or exercise related nutrition covertly hidden beneath the skirt. Underneath running skirts can be found: “spankies” or “bumhuggers” (underwear-sized briefs); girl shorties (boy-pant style underwear); shorties (compression shorts akin to longer spandex shorts used for biking—sometimes complete with extra padding for long bike rides); or pants. Many of the major sportswear manufactures, including Nike, New Balance, and Moving Comfort, now make their own models and many have expanded their target audience to include bikers, triathletes, yoga practitioners, surfers, and even dragon boat paddlers. As further indication of the growing popularity of skirts, such sports as professional women’s soccer (WPS, 2009), Olympic curling (McCauley, 2010), and boxing (Despres, 2009) have added fitness skirts to their uniforms.

### *SkirtSports' Target Market and Skirt Chaser Participants*

According to SkirtSports' Marketing Coordinator, Chris Grack-Wilson (personal communication, January 14, 2010), the SkirtSports target market is middle- to upper-middle class college-educated women age 35-45, with a combined household income of over \$100,000. As the primary marketing initiative of SkirtSports, Skirt Chaser races target a similar audience in an effort to grow SkirtSports' size and scope. Skirt Chaser event cities vary in size, as have the number of participants at each. Tempe, Arizona, and Denver, Colorado, have consistently attracted the largest number of participants at approximately 1000 per race, while Savannah, Georgia, in its first year attracted the fewest at just under 200. Overall, the average percentage of women participants per race is 61.4%, while the number of men at each race is only 38.6% ("Results," 2010). Thus far, and based on data available, the age range for Skirt Chaser events is 8-81 and the overall average age is 33.4 years. Based on observation alone from the three events I attended in 2009 (Bloomingdale, Savannah, and San Francisco), participants appeared predominately to be White, able-bodied, and heterosexual.

### *The Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series Locations*

After the initial September 2007 Convert to Skirt race in Boulder, Colorado, and the first Skirt Chaser event in Austin, Texas, in November 2007, the race sites in 2008 included: Tempe, AZ; Raleigh, NC; Chicago (Arlington Heights), IL; Denver, CO; Austin, and Santa Monica, CA. Races in 2009 included: Tempe; Raleigh; Chicago (Bloomingdale), IL; Denver; Savannah, GA; and San Francisco, CA. In 2010, the race



series will return to the six 2009 locations, but will add an additional five sites to expand their presence across the US.

*Events with Similar Themes: Battle of the Sexes, Races with Handicaps, and Themed*

*Sportswear*

Road races, especially at the 5k distance, are ubiquitous and usually only vary by the charity they benefit. In an effort at product differentiation, various races have become infamous for their creative themes such as the Bay to Breakers 12k in San Francisco which features elite runners as well as costumed participants (“ING Bay to Breakers,” 2010), and the Flying Pig marathon weekend that has created a unique brand for itself through creative use of Cincinnati’s historical connection to swine (Olberding & Jisha, 2005). In particular, DeBoom modeled the reconfigured Skirt Chaser format after the Life Time Fitness Triathlon contested in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which pit women against men in a “Battle of the Sexes” format and granted a sizable monetary reward to the winner (N. DeBoom, personal communication, June 12, 2009; “No ‘Battle of the Sexes’ Race,” 2007). Significantly, the prize money for this event was the largest ever available at a professional triathlon event: in 2002, the first place award was \$50,000 and in 2006, the award had increased to \$200,000 for the winner (“No ‘Battle of the Sexes’ Race,” 2007). In 2010, the Life Time event was contested for the ninth time; however, the Battle of the Sexes iteration ended in 2006 (“Pro Race,” 2010). In 2009, the Country Music Marathon in Nashville, Tennessee, added a Battle of the Sexes competition to their event awarding the overall winner an additional \$10,000 on top of the \$10,000 prize awarded to the first male and first female finishers (Cruz, 2009).

Traditionally, road races acknowledge an overall winner for women and an overall winner for men, as well as those who place at the top of their age groups as defined by race organizers (e.g., women age 30-34 or men age 60-69). A growing movement within the road racing community, however, is to acknowledge the effect weight has on running ability, in addition to gender and age (Chase, 2008). Evidence of the Clydesdale movement—a term that specifically refers to men but which often includes women under its umbrella—can be found in two places. First, numerous running clubs organize events exclusively for Clydesdale-eligible runners, commonly defined as men over 170 lbs. and Athena-eligible runners, commonly defined as women over 140 lbs. Second, races such as the Nationwide Better Health Columbus Marathon retain rigid divisions based on sex, but give runners the opportunity to compete either in their age category or weight category. Chase (2008) explains that similar to the goals of age division supporters, the original supporters of weight divisions argued that weight divisions “provide a more equitable playing field for runners” (p.132). Given that in long distance races runners weighing more than specified weights experience an appreciable drop in performance, adding weight divisions similarly provides a more equitable field for heavier runners (Chase, 2008). Along similar lines, the Tortoise & Hare 5k race in Colorado Springs, Colorado, considers runners’ age, sex, height, and weight to calculate a starting “handicap” similar to that which is found in golf, and at the Four on the Fourth race in Flagstaff, Arizona, organizers factor in the effect of altitude on running performance when calculating start times (McDowell, 2010).

Finally, Skirt Chaser races are not the only events integrally entwined with a specific article of clothing. For example, originating in Boston, the Santa Speedo Run features runners sporting Speedo-sized bathing suits (preferably in red or green), Santa hats, and Santa beards (“Santa Speedo Run,” 2010). This charity event requires that participants raise a minimum of \$250 each for the opportunity to run 1.25 miles through downtown Boston in the middle of December. Atlanta, Austin, and Toronto host their own Santa events each year. Other road races may encourage costumes or have specific themes, but no other race is branded in the same way that Skirt Chaser races are specifically designed to promote SkirtSports sportswear.

#### Methods and Methodology: A Case for Using Multi-Sited Ethnography

In order to analyze the nuanced understandings and manifestations of gender and sexuality throughout my project, I use multi-sited ethnography as “giving voice to the differential perspectives of women as they negotiate this cultural landscape forms the basis of the contributions that the more qualitative approach of anthropological inquiry brings to the study of women in sport” (Bolin & Granskog, 2003, p. 250). Furthermore, a feminist, reflexive ethnography allows individuals to define their own gender identity and experience, while at the same time providing the ethnographer the space to put these experiences in conversation with the socio-historical and cultural context of women’s participation in sport. In what follows, I provide an explanation of multi-sited ethnography, an overview of sporting or “extreme” ethnography in sport studies literature, and conclude with a series of scenarios from my own research highlighting the power and need for negotiation ever-present in ethnographic research.

### *Multi-Sited Ethnography*

Ethnography “is predicated upon attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups” (Marcus, 1995, p. 99) and has been most commonly associated with anthropological inquiry. Andrews, Mason, and Silk (2005) explain that “early ethnographic work took place within a scientific world dominated by a positivistic research paradigm” (p. 65), in which Western researchers would travel abroad to observe those whom they considered primitive and uncivilized. Such anthropologically-based ethnography occurred in a space, or within a culture, that the researcher worked to clearly define (Sands, 2002). In the 1980s, a number of significant and related changes occurred in the field of anthropological inquiry that directly affected the implementation of ethnographic methods. First, Gupta and Ferguson (1997), among others, began to challenge the concept of “culture” itself, specifically, the idea that “as a universe of shared meaning, each culture was radically set apart from other cultures, which had, of course, ‘their own’ meanings, their own holistic logic” (p. 2). Instead, the authors suggested that cultures are rarely distinct entities with a homogenous perspective, thus fully shifting ethnographic research into a post-positivistic paradigm. Further, the increased interconnectedness of the world makes focusing on traditional groupings of “culture” problematic. One benefit of this shift has been that possibilities are opened for focusing on interest groups, such as athletes, or short-term events, such as road races, and to conducting research in one’s own backyard, instead of across the globe (Clifford, 1997; Hannerz, 2003). A further benefit is that numerous other disciplines (e.g., sports studies and women’s studies) have adopted ethnographic methods as their own.

Second, the emergence of multi-sited ethnography has also been a welcome shift in the field because “for ethnographers interested in contemporary local changes in culture and society, single-sited research can no longer be easily located in a world system perspective” (Marcus, 1995, p. 98). Marcus (1995) compellingly described multi-sited research as “designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography” (p. 105). While many ethnographers may have used such strategies in the past, it has not been named as such until recently.

Rapp (2000), Scheper-Hughes (2004), and Valentine (2007) provide particularly illustrative examples of multi-sited ethnographic research. Rapp (2000), in studying the reproductive technology amniocentesis, studied a social phenomenon embedded within “science as culture” (p. 13). In so doing, her research included exploring ideas such as confidentiality and language use while variously acting as a “researcher, pregnant woman, teacher, mother, activist” (2000, p. 14). Scheper-Hughes (2004) used multi-sited ethnographic methods to study the illegal trafficking of human organs. Her basic strategy of “follow the bodies!” (2004, p. 32), led her field of inquiry to include: police morgues, mental institutions, orphanages, and foreign countries, to name only a few of the locations she visited for her study. Last, multi-sited ethnography allowed Valentine (2007) to study the construction of the term “transgender,” rather than a predefined group of people. Although he bound his field to specified blocks within lower Manhattan, he traveled to many locations within this area to best understand how institutions,

individuals, and communities employ the term “transgender.” Thus, in studying a road race series, multi-sited ethnography provided a particular opportunity through which I have been able to form my own field of inquiry and to “chase skirts” where and when necessary in order to answer questions as they have arisen in the field.

Third, an important facet of multi-sited ethnography is reflexivity. The inclusion of reflexivity within ethnography is significant in that it recognizes the researcher as an active participant in the research at hand and in defining the field of inquiry.

Specifically, when conducting multi-sited work, the researcher must be doubly aware of their shifting positionality within each new site of inquiry. As Rapp (2000) argued, the “boundaries between self and other, or more properly, several selves...are inherently blurry” (p. 14). Groves (2003) further explained,

for researchers who struggle to discern their place along the insider-outsider continuum, it is helpful to understand that the continuum is not rigid. In fact, we may occupy various spaces and degrees of ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ depending on who we are speaking with, the topic of the discussion, who is present during the discussion, and a whole host of other contextual factors. (p. 107-108)

This is especially true in multi-sited ethnography as researchers move in and out of different research sites. Further, in “experiential” or “extreme” ethnography, as Bolin and Granskog (2003) have termed ethnographies conducted in sporting contexts, researchers become “increasingly subject and object, as we participate on an experimental level with those whom we study, we come to share the position that is

neither above nor below but a part of the studied groups” (p. 12). As a researcher intimately involved in my research sites at various times as volunteer, racer, confidant, and skirt-wearer, attention to and awareness of, my position in relation to my research was of significance throughout.

Finally, embedded in a well-executed multi-sited ethnography is a feminist sensibility, which includes not only reflexivity, but an attention to issues of power and representation, as well as the right to self-determination. Issues of power and representation in research stem from a legacy of researchers who have used people and communities to their own end with little attention paid to the effects of their research on the researched. For example, Smith (1999) is particularly critical of the abuse suffered by the Maori people of New Zealand at the hands of Western researchers. She contends, in particular, that

research is implicated in the production of Western knowledge, in the nature of academic work, in the production of the theories which have dehumanized Maori and in practices which have continued to privilege Western ways of knowing, while denying the validity of Maori knowledge, language, and culture. (1999, p. 183)

In order to rectify this situation, she has argued that indigenous ways of knowing must be placed in the foreground and undertaken by indigenous researchers themselves. With this in mind, a multi-sited ethnographic format within my own project has allowed my informants to define their own participation as opposed to having an academic define

what it means to be female, an athlete, a wearer of running skirts, or a Skirt Chaser participant.

One way to address power and representation in research is to work from a research paradigm that values this discussion, unlike research conducted from the positivistic paradigm. Sipe and Constable (1996) describe positivistic research as “an attempt to know the world as it is, and to communicate that knowledge to others in an objective and undistorted way” (p. 158). In the positivistic paradigm, little value is placed on research participants and expertise remains in the hands of the researchers. Conversely, Lather (1986) describes post-positivistic research as “marked by approaches to inquiry which recognize that knowledge is ‘socially constituted, historically embedded and valuationally based’” (p. 189). Similarly, Fine (1994) urges researchers to work the hyphens between self and other in order to “discuss what is, and is not, ‘happening between,’ within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretations, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence” (p. 72). Furthermore, researchers are encouraged to come out from behind their writing and acknowledge their role in the creation and affect on their field of inquiry. In so doing, the power between researchers and researched is exposed and problematized. As I will discuss later in detail, I made it a priority to volunteer at each Skirt Chaser race. Volunteering led to numerous methodologically intriguing situations that could only be addressed by recognizing the role I actively played in my field of inquiry.



### *Sporting or “Extreme” Ethnography*

Due to the numerous changes and shifts with regards to ethnographic research, scholars outside of anthropology have undertaken ethnographic research encompassing a variety of locations and topics, including those related to sport, physical activity, and exercise (e.g., Davis, 2003; Markula, 1995; Theberge, 2000). An exemplar of early sporting ethnographic work is that of Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Throughout this text, including the chapter titled “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” Geertz notably expanded the boundaries of ethnographic writing by using “thick description” to interpret rather than simply describe Balinese culture, specifically in this case a Balinese cockfight.

Other significant, more recent, examples of ethnographic research include Klein’s (1993) *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* and Theberge’s (2000) *Higher Goals: Women’s Ice Hockey and the Politics of Gender*. In *Little Big Men*, Klein (1993) used ethnographic methods through which to study the world of body building. Through his own participation in the sport of bodybuilding, he was able to aptly describe and explain its sub-culture and its varied meanings, especially as related to the expression of masculinity. In *Higher Goals*, Theberge (2000) followed a professional women’s hockey team in Canada as a researcher interested in women’s experiences in a skilled physical practice, namely, in a team sport setting. She attended games both home and away, practices, and social gatherings. This insider perspective and two-year engagement with one team assisted in her interpretation of gender and sexuality as performed by the players.

Andrews et al. (2005) argue that “ethnography can be used to provide voices within the academy for those who have not had them in the past and to explain the prevailing systems of domination and oppression within contemporary (sporting) cultures” (p. 70), including women, racial/ethnic minorities, gays, lesbians, and non-western “others.” Bolin and Granskog (2003) do just this in their edited collection of ethnographic research focused on women, culture, and exercise. Highlights from this text include Stratta’s (2003) investigation of the cultural expressions of African American female student-athletes, Dworkin’s (2003) analysis of gender relations as related to space in gyms, and Howe’s (2003) research on women’s rugby. Additionally, two ethnographic works of note can be found in *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory* (Caudwell, 2006). First, Jarvis (2006) researched a gay softball team in Toronto, Canada, while simultaneously participating as a member of the team, and Owen (2006) researched a gay rowing club also as a participant-observer.

Included with the expanded use of ethnographic research in sport studies are discussions about expanded forms of written representation. For example, in his Presidential Address at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) annual conference, Robert Rinehart (2009) advocated for a change in the academic model of publishing. Specifically, he suggested that expanded forms of representation in sport sociology, such as a poetic sensibility, require an active unpacking and highlighting of the messiness of representation, challenging the dominance of the positivistic paradigm. Similarly, in *Moving Writing: Crafting Movement in Sport Research*, Dennison and Markula (2003) argue that auto-ethnography and ethnographic fiction provide

opportunities to expand debate over the “socially constructed nature of sport and physical activity; they can enhance our critical understanding of sport and movement in contemporary society, and provide us with a new vision of our bodies to carry forward into this century and beyond” (p. 22). Similarly, in the introduction to *Feminist Sport Studies*, Markula (2005) explains that developing alternative ways of writing is “a particularly pertinent goal for feminists who aim to speak to a large number of women and reach outside the academic audience” (p. 13).

More so than ethnographic fiction, auto-ethnography has emerged as an increasingly employed research method. In a 2000 special edition of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* (SSJ), Sparkes (2000) and Tsang (2000) both present strong arguments for auto-ethnography as an accepted and valued form of research. Sparkes (2000) suggested, for example, that “by writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it” (p. 22). Along these lines, Tsang (2000) used her own stories as an elite Canadian rower to discuss issues of femininity, masculinity, and ethnicity. Here, she incorporated methods of naturalism, postmodernism, and emotionalism to create a research method that best addressed her area of inquiry at a particular moment in time. Sparkes (2000) acknowledged that hesitation regarding auto-ethnography stems from the fear of rewarding self-indulgence, however, this fear becomes unfounded when the connection is made “between individual experience and social processes in ways that point to the fallacy of the self/other, individual/social dichotomies” (p. 31). Instead, he argued that new criteria be established for evaluating the quality of auto-ethnographies that recognize its position on the borderlines of various disciplines. Thus, the insertion of

“self” in ethnography is of critical importance and the genre of auto-ethnography provides an exciting avenue through which to accomplish this goal. Additionally, two recent NASSS annual meetings have included various sessions on ethnographic research in sport sociology providing further evidence of the prevalence of auto-ethnography as a research method (NASSS, 2008; NASSS, 2009). In these sessions, the authors discussed the complexity of being participant-observers in their own research and how their own subjectivities influenced and interacted with their research topics.

While this brief review of sporting ethnographies is admittedly incomplete, I would be amiss if I failed to mention the myriad number of journalists who have written “insider” accounts of athletes, teams, and events. In many ways, sporting ethnographies and investigative journalism along these lines closely resemble one another. For example, in *The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams*, Frey (1994) traveled to Coney Island, New York, to research inner-city basketball and the misguided expectations of high school male athletes anticipating a road out of poverty through professional basketball and corporate sponsorship. Similarly, Blais’ *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle: A True Story of Hoop Dreams and One Very Special Team* (1995), provided a journalistic account of a girls’ high school basketball team in Amherst, Massachusetts, relating the stories of star athletes and their post-high school expectations. While ethnographers have borrowed literary techniques from journalists, the two methods should not be confused (Clifford, 1997). Clifford (1997) explains “the injunction to dwell intensively, to learn local languages, to produce a ‘deep’ interpretation is a difference that makes a difference” (p. 198). The prevalence and similarity between the

two methods, though, underscore the many ways in which sports and physical activity lend themselves to study through the use of ethnographic methods.

*Bloomingtondale, Savannah, and San Francisco: Three Sites, Multiple Selves, and Hundreds of Skirts*

Using both sporting and non-sporting ethnographies as guides, I have conducted my own multi-sited, extreme ethnography. The primary sites of my research included three of the six 2009 Skirt Chaser events. I attended events in Bloomingtondale, Illinois (June)—the race was alternatively referred to as occurring in “Chicagoland” in order to orient participants to Bloomingtondale’s proximity to the better known city; Savannah, Georgia (October); and San Francisco, California (November). Other sites central to my research included the SkirtSports and Skirt Chaser websites, the Facebook company pages for each, interviews with key SkirtSports and Skirt Chaser employees, questionnaires completed by members of the Skirt Entourage (SkirtSports’ fan group), as well as historically-related research on women’s participation in sport, distance running, and sportswear. In describing Susan Harding’s ethnographic research on Christian fundamentalism in the US, Clifford (1997) explained that she used a “mixture of participant observation, cultural criticism and media and discourse analysis” (p. 194). Similarly, my own research occupies an ethnographic “border zone” (Clifford, 1997, p. 194) encompassing a variety of research sites and methods in an effort to best address my research questions. In what follows, I provide anecdotes from the fieldwork I conducted at Skirt Chaser events that exemplify some of the aforementioned issues and concerns of central importance to ethnographic research methods and methodology.

*Chicagoland: Volunteering to Give Back and Gain Access.*

Initially, I was unsure about how I should approach my first Skirt Chaser event. After having reviewed the webpage for the Chicagoland event, I noticed a solicitation for volunteers—“Superman” for all day volunteers or “Clark Kent” for half-day volunteers. Using grounded theory (Corbin & Holt, 2005), I decided that volunteering would be the best way to orient myself to the event and observe those in attendance. In the end, I not only volunteered for two full days at the Chicagoland event, but volunteered, although to a lesser degree, at each subsequent race as well. In line with feminist research methodologies, I found that volunteering provided an excellent venue through which to repay the event organizers for the generosity they demonstrated by answering my questions and providing me full access to the event.

On the first day of my research at High ‘n Tri, the Chicagoland event’s retail partner, I helped distribute race packets, register new participants, organize timing chips, and provide advice on the fit of running skirts and favorable color combinations. Having never worn a running skirt before, however, this last task proved to be a challenge. I quickly became aware of my role in “selling” running skirts, how they should look, and what color combinations complimented one another and the woman in question. This was my first reality check regarding my role as a participant-observer in my research as well as an active participant in the formation of skirt culture.

On the second day of my research, I volunteered at the venue itself. This included helping to set-up merchandise and signs, registering participants, managing late participants, and at the end of the evening, undoing all that I had helped to set-up earlier

that day. Additionally, during this time I became a special assistant to an employee of Red Rock Co., the event production company, helping her with specific tasks throughout the day and becoming a point person for the dozens of other Skirt Chaser volunteers. For volunteering at the event, I was given a “volunteer uniform”: a bubble gum pink running skirt and black shirt with the text “Convert to Skirt” on the front, which I wore throughout my second day of volunteering. Additionally, the volunteer coordinator for the event loaned me a SkirtSports long-sleeved hooded jacket to compliment my outfit and provide an extra layer of warmth.

In addition to my unanticipated role as a running skirt consultant during race registration, two notable things occurred during the course of my volunteer work. First, I quickly gained insider status with the Red Rock employees, and with other event organizers, including the owners of High ‘n Tri, one of SkirtSports’ regional marketing representatives, and the founder and CEO of SkirtSports, Nicole DeBoom. At the end of the race registration event on Friday, the event organizers invited me to join them for dinner. This put me at the table with many of the key players in the Skirt Chaser event. From the beginning, I had been forthcoming with my purpose and motivation for attending the event. In return, I believe that my informants were similarly forthcoming with their answers to my questions. We built a rapport during dinner and during the day of the event that ultimately allowed me to conduct my research with full access to the event. For example, SkirtSports’ marketing representative went out of her way to include me in a conversation she had started with two event participants that had evolved to include a discussion of the emergence of running skirts. After spending all day

volunteering on Saturday, I again joined the event crew for dinner. This time, I was able to ask follow-up questions regarding their evaluation of the event and about other things I had observed occurring throughout the day. Volunteering, I believe, became a mutually beneficial relationship for us both.

Second, in my volunteer uniform—running skirt and Convert to Skirt shirt—and role as a special assistant and point person for all other volunteers, I was often mistaken by event participants and volunteers as an event employee. While this was not in and of itself problematic, it was not until part way through the event that I realized that the individuals I was interviewing may also have made this assumption. Although I clearly identified myself as a non-affiliated researcher in each of my conversations, by wearing a running skirt and a shirt proclaiming “convert to skirt” I cannot help but wonder how this influenced the conversations I had throughout the day. Along these lines, Smith (1999) argues that researchers should be mindful of the power imbalance implicit between researchers and participants. Ironically, on the other hand, I suspect that my volunteer “uniform” also worked in my favor as participants could easily identify me as part of the event, and thus were perhaps more willing to answer my questions than they would have otherwise.

