

Claire M. Williams, PhD
Department of Kinesiology
St. Mary's College of California
November 2, 2011

ABSTRACT

➤According to Running USA¹, women now outnumber men as participants in 5k, 10k, and half marathon road races, with women's marathon participation remaining stable at 41% of the entrants. While the running industry as a whole has benefited from this increased level of participation, niche retailers targeting female consumers have, in particular, prospered and grown in number.

➤One such company is SkirtSports which claims to have introduced the first skirt made for running and sold for commercial purposes in 2005². Since then, running skirts have found their way to retailers across the country and on to the bodies of thousands of women. Some women, however, have expressed consternation and bewilderment at the prominence of this trend. Here, I examine the popularity of running skirts and the varied reasons women offer as to the role fashion plays in their fitness endeavors.

➤Employing multi-sited ethnography to expand upon the current understanding of women's participation in sport as influenced by their sportswear, I argue that through self-presentation and the desire to stand out, “fastinistas” actively construct an objectified body that helps them fit into proscribed notions of femininity, perpetuating rather than challenging existing gender norms.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine the popularity of running skirts and the role fashion plays in the fitness endeavors of the women who wear them.
- To examine the construction of gender and sexuality within the context of fashion, fitness, and sport.



METHODS

Skirt Chaser Events

- Bloomingdale, Savannah, and San Francisco
- Interviews (field conversations and semi-structured)
- Participant-observation (e.g., volunteer and racer)

Skirt Entourage

- Open-ended questionnaire administered through an electronic mailing list
- Interviews (field conversations)

Web

- Company web pages
- Company Facebook pages
- Blogs and race reviews

Historical Research

- Texts related to women's sport history, sportswear, and running

FINDINGS

- Running skirts function in three interrelated ways:
 - Function through commodity feminism
 - Function through bodily discipline
 - Function as a matter of practicality

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

➤Sportswear is a negotiation between function, fashion, and femininity for women in sport.

➤The commodity feminism embraced by “fastinistas” wearing running skirts problematically suggests that the consumption of hyper-feminine sportswear provides empowerment in the face of continued gender-based discrimination, especially in the world of sports.

➤Running skirts normalize and hide imperfect bodies, and the women who wear them seemingly fail to question the priorities of a society that requires such normalization.

➤The functionality of running skirts has facilitated the participation in physical activity for some women.

➤The historical context of this participation must be considered as the perpetuation of gender norms through running skirts is contrary to the efforts of generations of women who have fought to participate in sport unencumbered due to dress or other social constraints.

In Reading Ads Socially, Goldman (1992)³ warns: “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).

REFERENCES

- ¹ Annual marathon report. (2010). Running USA. Retrieved from <http://www.runningusa.org/node/76115#76116>
- ² SkirtSports Company Info. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.skirtsports.com/about-skirt-sports/fact-sheet.cfm>
- ³ Goldman, R. (1992). *Reading ads socially*. London, England: Routledge.