*Savannah: Being Chased and Almost Placing.*

After gaining an insider perspective to Skirt Chaser events through my volunteer involvement at the Chicagoland event, at the Skirt Chaser event in Savannah, I signed up for and participated in the race itself so as to experience being chased and running in a skirt, which I had yet to do. In a running skirt, this time all black with spandex shorts



underneath, I waited at the starting line with the other 114 female participants. At the sound of the gun, we started running toward the seldom-used race car track on which the majority of the race would take place. Three-minutes later, 73 men started running in an effort to catch the lead women runners for a chance at the cash prizes for the overall first (\$500), second (\$200), and third (\$100) place finishers, regardless of sex. Importantly as well, Skirt Chaser races are described as an event “where you'll never stop smiling and you may just meet your future spouse!” (“Race Info,” 2010, para. 5), so Skirt Chasers also are racing to catch a date. About five minutes into the race, I realized that I was doing significantly more passing than I had expected, eventually finding myself solidly in third place. DeBoom explains that one of the purposes of the women’s head start is that it puts women at the center of the event, giving women the opportunity to excel athletically in comparison to men (N. DeBoom, personal communication, October 31, 2009). While I feared being passed by another woman, I was motivated most by the fear of the unknown, in this case, the male runners who likely were working extremely hard to make up the time difference they had lost at the start.

Skirt Chaser races include a built in “turn” approximately a half-mile from the end of the race; this race was no exception. DeBoom specifies that this turn allows women the opportunity to see what men might be directly behind them. With this knowledge, women can decide whether to slow down and be caught or continue racing until the end (DeBoom, 2009). When I reached this point on the race course, I caught my first glance of the lead male runner who was quickly approaching. My second glance of him was only that of his back as he sped past both me and the second place runner. At

this moment, I realized I was currently in fourth place overall but within striking distance of the third place runner.

From an ethnographic standpoint, I had serious reservations about trying to pass her: I was concerned that placing at the event and earning a cash prize would affect my relationship with the event organizers. The purpose of my continued volunteer efforts was to demonstrate my appreciation for the openness I had been shown throughout the duration of my research, and potentially taking cash from them seemed counterproductive to this effort. I was also concerned that my credibility would have been affected in the eyes of the participants I had already interviewed as well as other participants with whom I had not yet spoken. My overall goal was to be an unobtrusive researcher, blending in with the event much like any other participant (hence, part of my decision to run in a skirt and not wear the Convert to Skirt shirt), but also someone relatable as an average, recreational runner. Placing in the event would disrupt this goal. Realistically, though, placing would not necessarily negatively affect my research, but would instead shift my field of inquiry, self as researcher, and relationships in just one more way that would need to be reflected upon in interpreting my experiences as related to the whole.

As the finish line drew near and still ambivalent about the situation at hand, I succumbed to the heat of the moment not wanting to get beat. I caught the third place runner and we sprinted the last 200 meters to the finish line. She crossed first, with me following just .14 seconds behind. In the end, I was both disappointed to have lost, but also relieved to have avoided drawing attention to myself that was not readily in-line with my research purposes.

*San Francisco: Negotiating Insider Status and Participant Relationships.*

Having spent a significant amount of time volunteering at the Chicagoland event and racing in Savannah, for my third Skirt Chaser event in San Francisco, I focused my attention on collecting information through observation and interviews with participants. While my efforts were largely successful, a Red Rock employee's pre-event request resulted in an exercise in negotiating my role as a researcher with the role I had come to play as a regular and reliable volunteer. Additionally, a post-event interaction led to yet another new situation which required negotiating my position with regards to an event participant and social media.

The San Francisco Skirt Chaser event held in mid-November of 2009 was not announced until early Autumn as organizers were waiting to secure usage permits for Golden Gate Park before moving forward with its organization. Importantly, Skirt Chaser organizers usually rely on their charity partners to recruit volunteers to help stage the event. However, due to the last minute event planning, Skirt Chaser organizers had difficulty identifying a charity in the San Francisco area with whom to partner (A. Sanders, personal communication, October 30, 2009). This left Casey Brown, the Red Rock employee in charge of volunteer coordination, scrambling for volunteers. Because of the relationship we had established in Savannah, she knew that I would be in San Francisco for the event and that I had a number of friends living in the Bay Area. I was still surprised, though, to receive an email from her a couple of weeks before the event inquiring if any of these friends might be available to volunteer (C. Brown, personal communication, November 2, 2009).

Feeling as though I should do what I could to help Casey as a “thank you” for her assistance with my research, I agreed to try and recruit some volunteers for the event. However, upon sitting down to compose an email to accomplish this goal, I struggled with how exactly to do so. From my perspective, writing a volunteer recruitment letter positioned me as an advocate for Skirt Chaser events and, consequently, its premise, which I was reluctant to do. Additionally, having my own friends and family present at the event as volunteers would seemingly distort my field of inquiry. Below is an example email that I sent with a concerted effort to negotiate these concerns:

... I will be in SF this weekend for research, which involves the Skirt Chaser race series ([www.skirtchaser5k.com](http://www.skirtchaser5k.com)). I have come to know the organizers and they are looking for volunteers to help with the event. Packet pick-up is Saturday at See Jane Run in SF and the race is Sunday in Golden Gate [P]ark. I told their volunteer coordinator that I would send out a few messages to any contacts I have in SF...your name came to mind! So, if you are interested/available and/or know anyone else who might be interested/available, either let me know and I will forward your name along to Casey, or you can contact her directly.... (F. Murray,<sup>1</sup> personal communication, November 8, 2009)

Faye replied to my request but expressed confusion regarding the dates of the event and regret that she had missed the chance to forward the email to her

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to informants for privacy protection when those individuals are not easily defined as public figures or whose research-related identities are not readily available on the Internet. Internet web log usernames have not been altered.

running friends (F. Murray, personal communication, November 9, 2009). None of my other recruitment efforts ended in success either. However, my conscious was clear regarding my efforts to recruit volunteers as well as my negotiation of my researcher status in relation to the rapport I had built with Casey, specifically.

A second instance of negotiation at the San Francisco event occurred this time between me and an event participant. During the block party segment of the event, I started taking photos so that I could visually review the event at a later date. A woman who appeared to be in her early-thirties saw that I had a camera and spontaneously struck an exuberant pose. She walked over and asked if she could see the picture (M. Irving, personal communication, November 15, 2009). From there, we began a casual conversation, which included questions I had been asking of other event participants throughout the day. She was more forthcoming and outgoing than any participant I had interviewed to this point.

When we were almost done, she asked that I email her the photograph, which I did after returning home from my trip. In her reply, she thanked me for sending the photograph and requested that we become friends via Facebook so that we could keep in touch (M. Irving, personal communication, November 19, 2009). After initial hesitation about revealing my identity beyond what I had already shared with her, I “confirmed” her as a Facebook friend. Although we have not communicated since the San Francisco Skirt Chaser event, I now know much more information about her than I had gathered at the event itself. Whether this information is relevant to my research or whether using it is ethically

responsible are questions for debate. The prevalence of social media and the many ways in which it facilitates connections between individuals, and in this case, a researcher and an informant, signal just one more shift in the dynamic nature of ethnographic research.

### *Methodology in Action*

What does all this mean for an ethnographic researcher working in the field? Ethnography is a performance where the key player is a researcher trying to examine a polymorphous environment that is defined by her own actions and inactions. In my role as a researcher at the San Francisco event, I again chose to wear a running skirt so as to relate more readily with my informants. I also carried a tape recorder to capture the voices of my informants. In the times when my purpose was observation alone, I was able to hide my tape recorder under my running skirt in a pocket that was otherwise designed for an iPod or keys. In the times when I needed my recorder, I was able to access it easily from underneath my skirt. As I co-opted the skirt for my own purposes, I wondered if other women had perhaps co-opted the skirt for their own purposes, embedding it with their own meaning. Multi-sited, extreme ethnographic research, with all of its methodological nuances and complications is best suited to lead me to an answer to this question and many more.

### *Skirting the Issue No More: Contributing to the Field of Sport Studies*

Although this research is squarely situated in and informed by previous research in the field of sport studies, this project seeks to fill specific gaps in existing literature. In particular, this project contributes to the fields of sport history, sociology, and

management by expanding: 1) socio-historical research related to women's experiences in sport and physical activity as influenced by sportswear; 2) socio-cultural research examining strategies used to market sports and sportswear to women; and, 3) sports management research related to experiential branding and relationship marketing. Implicit throughout this research are questions pertaining not only to gender and sexuality, but also to race, class, and sexual orientation. In particular, though, this project is an analysis of female runners and their presentation of gender and sexuality through sportswear, as well as the marketing strategies used to feed their desires of consumption through products and brands.

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## Chapter 2 – The Skirting Issue: Why Now?<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Historically, women in the United States (US) have been discouraged from participating in competitive sports and rigorous physical activity (Cahn, 1994). Not only was participation discouraged culturally, but period clothes largely prohibited participation as well. For example, an 1887 *Chicago Tribune* article titled “Facts for the Fair Sex” outlined women’s relationship to clothing and physical activity:

How a light-footed girl could fly about the tennis court if it were [neat] and proper for her to appear in long stockings, white knickerbockers, a red and white blouse, and a silk jockey cap. However, that’s neither here nor there. The sex feminine must put up with its limitations and be glad that it has learned at least to live out doors. (p. 16)

As a result, some of the first sports open to women were those in which they could compete in a skirt (e.g., archery, golf, ice skating, tennis), and even sports such as baseball included skirts as part of team uniforms to emphasize the players’ gender, without regard to the safety hazard they posed to the players (Cahn, 1994). In the mid- to late-1800s, however, innovations such as the bloomer, the skirt elevator, and jersey fabric

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provided women viable clothing options in which to more easily participate in sports and physical activity (Warner, 2006). Since then, sportswear for women has become commonplace and has been developed in response to, and alongside, the increasing number of girls and women who participate in sports and physical activity. Furthermore, sportswear has both influenced and been influenced by fashion trends as well as the current ideal of feminine beauty (Steele, 1985).

Running skirts are one such recent sportswear innovation that has caused both joy and consternation in the running world (e.g., Armstrong, 2008; Graves, 2008). Specifically, in 2004, Nicole DeBoom, an elite-level triathlete and self-proclaimed inventor of running skirts, wore a hand-sewn prototype skirt at Ironman Wisconsin, which she won (“Our Story,” 2010). Later that year, she launched SkirtSports sportswear, “mirroring her ideal that women should never have to sacrifice femininity for performance in their workout clothes” (Donovan, 2009a, para. 4), and, subsequently, from June 2008 through June 2009, the sale of fitness skirts increased by 12.5%, while the sale of women’s running shorts decreased by 6.1% (Running Insight, 2009). Situated in an historical context from which women struggled to find suitable athletic attire and sought to free themselves from cumbersome and impractical skirts, as well as other cultural constraints, this recent adoption of running skirts necessitates scholarly contextualization and analysis. Furthermore, a discussion of women’s clothing in relation to sports participation is “important because it once again [holds] up for debate the seemingly endless compromise of fashion over practicality with women’s clothing” (Lee, 2007, p. 1423).

Quoting art historian Jules Prown in their article on the material culture of sport, Hardy, Loy, and Booth (2009) write, “material objects help us to ‘discover the beliefs—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time’” (p. 130). Along these lines, I use historical texts, marketing materials, product reviews, surveys, interviews, and participant-observation to expand upon the current understanding of women’s participation in sport by answering the question: why, at this historical moment, are running skirts in vogue? To answer this question, I argue three interrelated reasons explain their popularity in the early twenty-first century: first, running skirts function to promote the feminine apologetic; second, running skirts function as a material signifier of post-feminist empowerment; and third, running skirts function as a technology through which to discipline the body. I conclude that while women who own and wear running skirts may have multiple reasons for doing so, none are immune from historical and contemporary concerns that women participating in sport jeopardize their femininity and that donning running skirts appeases this fear. Furthermore, the selling and buying of running skirts is embedded in post-feminist narratives that equate consumption and bodily discipline with power.

#### Function via the Feminine Apologetic: Women Dress the Part

In recent years, women who run for exercise, competition, or pleasure have become commonplace; however, this cannot be said of previous eras. Factors such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and geographic location have tempered women’s participation in all sports and physical activity. Specifically, the fear that sports participation compromises femininity, especially for middle- and upper-



middle class women, has remained a constant concern (Cahn, 1994; Crossett, 1995). Felshin (1974) and others have argued that “since sport is associated with masculinity and women are supposed to behave in feminine ways, women athletes sometimes ‘apologize’ for women’s participation in sport by emphasizing femininity” (Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009, p. 131). When female athletes adopt hyper-feminine behavior they appease fears of “mannish lesbian” athletes (Griffin, 1998, p. 34) and compensate for the unfeminine characteristics of strength, speed, and power needed for successful athletic participation. Festle (1996) explains, “female athletes compensated for their lack of femininity on the court by making up for it in their language, looks, and behavior (often off the court)” (p. 45). This behavior stressed not only femininity but heterosexuality as well. Importantly, this requisite apologetic behavior stemmed from societal expectations of traditional notions of femininity and acted as a powerful force influencing, shaping, and discouraging women’s participation in sport and physical activity. Davis-Delano, Pollock, and Vose (2009) suggest, however, that apologetic behavior can be an enabling strategy as it makes being a female athlete more socially acceptable and thus may encourage participation.

Notably, because working-class women and women of color were held to a lesser standard of feminine propriety, restrictions on participation in sport and physical activity, including the clothes worn for such participation, was less rigid. Although Cahn (1994) rightly notes that working-class women at the turn of the twentieth-century had less leisure time than their middle-class peers, Peiss (1986) argues that single, working-class women who were employed outside the home were able to reserve funds each month for

“cheap amusements,” such as dancing or trips to the theater. Nonetheless, although working-class women were judged by a more lenient set of standards, “they too had clearly demarcated lines they were not to transgress” (Cayleff, 1995, p. 19). In what follows, I examine the evolution of sportswear as influenced by the feminine apologetic. Specifically, women who don modern running skirts engage in apologetic behavior, perpetuating the role conflict believed to exist between femininity and athleticism.

Apart from several notable exceptions (Lee, 2007; Phillips & Phillips, 1993; Rosoff, 2002; Schultz, 2004, 2005; Warner, 2006) few scholars have devoted significant attention to the influence of sportswear on women’s participation in sports and physical activity. Those who have, though, agree that “dressing in conventional clothing kept women from appearing too threatening while they engaged in their athletic activities” (Rosoff, 2002, p. 25). While some White, middle- and upper-class women in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries may have preferred fashionable clothes for their athletic pursuits, others were constrained by social mandates, as well as the unavailability of specialized clothing amenable to vigorous athletic participation. Along these lines, in *When the Girls Came out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear*, Warner (2006) concluded that although small adjustments to dress were made from roughly the 1860s to the 1930s for the purpose of sport, fashion more than anything else dictated dress and style. Sport, as long as it remained a hetero-social activity, required and prompted women to stay in step with fashion, not function.

For example, Victorian-era fashion, as was in vogue for much of the nineteenth-century, favored narrow waists, wide hips, and voluminous busts (Lee, 2007). In order to

achieve this feminine ideal, women donned movement-restricting undergarments such as tightly laced corsets and bodices that severely hindered their ability to move freely (Steele, 1985). Additionally, Phillips and Phillips (1993) wrote that long dresses remained the norm for reasons beyond Victorian-modesty as they kept out the cold in dwellings with inadequate heat, concealed varicose veins in legs resulting from frequent pregnancy, and concealed female private parts that remained uncovered by underwear due to hygienic concerns related to thrush. When women began more actively participating in outdoor pursuits in the mid-to-late 1800s, they stayed true to fashion by participating primarily in “stationary” activities that accommodated these clothing-related restrictions. Upper-class women participating in sports associated with the aristocracy, such as riding and hunting, did so in specialized, slightly shortened dresses; however, it was highly unusual and expensive for women to own any sort of specialized clothing, especially for sport (Steele, 1985).

A significant departure from Victorian social norms was the “bloomer,” which Amelia Bloomer introduced in the US and in Britain the 1850s (Lee, 2007; Warner, 2006). Bloomers were full trousers gathered at the ankle, inspired by a Turkish trouser outfit, and were often worn with a calf-length skirt over the top. Although they were initially met with public scorn, the popularity of bloomers rose in particular during the cycling craze (roughly 1887-1903) as long skirts and bicycles proved incompatible (Lee, 2007; Warner, 2006). Even though cycling was a universal activity for all social classes, its outfit often required a middle-class income, which was frequently also the case with other sports and the associated specialized clothing (Phillips & Phillips, 1993; Warner,

2006). The popularity of bloomers, though, diminished with cycling and, Warner (2006) wrote, “perhaps women simply got tired of defending themselves from the onslaughts of the critics and the ridicule of the populace at large” (p. 134), who found bloomers particularly inappropriate. Along similar lines, the Rational Dress Society formed in 1881 to advocate for changes to women’s fashion (Lee, 2007). Lee (2007) explained “the rational dressers were trying to create a more comfortable style of clothing for women, one that moved away from tight corsets and heavy dresses, allowing for greater freedom of movement, yet one that was decidedly feminine in its appearance” (p. 1422). Largely, however, the rational dressers were unsuccessful in their reform attempts, even though maintaining a feminine appearance remained a priority for the group.

While Victorian-era norms remained resilient, functional changes necessitated by sport and technological advances outside of sport led to various advances in women’s sportswear. For example, the “skirt elevator,” which lifted women’s long skirts to just above the ankle, gained societal approval because it relieved safety concerns related to participation in croquet and ice skating by allowing women to see the ball and any cracks in the ice respectively (Warner, 2006). Regarding technological advances, Phillips and Phillips (1993) explained “in the 19th century engineers piped running water into houses and ultimately gas and electricity to heat it, vastly improving sanitation, hygiene, health and life expectancy” (p. 134). Thus, women could clean their clothes more easily making the practical ramifications related to getting dirty or sweaty more manageable. Although discussing the German context in particular, Makela (2000) wrote that the mass production of clothing made it cheaper and more readily available to the public, and

women's contributions to World War I necessitated clothing adjustments that were not considered unfeminine, such as shortened skirts and looser tops. Finally, the increased availability and decreased cost of both cotton and elastic allowed for sportswear with more "give" than wool or tweed, and for undergarments that could more easily be secured, allowing women to move around actively without fear of impropriety (Phillips & Phillips, 1993; Warner, 2006).

The 1920s have been referred to as the "golden age" of sport due to "transformations in population, consumption, and leisure" (Cahn, 1994, p. 34). This transformation also included significant changes to women's fashion and dress. Specifically, Warner (2006) credited tennis player Suzanne Lenglen with being the first sports star to influence fashion, as her "flapper image" became the rage of the 1920s both on and off the court. Cahn (1994) explained that "where the Victorian female body was frail, pale, fully covered, and staid, Lenglen's much-worshipped body was tan, lithe, and in constant motion" (p. 48), representing a significant widening of idealized notions of beauty and a newly acceptable "fit" femininity. Conversely, her primary rival in the mid-twenties, Helen Wills, "combined old-fashioned female virtues with a new style of athletic, assertive womanhood," offering a "nonthreatening portrait of refined, well-bred, and charming womanhood that blended modern athleticism with aspects of conventional femininity" (Cahn, 1994, p. 50). Reflecting these differences, Engelmann (1988) refers to Lenglen as "The Goddess" and Wills as "The American Girl" in his biography of the pair. Thus, even though there were various function-related advancements in women's sportswear, as well as some widening of societal norms, fashion served as a dominant

force in maintaining femininity and ideal beauty for female athletes. Within the confines of homo-social environments, however, athletic dress was adapted in lasting ways to meet sporting needs.

The private sphere of women's colleges in New England and girls and women's schools in Britain provided venues shielded from men, allowing for greater latitude in dress as women took on tasks otherwise reserved for men (Lee, 2007). Catherine Beecher, in particular, advocated for women's education as well as the importance of health through exercise. Accordingly, and thanks to a new gymnastics program promoted by Dio Lewis, Mount Holyoke students each had a "gymnastics dress" (Warner, 2006, p. 174). The outfit fit loosely on the top, providing for optimal movement, did not hug the body, as was the fashion of the times, and did not necessitate the use of a corset. At Wellesley, function overtook fashion in the name of creating an outfit for crew. Warner (2006) credits Wellesley as being "the first school for women to use a common outfit for a single sport" (p. 195), although Smith College "gym suits" were not far behind.

The gym suit originated as a result of demands from women playing the new game of basketball in the early 1890s and subsequently "revolutionized women's clothing and set the stage for the easy clothing of the twentieth century that became known as sportswear" (Warner, 2006, p. 196). The outfit included wide, short bloomers and a loose blouse, which made it unacceptable to wear out-of-doors. Warner (2006) explained that the version of the gym suit that remained popular through the 1960s was based on a tennis dress: "it had a romper as the base and a removable skirt that girls could wear over it if they wished. For certain activities, such as gymnastics, the skirt generally

remained off; for sports it generally stayed on” (p. 223). Importantly, gym suits remained appropriate only within the confines of homo-social environments throughout the first half of the twentieth-century (Warner, 2006).

Once athletic wear became accessible and participation in sports and physical activity more widely accepted, women developed strategies to navigate fashion trends and clothing restrictions that were incompatible with their athletic pursuits. For example, in the early-twentieth century, Marion Randall climbed mountains throughout California, eventually converting from skirts to knickerbockers after the hem of her “denim skirt caught over a boulder and hung [her] there, head down, till an obliging passerby set [her] on [her] feet again” (Ogden, 1988, p. 11). She and her climbing companions, though, appeased conservatives who frowned upon skirt-less women by remaining appropriately dressed until out of sight before removing their skirts and continuing their climb in more practical bloomers or knickers (Ogden, 1988). Similarly, a 1930 column from *The Washington Post* suggested: “a yachswoman is to be always correctly dressed for her environment. On board small boat competing in a regatta with a fresh breeze blowing and a lively sea running, skirts are impossible and ridiculous” (“Dare Interprets the Mode,” 1930, p. 11). However, here, too, yachting-inclined women must mitigate the negative attention they would receive by remaining in such dress by submitting “to custom when they are ashore and should not be distinguished from any other women at banquets, club gatherings, &c [sic]” (“Dare Interprets the Mode,” 1930, p. 11). Thus, these active women had to balance their femininity and athleticism in order to pursue their sporting interests.

The British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC) was another group of women who challenged conventional dress and expectations of femininity at the turn of the century. The BLFC vocally asserted their support of the rational dress movement and the need to have free feet and legs with which to play their game (Lee, 2007). They felt their contemporaries in cricket, field hockey, and tennis had compromised their athletic prowess when they agreed to play in skirts, and that lady lacrosse players had similarly compromised by wearing tunics (Lee, 2007). Lee (2007) wrote, though, that field hockey's particularly conservative development—insisting on skirts as well as limiting the public visibility of its games—may explain why its founding organization lasted so much longer than the more aggressive and outspoken BLFC.

Although almost a half-century before their time, the women of the BLFC likely would also have disapproved of the women in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) who wore skirts as a condition of their employment, as well as the fact that players “were judged as much for their beauty as for their baseball ability” (Weiller & Higgs, 1992, p. 50). Arthur Meyerhoff, whose company managed the league from 1944 through 1950, imposed strict rules based on his “femininity principle” designed to keep players acting and looking “appropriately” feminine (Cahn, 1994; Weiller & Higgs, 1992). Although the AAGPBL undoubtedly offered women, most of whom were of working-class origins, a unique opportunity to participate in sports as professional athletes, the status of their femininity remained a central concern throughout the duration of their participation and was actively reinforced through mandatory “short skirts, makeup, and physical attractiveness” (Cahn, 1994, p. 150).



The 1950s and 1960s marked decades of transition in women's sports: women physical educators wrestled with the idea of permitting more rigorous physical activity for their female students while the Olympic movement began to value women's contribution to the international sporting prowess of the US (Festle, 1996). In the 1970s, thanks in part to the passage of Title IX, girls and women began playing school-based sports in unprecedented numbers (Acosta & Carpenter, 2005). The cloth signifier of Title IX has been the sports bra. Prior to its invention in 1977, women bound their breasts to their bodies (ancient Rome), relied on corsets (Victorian-era), or brassieres (popular not until the 1920s), to support their breasts during physical activity (Schultz, 2004). Schultz (2004) explained that two runners, Hinda Miller and Lisa Lindhal, created a prototype for the modern sports bra out of jockstraps. She continued that although a technological revolution, sports bras shape, sometimes literally, women's participation in sports and physical activity. In particular, she suggested that media representations of Brandi Chastain's sports bra revealing moment at the 1999 Women's World Cup Championship celebration sexualized sports bras, the women who wear them, and normalized a particular feminine ideal. Thus, although an undeniably enabling technology, sports bras discipline the body and reproduce the traditional gender ideal. Further, in "Reading the Catsuit: Serena Williams and the Production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S. Open," Schultz (2005) provided a poignant example of the transformation in sportswear, as well as the expansion in participation opportunities from the Victorian-era to the present. Williams' "body-clinging, faux leather, black catsuit" (Schultz, 2005, p. 338) facilitated

movement through its minimalism and spandex, but also prompted a racialized discourse focused on the Black female body.

Thus, sportswear, although currently widely available in varied colors, sizes, and shapes, and specialized by sport, exercise, physical activity, or “lifestyle,” remains a negotiation between function, fashion, and femininity. Two final examples illustrate this negotiation. First, in 1999, the International Volleyball Federation imposed a *maximum* size for the women’s bathing suit-style uniforms (Hardy, Loy, & Booth, 2009), although that requirement no longer exists (“Players’ Equipment,” 2009). Second, and conversely, the advent of the female boardshort in surfing has allowed women surfers to “actually go surfing” (in Booth, 2001, p. 13), now not having to worry about making adjustments mid-ride to their bathing suit bottom.

Warner (2006) wrote, “to a historian of dress, it seems obvious that engagement in sports, certainly for American women, depended almost completely on clothing, first as a physical factor that hampered movement, and second as a societal factor that, for very different reasons, hampered participation” (p. 100). It is within this historical context that we see the contemporary nature of women’s sportswear discourse as it pertains directly to running skirts. While in some instances they may facilitate movement (as will be discussed later), they also facilitate participation in physical activity for the same historical reasons as long skirts did in previous decades: they appropriately feminize the sporting women who wear them.

Nicole DeBoom, an accomplished youth, college, and elite-level athlete, “grew up thinking she never looked feminine enough, giving her a lack of confidence in life”

(Ritter, 2007, p. 10). While on a training run in 2004 she caught a glimpse of herself in a window: “I look like a boy” (in Gorin, 2005, p. 28), she said, realizing that something was amiss because “her clothes had no sass or femininity” (McNealy, 2008, para. 4). Upon returning home, she started brainstorming ideas for “a line of fun, edgy, sexy women’s fitness apparel” (McNealy, 2008, para. 4). Subsequently, she created a prototype skirt and eventually launched SkirtSports sportswear, creating “a line of fitness attire that would give confidence to today’s woman” (Ritter, 2007, p. 10) through feminization and an appeal to increased sexiness. While DeBoom explicitly works to promote women’s participation in fitness activities, her rationale for starting SkirtSports implies that athleticism and femininity are mutually exclusive.

A central tenet of apologetic behavior is that the athlete must be “motivated by a fear of being perceived as too masculine...in other words, she must recognize the cultural contradiction between femininity and athleticism and she must act on her desire to promote her femininity to others” (Davis-Delano et al., 2009, p. 135). In my own research, I found this fear clearly evident. For example, the volunteer coordinator at the Savannah, Georgia, Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series event, a brand extension of SkirtSports intended to increase the sale of SkirtSports products, started wearing fitness skirts for reasons similar to DeBoom. Marina Kesler,<sup>3</sup> originally from Denmark, in her early thirties and an elite-level triathlete, exclusively wears skirts because she does not have “traditional curves” due to her athleticism and muscularity, but still wants to feel

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to informants for privacy protection when those individuals are not easily defined as public figures or whose research-related identities are not readily available on the Internet. Internet web log usernames have not been altered.

feminine (M. Kesler personal communication, October 30, 2009). Another woman explained her decision to wear a running skirt during her participation in the Capital City Half Marathon in Columbus, Ohio, because “she might as well look feminine” (S. Taylor, personal communication, May 5, 2010) while doing so. Running skirt-related publicity routinely echoes this negotiation between athleticism and femininity as well. One Portland, Oregon-based blogger opined:

The pink-based skirts are feminine and sassy, slimming and flattering, a combination that is missing from the fitness apparel market. It's not your mom's skort. It's not a kilt. It's not like any tennis skirt. Most of all, and most importantly, it's not sausage-casing tights or boxy, mannish shorts. (“Portland Picks,” 2006, “Skirt Power,” para. 2)

Thus, these women echo the findings in Davis-Delano et al. (2009) that there is a socially constructed contradiction between athletic participation and femininity. Apologetic behavior, then, is employed in order to thwart long standing and persistent stereotypes that female athletes are masculine, lesbian, or inferior athletes.

Importantly, as Armstrong (2008) writes in *Runner's World*, women should not have to dress like men in order to be successful or to be considered serious athletes: “Whether we are in the boardroom, on the home front, or on the starting line, we can bring it on like a man, but it doesn't mean we have to look like one” (p. 73). Similarly, a reviewer of Nike's New Adventure-style skirt wrote: “Stylish, flexible and allows a little gender identity when you wear this—comfort all the way!” (Jewelsrjules, 2008). However, when the motivation to dress differently (i.e., don a running skirt) is grounded

in the notion that athletic women cannot also be considered feminine and that “brining it on” is by default associated with men, this is also highly problematic.

#### Function through Post-Feminism: Women Runners Buy Skirts and Empowerment

Women have long battled for the right to participate, unencumbered due to dress or otherwise, in competitive sports and physical activity. Starting in the 1970s, societal acceptance of active women broadened significantly, bringing with it, eventually, attention from sportswear companies. As I explore in detail below, sportswear manufacturers, including SkirtSports, have marketed sports to women as empowering through the post-feminist ideologies of consumption, individualism, and sexuality (McDonald, 2005). Throughout this analysis, I recognize that post-feminism is an ambiguous and contested term. I understand it not to mean the end or failure of feminism, but rather at its best, “‘femininity’ is no longer at odds with ‘feminism,’ but at the very centre of an ideology of agency, confidence and resistance” (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p. 171). Gills & Munford (2004) warn, though, that the attempted acceptance of “hybridity and contradiction” (p. 171) is subverted by consumerism and disengagement with engaged, politicized, and active feminism(s).

In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, marking a significant turning point for girls and women in sport. Title IX legislation gave women’s sports advocates legal ground, although admittedly without much teeth, from which to challenge gender inequities in educationally-based athletic programs (Fields, 2005). Outside of educational institutions in the mid-1960s, just prior to the passage of Title IX, women in growing numbers started participating in road races of varying distances, joining the jogging boom of the 1970s in

unprecedented numbers (Plymire, 1997; Rhodes, 1978). As a reflection of this trend, the editors of *Runner's World* magazine published *The Complete Woman Runner: The Female Runner's Ultimate Guide from the Beginner to Marathoner* in 1978. *The Complete Woman Runner* (1978) included information related to training, racing, safety, injury prevention, "dealing with the family," the history of women's running, and biographies of typical American female runners.

With regards to dress, Stricklin (1978) wrote that beginning runners "can probably make do with a pair of loose, comfortable shorts and a cotton T-shirt" (p. 12), a significant departure from requisite corsets, long skirts, or even the ubiquitous gym suit, which had a romper base and removable skirt, of the previous decade. Soon thereafter, Reebok and then Nike courted women consumers tapping into a desire for clothing of their own. Consumption of sport specific clothing, specifically clothing in which women felt simultaneously sexy and strong, quickly became a material signifier of post-feminist empowerment (e.g., Lafrance, 1998; Lucas, 2000). Running skirts continue this function.

In 1981, Reebok distinguished itself as the first sportswear company to target women consumers (Lucas, 2000). Nike initially scoffed at the prospect of following Reebok's example of making shoes for women participating in the newly popular activity of aerobics "because [Phil Knight] conceived Nike as creating shoes for authentic sports and apparently aerobics did not meet that criteria" (Lucas, 2000, p. 150). Goldman and Papsen (1998) explain that Nike eventually recognized women's increased presence in the workplace, increased salaries, and economic independence. As a result, the consumer-goods world finally took notice of women's buying power, discretionary

income, and customer loyalty, which “created a market niche attractive enough to lure mass-market manufacturers” (Goldman & Papson, 1998, p. 119). Importantly, profit was the driving force behind this long-awaited embrace of the female sporting consumer, not idealism or the recognition that women had unjustly been denied athletic opportunities for decades.

Nike’s advertising campaigns directed at women have received much scholarly attention (e.g., Capon & Helstein, 2005; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Giardina & Metz, 2005; Goldman & Papson, 1998; Helstein, 2003; Lafrance, 1998; Lucas, 2000; McDonald, 2005). Most of this research draws attention to Nike’s use of consumer driven empowerment, in particular, commodity feminism and its appeal to post-feminist sensibilities. Goldman (1992) explains that “‘post-feminism’ emerged during the 1980s to designate a new generation of women who take for granted the victories secured by their elders, presuming their right to equitable treatment both in the workplace and at home, while shunning the label of feminism” (p. 130). Furthermore, post-feminism is grounded in individual freedom of choice and consumption: “when framed by ideologies of individualism and free choice, feminism put into commodity form *forgets* its origins in a critique of unequal social, economic and political relations” (Goldman, 1992, p. 132).

Along these lines, DeBoom’s SkirtSports has distinguished itself as a pink-based fitness-skirt specialty company with apparel designed *by* a female athlete, *for* female athletes (“Fact Sheet,” 2010). She has subverted the decidedly liberal feminist goal of business self-sufficiency, however, by failing to acknowledge the decades of women who have fought to make athletic participation without donning a skirt socially acceptable.

Similarly, she readily describes her company as promoting femininity (harkening back to the previous discussion of apologetic behavior), not feminism (N. DeBoom, personal communication, June 12, 2009). DeBoom's use of "feminism" highlights the difficulty in defining the term (Beasley, 1999). Here, she seems to distance SkirtSports from the negative connotations and baggage presently associated with a singular "feminism" (i.e., liberal feminism is synonymous with feminism *per se*; Beasley, 1999), in favor of femininity which she problematically sets as distinct and incompatible with feminism of any type.

In addition, post-feminism disposes of any potential irony between feminism and consumption, instead making identity formation through consumption one of its central tenets (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Goldman, 1992). A Caucasian member of the Skirt Entourage, a SkirtSports organized fan-group, explains her affinity for skirts:

I saw Skirt in a magazine and thought I had to have one! I looked online and found a local retailer and went to try it on. [I] went home with a Skirt and two Skirt tanks. Compared to a lot of women, I'm not a girly girl. I don't wear makeup to the gym. I don't apply lipstick for finish line photos at marathons (there are women who do this!!!). I don't have a shopping addiction. I don't wear perfume. I live in flip flops and running shoes. But with Skirt, it's different. I love to feel good about myself when I run. And it makes me go faster! (K. Morgan, personal communication, October 30, 2009)

Here, while Kathy Morgan clearly outlines the apologetic behaviors of other athletic women she knows or has observed, she distances herself from them, drawing a



seemingly contradictory distinction between makeup, lipstick, shopping, and perfume, with skirt wearing. In the end, though, why is it that wearing “Skirt” makes her feel good about herself? Through consumption, she is able to buy a specific identity embedded in SkirtSports products. In so doing, she associates herself with the company, its ethos, and other women consumers who are united solely through their consumption of SkirtSports products. One such woman explains, “The feeling I got when I wore my Skirt in races is indescribable. Empowering!” (S. Davis-Roberts, personal communication, November 2, 2009). In this equation, personal empowerment derives not from the intrinsic benefits of physical activity, such as enjoyment and psychological well-being, but rather from consumption of athletic goods, which in this case is a running skirt that costs between \$50 and \$75. Heywood (2007) argues, though, that this type of market-driven consumer feminism problematically disregards structural differences (e.g., race, socio-economic status) between women. McDonald (2005) further supports this argument: “post-feminism continues to construct a false sense that women belong to the same group based upon a shared sense of sisterhood, thus suggesting that social class and race are irrelevant to the liberated woman” (p. 33). For a majority of women, though, consumption of sportswear, specifically running skirts, remains economically unfeasible, thus maintaining a divide between the predominately White, middle-class women who comprise the majority of runners in the US and those who do not (“Annual Marathon Report,” 2010).

Similarly, Lafrance (1998) explains that post-feminism signals a “re-territorialization” of movement feminism: “it is a recuperative and distorted vulgarization

of [feminist ideas], it replaces activism and consciousness-raising with benefits and solutions attainable only through consumption” (p. 119). Along these lines, in 2009, SkirtSports joined the increasingly popular strategy of cause-related marketing in order to efficiently integrate its “philanthropic activities with its drive for profit” (King, 2006, p. 9). In order to do so, SkirtSports launched the Kendall Kollektion, a series of five skirts and shirts with a signature pattern, in order to benefit the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. DeBoom explained: “I started SkirtSports with the intention of giving women everywhere extra confidence and style with feminine and functional workout wear. Kendall Kollektion Athletic Apparel pursues these same ideals while benefiting a great cause” (in Donovan, 2009b, para. 2). While supporting research related to leukemia and lymphoma is undoubtedly a social good, achieving this support through consumption ignores the profit-driven motivation of the company as well as the consequences of a rapidly shrinking public sector that increasingly relies on the private sector for funding and support (Duggan, 2003). Furthermore, this partnership reinforces the consumptive activities of socially conscious women who, instead of donating their money or time directly to a cause, use the partnership as moral justification for purchasing a costly new running skirt.

Post-feminist empowerment is achieved not only through the act of consumption itself, but more importantly from the envy and desire it elicits from others. In particular, empowerment derived from the consumption of running skirts comes from attention brought to the sexed body through an appeal to the erotic gaze. Guttman (1996) contends that the ancient Greeks “understood that physically trained bodies, observed in

motion or in rest, can be sexually attractive” (p. 1). He continues, though, that the erotic element inherent in sports and physical activity has been under-examined and ignored in the modern sporting era. Similarly, Goldman (1992) explains that post-feminist “meanings of choice and individual freedom become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their ‘liberated’ interests” (p. 133). Here, the liberated interest is empowerment through individualized attention allowing women to leverage their sex appeal and power to their advantage.

SkirtSports’ first apparel line, as well as their advertising narratives and photographs, explicitly and implicitly provide women post-feminist empowerment through the erotic gaze of others. For example, SkirtSports’ first apparel line, “TRIKS,” named as such because “triks” is “skirt” spelled backwards, knowingly or not invited an association between their products and prostitution. While “SkirtSports turned TRIKS...around” (Donovan, 2007, para. 1) in 2007, many of their individual product descriptions continue to have sexual connotations. The Marathon Girl Ultra running skirt is “famous for its sexy-sweet built-in Spankies (More Victoria’s Secret than Granny-style!)” (“Marathon Girl Ultra,” 2010, para. 1), and the name for the Sexy Back Tank was inspired by Justin Timberlake’s 2006 hit song, but it was “Madonna’s sexy, Victorian-styled corset in [the Vogue music video] that influenced this hot little number. Our high-performance cycling tank will highlight your sexy back and curves” (“Sexy Back Tank,” 2010, para. 1). Here, then, SkirtSports creates sportswear specifically to promote a hyper-sexualized image and in the process women are encouraged to draw empowerment from the positive attention their eroticized bodies receive from both men and women.

Drawing empowerment from the attention aimed at a sexualized body, however, undermines athletic ability and prowess, reinforcing the trivialization of women as athletes.

Hargreaves (1994) argues that “sportswear makes statements about femaleness and enhances sexuality; it both reveals the body and conceals the body, promoting an awareness of the relationship between being dressed and being undressed” (p. 159). DeBoom references this idea when she asked: “And it makes you wonder what is under the skirt, doesn’t it? That’s part of the fun...” (Ritter, 2007, p. 11). For skirt and non-skirt wearers, this wonder can be a source of erotic curiosity. Indeed, in at least two instances of my own skirt wearing, fellow runners posed that very question. SkirtSports is well aware of this curiosity and uses it as an advertising strategy. For example, during the first half of 2010, one of the primary photographs on the SkirtSports homepage was that of a woman bouncing off the ground, body facing forward, mouth open, long hair flying wildly behind her, dressed in the Wonder Girl Tank and Summer Breeze Skirt. She exuberantly lifts her skirt to reveal built-in Girl Shorties—“boy pant styled fitness panties with full-check [*sic*] coverage” (“Girl Shorties,” 2010, para. 2). Tellingly, one of the many recommended activities for this skirt is flirting (“Summer Breeze Skirt,” 2010). Another photograph on the SkirtSports homepage featured a side shot of DeBoom holding her skirt high to reveal the shorties underneath. If we agree with Guttman (1996) that there is an erotic element to the act of running and to the body in motion, running skirts surely increases this eroticism, and women wearing the Summer Breeze Skirt, in particular, seem to invite more than flirting.

Finally, women, in their own words, describe the attention drawn to their skirts and the empowerment they associate with this attention: “Mostly I wear a skirt because I like how it makes me feel and how people stop and notice ‘that lady is running in a skirt.’ No one will ever comment on my athletic abilities so at least they can say I look great while I am out there forever!” (C. Patterson, personal communication, October 30, 2009).

Cate Patterson also explains:

Most people really appreciate the ‘fashion,’ we look nicer in a cute skirt than if we were running around in shorts. A good friend of mine who is quite large (3XL) finally got a skirt this summer and she said to me, ‘Wow I always thought Cate’s hot with that skirt on, now I get you, you were probably thinking the same thing about me, I need to get another couple of these!’ (personal communication, October 30, 2009)

Kathy Morgan writes, “Men love them. They don’t like to get passed by the girl in the Skirt...but I get tons of compliments from both sexes” (personal communication, October 30, 2009). Another runner, this time African American, says “people often think I look cute in running skirts, but that they could never wear one” (S. Anderson, personal communication, November 1, 2009). The erotic gaze and desire coveted by skirt wearers is decidedly heterosexual; however, its purpose is also to elicit envy from other women. Goldman (1992) explains:

Becoming an object of desire supposedly makes a woman more valuable in the eyes of others, and hence more valuable to herself. If successful, men will desire you and women will envy you. But to be valued in such terms is to stand out, and

the process of judging is based on the premise of invidious, competitive comparisons with other women. (p. 129)

Women who compete with one another for the approving gaze of men perpetuate “eroticized subordination” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 167) and the commodification of the female body. Running skirts, then, function to promote empowerment through the post-feminist ideologies of consumption, individualism, and sexualization of the body achieved through the erotic gaze of others.

### Function through Bodily Discipline: Covered and Cute

Running skirts function as a technology through which women discipline their bodies in an effort to achieve heteronormative expectations of beauty. In particular, running skirts hide deviant bodies and normalize bodies that are not sufficiently feminine, which is presented in SkirtSports advertising as White, youthful (although not always young), and toned, but not overly muscular. Through the consumption of running skirts, women with aging, imperfect, (dis)abled, racialized as Other, lesbian, or working-class bodies can strive to achieve this heteronormative ideal. First, though, women’s participation in running as a sport necessitates attention as this history will help elucidate why running skirts so readily function as a technology through which to achieve bodily discipline.

Due to societal expectations of middle-class women, as well as the scientific belief of the harming effects of athletic participation on women’s bodies (Vertinsky, 1989), women’s track and field events were not added to the Olympic Games until 1928. At the conclusion of the 800-meter race, which was the longest running event contested,

several women competitors collapsed with exhaustion, likely due to insufficient training regimes (Cahn, 1994). As a result of misconceptions of women's physical capabilities, the 800-meter race, and any event longer, remained absent from the Olympic Games program until 1960. Furthermore, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), which governed track and field events, "prohibited women from competing in any distance over 2.5 miles" prior to 1971 (Cooper, 1996, p. 65). Women's participation in road races in the 1960s and 1970s grew more quickly than in track and field because road races fell outside the purview of the AAU (Plymire, 1997). However by 1974, the AAU had changed its rules and hosted its own marathon championship race. Finally, in 1984, the women's marathon was added to the Olympic Games program and an American, Joan Benoit Samuelson, won the gold medal (Cooper, 1998).

Integral to the institutionalization of the women's marathon and women's participation in the running boom of the 1970s, were Katherine Switzer and the cosmetics giant Avon Products, Inc. (Cooper, 1996). While Switzer and other early women distance running participants ran in order to prove their athletic competence, the second wave of participants did so because they prescribed to the prevailing mythology of women's running as "neither exercise nor training for competition but rather as a beauty 'treatment' that would 'help you lose weight'" (Cooper, 1996, p. 69). Avon played a vital role in recruiting women to start running by connecting their beauty products with running as a physical activity that would similarly enhance their looks and heterosexual appeal. Through the door-to-door sales of Avon cosmetics and perfume, representatives also sold women's running, specifically through their Avon-sponsored running series, to

a more diverse population than had previously participated (Cooper, 1996). Cahn (1994) adds that while the fitness boom of the 1970s and 1980s prompted millions of American women to take up jogging and a variety of other individual sports, contributing to overall confidence and a healthy body, “the fitness boom also capitalized on widespread, almost obsessive, anxieties women felt about their body weight” (p. 274). This implicit and explicit connection between running, health, fitness, and beauty functioned to promote the activity as appropriately feminine in the same way sportswear, specifically in this analysis, running skirts, has been used as well.

Today, women’s participation in distance running has increased immensely. For example, 41% of marathon finishers in 2009 were women as compared to only 10% in 1980 (“Annual Marathon Report,” 2010). Furthermore, women comprised 51% of road race finishers in 2009 as compared to only 22% in 1980 (“Statistics,” 2010). In 2009, women runners were affluent (69% earned a household income of over \$75,000), college educated (78.7%), married (61.9%), and the average age was 38.6 (“State of the Sport,” 2010). In *The Complete Woman Runner* (1978), Switzer writes that friends and respected runners thought her prediction of a woman running a 2:35 marathon absurd. Paula Radcliff held the women’s world record in 2010 running a 2:15:25 at the 2003 London Marathon (“Runner Records,” 2010). Switzer’s friends most certainly would not have believed that possible in 1978.

Because of the number of women runners as well as their relative affluence, it should come as no surprise that corporations find this market attractive. As I have argued, manufacturers of running skirts, in particular, appeal to women’s desire to appear



both feminine and athletic as well as their desire for empowerment, here achieved through consumption. Another reason running skirts have become popular, however, is that women perceive them as practical. Women with whom I spoke wore their skirts because of its many pockets as well as the spandex shorts underneath that prevented between the legs chaffing that can occur during physical activity (e.g., F. Naylor, personal communication, June 13, 2009). To this end, Atalanta Athleticwear offers this reason for wearing a skirt: “Because 2 hours of sweaty thighs rubbing together leaves you with the unpleasant after effects not so affectionately known as ‘chub rub’” (“You Might Need a Skirt If,” 2010, #7). One woman explains that she was looking for “an alternative to shorts which would bunch between my thighs” (S. Anderson, personal communication, November 1, 2009). Kathy Morgan echoes this sentiment: “Skirts are amazing because they are sooooo comfortable, flattering, and never cause that riding up of the shorts between the legs we are all so familiar with” (personal communication, October 30, 2009). Thus, SkirtSports and other manufacturers found a niche for themselves in a crowded sportswear market by offering a solution to practical problems associated with the currently available sportswear options.

The functionality of running skirts for many women extends to their post-exercise activities as well. Armstrong (2008), in her largely autobiographical article titled “The Rise of Skirt Culture,” opines that “from a practical standpoint, it’s nice to have clothing that reflects our multitasking lives; it performs on the track and looks presentable when you roll directly into the supermarket or elementary school” (p. 72). Thus, the versatility sold here specifically targets women who have multiple life roles and have limited time

to exercise, shower, and change into more “appropriate” attire. This suggests, however, that wearing exercise clothes in public is somehow inappropriate and, consequently, that exercise is something to be hidden. This falls in step with the notion that women today are supposed to be active, toned, and fit, within reason, but that the visible effort this requires should be hidden. Running skirts provide a wearable option for women to meet these objectives.

Early adopters of running skirts have been older and larger women, as well as new exercisers because certain styles of running skirts, but not all, provide *more* coverage than running shorts (S. Kirk, personal communication, April 18, 2010). In fact, SkirtSports’ target market is women between the ages of 35 and 45, although younger women have recently started buying more skirts (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). DeBoom explains: “People looked at skirts in the beginning and they thought, ‘Oh, that’s way too sexy for me, or way too girly for me.’ But in the end, it’s actually more modest. It covers you up more but it also gives that mystery of what’s under the skirt” (in Elsberry, 2007, para. 4). By providing more coverage than shorts, women are able to hide aging and imperfect bodies from public display, while maintaining an erotic appeal. One middle-aged woman explains that she runs in a skirt “because no one needs to see my cottage cheese in spandex” (C. Patterson, personal communication, October 30, 2009). A Caucasian woman in her twenties explains that she enjoyed wearing full-body spandex outfits when she rowed with her college crew team, but now prefers her spandex be covered with a skirt (A. Young, personal communication, June 13, 2009). The enabling technology of running skirts,

then, should be applauded for its facilitation of increased participation by women in sports and physical activity.

Hargreaves (1994) warns, though, that “sportswear contributes to the making of a self-conscious, narcissistic individual image, and it is worn by women who are active participants [in sports and physical activity] as well as those who wear it just for effect” (p. 159). Indeed, DeBoom’s SkirtSports products are marketed to active women and those seeking to become active, but also as “lifestyle” clothes for “people who just want to look like runners, cyclists, and triathletes” (DeBoom, 2009). Regarding the development of a narcissistic individual image, Graves (2008) describes her first experience wearing a running skirt: “my ‘nice outfit’ made me more aware of my appearance—the last thing I want to be distracted by when running” (p. 73). She continues, “I prefer to forget my outward appearance [while running] as much as possible so I can give myself over to something much more important: what’s going on inside” (Graves, 2008, p. 73). For Graves (2008), running skirts contribute to an undesirable self-awareness of bodily appearance that she seeks to escape while running.

While some women consider running skirts practical due to the modesty they provide, why, in the first place, do women seek to hide from public view what they perceive to be as aging and imperfect bodies? As with other types of sports and physical activity, Chase (2008) explains that “all bodies engaged in distance running are subjected to the spectator gaze, disciplinary processes, and surveillance” (p. 134). Bartky (1988) expands on this idea: “disciplinary power that inscribes femininity on the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular”

(p. 74). More specifically, numerous sports scholars have used a Foucauldian (1977) framework to argue that sports participation is a primary site through which self-surveillance leads to the disciplining of docile bodies (e.g., Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008; Markula, 2003, 2004; Schultz, 2004). For example, Schultz (2004) argues that “mediated images of sports bras homogenize and normalize a particular feminine ideal” (p. 199) as they discipline and shape breasts in heteronormative and hetero-sexy ways. Running skirts are another technology of sport through which to discipline docile bodies in specific and heteronormative ways.

While some running skirts provide more coverage than shorts, what happens in effect is that bodies are shaped and contained to look the same. In 2008, Shea enlisted the help of numerous women to review running skirts for *Runner's World* magazine. Various skirts are favored because they are “young and cute,” “very slimming,” make runners of all sizes “look slender,” hide “unsightly bulges,” or have wide waistbands to cover imperfect stomachs (Shea, 2008, p. 74-75). In 2010, Shea again opines in *Runner's World* about her skirt wearing. This time she is more specific, and personal, about how she shapes her body to explicitly garner her husband's attention. Here, she suggests that her husband only pays attention to her when she engages in heteronormative bodily maintenance:

I have discovered one surefire, running-related way to get his attention, though. Jack should say a prayer of thanks at church to the running skirt. Because I want to stay, um, well groomed, I get a bikini wax every so often, especially during skirt season. When I'm freshly waxed, it just takes mere mention of that fact, and

Jack thinks having a runner for a wife is the greatest thing since, well, *SportsCenter*. Maybe even better. (Shea, 2010, p. 72)

In an article on Baylor College basketball star Brittney Griner, who is 6-foot-8 and Black, Trebay (2010) suggested that “feminine beauty ideals have shifted with amazing velocity over the last several decades, in no realm more starkly than sports. Muscular athleticism of a sort that once raised eyebrows is now commonplace” (p. 8). Athletic and muscular women, he continued, have “helped reset the parameters for how feminine beauty is defined” (Trebay, 2010, p. 8). The recent popularity of running skirts, however, is the antithesis to this assertion. Even though running skirts seemingly promote the inclusion of aging and larger women in physical activity, the participation of women who identify as such is predicated on their commitment to discipline their bodies in specific ways that replicate a White, heteronormative ideal. Furthermore, the advertising of running skirts is overwhelmingly under-inclusive, featuring predominately White women.

Moreover, in 2009, *Runner’s World* featured a story on Scout Bassett, a 20-year-old single-leg amputee and world-class triathlete (Averett, 2009). In the photo accompanying the article, Bassett wears a black running skirt as she jogs next to Ironman Sarah Reinertsen, her mentor who has also had a single-leg amputation. While I can only speculate, this running skirt may more practically accommodate her differently-sized legs than other available sportswear. At the same time, though, it normalizes and makes acceptable her otherwise “abnormal” and de-sexed body (Frank, 2000).

Another significant factor to the discussion of disciplined bodies that I have not sufficiently addressed is that of the embodiment of social class. The donning of running skirts contributes to post-feminist empowerment through consumption, attainable primarily by those with the economic capital to purchase running skirts. Booth and Loy (1999) argue that “within the context of leisure, sport has historically provided a medium for displaying status, learning new tastes, and acquiring social distinctiveness” (p. 3). The disciplining and containing of bodies in specifically heteronormative ways, then, is also associated with social-class status, as embodied sporting practices “reflect, reveal, and reinforce the status of classes and class fractions” (Booth & Loy, 1999, p. 6). One woman runner makes an explicit connection between running skirts and the desirous association with the upper-class activity of tennis: “I will never go back to shorts—finally, we runners can look as good as our tennis playing friends!” (SusanSB, 2008). Along these lines, Cooper (1998) noted that the running boom of the 1970s and 1980s was driven by upper- and middle-class women with leisure time, wealth, and open space in which to safely run.

Running skirts, however, fail to contain, shape, and discipline all bodies. For example, at the 2009 Skirt Chaser 5k Race outside of Chicago, an African American race participant exchanged one skirt for another because the Gym Girl-style skirt which came with her race entry did not sufficiently cover her well-endowed back-side (M. Bryne, personal communication, June 13, 2009). At the 2009 Skirt Chaser 5k Race in San Francisco, DeBoom’s former triathlon teammate Kerrie Scott, now in her late 40s, modeled a running skirt and bra-top as part of the SkirtSports fashion show. Although

she was exuberantly bouncing around the stage, it was obvious that Scott was extremely muscular and her long braided ponytail contributed to a youthful appearance. The juxtaposition between the running skirting and her youthful energy, with her muscular, but aging body, however, presented a combination of seemingly incompatible characteristics. In this instance, the running skirt failed to normalize and contain her. Finally, I have personally observed many exposed butt-cheeks due to skirts flying up in the back to reveal Girl Shorties that had shifted out-of-place during activity. These instances serve as notices to other women that they should discipline their own bodies or forgo running skirts completely lest they face the same undesirable fate. In the end, though, not all bodies can or will be contained, perpetuating embodied distinctions between social classes.

### Conclusion

As I have illustrated, women offer various reasons for wearing running skirts. On the surface, these decisions seem to be as a series of individual choices, however, upon closer analysis, each decision cannot escape historical and contemporary restrictions on women's bodies. First, running skirts function to promote the feminine apologetic, in effect maintaining the socially constructed role conflict between femininity and athleticism. Second, running skirts are a symbol of post-feminist empowerment achieved through consumption, individualism, and sexualization, resulting in increased class stratification and "identities invested in the status quo" (Cole & Hribar, 1995, p. 366). Finally, running skirts function to normalize diverse bodies through discipline and surveillance in such a way that perpetuates an idealized, and largely unattainable, notion

of “fit” femininity. Deviant bodies, those considered contra to the heteronormative status quo, are largely made invisible and thus undesirable.

While the popularity of running skirts has likely evaded a great number of people outside the running community, their popularity among recreational women runners is significant and has been worthy of scholarly attention. Only time will tell whether their popularity will continue far into the twenty-first century, however, as of yet, DeBoom’s running skirts now comprise their own product category within the sportswear industry (McNealy, 2008). Heywood (2007), here with regards to women’s participation in athletic training, warns:

this is not to say that being healthy and athletic is in any sense ‘bad’ or that we should not participate in these practices, but rather that as we do, we should also be aware of the larger cultural forces that shape these practices and our own choices to participate in them. (p. 115)

This warning should apply to running skirts as well. Their practical functionality for some women runners must be considered in light of the historical context from which they have arisen: namely, a long history of women who have fought for the right to participate in sports and physical activity unencumbered by dress or social constraints on their athletic prowess.

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## Chapter 3 – Marketing the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series: “Combining Fun, Fitness, and Entertainment All-in-One”<sup>4</sup>

### Introduction and Purpose

The Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series is uniquely premised upon SkirtSports sportswear’s signature product, the fitness skirt, resulting in an innovative and creative brand extension that provides a valuable case study through which to analyze a number of different marketing strategies. Through Skirt Chaser events, SkirtSports seeks to build brand equity, increase customer loyalty, enhance emotional attachment, and, in the end, generate revenue through increased sales (Apostolopoulou, 2002). In order to accomplish these goals, SkirtSports developed Skirt Chaser events utilizing both experiential branding and relationship marketing in an effort to foster strong relationships between customers and the SkirtSports brand (Apostolopoulou, 2002).

The purpose of this case study is to assess the developmental trajectory and effectiveness of the Skirt Chaser race series as a brand extension of SkirtSports sportswear. Specifically, the objective is to create a marketing mix through product, price, place, product distribution, and promotion, that improves the branded experience of Skirt Chaser participants and helps accomplish SkirtSports’ goals. In its first two years in

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<sup>4</sup> This article is intended for publication in *Sport Marketing Quarterly* as a case study.

operation, Skirt Chaser events have attracted as many as 1100 participants and as few as 200 (“Results,” 2010). Furthermore, the owner of SkirtSports has noted a “brand misstep” between the core brand (SkirtSports) and the extension (N. DeBoom, personal communication, June 12, 2009). Based on an analysis of the first two seasons of the race series, recommendations and suggestions to enhance the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses of the current Skirt Chaser marketing plan will be provided.

### Background

In 2004, elite-level triathlete Nicole DeBoom launched SkirtSports sportswear, a fitness-skirt specialty company that features pink-based fitness skirts, designed by a female athlete, for female athletes (“Fact Sheet,” 2010). Searching for a fitness wear alternative, DeBoom started SkirtSports “mirroring her ideal that women should never have to sacrifice femininity for performance in their workout clothes” (Donovan, 2009, para. 4). SkirtSports’ signature item is a skirt made for running, which vary in color, style, length, and “what’s underneath”—spankies, girl shorties, shorties, or pants. Their products also include apparel for bicycling, triathlon, and general fitness. While originally sales were conducted solely on-line through their website, SkirtSports products can now be found in approximately 500 retail stores (e.g., local running and biking specialty stores or the national outdoor adventure store REI), in the United States (US) and abroad (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010; “Store Locator,” 2010). Retailers such as Nike, New Balance, and Moving Comfort currently make their own fitness skirts attempting to capitalize on SkirtSports’ innovation and success.

From June 2008 through June 2009, the sale of fitness skirts increased by 12.5%, while the sale of women's running shorts decreased by 6.1% (Running Insight, 2009). SkirtSports led this trend as the top retailer of fitness skirts, outperforming rival companies (Running Insight, 2009). *Runner's World*, *The New York Times*, *Shape*, and other mainstream media sources have featured fitness skirts in their pages, documenting their growing popularity (e.g., Gorin, 2005; Lee, 2006; "Who wears short skirts," 2007). Fitness skirts have permeated other sports as well, including the Women's Professional Soccer league, which included a fitness wrap as part of its inaugural season uniform (WPS, 2009), the Danish women's curling team at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games (McCauley, 2010), and women's boxing, where Tiffany Perez, three-time Chicago Golden Glove champion and 2012 Olympic hopeful, wears a skirt over her shorts during competition (Despres, 2009). As the number one retailer and self-proclaimed originator of fitness skirts, however, a distinctive brand is especially important to maintaining SkirtSports' hold on the fitness skirt market.

SkirtSports' primary marketing strategy has been to promote its products through innovative and fun road races. In October of 2007, SkirtSports organized the first such event: a Convert to Skirt 5k in Boulder, Colorado (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). This women-only event was part of a larger marketing effort in 2007 that attempted to persuade women to discard their shorts in favor of running skirts. The \$30 race entry fee included a skirt and the opportunity for women to donate their old athletic shorts to the American Heart Association, the charity partner for the Convert to Skirt campaign. Just over 250 women participated in the race

and all were invited to enjoy post-race women-centered “treats” such as chocolate fondue (“Results—Convert to Skirt,” 2007; C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). In addition, the event also included a mini-skirt race for girls. SkirtSports organizers noticed, however, that participants did not stay at the venue much beyond the race itself. They speculated that this was due to familial obligations, including the presence of impatient husbands who had accompanied their wives to the race in support, but who had no interest in spending any additional time after its conclusion (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). To address this concern, SkirtSports re-named and reconfigured the race to include men (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010) because, as DeBoom explains, “women’s only events, which are very fun, [are also] a little bit boring” (2009b). Subsequent promotional activities, namely the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series, are now geared toward both men and women.

After an initial Skirt Chaser event in Austin, Texas, in November 2007, SkirtSports launched a full Skirt Chaser race series in 2008 and 2009 in multiple cities across the US. Skirt Chaser events continue to feature a 5k road race, but have been expanded to include a significant number of post-race mixed-gender social activities. The race itself features women wearing SkirtSports running skirts starting first in a “Catch Me” wave followed three minutes later by men in a “Skirt Chaser” wave; the first person to cross the finish line, male or female, wins. After the race, celebratory events include a block party, awards presentation, fashion show, live music, and dating games. Both nationally- and regionally-based companies sponsor the event, including such

companies as Barefoot Wine & Bubbly, Native Eyewear, American Laser Center, and It's Just Lunch (a San Francisco Bay Area dating service). In 2010, the race series will return to the six 2009 locations, but will add an additional five sites to expand their presence across the US.

#### Relevant Literature: Experiential Branding and Relationship Marketing

As the primary marketing initiative of SkirtSports, the Skirt Chaser event is a brand extension that uses, in particular, experiential branding and relationship marketing in order to build brand equity and customer identification. Shank (2005) explains, “the broad purpose of branding a product is to allow an organization to distinguish and differentiate itself from all others in the marketplace” (p. 228). Furthermore, Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2007) write that the key goal of branding is to “create such a strong impression in the consumers’ minds that when they see or hear something that includes a brand’s name or see its logo, marks, or colors, they experience intense positive feelings” (p. 173). The purpose of Skirt Chaser events, however, goes beyond simple product differentiation from its competitors in the fitness skirt or road race industries. Instead, its purpose is to create an overall experience that is uniquely and distinctively representative of the SkirtSports brand.

Similar to the National Football League (NFL) Experience, a fan festival hosted in conjunction with Super Bowl each year, Skirt Chaser events are premised on the desire for experiential branding and relationship marketing (Waddell, 1994). Simply, interactive sports fan festivals are “designed not only to promote the sport, but to make fans part of the action” (Waddell, 1994, p. 59). The only difference here is that

SkirtSports seeks to promote their product more so than the sport of running.

Experiential branding, then, seeks to strengthen the loyalty and positive images and associations between the brand and the consumer while the customer purchases, uses, or owns the product (Jowdy & McDonald, 2003). Skirt Chaser events epitomize this strategy: without SkirtSports, and more to the point, the fitness skirt itself, Skirt Chaser events would cease to exist at all. Instead, SkirtSports has created a fun, flirty, fitness event premised completely on the fitness skirt itself, creating a holistic experience for its customers (Schmitt, 1999; “Skirt Chaser,” 2010). Furthermore, this brand experience, or branded entertainment, does not end with the event itself. Signature race skirts, tops, and other premium items available only at the event, allow participants the opportunity to continue their affiliation and emotional connection with the event and company well after its conclusion.

Through this branded experience, Skirt Chaser events also utilize relationship marketing which “focuses on integrating the customer into the company through interactive communication to create and sustain a long-term relationship” (Jowdy & McDonald, 2003, p. 297). Additionally, Fournier (1998) explains that “feminine identity is structured and sustained by themes of connectedness and relationality,” which can be parlayed into the world of branded goods by being attentive to women’s “relational dealings in the world of branded consumption” (p. 367). While Skirt Chaser events are intended for both men and women, marketing efforts are targeted at women, SkirtSports’ primary consumer (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). Hence, marketing to women through relational means is an effort to provide an

experience with the SkirtSports brand that brings it value and increased emotional attachment (Jowdy & McDonald, 2003).

In his article on successful brand extension strategies by US professional sport teams, Apostolopoulou (2002) finds that even if a brand extension does not generate significant revenue for the organization, the extension is still successful if the fans' emotional connectedness with the team increases. In its first years establishing road races around the country, Skirt Chaser events were almost certainly not generating much profit, if any at all. SkirtSports continues to benefit, however, from the experiences its customers have with their brand and the long-term relationship being established.

## Methods

Information for this analysis was gathered through interviews with central SkirtSports and Skirt Chaser employees, participant-observation at Skirt Chaser events, direct event involvement by the author, and analysis of print and web-based marketing materials.

### Results and Analysis: The Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series Marketing Mix

According to SkirtSports' Marketing Coordinator, Chris Grack-Wilson (personal communication, January 14, 2010), the SkirtSports target market is middle- to upper-middle class women age 35-45, college-educated, with a combined household income of over \$100,000. As the primary marketing initiative of SkirtSports, Skirt Chaser races, then, target a similar audience in an effort to grow SkirtSports' size and scope. Thus far, and based on data available, the age range for Skirt Chaser events is 8-81 and the overall

average age is 33.4 years. Participation rates for women average 62.2% per race (“Results,” 2010). Grack-Wilson (personal communication, January 14, 2010) notes, however, that younger women are beginning to buy more SkirtSports products. Additionally, and of note, over 4.8 million women competed in road races in 2008, comprising 51% of all finishers, as compared to 1998 when women comprised only 38% of finishers, suggesting that SkirtSports chose a seemingly lucrative marketing strategy (“Statistics,” 2010). In what follows, I provide a detailed description of the Skirt Chaser marketing mix for 2008 and 2009, including product, price, place, product distribution, and, finally, promotion (see Figure 1).



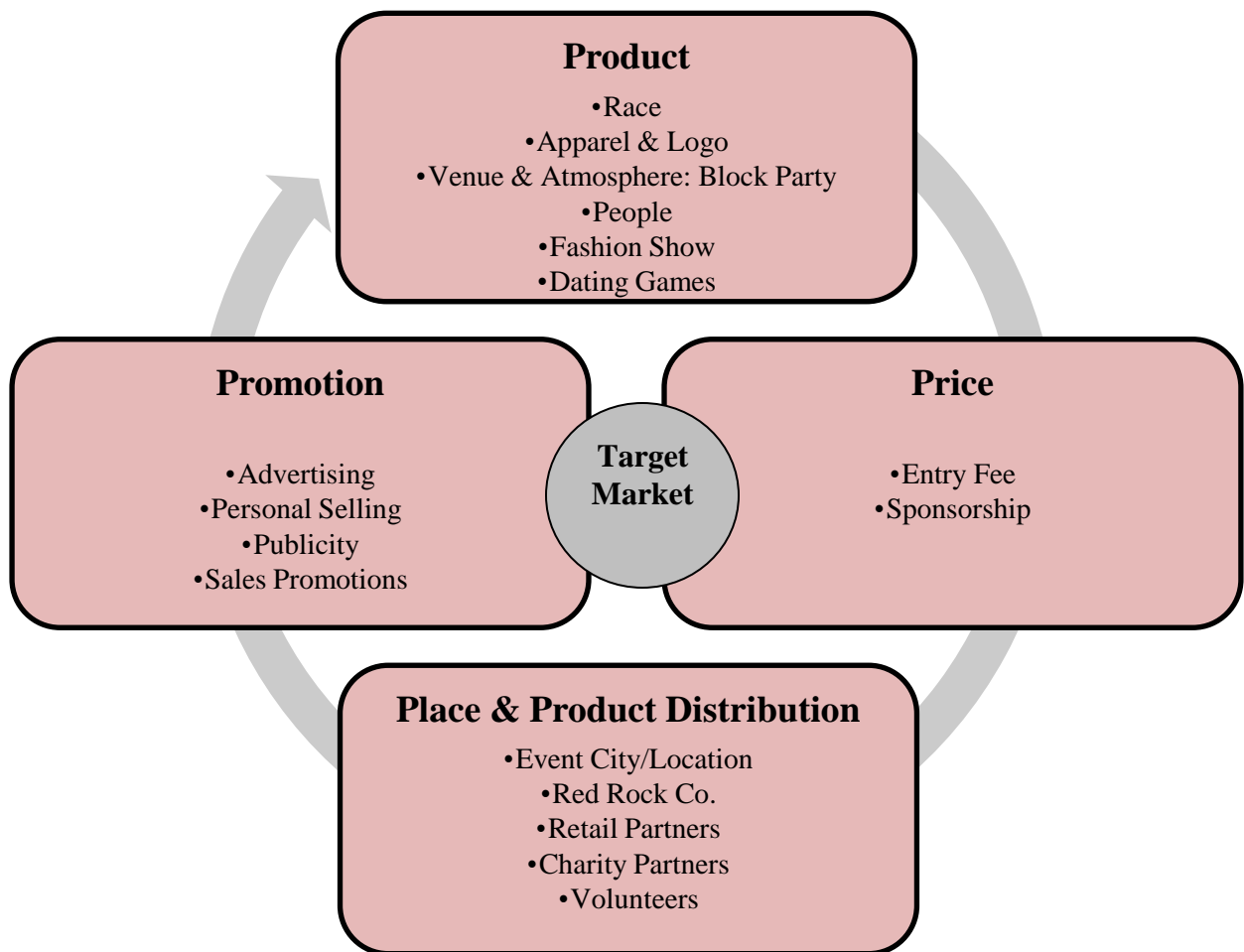


Figure 1. Skirt Chaser Marketing Mix

### *Product*

The Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series is evidence of a growing trend in marketing: it is an event created purely to sell SkirtSports products (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007).

While SkirtSports' fitness skirts and apparel take center stage at this event, the race itself, the venue and atmosphere—namely the post-race block party, and involvement of event organizers, such as Nicole DeBoom, CEO and founder of SkirtSports, are all key

components of Skirt Chasers' core product. The extended elements of the core product include the post-race fashion show and dating games. In what follows, I provide the details of each and how Skirt Chaser events have evolved since their inception.

#### *Race.*

The Skirt Chaser 5k Race's motto and philosophy is "experience the most fun you've ever had while working out!" ("Race Info," 2010, para. 1). Specifically, DeBoom started Skirt Chaser events with three ideas in mind: skirts, beer, and flirting (DeBoom, 2009a), creating a "sexy spin on a running classic by mixing racing, flirting and entertainment in an innovative social fitness event" ("Skirt Chaser," 2010, para. 1). Before the race in San Francisco, DeBoom (2009c) offered three reasons why she created Skirt Chaser races for women: first, women get to wear fun, casual, sexy, comfortable fitness clothes; second, women get to start first; and third, women have the potential to establish a "life-long love affair" with one of the male participants—although she would likely settle for a "life-long long affair" with SkirtSports itself.

In the race, Skirts (women) started first and were followed three minutes later by Skirt Chasers (men). In so doing, DeBoom created an event which puts her target market uniquely at the center of attention and provided an opportunity for female race participants to engage with the brand in such an intimate way that the brand can "provide perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem" (Fournier, 1998, p. 359). DeBoom further explains that the race is an empowering experience because women do not otherwise start first or lead in road races (DeBoom, 2009b). Along these lines, DeBoom says she prefers

that Skirts win more frequently than Skirt Chasers (of the available results, women have won 14 of 17 events; “Results,” 2010).

As the name of the race indicates, Skirt Chasers chase Skirts to the finish line in an effort to compete, but also to meet someone along the way. In particular, to help single women and men identify each other, race participants are encouraged to wear Skirt Chaser logo stickers in order to identify one another. Marketing materials explaining the race, for example, included the following: “Catch Me Wave: The women's start kicks-off the event at 2pm. Skirt Chaser Wave: Three minutes later, the men will chase 'em down!” (S. Grossi, 2009a, para. 1). Since the race’s inception, however, DeBoom has received negative feedback regarding the premise of the race. The first criticism has been aimed at the race’s alleged objectification of women, including the role SkirtSports’ fitness skirts contribute to this objectification (N. DeBoom, personal communication, June 12, 2009). The second criticism has been aimed at the imagery of men chasing women from a violence perspective (T. Green,<sup>5</sup> personal communication, November, 14, 2009). For these reasons, Skirt Chaser organizers had a difficult time identifying a charity partner in San Francisco. The first few charities Skirt Chaser organizers contacted—each were advocacy groups for girls and women in different respects—refused their request because they thought the message of the Skirt Chaser race was incompatible with their own (A. Sanders, personal communication, October 30, 2009). Because some potential race participants may find the suggestive language associated with this event problematic,

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to informants for privacy protection when those individuals are not easily defined as public figures or whose research-related identities are not readily available on the Internet. Internet web log usernames have not been altered.

Skirt Chaser organizers would be wise to evaluate their promotional materials and make adjustments accordingly.

*Apparel and Logo.*

Central to the success of Skirt Chaser events is that female participants elect to run in skirts. In order to assist with this goal, and to continue their campaign to get women to convert from shorts to skirts, race packages for women include exclusive race series skirts. After the finish of the race, SkirtSports wants its female participants, in particular, to continue to wear their product. Unlike similar road races which commonly require its participants to select their commemorative race shirt size prior to the event and prior to a proper sizing assessment, Skirt Chaser participants are unabashedly encouraged to try on their skirts and get “Skirt-fitted” before they decide on a size or color. This both speaks to the newness of the skirt phenomena for runners and a concerted effort by the race organizers to size women properly so that participants continue to wear SkirtSports products after the event providing ongoing advertising for the company and brand.

Unfortunately for Skirt Chaser organizers and the SkirtSports brand, the women winners of Skirt Chaser races are notorious for not having worn skirts in their races. At the Bloomingdale 2009 event, the winner asserted that she had just graduated from college and could not afford the higher entry fee through which to obtain a skirt (Baumert, 2009). In Savannah, the winner explained that she was a low maintenance runner and preferred to run in ordinary running clothes—indeed, she was wearing a well-worn over-sized cotton t-shirt and shorts (L. Grant, personal communication, October 31, 2009). In San Francisco, the winner told the crowd at the awards ceremony that when

she was registering for the event she “chickened out” (Peterson, 2009). From a marketing perspective, the Skirt Chaser organizers obviously find this trend unfavorable. In response, SkirtSports has sent each woman home with a new SkirtSports running skirt. Part of the challenge, too, though, is that skirt-wearing remains primarily in the realm of recreational runners. Those women running fast enough to win a road race likely consider themselves part of a group where skirt-wearing is not the norm (L. Baumert, personal communication, June 13, 2009).

Color is central to the brand identity of a product, as “colors can have a significant affect [*sic*] on people’s perception of a product or brand” (Daye & VanAken, 2007, “Color & Brand Identity,” para. 1). Along these lines, Skirt Chaser event colors are red and black, as compared to SkirtSports’ signature color: pink. While Skirt Chaser events are marketed primarily to women, the color-scheme change is a direct reflection of the event’s inclusion of men. Although a seemingly reasonable change, the color-scheme difference between SkirtSports and Skirt Chaser events has contributed to a disconnection between the two for participants (N. DeBoom, personal communication, June 12, 2009). Similarly, the color scheme difference between SkirtSports and Skirt Chaser events is further reflected in their company logos, which share a font but are otherwise problematically independent of one another (see Appendix A).

Equally important to brand identity, if not more so, is a company’s distinctive mark, or logo. SkirtSports’ first product line, and that used for Skirt Chaser events in 2007, was named TRIKS, or “skirt” spelled backwards. Starting in 2008, SkirtSports adopted a new logo, which is the outline of a skirt with a hint of shorts underneath. In an

August 2007 press release, SkirtSports explains this branding shift: “No longer will the company call its sassy and sexy apparel line by the name TRIKS, but all products will be SkirtSports-branded” (Donovan, 2007, para. 1). DeBoom further explains: “I have always seen SkirtSports as the bigger picture, and envisioned multiple lines under the 'Skirt' umbrella, including TRIKS. With our enormous growth in the past six months, we've recognized a need for more consistency in the SkirtSports brand" (in Donovan, 2007, para. 2). Presumably as well, SkirtSports realized that while spelling skirts backwards was creative, the association between “triks” and their products was not the image they hoped to build for their brand.

Presently, SkirtSports uses the outline of a running skirt as its primary logo, and Skirt Chaser events use “The Skirt Chaser Woman” (see Appendix A). The Skirt Chaser Woman is a red silhouette, she wears a skirt, her hair hangs freely below her shoulders, and her hands rest behind her head as she leans backwards coquettishly, hip popped to the side, somewhat resembling the ubiquitous silhouette of a naked woman found on semi-truck mud-flaps. Central to the success of Skirt Chaser events is the congruence between the SkirtSports brand and Skirt Chaser events. While DeBoom has certainly asserted that Skirt Chaser races are edgy and fun (“Race Info,” 2010), the Skirt Chaser Woman may detract from her commitment to women and to the relationship building she seeks to achieve through experiential branding (“Fact Sheet,” 2010).

*Venue & Atmosphere: Block Party.*

Because Skirt Chaser races rotate between cities, organizers do not have the benefit of working with and improving upon a single location. Instead, each location

presents certain advantages and disadvantages that must be taken into consideration. In general, though, Skirt Chaser events strive to create a block party atmosphere before, but especially after the event. The block party that follows the race, including the alcohol involved, is intended to create a fun, adult atmosphere for mingling, dancing, and flirting. Race packages include entry to the block party event, which features live music, two drink tickets, free food, and post race entertainment. Listing the block party explicitly as part of each race package is an effort on behalf of the organizers to justify the race entry fee that is higher than similar races that are more commonly priced between \$20 and \$25 (Lykken, 2009; M. Melley, personal communication, October 30, 2009). In order to contribute to the block party atmosphere, events are primarily held on Saturdays, starting either mid-afternoon or early evening, instead of a more traditional morning start time. The final element of the block party is the live entertainment. On the whole, entertainment hired for the events are local bands, primarily those who cover other artists' songs. The ability of the band to provide entertainment that caters to its audience and truly provides motivation to dance and enjoy their surroundings plays a significant role in the overall success or failure of Skirt Chaser events.

#### *People.*

As can be said for many events, the people organizing the event and, especially those in contact with the participants, contribute immensely to the event's success or failure (Mullin et al., 2007). In 2008, SkirtSports partnered with Red Rock Co., which specializes in race production, in order to provide more consistent race experiences from city to city. Thus, the Red Rock staff provides the primary organizational power and

personnel for the event, although they rely heavily on volunteer support and members of the Skirt Entourage, a company sponsored fan club. In particular, though, DeBoom's presence and participation in each Skirt Chaser event is a significant contribution to the event as a whole. While many of the participants are unaware of her relation to the event until she makes her connection known explicitly at the starting line and fashion show, for others, the opportunity to meet her is a significant attraction. DeBoom usually runs in the event, undoubtedly wearing a SkirtSports dress or skirt, as a casual participant and during other times can be found mingling with participants. In addition, DeBoom has a Twitter account that she updates frequently and she periodically sends emails through the SkirtSports electronic mailing list in an effort to create a personal connection with SkirtSports customers.

#### *Fashion Show.*

The first of the two extended elements of Skirt Chaser's core product is the fashion show, which occurs directly after the awards ceremony on the main event stage. The fashion show exclusively features SkirtSports products and is intended to explicitly connect Skirt Chaser events with SkirtSports and to drive customer consumption. Five female race participants model SkirtSports products on stage while DeBoom provides the narration, music blaring in the background. In an effort to keep the crowd entertained, DeBoom's narrative is often provocative in its representation of the product itself and in its representation of the women models. She is largely successful with this endeavor and her energy fits neatly with that of the block party atmosphere and event as a whole. In particular, the fashion show sets the tone for the dating games that follow. On the one



hand, DeBoom's narration appeals to the rational consumer, providing a description of the direct benefits and practicality of SkirtSports' products. On the other hand, her narration targets the audience from an emotional perspective, enticing them to purchase sportswear because of the seemingly positive attention it attracts from both men and women.

#### *Dating Games.*

The second of the two extended elements of Skirt Chaser's core product is the dating game, which occurs shortly after the fashion show at each event. The dating games (heterosexual in orientation) have taken various formats: speed dating, a newly-wed game, and a bachelor auction. As with the fashion show, the dating games are lively and in-line with the premise of the event, as they promote the event as an opportunity for single individuals to find a mate. The newly-wed game, however, does little to promote new relationships as the game itself is for couples already dating or married—in Savannah, for example, one participant couple had been married for 42 years (G. Grossi, 2009).

#### *Price*

##### *Entry Fees.*

The primary price consideration for Skirt Chaser events is the participants' registration fee. In the two years the event can truly be considered a series (2008 and 2009), SkirtSports has used various pricing strategies in an effort to strike a balance between the costs of producing the event, the price of competing events, consumer perception of the value of the event, and their marketing objectives (Fullerton, 2008).

Between 2008 and 2009, the pricing structure of Skirt Chaser events changed, suggesting that SkirtSports has yet to find an ideal balance.

During the 2008 and 2009 race series, Skirt Chaser events were priced using both price tiering and price bundling (“Skirt Chaser Race Series—Chicago,” 2008; “Skirt Chaser Race Series—Chicago,” 2009). Price tiering is a strategy acknowledging that “various target markets create different price points for the organization to take into account” (Fullerton, 2008, p. 350). Along these lines, in 2008, SkirtSports targeted female participants using three “Convert to Skirt” tiers (Deluxe, Standard, and Skirtless), male participants using two “Skirt Chaser” tiers (Standard and Birthday Suit), and students (Standard and Penniless). At each tier, the price of the package included a number of different items bundled together, making the purchase as a bundle much less expensive than had each component been purchased individually. In 2009, the price structure for the event remained largely the same (see Table 1 and Table 2). In addition, though, Red Rock added a bundling option for couples (\$15 off the race entry fee for the second participant), and eliminated the student options. Of note, however, is that the bundle for couples was available only through on-line registration and seemed not to be tracked (C. Brown, personal communication, November 14, 2009). Finally, Red Rock added a goody bag to each package option filled with sponsor-related advertising, sample products, and coupons.

Table 1. Women's Race Packages 2008 & 2009

	Race Package	2008	2009
Women	Deluxe (2008: \$80) (2009: \$85)	Race Series Skirt Race Series Shirt Visor or Lace Arm Warmers Race Entry Block Party Entry	Race Series Skirt Race Series Shirt Visor Race Entry Block Party Entry
	Standard (\$55)	Race Series Skirt Race Entry Block Party Entry	Race Series Skirt Race Entry Block Party Entry
	Skirtless (2008: \$30/2009: \$35)	Race Entry Block Party Entry	Race Entry Block Party Entry
	Student (\$45)	Race Series Skirt Race Entry Block Party Entry	
	Student: Penniless (\$20)	Race Entry Block Party Entry	

Table 2. Men's Race Packages 2008 & 2009

	Race Package	2008	2009
Men	Deluxe (\$85)		Race Series Shorts Races Series Shirt Visor Race Entry Block Party Entry
	Standard (2008: \$42) (2009: \$50)	Race Series Shirt Visor Race Entry Block Party Entry	Race Series Shirt Race Entry Block Party Entry
	Birthday Suit (2008: \$30/2009: \$35)	Race Entry Block Party Entry	Race Entry Block Party Entry
	Student		
	Student: Penniless (\$20)	Race Entry Block Party Entry	

The 2009 pricing strategy reflected DeBoom's exclusive vision (M. Melley, personal communication, November 30, 2009), arguing that the price tiers met her marketing objectives: first, the prices target women in the same demographic as SkirtSports customers. Next, the price and what is included in the price differentiates Skirt Chaser events from ordinary 5k road races, which commonly cost \$20 or \$25 (Lykken, 2009). Most importantly, though, DeBoom wants women to convert from shorts to skirts, which she argued happens best by offering deluxe and standard packages with skirts included. Mike Melley, Red Rock part-Owner and Event Director, however, argued that a lower price point would entice a greater participation rate as runners are notoriously price sensitive (personal communication, October 30, 2009). Instead, he proposed increasing the number of participants at each event by lowering the price (M. Melley, personal communication, October 30, 2009). Once participants are at the event, he suggested that SkirtSports would then be able to focus on increasing its visibility and sales to a greater audience by having product available on site to purchase. Importantly, at the 2009 San Francisco event, approximately half of the female participants actually raced in a skirt. For a race that is premised on skirt chasing, this should be considered highly problematic and evidence, perhaps, of price points that are beyond the reach of a significant number of women at the race and an even greater number of women who were priced out of the race completely.

### *Sponsorship.*

The price structure for outside sponsorship of Skirt Chaser events is another significant point of consideration for event organizers. The opportunities for sponsorship are many, and the cost varies with each type of sponsorship (see Table 3). Notably, the price for each category was the same across host cities in 2009, except for food sponsorship, even though the number of participants and, thus, exposure was in some instances drastically different (e.g., Tempe anticipated 1500 participants, while Atlanta anticipated only 700).

Table 3. Sample 2009 Skirt Chaser Sponsorship Levels

Host City: Tempe								
Anticipated Athletes: 1500								
Sponsorship Opportunity	Title	Presenting	Run Course	Aid Station	Finish Line	Awards	Expo	Post Race Food
Price	\$5,000	\$2,000	\$1,000	\$500	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$4,500

Skirt Chaser events utilize a combination of national and regional sponsorships to help fund their event. The goal is not only to secure sponsorships, however, it is to find a good fit between Skirt Chaser events and its sponsors as “brand congruence and compatibility will generate the highest positive response from consumers, which in turn will influence buying habits through an increased positive perception of the brand” (Mueller & Roberts, 2008, p. 156). National sponsors in 2009 included: SkirtSports, Cool Max fabric, Headsweats hats, Native Eyewear, Oskar Blues Brewery, Power Bar,

and *Women's Adventure* magazine. Regionally, Skirt Chaser events have had a variable number of sponsors. For example, the Denver event, which has consistently been one of the most successful, in 2009 featured 15 sponsors varying from a women's bag company to a travel company specializing in sustainability to a chiropractic company (S. Grossi, 2009a).

Skirt Chaser sponsors, for the most part, have been a good fit for the brand and its intended image. Sponsorship activation, though, has largely been non-existent. Wakefield (2007) explains that "activation occurs when fans recognize and make the connection between the sponsor and the property, allowing for fan identification and affinity with the property to transfer to the sponsor" (p. 153). Event sponsors' logos can be found on the Skirt Chaser website and email blasts, sponsors are allowed signage at the event expo, and are free to include flyers and/or coupons in event goodie bags—all of which do little to create an active association in participants' minds between the event and sponsor. Some sponsors may elect to host a booth at the race expo in order to create more of a presence at the event. Here, too, unless the sponsor actively engages race participants, their presence is likely easily forgotten.

Native Eyewear provides a notable example of successful sponsorship activation and leverage. For example, under the sponsorship section of the Skirt Chaser website, Native Eyewear's mission is explained as follows:

... to encourage people to play where they live and inspire urban dwellers to see their city in a new light. What a perfect fit for Skirt Chaser! Come out to a race and you'll see them all over the place including the 'Native Battle of the Sexes

Awards Ceremony’ and the ‘Native Eyewear Dash.’ The first couple to cross the line together [*sic*] get a free pair of Native sunglasses and the first three to cross the line, regardless of gender, get the shades and a check! (“National Sponsors,” 2010, para. 3)

Native Eyewear not only provides a prize for each of the winning runners, but also claims the naming rights to the awards ceremony and the couples’ contest. At the San Francisco event, Native Eyewear was mentioned 12 times throughout the awards ceremony and dating game, which was twice as many times as the next most mentioned sponsor, It’s Just Lunch (S. Grossi, 2009c). In addition, at the 2009 Savannah event, the Native Eyewear representative participated as one of the models in the fashion show, garnering attention not only for SkirtSports products, but also for her own company. While increased sponsorship activation is important for all of Skirt Chaser’s sponsors, it is particularly important for its national sponsors who are participating in the event with the direct intention of marketing their own product.

### *Place and Product Distribution*

#### *Place.*

With regards to the place components of Skirt Chaser’s marketing mix, attention is paid to both the selection of host cities and the location for the event within the host city itself (see Table 4 for a list of host cities).

Table 4. Skirt Chaser Event Locations

2007	2008	2009
Boulder, CO (Convert to Skirt)	Tempe, AZ	Tempe, AZ
Austin, TX	Raleigh, NC	Raleigh, NC
	Chicagoland (Arlington Heights), IL	Chicagoland, (Bloomington), IL
	Denver, CO	Denver, CO
	Austin, TX	Savannah, GA
	Santa Monica, CA	San Francisco, CA

Both the Tempe and Denver locations were chosen due to the company headquarters of Red Rock and SkirtSports respectively. Because each company has established a local presence, these races have had the largest number of participants and have been the most successful overall. Each of the other locations has been established through a two-fold process. First, retailers are identified who successfully carry SkirtSports products and second, company representatives travel to the area to propose a partnership in organizing a Skirt Chaser event. To help identify event cities for the 2010 race series, the Skirt Chaser website hosted an on-line voting system where visitors could vote on what cities Red Rock should pursue. The cities themselves vary in size and regional location in an effort to grow the series geographically.

The characteristics of event locations within each city are hard to generalize. In San Francisco, the race took place in the middle of Golden Gate Park on a busy Sunday



afternoon. In contrast, the event in Bloomingdale, a Chicago suburb, took place on the grounds of the Hilton Chicago/Indian Lakes Resort, with the race course winding its way through a residential neighborhood and golf course. In Savannah, the event was held on Hutchinson Island, which sits in the middle of the Savannah River directly across from downtown. The race course followed a seldom used racetrack, providing participants with an unique experience, although completely devoid of spectator support.

Similar in all three races, however, is a common start and finish area with race day registration and packet pick-up, sponsor booths, entertainment stage, and food and beverage tables. Also common to all three race courses was a built in out and back “turn” approximately a half mile from the finish line. Prior to the start of each race, DeBoom explains to the female participants in particular: “you’ll have time to check out the scenery, if you know what I mean, and decide how quickly or slowly you want to run it in” (2009c). Additionally, Skirt Chaser events generally have an early-evening start time. As opposed to most other road races that start mid-morning, the early-evening start times are intended to contribute to the social, mingling, block party atmosphere of the event.

*Red Rock Co.*

The first of four primary distribution strategies was SkirtSports’ hiring of Red Rock Co., a Tempe, Arizona-based race production company. Since the initial Convert to Skirt event and the first Skirt Chaser event in 2007, management and implementation of the event series has changed hands, directly reflecting its expansion and growth. In 2007, SkirtSports produced its two events. In 2008, SkirtSports retained primary control of event production, but enlisted the help of production companies located in the cities

hosting each event (N. DeBoom, personal communication, November 15, 2009). In 2009, SkirtSports hired Red Rock to produce each of its events around the country. This change reflected SkirtSports' full realization that the management of the event exceeded the scope of its in-house capabilities and that the continuity in branding and event experience in 2008 harmfully varied from city to city. The partnership with Red Rock occurred because there is cross-ownership and investment between Red Rock and SkirtSports—Tim DeBoom, Nicole DeBoom's husband, is an investor and part owner of Red Rock, and Red Rock part-owner Kimo Seymour is an investor in SkirtSports (M. Melley, personal communication, October 30, 2009).

Red Rock's responsibilities include handling event registration, managing the Skirt Chaser website, identifying host cities and retailers within those cities with whom to partner, securing street permits, hiring live-entertainment, and general day-of event management. When not managing Skirt Chaser events, Red Rock primarily produces events in Arizona, making the Skirt Chaser event series its only nationwide responsibility. Red Rock remains in close contact with SkirtSports throughout the planning process to ensure the image and vision of SkirtSports is consistent with what is produced at Skirt Chaser events. SkirtSports' post-race participant surveys from Denver, Savannah, and San Francisco indicated, however, that participants were confused as to the role of SkirtSports in the event (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). For example, in response to the question of whether participants knew SkirtSports was the "brains behind the Skirt Chaser event," only 50% answered affirmatively (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010).

Additionally, many survey respondents replied that the survey itself was the first time they had heard of SkirtSports.

This final point should be particularly alarming for Skirt Chaser organizers because if participants do not associate Skirt Chaser events with SkirtSports, then it is not truly working as a brand extension. Similarly, in terms of sponsorship, Wakefield (2007) explains “if the sponsor’s brand gets lost in the clutter of the event and the plethora of other sponsors, there is little chance that fans will transfer their affinity and love for the team to the brand” (p. 200). Thus, Red Rock’s task is to more clearly activate SkirtSports’ sponsorship of the event so that fans process and deeply elaborate on the relationship between the two (Wakefield, 2007).

#### *Retail Partners.*

The second product distribution method is through local retail partners, both for general distribution of SkirtSports products, and as a vital partner in producing Skirt Chaser events. Originally, SkirtSports products were solely available through on-line sales until customer demand led the company to start distributing its product in retail stores as well (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). SkirtSports products are now found primarily in specialty running and biking stores, reflecting a selective distribution strategy (Fullerton, 2008). Specialty running and biking stores tend to carry only higher-end apparel and cater to individuals financially able to afford the apparel and the time it can take to run or bike (Spiegel, 2008). Red Rock relies on the distribution capabilities of each retail partner as a main means of organization and recruitment of participants for Skirt Chaser events. For example, the Skirt Chaser events

in Tempe and Denver have consistently been the most successful because of the distribution lists that Red Rock and SkirtSports themselves maintain as well as the close relationship they have with their retail partners. On race weekend, retail partners host the packet pick-up the day before the event, which is an incredibly important component of the event as it sets the tone for its organization, mood, and overall satisfaction. On the day of the event, the retail partner hosts an apparel booth at the event featuring SkirtSports products available at a discounted price. The fit and communication between the retail partner, SkirtSports, and the Skirt Chaser events must be seamless for a successful event.

*Charity Partners.*

The third and fourth methods through which Skirt Chaser events are produced are through event charity partners and volunteer support during packet pick-up and race-day management, with some overlap between the two methods. SkirtSports has yet to identify a national charity partner, instead finding a local charity partner for each event. Grack-Wilson (personal communication, January 14, 2010) explains that SkirtSports would ideally like to partner with one national charity in addition to partnering with a local charity in each event city. National charity partners with whom to partner, though, are hard to find as most are already affiliated with other fundraising events and companies (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010).

The charities themselves are involved in the event to varying degrees. On one end of the involvement spectrum is Marklund—which provides services for children with developmental disabilities in Bloomingdale—who brought an army of volunteers to the

event to help with registration, product pickup, race course set-up, food distribution, and many other tasks. In addition, the Hilton donated their event space for the race and block party, and the police donated their time to monitor the race course on Marklund's behalf. Furthermore, Marklund worked with SkirtSports to organize a charity runner program to benefit their organization. In return, Red Rock donated the money they saved through Marklund's procurement of event space and police support directly to the organization (K. Seymour, personal communication, June 13, 2009). On the other end of the involvement spectrum, for example, was the charity partner for the Savannah event: Girls on the Run of Coastal Georgia, whose mission is to help girls develop healthy life habits through running and attention to physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual well-being ("Girls on the Run," 2010). The leader of the organization simply hosted a booth at the event in order to collect names of individuals interested in volunteering with the organization at a later date, but was otherwise not involved in the event.

An additional component to the relationship between Skirt Chaser events and its charities is that of alcohol. Central to Skirt Chaser events is the consumption of alcohol and, in order for this to occur, Skirt Chaser organizers must apply for an alcohol permit with the event's host city (A. Sanders, personal communication, October 30, 2009). With a non-profit charity as the signatory, Red Rock can procure the permit at a reduced cost, or sometimes at no cost. For instance, in Savannah, permit fees would have been upwards of \$650, however, non-profit organizations, such as Girls on the Run, are exempt from these fees (Leisure Service Bureau, 2010). In exchange, Red Rock then donated the difference to the charity. Additionally, with Skirt Chaser event registration,

each participant over the age of 21 receives tickets for two alcoholic drinks. All of the profit from additional sales of beer and wine is donated to the charity partner. In Bloomingdale, however, Red Rock employees were concerned that the block party was petering out too quickly, so they began handing out extra drink tickets as incentive for participants to stay longer (S. Grossi, personal communication, June 13, 2009). But, in so doing, they directly impacted Marklund's potential financial gain.

In San Francisco, SkirtSports had difficulty identifying a charity partner. After a successful partnership at the Savannah event, SkirtSports contacted Girls on the Run of San Francisco, who also focuses on improving the overall well-being of girls, hoping for a similarly successful partnership. Girls on the Run of San Francisco, however, turned them down citing concern that alcohol and skirt chasing were incongruent messages with that of their organization (A. Sanders, personal communication, October 30, 2009). Two additional San Francisco charities affiliated with women's issues also turned down their request for partnership. Instead, Skirt Sports contacted the Tempe charity with whom they have previously worked, Chances for Children, and proposed a partnership for the San Francisco event. Chances for Children agreed. The leader of the Coastal Georgia chapter of Girls on the Run also had initial hesitations regarding partnering with the Skirt Chaser event. Her hesitation, though, stemmed from associating her charity with alcohol, not the potential incongruence of the organizations' messages (I. Dayoub, personal communication, October 31, 2009). After consulting with the national governing office, she reasoned that although the partnership involved alcohol, those consuming the alcohol

were all legally-aged individuals, and the origin of the money would be irrelevant to anyone who was not at the actual event.

### *Volunteers.*

The fourth and final product distribution strategy is the utilization of volunteers. Recruitment of volunteers occurs in three ways: solicitation through the Skirt Chaser website, charity partners, and an official volunteer coordinator. The Skirt Chaser website advertises the need for volunteers, asking those who cannot or chose not to race to volunteer as a way to still experience the event and, in so doing, get free SkirtSports or Skirt Chaser products. The second strategy is to ask the charity partner to help with recruiting volunteers, which was a successful strategy at the 2009 Bloomingdale event, but at the San Francisco event, an absent local charity partner led to a last minute scramble for volunteers (C. Brown, personal communication, November 2, 2009). The most important volunteer recruitment strategy occurs through the volunteer coordinator that Red Rock hires in each event city. Volunteer coordinators are chosen for their connection to the running, or often triathlon, communities in the area, as well as their enthusiasm for the SkirtSports brand. In addition to finding volunteers, volunteer coordinators might also be asked to help with on-the-ground organization of the event that can only be done locally. Because Red Rock does not have its own employees in each event city, the volunteer coordinator becomes a key player in each event's success. As the events begin to return to the same cities on a yearly basis, finding a competent, trustworthy, and reliable volunteer coordinator will surely help with continuity and event success from year to year.

### *Promotion*

Since 2009 when SkirtSports hired Red Rock to produce Skirt Chaser events, promotion of the event has been a split responsibility between the two. Mullin et al. (2007) describe promotional activities as those “designed to stimulate consumer interest in, awareness of, and purchase of the product,” in so doing, they are a “mechanism for positioning a product and its image in the mind of the consumer” (p. 237). In order to accomplish this goal, Red Rock uses a combination of advertising (print and electronic), personal selling, publicity, and sales promotions in order to stimulate consumer interest in Skirt Chaser events, and, in the end, SkirtSports products. In the following section, I describe each component of their promotional strategy in detail.

#### *Advertising.*

The combination of print and electronic advertising seeks to grab participant attention and spark curiosity about the event, while at the same time convey essential information, such as location, date, and the benefits of participation. While Red Rock primarily relies on electronic advertising, a few notable print advertising strategies are worth mentioning. First, postcard-sized advertisements are sent in advance to each retail partner as a way to actively involve them in the recruitment of participants. Second, signage is abundant at each Skirt Chaser event. In addition to national and regional sponsor signage at the event expo, SkirtSports’ signage is also prevalent. As previously mentioned, however, approximately half of event participants responding to a post-event survey indicated that they were unaware of SkirtSports and its relevance to the event (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). While SkirtSports signage



was employed widely and located directly behind the stage used for the awards presentation, fashion show, newly-wed game, and live entertainment, it may have been lost in the clutter of messages found throughout the tent.

SkirtSports uses radio advertising sparingly; their main electronic media channel is through their website and social networking (C. Brown, personal communication, November 14, 2009). Until mid-February, 2010, the Skirt Chaser website was easily located using popular search engines and provided information regarding the premise of the event, race dates, sponsors, registration, and volunteering. Additionally, it reflected the color-scheme of the event, featured videos of past races, and provided visitors the opportunity to sign-up for an electronic newsletter or Twitter feed. In mid-February, SkirtSports took a step through its website to better align itself with Skirt Chaser events. Now, no separate website exists for Skirt Chaser events, rather a new webpage opens within the SkirtSports homepage, providing a pivotal connection between the two entities. However, the videos and photos of past races are no longer available and are a significant loss from an advertising perspective: both provided a fun and informative look at the Skirt Chaser event.

SkirtSports and Red Rock also use social media as an important and cost effective advertising channel. The Skirt Chaser company page on Facebook is updated frequently with announcements regarding upcoming races and several of its 800 members post proclamations about their affinity for the event and request that races are brought to their region of the country. The SkirtSports company page, with more than 2300 fans who “Like” the company, also frequently includes posts about Skirt Chaser events as well. In

the later events of 2009, both Red Rock and fans shared event photos through the Skirt Chaser company page. Importantly, the Facebook group is a venue through which fans can affiliate with the event, regardless of their physical location or ability to attend in person (C. Brown, personal communication, November 14, 2009). Additionally, DeBoom uses a Twitter account to promote races, although the account is technically a SkirtSports account rather than one devoted entirely to Skirt Chaser events.

Two other methods of electronic advertising are noteworthy. The first is SkirtSports' and Red Rock's use of email blasts to its customers, former participants, and individuals who have signed up to receive electronic newsletters. The purpose of such an approach is to drive customers to the Skirt Chaser website and to prompt them to take action by signing up for the event. Furthermore, the hope is that the email will "go viral" as recipients forward it to their friends. Email blasts include information about the race and how to register, names of sponsors and the event's charity partners, a link to forward the email to other people, and an announcement that there are limited entries (even though this is not the case) to entice prompt registration. Additionally, email blasts function similarly to direct-mail campaigns: "its major advantage is that it reaches only the people the organization wants to reach, which minimizes spending on circulating a message to people who have little interest in the contents" (Mullin et al., 2007, p. 249).

Red Rock also utilizes the services of Active.com, which is an "online community for people who want to discover, learn about, share, register for and ultimately participate in activities about which they are passionate" ("About Us," 2010, para. 1). Active.com hosts event registration for Skirt Chaser events at no cost to Red Rock. Rather, event

participants pay a fee to Active.com—for the Savannah event, for example, the processing fee was five dollars on top of the cost of the event itself. Another example of this approach to advertising is Trifind.com, which helps direct triathletes to various events around the country, at no cost to event organizers. Along these lines, Casey Brown, a Red Rock employee, has joined several social networking websites to advertise the event, including a dating site for active singles (i.e., [www.fitness-singles.com](http://www.fitness-singles.com)) and a website for busy moms called Work It, Mom! (C. Brown, personal communication, November 14, 2009). Of Red Rock's and SkirtSports' electronic advertising strategies this seems the most innovative and potentially fruitful as it reaches the event's target market directly while not relying solely on the fan base that it has already created.

*Personal Selling.*

In Skirt Sports' formative years, the company had just a few employees, little office space, and relied on Internet sales through their website for all sales (McNealy, 2008). Although the company started small, a number of women were instantly “touched” by the newly available fitness skirts and contacted SkirtSports to see how they could help spread the word about the company (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). SkirtSports researched other company-sponsored ambassador programs looking for guidance as to how best to harness the women's interest in the company. Ultimately, SkirtSports created a Skirt Ambassador program, now named the Skirt Entourage, as a brand community that would provide SkirtSports an important personal connection to current and future customers on a grassroots level in order to drive a “skirt revolution” (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January

14, 2010). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) explain that a brand community is a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand," additionally, "brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy" (p. 412).

For SkirtSports, the ultimate purpose of the Skirt Entourage was the personal selling of SkirtSports' products and the company's ethos, and assistance in driving traffic to their website. Through an application process, SkirtSports originally selected approximately 40 women for the program from all over the country, including a few women overseas. Women were accepted based in part on their connection to their communities and in part based on their enthusiasm for the brand—for example, one Entourage member concluded an email as follows: "Have a Skirt-tastic day!" (B. Abbott, personal communication, July 14, 2009). Each woman was given a couple of skirts and tops, business cards featuring the SkirtSports web address, and a discount code for themselves and to pass out to other women. In exchange for discounted clothing (as opposed to cash), Entourage members were expected to promote the brand when asked about it and complete assignments, such as working at race expo booths, as needed (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). In the words of one Entourage member, their responsibility is to "race in Skirt, talk about Skirt, and get other women involved with Skirt" (K. Morgan, personal communication, October 30, 2009). Since the group's inception, the number of members has been reduced to between 10 and

15 women, a more manageably sized group for SkirtSports' current needs (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010).

According to one SkirtSports employee, Entourage members have been an invaluable part of establishing Skirt Chaser events across the country as they are able to provide local connections to retail partners, charities, and venues (S. Grossi, personal communication, October 30, 2009). An Entourage member in Minnesota suggested that SkirtSports also benefits from having "regular women who do athletic events promoting their product [because it] makes [the product] more accessible, real and attractive" (C. Patterson, personal communication, October 30, 2009). The relationship between SkirtSports and the Skirt Entourage is a two-way relationship: SkirtSports "emesh[es] the customer in a network of relationships with the brand and fellow customers" (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008, p. 2) in an effort to create long lasting relationships that will encourage long-term patronage. In addition to SkirtSports having "great products," Skirt Entourage members are able to connect to a network of women who love endurance sports and provide support for one another for sport and non-sport related life events (S. Davis-Roberts, personal communication, November 2, 2009; S. Anderson, personal communication, November 1, 2009). One primary facilitator of this support was a Google group established for Skirt Entourage members through which they could easily communicate via email or on-line discussion forums (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010).

Specifically as related to Skirt Chaser events, Skirt Entourage members have been of vital importance both in providing their own volunteer services, at least one Entourage

member traveled to all but two of the Skirt Chaser events in 2008 to volunteer her time (S. Davis-Roberts, personal communication, November 2, 2009), but also in the selection of event cities and acting as official volunteer coordinators in those cities. In 2009, however, SkirtSports did not activate the group much for official business apart from Skirt Chaser events due to the slowed economy. Grack-Wilson (personal communication, January 14, 2010) notes that Skirt Entourage members know SkirtSports product extremely well as they often own all of the clothes, many times in each color offered. This grassroots marketing effort is yet another way SkirtSports uses relationship marketing to promote its products and Skirt Chaser events.

#### *Sales Promotions.*

Sales promotions, both price-oriented and non-price oriented, are the least utilized facet of the promotions component of the Skirt Chaser marketing mix. The first price-oriented sales promotion is that of the discount offered to couples who register together, although this is under-utilized and untracked. The second price-oriented sales promotion is the prize awarded to race winners. Specifically, the top three finishers of Skirt Chaser events receive cash prizes (\$500, \$200, and \$100, respectively) and a pair of sunglasses from Native Eyewear, one of the event's national partners. The first couple to cross the finish line together also each receives a pair of sunglasses. In San Francisco, each of the three top finishers and the top finishing couple also received a bottle of champagne from Barefoot Wine & Bubbly, a regional sponsor (S. Grossi, 2009c). To the credit of Skirt Chaser organizers, the cash prizes may help attract participants not otherwise interested

in the race's theme, as it is relatively unusual to award cash prizes at small road races (L. Baumert, personal communication, June 13, 2009).

Non-price oriented sales promotions are also relatively limited in size and scope. Non-price oriented give-a-ways are also used as sales promotions for the winner of the dating game and as a general participation incentive. For example, the winners of the newly-wed game in Savannah received a Nintendo Wii video game console and the participants in the dating game in San Francisco each received a limited membership to It's Just Lunch (G. Grossi, 2009; S. Grossi, 2009c). Finally, all race registrants are automatically entered into a raffle for the chance to win a \$200 SkirtSports outfit (e.g., S. Grossi, 2009b).

#### *Publicity.*

While Red Rock and SkirtSports are always hoping for more publicity for Skirt Chaser events, they have received attention from two important sources in particular: *Runner's World* and *Sports Illustrated*. In August 2008, *Runner's World* devoted its cover and numerous articles to "the rise of skirt culture" (Armstrong, 2008, p. 71) in reference to the recent adoption of running skirts by female runners. Within Armstrong's (2008) article specifically, she prominently featured DeBoom, SkirtSports, and the Skirt Chaser Race Series (perhaps not-coincidentally, the two women are friends), providing the event exposure to print and on-line *Runner's World* readers. Notably, 43% of *Runner's World* readers are female and the average household income of readers is almost \$110,000, providing the Skirt Chaser event with publicity that reaches its target market (Echo Media, 2010a).

In contrast, the coverage of the Skirt Chaser event series in the November 2, 2009, issue of *Sports Illustrated* was brief, but still significant as *Sports Illustrated* reaches a weekly audience of nearly 21 million adults (“SI About Us,” 2010). The spot in *Sports Illustrated* was found in the section called *Gameplan: What smart fans should do this week*. The complete text reads as following: “Run the Skirt Chaser 5k. No, it’s not a race honoring Wilt Chamberlain. These flirtatious 5ks—there’s one in Savannah this Saturday and in San Francisco on Nov. 15—give women a three-minute head start. Male runners chase, and everyone mingles over drinks at the finish. Details are at [skirtchaser5k.com](http://skirtchaser5k.com)” (*Sports Illustrated*, 2009, p. 20). While short, it is to the point and perhaps appropriately geared toward *Sports Illustrated*’s predominately male audience (Echo Media, 2010b). Specifically, 77% of *Sports Illustrated* readers are male and the average household income is \$60,000 (which is almost half as much as that of the *Runner’s World* audience), placing this publicity outside the scope of the Skirt Chaser target market. However, the reach of the magazine as well as the inclusion of the event’s web address makes the publicity a welcome occurrence.

Additional sources of publicity are found in local newspapers, such as an article published in the *Savannah Morning Gazette* on Friday, October, 30, 2009, the day before the event, highlighting local weekend sporting activities (“Friday’s Sports Briefs,” 2009). More prevalent, though, are the numerous independent bloggers who feature Skirt Chaser events on their blogs or websites. For example, Skirt Chaser events have been promoted on “Beer Runner” (Cigeleste, 2009) and “Meet-Up” (Jane, 2010). The publicity garnered through bloggers is both welcome and presents



numerous concerns. Bloggers provide exposure for Skirt Chaser events without cost to its organizers and often reach a variety of people who otherwise would not have been reached by Skirt Chaser-originated advertising. However, in this format, Red Rock and SkirtSports lose control of how the event is presented and the message conveyed to its audience. While unsolicited publicity via the Internet should be a welcome inevitability, it also brings with it an elevated need for organizations to monitor the coverage their event receives. Furthermore, Grack-Wilson (personal communication, January 14, 2010) acknowledged that the concept of “skirt-chasing” has a negative connotation (e.g., Tiger Woods and Wilt Chamberlain) and requires an active marketing agenda to create new associations with the term in order for SkirtSports to continue to benefit from its event.

## Discussion

Through experiential branding and relationship marketing, the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series attempts to create an identification with, and long-term relationship between, event participants and the SkirtSports brand. In many ways, event organizers have been successful in so doing. For example, participation numbers at each race location increased from 2008 to 2009 (“Results,” 2010) and hiring Red Rock to produce its events nationwide was a significant step toward building a more consistent brand. However, while the initial September 2007 Convert to Skirt event’s intention was to encourage women to discard their shorts in favor of skirts, the reconfigured Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series has to a certain degree become an entity unto itself, losing its explicit connection to SkirtSports, its ultimate benefactor. In 2010 and beyond, Red Rock and SkirtSports

must evaluate their marketing mix in order to re-establish the connection between events. Changes to the pricing strategy to ensure that women are more likely to actually wear a skirt in the race, reactivation of the Skirt Entourage, and advertising SkirtSports prevalently as the presenting sponsor of Skirt Chaser events are just a few examples of how to more concretely solidify the relationship between the two.

When adjusting its marketing plan from year-to-year, however, Skirt Chaser organizers must not lose sight of its core product and identity, and the continuity necessary to build a strong brand identity. On the one hand, Skirt Chaser events are marketed as a social event, “combining fun, fitness and entertainment all-in-one” (Sanders, 2010, para. 3). DeBoom asserts, “I feel it’s very important to have a little fun with your fitness. I think when you’re enjoying yourself out there you’re much more likely to continue exercising” (2009b). Overall, DeBoom achieves this goal through Skirt Chaser events. While the “battle of the sexes” theme is not new, it is a perennial favorite, and by adding her SkirtSports product into the equation, the event becomes unique and distinctive from other fitness skirt brands and road races.

On the other hand, Skirt Chaser events have not been marketed solely as fun, fitness events. More accurately, they create a “sexy spin on a running classic by mixing racing, flirting and entertainment in an innovative social fitness event” (“Skirt Chaser,” 2010). With the addition of beer, flirting, and chasing, the event has become edgy in a way Skirt Chaser organizers did not completely anticipate. Criticism from potential customers, rejection from potential charity partners, alienation of non-heterosexual participants, and a re-working of its core message from social media bloggers, all are

cause for concern. Apostolopoulou (2002) explains: “probably the biggest risk associated with introducing a brand extension is the potential damaging effect that the extension product may have on the perceived quality and goodwill of the organization if the extension proves to be unsuccessful” (p. 206). Here, SkirtSports must find a better balance between fun, edgy, and offensive in order to reach a wider audience for its event, and hence for SkirtSports products in general. Moving forward, SkirtSports, as the ultimate beneficiary of Skirt Chaser events, needs to clarify its goals in order to most effectively benefit from them.

### Conclusion

Mueller and Roberts (2008) write: “Brands serve as powerful repositories of meaning. Consumers do not choose brands—they choose lives. The power and influence of relationships goes beyond the interpersonal domain to the world of branded goods” (p. 165). Thus, when consumers participate in Skirt Chaser events and engage with the SkirtSports brand, they symbolically choose a lifestyle that is fun, flirty, and free from the many challenges they face on a daily basis. SkirtSports and Red Rock should continue to evaluate their marketing strategies in an effort to best reach their target market through the event. As the event series continues to grow and mature, this adaptation will continue to be essential to their success and to negotiating and benefiting from the relationships they create with their past, current, and future consumers.

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## Chapter 4 – Buying What’s for Sale?: Running, Flirting, and Fashion<sup>6</sup>

### Introduction

On a training run in 2004, elite level tri-athlete Nicole DeBoom caught her reflection in a store window and thought: “I feel like a boy; I look like a boy; I want to feel more feminine” (DeBoom, 2006). Searching for a fitness wear alternative, DeBoom started SkirtSports sportswear “mirroring her ideal that women should never have to sacrifice femininity for performance in their workout clothes” (Donovan, 2009, para. 4). SkirtSports’ signature item is a skirt made for running; these skirts vary in color, style, length, and “what’s underneath” (e.g., spankies, girl shorties, shorties, or pants). In addition to SkirtSports, specialty sportswear companies such as Runningskirts.com and Atalanta Athleticwear, as well as mainstream sportswear companies Nike, New Balance, and Moving Comfort all manufacture their own variety of running skirts. Additionally, *Runner’s World*, *The New York Times*, and *Shape* (e.g., Gorin, 2005; Lee, 2006; “Who wears short skirts,” 2007) have featured fitness skirts in their pages documenting their growing popularity, and *Outside* magazine chose SkirtSports’ Gym Girl Ultra as the top women’s specific running bottom for their coveted summer 2010 buyer’s guide (Donovan, 2010). SkirtSports products are sold in the United States (US), as well as

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<sup>6</sup> This article is intended for publication in the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*.

Australia, Canada, China, Ecuador, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Puerto Rico, and Singapore (“Fact Sheet,” 2010).

SkirtSports’ primary marketing strategy has been to promote its products through a series of innovative and fun road races. In October of 2007, SkirtSports organized the first such event: a Convert to Skirt 5k in Boulder, Colorado (Ritter, 2007). This women’s-only event was part of a larger marketing effort in 2007 that attempted to persuade women to discard their shorts in favor of running skirts. Although the event was largely successful, SkirtSports re-named and reconfigured the race to include men (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010) because, as DeBoom explains, “women’s only events, which are very fun, [are also] a little bit boring” (2009a). Subsequent promotional activities, namely the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series, are now geared toward both men and women.

After an initial Skirt Chaser event in Austin, Texas, in November 2007, SkirtSports launched a full Skirt Chaser race series in 2008 and 2009 in multiple cities across the US. Skirt Chaser events continue to feature a 5k road race, but have been expanded to include a significant number of post-race mixed-gender social activities. The race itself features women wearing SkirtSports running skirts starting first in a “Catch Me” wave followed three minutes later by men in a “Skirt Chaser” wave; the first person to cross the finish line, male or female, wins. After the race, celebratory events include a block party, awards presentation, fashion show, live music, and dating games. Both nationally- and regionally-based companies sponsor each event, including such companies as Barefoot Wine & Bubbly, Native Eyewear, American Laser Center, and

It's Just Lunch (a San Francisco Bay Area dating service). In 2010, the race series will expand from six cities to 11 in an effort to increase SkirtSports' presence across the US.

While SkirtSports has its own business-related goals for Skirt Chaser events, such as building brand equity, increasing customer loyalty, enhancing emotional attachment, and, in the end, generating revenue through increased sales (Apostolopoulou, 2002), success is dependent upon the experiences of each participant. For example, reviews of the race held in a suburb of Chicago in 2009 range from: "the event as a whole was soooo fun...make sure you put on the sticker [to indicate you are single]...heck maybe even a couple of 'em!!" (Frogzontop, 2009), to "fun concept, but not well done at all" (Getterbetter, 2009), to "let's face it, it's an over-priced marketing event with a fun run tossed in. Ladies...Do not waste your money on their overpriced, poorly constructed, cheap shiny fabric skirts" (E-dogg, 2009). Thus, Skirt Chaser organizers have control over the organization, implementation, and marketing of their events; however, they have less control over how participants define its success and actually experience, perceive, or interpret these events (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007).

DeBoom asserts she created the Skirt Chaser event series with three ideas in mind: running, flirting, and fashion (DeBoom, 2009a). In what follows, I use multi-sited ethnography to analyze specifically how Skirt Chaser events sell each of these components to participants and to what degree participants buy into each, or rather, how participants (re)interpret the messages conveyed at Skirt Chaser events. In particular, sites central to my analysis included participant-observation and interviews at Skirt Chaser events, interviews with key SkirtSports and Skirt Chaser employees,

questionnaires completed by members of the Skirt Entourage (SkirtSports' fan group), and, finally, media and discourse analysis of SkirtSports' marketing materials as well as web-based race reviews. In so doing, I consider Amis (2005) who writes:

the social world cannot be taken as a literal world but should instead be viewed as one that is individually constructed and interpreted...we make sense of the world around us based on our individual values and experiences, and thus we all interpret events in our lives, even shared events, differently. (p. 104)

This analysis, then, sits at the nexus between sports as business, specifically, the revenue-related goals of SkirtSports, and sports as culture, specifically, the socio-cultural [re]interpretations of these goals. While Skirt Chaser events are clearly an innovative brand extension, they are problematic in their reinforcement of cultural norms with regards to male athletic superiority, heteronormativity, and appeal to post-feminist sensibilities. Furthermore, although Skirt Chaser participants literally buy into much of these cultural norms through their race entry fees, they simultaneously negotiate these messages in ways that make sense to their own social worlds. In the end, I use queer theory in order to deconstruct the buying and selling of Skirt Chaser events in order to provide an alternative reading that complicates its messages and challenges its heteronormative structure.

### Running: Fun, Innovative, and Skirts Start First

SkirtSports, leader in the running skirt world, believes fitness should be fun. With the Skirt Chaser 5k Race Series, we're putting a new spin on a running classic by

mixing racing, flirting and entertainment in an innovative social fitness event.

(“Overview,” 2010, para. 1)

First and foremost, Skirt Chaser events are advertised as fun and innovative fitness events, with DeBoom asserting: “without fun in our fitness we are much less likely to do it” (DeBoom, 2009a). Road races, especially at the 5k distance, are ubiquitous and usually only vary by the charity they benefit. In an effort at product differentiation, various races have become infamous for their creative themes, such as the Bay to Breakers 12k in San Francisco which features elite runners as well as costumed participants (“ING Bay to Breakers,” 2010), and the Flying Pig marathon weekend, which has created a unique brand for itself through creative use of Cincinnati’s historical connection to swine (Olberding & Jisha, 2005). In reconfiguring the event from its women-only Convert to Skirt origins, DeBoom modeled the new event after the Life Time Fitness Triathlon, which pit women against men in a “Battle of the Sexes” format and granted a sizable monetary reward to the winner (N. DeBoom, personal communication, June 12, 2009; “No ‘Battle of the Sexes’ Race,” 2007).

Participants seem to agree that Skirt Chaser events are fun and innovative. One participant exclaimed: “I think it’s a very innovative race and I think it’s very playful and competitive. It pokes fun at 1950’s traditions of men and women. I love it!” (F. Kaufman,<sup>7</sup> personal communication, November 11, 2009). Another runner wrote in his review of the 2009 Chicago race: “The Skirt Chaser is a great race and lots of fun. You

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<sup>7</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to informants for privacy protection when those individuals are not easily defined as public figures or whose research-related identities are not readily available on the Internet. Internet web log usernames have not been altered.

can run in a standard 5K road race anywhere, anytime, but you can only ‘chase’ the ‘skirts’ in the Skirt Chaser” (TriMan AndyR, 2009). Specifically, a number of participants chose to participate in the event because they were new exercisers and/or road racers and the theme helped create a non-intimidating and comfortable environment for beginners (MBarr, 2009; M. Regan, personal communication, October 31, 2009; J. Kim, personal communication, November 15, 2009). Recognizing its friendliness to women and first timers, *More Magazine* listed Skirt Chaser events among the top in the country in this category (Maher, 2010). For others, however, the theme had little to do with their involvement in the event; rather it was simply the next road race in the area (H. Joseph & W. Joyce, personal communication, October 31, 2009). Still others were motivated to participate because of the charity it benefited—in this instance Marklund, which provides services for children with developmental disabilities (Jerrilyn, 2009). Overall, though, Skirt Chaser events accomplish the goal of creating a fun and innovative fitness event for its participants, and to their credit, create an environment in which many individuals feel comfortable trying out their newly developed athleticism.

The central premise of this fun and innovative running event, however, is the three minute head start given to women and the encouragement given to men to catch them: “Catch Me Wave: The women’s start kicks-off the event at 5pm. Skirt Chaser Wave: Three minutes later, the men will chase ‘em down!” (Grossi, 2009a, para. 3). DeBoom explains that the three minute head start is an empowering experience because women do not otherwise start first or lead in road races (DeBoom, 2009a). While physiological differences between men and women support this assertion (Lamb, 1978),

Symons and Hemphill (2006) suggest that a more complete explanation includes that “modern sport was developed and institutionalized to promote manly aggression, heroism and military readiness” (p. 110). Consequently, stereotypically male sports such as football, baseball, and ice hockey become avenues through which men can assert and reinforce their masculinity (Messner, 2002). And, by playing sports that emphasize the masculine-affiliated characteristics of strength, power, and speed, men’s athletic superiority has become normalized.

Because sport for men has been a primary location through which to reinforce heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity, sport for women has been marginalized, or completely disallowed, as female athletes challenge this core social purpose. For example, at the turn of the twentieth-century, medical discourse provided justification for limiting women’s participation in sports and physical activity (Vertinsky, 1989). As women eventually overcame this barrier, female athletes exhibiting power, strength, and speed through athletic competition were labeled as “mannish lesbians” (Griffin, 1998, p. 34) in order to dissuade participation. Media discourse has also played a role in perpetuating societal discomfort and disapproval of female athletes, including such recurring themes as under-representation, trivialization of accomplishments, objectification (often emphasizing sex appeal), homophobia, women’s sport participation as tragic, and women athletes as unnatural (Birrell & Theberge, 1994; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988). Furthermore, men’s sports and male athletes are considered the standard bearers of athletic accomplishment, reflected when the qualifier “women” is added before such events as the World Cup or the National Basketball Association;

men's events need no such adjective as each event is assumed to be male unless otherwise stated. In effect, this combination of factors, including Skirt Chaser races, naturalizes male athletic superiority and reinforces female athletic inferiority.

Instead, alternative ways to account for athletic aptitude include divisions based on age, height, weight, past performance, or altitude (Chase, 2008; McDowell, 2010). Such alternative divisions attempt to make road races more inclusive of varying body types, without relying solely on the social construction of sex or gender. Furthermore, these "categories are usually defended on the grounds that closer competition amongst relatively evenly matched individuals or teams (the 'level' playing field) will be more challenging and fair, will produce better performances and satisfaction, and validate 'personal bests' and winning" (Symons & Hemphill, 2006, p. 109-110). Similarly, Clark-Fory (2008) suggests that Skirt Chaser races are entirely too routine. Instead, a queer reading of "edgy" and "innovative" would "be putting men in skirts and having women chase after them" (Clark-Fory, 2008, para. 2).

Notably, Lisa Baumert, winner of the Chicago race in 2009 and recent college graduate, took advantage of the presumed male athletic superiority inherent to Skirt Chaser races. Although she had no interest in the premise of the race (she sported a singlet and spandex shorts), she was interested in the \$500 awarded to its winner (L. Baumert, personal communication, June 13, 2009). Based on average 5k racing times for women and men, she knew that a three minute head start worked in her favor (i.e., there is only a 94-second difference between men's and women's world records at this distance; "Outdoor Records," 2010). DeBoom, too, calculated average 5k finishing times



for women and men before selecting the lead time, admitting that three minutes favors women, which she prefers. In fact, of the available results, Skirts have won 14 events while Skirt Chasers have won only three (“Results,” 2010). Here, then, Baumert used the fallacy of male athletic superiority to her advantage, circumventing the premise of the race in the process, while DeBoom’s choice of three minutes exaggerates the difference in athletic aptitude between women and men. This over-emphasis not only normalizes male athletic superiority but also is tantamount to “affirmative action” for women participants, which at least a few male participants thought unfair (F. Mills & B. Joyner, personal communication, June 13, 2009).

In addition to presumed male athletic superiority, Skirt Chaser events conjure violent images of men chasing women. For example, a SkirtSports originated electronic mailing list message promoting an upcoming event included the following: “Combining fitness and entertainment all-in-one, come experience this unique event that is redefining Tough Love” (Grossi, 2009a, para. 1). And the blogger for *Draft Magazine*’s Beer Runner series wrote, “This Saturday you can officially chase skirts, watch an ‘all the way down to the skivvies’ show and drink beer. Sound like your typical weekend? Well, this time you can actually get rewarded for it, instead of potentially going to jail” (Cigelske, 2009, “Chase Skirts,” para. 1). Finally, in response to an on-line review of the 2009 San Francisco event, a participant named Deliab comments, potentially sarcastically, “This is awesome to hear! I am starting a new event at the finish line next year for the top male and female finishers to mount one another and procreate” (2009, #3). Here, the success of the event’s fun and innovative theme is tempered by images related to skirt chasing,

animalistic men racing after, and catching their prey: innocent skirt wearing women. Although women can indicate their singularity by wearing a race sticker, Skirt Chasers remain in a position of dominance as they decide who to catch and who to pass. DeBoom has received criticism aimed at the event due to these connotations (personal communication, June 12, 2009) and since the inception of the race, advertising language has been toned down to avoid phrases such as “tough love”. Nonetheless, for women and men concerned with issues related to violence against women, Skirt Chaser races are anything but fun and innovative.

### Flirting: Catching a Future Spouse

Come for the crazy awards, or the scandalous fashion show, or the free beer and music, or the chance to leave your kids at home with the babysitter on a party night, or imagine that, the actual race! But mostly, come help SkirtSports and all of its sponsors celebrate a fun-filled life of fitness, where you'll never stop smiling and you may just meet your future spouse! (“Race Info,” 2010, para. 5)

The second premise around which Skirt Chaser events are organized is flirting, which is incorporated into the race itself as well as the post-race block party. Specifically, flirting is both implicitly and explicitly stated as heterosexual. For example, because Skirt Chasers are exclusively men and Skirts exclusively women, there is little room to misinterpret the event’s heterosexual orientation: desire and agency singularly flow from athletically superior men to athletically inferior women who make “the world a more beautiful place” (DeBoom, 2009a) by wearing skirts. In order to facilitate flirting, the event emcee in San Francisco encouraged participants to “grab your [Skirt Chaser]

stickers so everyone knows who is single and who is looking to mingle” (Salim, 2009). Prior to the start of the race, though, DeBoom gave women some advice on how to use the race as an opportunity to find a future spouse:

there is a little out and back a half mile from the finish so you should have time to check out the scenery, if you know what I mean, and decide how quickly or slowly you want to run it in...it could be your ticket to a life-long love affair!  
(DeBoom, 2009b)

Although DeBoom says that she would not be opposed to participants who transgress the intended event arrangement of men chasing skirted women, no one yet has in any appreciable way (personal communication, June 12, 2009). For instance, each race seems to attract at least one or two skirted men, but their skirts have been worn in jest rather than protest (e.g., Barber, 2009). Other examples of transgression may feature men chasing men, women chasing women, or, as previously mentioned, women chasing (skirted) men. DeBoom’s willingness to entertain participants who decide to challenge her race premise, though, would likely be tested if men lined up with women ready to be chased, as this would call into question the competitive advantage DeBoom seeks to lessen as well as the traditional courting arrangement her event promotes.

At the post-race block party, running quickly becomes secondary to the fashion show, dating games, live music, and, of course, beer and wine. Skirt Chaser participants were encouraged to redeem the two “free” beverage tickets they received as part of their race entry, and when the block party seemed to be fading prematurely at the Chicago event in 2009, employees passed out extra tickets in an effort to extend the life of the

festivities (M. Bryne, personal communication, June 13, 2009). Although beer (and wine) are logical additions to a block party-style event, Skirt Chaser organizers have presented alcohol as “liquid courage” (Grossi, 2009b) to facilitate hetero-socialization between participants. During the dating game portion of the event, which has included the newly-wed game and bachelor auctions, heterosexuality is further reinforced as the participant couples and auction have been exclusively male-female. Even in the notoriously liberal City of San Francisco, the dating service sponsor of the bachelor auction solely matches women with men.

The question, then, is how much and in what ways do event participants subscribe to the premise that Skirt Chaser races are a place for flirting and meeting a future, heterosexual spouse? Participants offer varying reasons for attending events, some in-line with the event premise but most not. In fact, I only spoke with one woman, although part of a singles group attending the race together, who considered the event an opportunity to find a date (M. Irving, personal communication, November 15, 2009). Otherwise, as previously noted, the winner of the Chicago race was solely interested in the cash prize (L. Baumert, personal communication, June 13, 2009) and other participants were at the event simply because it was the next road race in their area or was hospitable to beginners (e.g., H. Joseph & W. Joyce, personal communication, October 31, 2009; M. Regan, personal communication, October 31, 2009). Furthermore, a group of three women at the Chicago event participated because they were fans of SkirtSports products, not because they were interested in finding a date or future spouse (A. Young, personal communication, June 13, 2009). Although marketing materials

clearly target singles, events attract a significant number of heterosexual couples who are targeted as well, although to a lesser degree (e.g., Grossi, 2009a). However, participant couples seemingly have already been “caught” and thus have no real investment in the dating premise of the event other than to have fun.

A noteworthy example of resistance to the Skirt Chaser premise, including the flirting component, occurred at the 2009 San Francisco event. In order to fulfill their philanthropic mission (“Fact Sheet,” 2010) as well as to more easily secure various event-related permits (A. Sanders, personal communication, October 30, 2009), Skirt Chaser organizers attempt to partner with local charities in each event city (N. DeBoom, personal communication, October 31, 2009). In San Francisco, this presented a challenge. After a successful partnership in Savannah, Georgia, SkirtSports contacted Girls on the Run of San Francisco (whose organization focuses on improving the overall well-being of girls), hoping for a similarly beneficial partnership. Girls on the Run of San Francisco, however, turned them down citing concern that alcohol and skirt chasing were incongruent messages with that of their organization (A. Sanders, personal communication, October 30, 2009). Two additional San Francisco area women-affiliated charities also turned down their request. Skirt Sports then contacted Chances for Children, the Tempe-based charity with whom they have previously worked, and proposed a partnership for the San Francisco event. Chances for Children, who help provide children access to sports, physical education, and character education (“Chances for Children,” 2010), agreed. Unlike the San Francisco-based charities, Chances for Children did not have the same reservations about the association between the two

organizations, and if they did, for them, the benefits of partnership outweighed the drawbacks.

From a business perspective, participation motivation matters little so long as entry fees are paid, although rejection from potential charity partners and alienation of potential participants does pose significant concerns. One such business-related concern is that alienation diminishes the size and scope of SkirtSports' potential market. From a socio-cultural perspective, wide-spread disregard of the hetero-flirting theme suggests participant ambivalence rather than an active resistance to it. Thus, while Skirt Chaser participants may not attend the race in order to flirt or find a spouse, their presence at the event and paid entry fee implicitly suggests that they support its heteronormative premise. In so doing, gay and lesbian participants, or potential participants, are ignored and erased from the sporting landscape further perpetuating the heteronormative status quo (see Cahn [1994] and Griffin [1998] for extensive discussions of homophobia and heterosexism in sport). Furthermore, exclusion of queer participants promotes a segregated sporting landscape: one for same-sex oriented participants and another for opposite-sex oriented participants. While gay and/or lesbian sports leagues exist in many major cities (e.g., Columbus Lesbian and Gay Softball Association) and the Gay Games and Outgames are held quadrennially, a separatist model of sport, including Skirt Chaser races, problematically promotes segregated sporting spaces, which in turn perpetuate inequality and presumed inferiority.

## Fashion: Skirt Revolution

We think of a skirt not just as the garment you're wearing, but more about the person that's wearing it. The word "skirt" can mean so many things: it's an adjective, it's a verb, it's a noun. And to us, it really embodies our message, which is about promoting fun in fitness. So, if you're wearing a piece of the TRIKS line, then you are to us a Skirt. (DeBoom, 2006)

The third premise around which Skirt Chaser events are organized is fashion, namely the running skirts themselves and the women who wear them. As the self-proclaimed inventor of running skirts, SkirtSports has created its own product category within the sportswear industry (DeBoom, 2006). In so doing, their goal has been to convert women from plain, old, and unfashionable shorts to "fun, casual, sexy, comfortable," (DeBoom, 2009b) and fashionable skirts. Accordingly, as a brand extension of SkirtSports, Skirt Chaser events are ultimately designed to facilitate this conversion process. This is accomplished in two ways: first, with event registration women receive an exclusive race series running skirt, and second, a post-race fashion show features a variety of SkirtSports apparel. DeBoom's appeal to women who want to "push the limit with fashionable performance wear" ("Fact Sheet," 2010) goes beyond the sportswear itself. Rather, her "Skirt Revolution" (Donovan, 2007, para. 4) is also an "attitude and emotional trend" (in Shea, 2008, p. 74) in which women disregard their shorts in favor of SkirtSports brand skirts, embody its branded image, and "make the world a more beautiful place" (DeBoom, 2009a).

One strategy DeBoom has employed to start this revolution is the Skirt Entourage, which is a group of approximately 15 women who voluntarily support SkirtSports in various capacities, including helping with Skirt Chaser events. The Skirt Entourage is a brand community, which Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) describe as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). Other notable examples of brand communities include Harley Davidson and Jeep consumers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Additionally, "brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). In essence, the Entourage is a group of super fans who are enamored with the company and act as grassroots marketers because of the community and sense of belonging it provides.

In exchange for discounted clothing, not cash, Entourage members are expected to promote the brand when asked about it and complete assignments, such as working at race expo booths or Skirt Chaser events, as needed. In the words of one Entourage member, their responsibility is to "race in Skirt, talk about Skirt, and get other women involved with Skirt" (K. Morgan, personal communication, October 30, 2009). This attitude and emotional trend, signified through the "Skirt Symbol," suggests "fun in fitness, power through self-confidence, or even emotional connections with other Skirt Sistas" (Donovan, 2007, para. 3). Along these lines, one Entourage member concluded an email as follows: "Have a Skirt-tastic day!" (B. Abbott, personal communication, July 14, 2009), and another authors a blog, Twitter account, and Facebook page to help



“spread the word” about SkirtSports (F. Kaufman, personal communication, November 11, 2009).

While SkirtSports directly benefits from the Entourage’s dedication to the brand and its image, participation in the group is a two-way relationship for many of its members. For example, in addition to getting “great product” (S. Davis-Roberts, personal communication, November 2, 2009), one of the primary benefits is a connection to a network of women who love endurance sports (S. Anderson, personal communication, November 1, 2009). An Entourage member from New Mexico explains:

I benefit a lot from the forum with the other women. We share what’s going on in our daily lives [and] our race[s]...It’s nice to have a group of women that listen, care, and cheer me on. I love my husband, but women are much better about supporting each other’s emotional needs. (K. Morgan, personal communication, October 30, 2009)

Similarly, an Entourage member from Nevada writes, “I feel that being part of the Entourage allows me to meet incredible woman [*sic*], across the country and challenge their feelings about traditional ideologies when it comes to our bodies and ‘displaying them’” (F. Kaufman, personal communication, November 11, 2009). In sum, Entourage members may participate in geographically bound events, such as Skirt Chaser races, via the Internet through the Entourage electronic mailing list, or by visiting their local retail store to purchase SkirtSports products all in order to actively engage with the SkirtSports-organized consumption community (Devasagayman & Buff, 2008).

Although the SkirtSports—Skirt Entourage relationship is seemingly mutually beneficial, the group is premised on post-feminism which encourages empowerment through consumption and “spaces that work to homogenize, generate conformity, and mark Others, while discourage questioning” (Cole & Hribar, 1995, p. 356). It is this lack of questioning that is particularly problematic. Similar to other Entourage members, Kathy Morgan explains that she loves the connection with other women, and that “she [Nicole DeBoom] recognizes our need to feel good about ourselves and her products go a long way toward boosting our self-esteem” (personal communication, October 30, 2009). Here, self-esteem is premised on the ability to purchase a fashionable running skirt, rather than on the intrinsic satisfaction of exercise and physical activity. Another Entourage member explains that she wears a skirt because no one needs to see her “cottage cheese” in spandex (C. Patterson, personal communication, October 30, 2009). Rather than questioning the priorities and expectations of a society that encourages women to cover-up their athletic, yet imperfect bodies, however, this Entourage member instead speaks with her dollars by purchasing a fitness skirt or participating in a Skirt Chaser event. Thus, by capitalizing on consumers’ material desires for their brand (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), at a minimal cost, SkirtSports is able to increase their sales. For their part, Entourage members connect themselves to a community that is premised on the SkirtSports message, that exercise and the athletic body are inherently unfeminine and in need of a fashionable and feminine way to rectify this situation, without questioning the larger societal implications of this assertion.

Next, Skirt Chaser events feature a post-race fashion show that highlights various SkirtSports products in an effort to increase interest in and exposure to their products. In San Francisco, five female race participants—representing a variety of ages and body sizes—took the stage with the crowd’s attention and Justin Timberlake’s (2006) *Sexy Back* blaring in the background. DeBoom narrated as each woman donned SkirtSports apparel, ranging from the Sexy Back Tank (named after the song), to the Happy Hour Skirt, to the Wonder Girl Dress. In an effort to keep the crowd entertained, DeBoom’s narration included provocative descriptions of both the clothes and the models. For example, DeBoom described the Wonder Girl Running Tee as follows: “This tee has a little bit of bunching up at the neck line that makes all busts look good. And Emily, you have a great bust too” (2009c). Describing the Sunless Tee, DeBoom said, “this is my favorite rash guard style tee for swimming, biking, running, playing around, modeling in the bedroom, whatever you so desire” (2009c). Not only are her descriptions provocative, but they are also markedly heteronormative. As DeBoom describes, the Wonder Girl Tank features a “cleavage alley” pocket to hold “[energy] gel, lip gloss, or business cards from any available men” (DeBoom, 2009a), and the Runner’s Dream has nice long sleeves because “our men appreciate our warm hands” (DeBoom, 2009a).

DeBoom’s narration of the fashion show on occasion crosses the line from fun to edgy to questionable in taste. As a woman in San Francisco modeled the Cruiser Bike Girl cycling skirt DeBoom reported as follows: “It has built in shorties with little grippers to keep [the shorties] in place, and what’s really cool is the chamois inside. Do you want to show us your chamois? Oh, wait a minute. I didn’t know that’s what they called it!”

(2009c). And, finally, the fashion show advertises that it goes all the way down to the “skivvies,” as it did in Savannah. One volunteer model in particular, Lacey, received loud cheers of approval from the crowd when she modeled the Marathon Girl Skirt by flipping it up to show the skirt’s spankies, or “running panties,” as DeBoom called them (2009a). She also modeled SkirtSports’ Everyday Bra while DeBoom provided the following commentary:

This is for everyday women who might happen to hang out in the A/B club. But the C/D club we love you too. You can make your own decisions about this bra. Hey Lacey, how about you show us some of the art [i.e., tattoo] on your back? What do you got going on? Nice, huh? You know what they say about ladies with tattoos [i.e., lower-back tattoos are pejoratively referred to as ‘tramp stamps’]! (2009a)

Fashion shows were full of energy in-line with the Skirt Chaser event, provided entertainment to at least some of its spectators, and achieved its practical goal of increasing exposure to SkirtSports’ many products. DeBoom’s commentary, however, objectified the women who volunteered their services on SkirtSports’ behalf. Furthermore, while SkirtSports’ sportswear includes many practical features that active women may appreciate, such as multiple pockets and longer sleeves for warmth, DeBoom described these features in such a way that eliminates any chance that the women wearing them will be considered serious athletes or competitors (Clark-Flory, 2008).

If “clothes and accessories are expressions of how we feel, how we see ourselves—and how we wish to be treated by others” (Tungate, 2005, p. 2), which of the messages conveyed through the Skirt Chaser fashion show do women subscribe? Goldman (1992) explains that post-feminist “meanings of choice and individual freedom become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their ‘liberated’ interests” (p. 133). Here, the liberated interest is empowerment through individualized attention allowing women to leverage their sex appeal and power to their advantage. Empowerment through consumption, however, has its limitations. Specifically, women deriving empowerment through feminine, sexy, sportswear subscribe to a heteronormative social order in which athletic women remain “lesbian boogeywomen” (Griffin, 1998, p. 92) unless they sufficiently feminize their bodies, and objectification is perpetuated as women become defined solely by an article of clothing.

A significant number of women, however, participate in Skirt Chaser events, but do not wear running skirts. For example, at the 2009 event in San Francisco, approximately half of the women participants actually raced in a skirt, perhaps suggesting that their motivation for participating in the event had little to do with fashion. Other participants wore their own skirts for racing, including jean skirts, Hawaiian-printed skirts, tutus, grass skirts, and plaid skirts. Finally, still others have a favorable opinion of running skirts, including their fashion, but not the premise of the Skirt Chaser event itself and, presumably, the tone of the fashion show (Catling, 2008; D. Smith, personal communication, March 8, 2010).

From a business perspective, Apostolopoulou (2002) suggests that the “biggest risk associated with introducing a brand extension is the potential damaging effect that the extension product may have on the perceived quality and goodwill of the organization if the extension proves unsuccessful” (p. 206). Thus far, Skirt Chaser events continue to grow in popularity, as evidenced by increasing participation numbers as well as event locations. For some women, however, Skirt Chaser fashion shows and events in general, cause a negative brand association, harming, instead of helping SkirtSports’ image. Furthermore, the skirt revolution and fashion show are particularly problematic in that they “take the women-centered discourses of empowerment and corporeal liberation pioneered by feminists [and] turn them into conveniently commodified packages of post-feminist catharsis” (LaFrance, 1998, p. 118). While Skirt Chaser races successfully promote women’s participation in physical activity, this benefit is tempered by the explicit and implicit messages of the fashion show as well as the brand community that supports it.

### Conclusion: Converting to Skirts

At the beginning of this analysis, I suggested that Amis (2005) provided an important guiding principle regarding the individual construction and interpretation of social worlds, such that “we make sense of the world around us based on our individual values and experiences, and thus we all interpret events in our lives, even shared events, differently” (p. 104). Social worlds, in this instance Skirt Chaser events, are not only individually constructed; they are also open to deconstruction as well. Using deconstruction as a reading technique (Eng, 2006), I provide a few final

(re)interpretations of the buying and selling of Skirt Chaser events. In particular, I use queer theory to make visible the queer existence within Skirt Chaser races in an effort to challenge its heteronormative structure and provide an alternative socio-cultural interpretation of the event (Eng, 2006).

First, although Skirt Chaser races are now male-female oriented, their ultimate purpose is to persuade women to “convert to skirt,” which was reflected in the first such event that was for women-only (C. Grack-Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2010). Part of DeBoom’s attempts along these lines is a complete “attitude and emotional trend” (in Shea, 2008, p. 74), in which she describes women themselves as Skirts (DeBoom, 2006). While the Skirt Chaser race is decidedly heteronormative, a queer reading of her efforts suggests her purpose is to convert women to lesbianism. Accordingly, the SkirtSports homepage declares: “Fall in love with Skirt” (“SkirtSports,” 2010, para. 5), and one Entourage member aptly explains that she is supposed to “get other women involved with Skirt” (K. Morgan, personal communication, October 30, 2009), and that she has been involved for two years. Although acknowledging this queer existence within a normalized sporting space does not in and of itself transform the space, it does in a small way contest its traditional heterosexist assumptions and practices (Krane & Waldron, 2000).

Next, DeBoom’s prototype skirt specifically intended for use during triathlon competition was called the Transition Girl (DeBoom, 2006). DeBoom first wore it during the 2004 Ironman Wisconsin competition, helping her literally transition from swimming to biking by providing extra coverage, as well as figuratively transition her

athletically androgynous body to one more feminine in appearance (Babbitt, 2010). The Transition Girl name also conjures a more specific queer association with the transitioning process undertaken by transsexual individuals. Although DeBoom likely failed to make this connection in particular, the queer association remains even though the skirt has since been re-named the more neutral Race Belt Skirt.

Thus, Skirt Chaser events are clearly an innovative form of branding, attracting participants for a variety of reasons, some related to the premises of racing, flirting, and fashion, and some not. The purpose of the event is to increase sales of SkirtSports products as well as to create a lasting relationship with the brand that will encourage long-term patronage. From a socio-cultural perspective, though, the event is problematic in its objectification of women and promotion of cultural norms that seem inconsistent with the trends of the twenty-first century. While some participants appear to challenge the dominant premise of the event in small ways, the over-arching message of the race remains intact. A queer reading of the event, although brief, in a small way, provides an avenue through which to challenge its heteronormative discourse and interpret it in such a way that makes more sense to those in social worlds who refuse to subscribe to dominate discourse regarding male athletic superiority, heteronormativity, and post-feminist tendencies.

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## Chapter 5 – Conclusion

### Sportswear as Identity

Having thought about running skirts intently for almost two years, I have also had the opportunity to reflect upon my own relationship to sportswear and its impact on my research. Since the age of five I have played soccer and as a result had become primarily accustomed to exercising wearing baggy cotton shirts, modestly-cut shorts, and tall socks to cover and hold my shin guards in place. In high school in the late 1990s, we wore old, ill-fitting boys' uniforms until the Beaverton-based Nike cleaned out its warehouse and uniformed all of Portland Public Schools' athletic teams giving us our own girls' uniforms for the first time. In college, our uniforms were largely the same style, although technical fabrics such as Dri-FIT were rapidly replacing sportswear made with other material.

Running track in high school and college introduced me to an entirely different sportswear culture. As a sprinter in college, I practiced in long spandex pants in Massachusetts' cold winter months or soccer shorts in the spring. In competition, though, our uniforms consisted of "bumhuggers" (underwear style briefs) on the bottom and a tight lycra singlet on top. I, along with many of my other teammates, found this uniform a bit disconcerting, much too revealing, and unrelated to our athletic-related goals. Our

female coach provided little reason for these uniforms other than that our competitors wore them as well. Notably, the stereotypically larger throwers wore a looser-fitting uniform and since my own graduation, bumhuggers have been replaced with short spandex shorts.

While I still play soccer on a weekly basis, these days I do a lot more distance running. It has taken me a while to convert to the culture of distance running sportswear (cost being an important factor), but I now rarely wear soccer shorts for running (they lack the pockets I need for my energy gels) and instead have a drawer full of shirts, shorts, and socks made from technical fabrics to appropriately wick sweat when I run for hours at a time. I still, though, am wary of shorts that are too short and tops that are too tight, holding onto my soccer-playing identity in a small way. I wear my running skirt on occasion in order to take advantage of its many pockets and the motivation it gives me to work on this project, not because I think it is particularly cute, I look cute in it, or that wearing it is empowering.

I fully recognize that part of my discomfort with my college track uniform was the degree to which my body was on display. Although I understand the theoretical reasoning behind my discomfort via my internalization of surveillance from others, I was not immune to its effects, preferring instead to have worn a more modestly-cut uniform. Here, I echo concerns expressed by skirt wearing women regarding the public display of their own bodies. Where we differ, though, was that my sportswear alternative was still shorts, not a skirt whose purpose was modesty *and* “to make women feel like women” (DeBoom, 2006) during exercise. Furthermore, perhaps had I grown-up playing sports



such as field hockey, golf, lacrosse, or tennis which have long traditions of skirt wearing, I would be more sympathetic to the skirt revolution. Instead, my primary frame of reference comes from a sport where the uniforms are the same between the women's and men's games and bodies are largely hidden beneath loose fitting uniforms. Although in recent years, soccer uniform tops for both women and men have become more form fitting.

What I also bring to this project, though, is an understanding of and appreciation for women's sport history. The contemporary adoption of running skirts cannot be fully understood without this context. For example, a journalist from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* proclaimed that running skirts are an emerging trend "attempting to put an end to androgyny in sports" (Bass, 2010, para. 4). While running skirts may be an emerging trend, physically active women have for decades been subject to scrutiny based on the degree to which they proscribed to or defied socially constructed definitions of femininity with significant efforts being made by the media, league organizers, and athletes themselves to feminize their athletic (aka male) bodies (Cahn, 1994; Festle, 1996). Additionally, this fear of androgenic female athletes is rooted in homophobia and heterosexism that problematically persists in sports to greater degrees than other facets of American culture (Griffin, 1998). DeBoom asserts that "people either love them [running skirts] or hate them" (in Bass, 2010, para. 6). Part of the divisiveness regarding running skirts can likely be attributed to their recognized socio-historical significance. DeBoom's investment in the success of her business, however, seems to supersede this significance.

Ultimately, the debate over women's sportswear is a positive problem to have. It is a far cry from previous decades and centuries in which women were not permitted to participate in sports or had little to no sportswear options whatsoever. In fact, girls and women currently participate in sports and physical activity in unprecedented numbers (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). However, Messner and Cooky's (2009) longitudinal study of women's sports coverage on ESPN's *SportsCenter* and three Los Angeles-area network affiliates indicate that coverage is at its lowest since the beginning of the study in 1989. While this trend cannot be attributed to one reason, it does suggest that the symbolic value of women's increased participation in sports has not translated to economic value, which in a capitalistic country is a more salient determination of cultural and societal importance. Moreover, during the 2010 National Hockey League (NHL) Stanley Cup Playoffs, the *Chicago Tribune* published a digitally altered picture of Philadelphia Flyers' "Chrissy" (Chris) Pronger wearing his hockey uniform on top and a skirt on the bottom with the headline "Looks like Tarzan, skates like Jane," playing on the long-standing premise that girls and women are inferior athletes to men ("Chicago Blackhawks," 2010). Continued critical analysis and attention to women's participation in sport and physical activity, especially in areas under-studied such as sportswear, is needed to better understand the continually changing context and social construction of this participation.

### Limitations

An important purpose of this research was to fill a gap in the existing literature on women's participation in sport and physical activity by investigating the role sportswear,

specifically running skirts and the associated Skirt Chaser race series, have played in this participation. To accomplish this goal, I employed multi-sited ethnographic research methods/ologies. Goldbart and Hustler (2005) explain that the distinctive features of ethnography “revolve around the notions of people as *meaning*-makers, around an emphasis on understanding how people *interpret* their worlds, and the need to understand the particular cultural worlds in which people live and which they both construct and utilize” (p. 16). Due to the complexity of the human experience, this project is limited to the specific ethnographic “sites” that informed my research as well as to the people with whom I spoke, summarily resisting the “application of ‘one size fits all’ theories” (Somekh et al., 2005, p. 3). For example, although I attended three Skirt Chaser events, I did not attend other road races specifically to interview women who may or may not wear running skirts or who decided against attending a Skirt Chaser event. Furthermore, because of the variety of ways (all indispensable) I engaged with Skirt Chaser events (e.g., volunteer, racer, participant-observer, interviewer), time limited my ability to have as many in-depth conversations with participants as I would have liked. In so doing, I would have been able to provide more nuanced portrayals of gender and sex as manifested through running skirts and race participation.

With regards to my emphasis on the marketing of Skirt Chaser events, I was limited by the parameters of qualitative research; sport marketers traditionally use quantitative methods in their research. In terms of this project, determining the marketing and sponsorship efficacy of Skirt Chaser events could be studied more

comprehensively through the use of post-event surveys and compared between events and/or years.

Finally, the Skirt Chaser events I did attend were each the first such events in their exact locations. Attending races in either Tempe, Arizona, or Denver, Colorado, which have consistently had the largest number of participants across the race series, may have yielded information not present in the events I did attend. With these limitations in mind, I next provide suggests for future research.

### Next Up

My research of running skirts and Skirt Chaser events has yielded an incredible amount of information providing numerous topics worthy of continued scholarly attention. In particular, the continued increase, decrease, or stagnation in popularity of running skirts will be instructive to monitor, as will be the marketing strategies used to sell them. Along these lines, another company primarily specializing in running skirts is RunningSkirts.com, providing a future site for comparison with SkirtSports. While RunningSkirts.com similarly markets its skirts to women looking for “girly-girl style,” they more explicitly target market to pregnant women and girls (“RunningSkirts.com,” 2010), presenting new areas for analysis. In contrast, while fitness skirts more generally have continued to permeate sports that do not have a history of usage, the lacrosse community at various levels has been engaging in debates about discontinuing the use of kilts all together with people arguing passionately on either side (Lochary, 2009). As I have argued elsewhere (i.e., Williams & Wiser, 2009), putting the emergence of running

skirts in direct conversation with sports having historical connections to skirts, such as lacrosse, has the potential to add depth and nuance to the current analysis.

A SkirtSports June 2010 press release announced that the number of Skirt Chaser events will expand from 11 in 2010 to 20 in 2011 (Donovan, 2010). As the event series continues to expand, I anticipate their marketing strategies will continue to evolve. Specifically, using quantitative methods to study these evolving Skirt Chaser marketing efforts is a logical project to compliment my own. However, I maintain that open-ended questions that allow participants a voice not restricted to a pre-defined scale should be included in any study as they are essential to fully understanding participant motivation and negotiation of marketing efforts. An area not fully addressed in my project that would benefit from such research methods is a closer investigation of Skirt Chaser sponsorship. While the sales representative from Barefoot Wine & Bubbly present at the 2009 Chicago event asserted that his company's demographics and "fun and carefree" image aligned with Skirt Chaser events (J. Tucker,<sup>8</sup> personal communication, June 13, 2009), it would be instructive to analyze more systematically the brand alignment between Skirt Chaser events and sponsors, including post-event evaluations by the sponsors themselves.

Finally, building from the design and findings of this project, there are numerous other events with unique target audiences worthy of scholarly review focused in particular on gender, sexuality, and women's experiences in sport and physical activity.

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to informants for privacy protection when those individuals are not easily defined as public figures or whose research-related identities are not readily available on the Internet. Internet web log usernames have not been altered.

For example, there are growing numbers of running events that primarily target women participants as well as those that are for women-only (“Largest Races,” 2010). The Nike Women’s Marathon in San Francisco is one such event that targets women (but permits men to run as well) by offering finishers chocolate and Tiffany & Co. designed finishers necklaces handed out by firemen (“Frequently Asked Questions,” 2010). In light of the extensive scholarly literature on Nike’s marketing efforts toward women (e.g., Lafrance, 1998; Lucas, 2000), it should come as no surprise that Nike is the title sponsor of a women-centered event. Just as with Skirt Chaser races, the central question for me would be how and in what ways do participants negotiate what is being “sold” to them.

Similarly, while some research has been done on the Gay Games as well as various gay and/or lesbian sports leagues (e.g., Pitts, 1989, 1997, 1998, 2003; Symons, 2010), the road races that accompany Pride festivals have yet to be studied. Although the queer community continues to gain recognition as an identifiable and distinct consumer group (Peñaloza, 1996), the pink dollar of queer sport participants and consumers remains a relatively untapped market. Thus, I am interested both in the strategies that organizers use to promote queer sporting events as well as how participants experience these strategies. Combining these two facets is an opportunity to continue to fill the void in existing literature regarding the nexus between sport as business trying to attract queer participants and sport as culture.

#### Concluding Thoughts: Personal Goals vs. Durable Achievements

In May of 2010, Rachel Maddow, a radio and television political commentator, gave the commencement address at the Smith College graduation (Maddow, 2010). In

her address she described the tireless efforts of Carry Nation during the first decades of the twentieth-century to pass Prohibition laws in the United States (US). Maddow warns, though, that Nation's personal triumph was a disaster for the US as Prohibition laws led to unprecedented governmental corruption, including a criminal-driven economy that funneled money away from Depression Era efforts to revitalize the real economy. Ultimately, Maddow concludes that "personal goals are overrated" (2010) and instead advises that the Smith graduates aim for durable achievements for which they and their nation will be proud at their life's end.

Similarly, Nicole DeBoom's admitted anxiety about her own "unisex" (Babbit, 2010) appearance has prompted her to achieve her own personal triumph by creating fitness wear options that feminize women's athletic bodies (DeBoom, 2009). Notably, however, her body-image concerns derived from an incredibly athletic and muscular body trained to compete in ironman-length triathlons. Seemingly, the recreational athletes who comprise the core of SkirtSports' consumers (Bass, 2010), would not encounter this "problem" to the same degree. Thus, instead of using her success and visibility as an elite athlete to redefine and expand notions of femininity, DeBoom's efforts instead project shame and insecurity onto women who already endure relentless societal messages about ideal body types. Like Nation, her personal triumph has implications for society at large that should be considered above her own convictions.

Lochary's (2009) editorial on lacrosse kilts concludes with the following sentiment: "Ultimately, that's what we all do—just throw on some clothes and play. But uniforms aren't just any old rag that's balled up in the bottom of your hamper. They're a

symbol of your team and your sport, and that's a question worthy of some thought" (2009, p. 14). Similarly, I hope to have shown that running skirts are a symbol embedded with meaning exceedingly worthy of in-depth scholarly thought and attention.

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## Appendix A: Logos



Figure 2. SkirtSports Corporate Logos



Figure 3. Skirt Chaser Corporate Logo and the Skirt Chaser Woman