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# Gender Manoeuvring in Swedish Skateboarding: Negotiations of Femininities and the Hierarchical Gender Structure

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## Abstract

The Nordic countries score high in gender equality ratings and we have a long tradition of working with feminist agendas promising liberal futures to both young women and men. Still, contemporary young women struggle to make room for female participation in male-dominated spaces. Based on ethnographic research, this article explores gender manoeuvring, that is, manipulations of the relationship between masculinity and femininity in the patterned beliefs and activities of Swedish skateboarding. The three most apparent femininities in the empirical material, 'the tomboy', 'the bitch', and 'the lesbian', are discussed and how they sometimes give rise to gender manoeuvring and sometimes not. I argue that the formation of a national network harnessing feminist strategies has been successful in making space for female skateboarding in local skateparks and the mainstream media. The negotiations these actions result in have the potential to transform the hierarchical gender order between and among masculinities and femininities. However, simultaneous tendencies to preserve the unequal gender structure through valuing both hegemonic masculinity and femininity become visible.

## Keywords

gender, femininity, skateboarding, youth culture, sports

## Introduction

Skateboarding is a physical activity where men, most of the time and in most places, outnumber women, i.e. it is male dominated (Bäckström, 2005; Beal, 1995, 1996; Yochim, 2010). Drawing on my earlier work on skateboarding (Bäckström, 2005) as well as on Kelly et al. (2006), I presuppose that skateboarding in a Western context has come to be coded as masculine, like technological skills and competence (Facer et al., 2001; Jenson et al., 2003). Moreover, in Sweden, skateboarding as well as the related board sport snowboarding show hierarchical gender relations (Bäckström,

2005) similar to the United States (Atencio et al., 2009; Beal, 1996), Canada (Porter, 2003), New Zealand (Thorpe, 2005, 2009), and Sweden's neighbour Norway (Sisjord, 2009).

The field of sports is interesting to study because it provides an area for participants to challenge and contest physical capacities and in some cases gender norms. Sports have a long history of being a male bastion (see, for example, Hargreaves, 1994). In Sweden, Olofsson (1989), in her study on ideology and women's participation in the sports movement, asked whether women have a sporting chance. This question is still relevant 20 years later in certain sports, for instance ice hockey (Gilenstam, 2009), more than others. Even in equestrian sports where women outnumber men, and where men and women traditionally compete on an equal basis, women face discrimination on perceived reasons of physical strength, body shape and the tradition and history in the industry (Roberts and MacLean, 2012). A multitude of studies on sports and gender have dealt with different related aspects (see, for example, the special issue on sport and gender edited by Hedenborg and Pfister, 2012, for a recent overview with a predominantly Nordic perspective).

In the Nordic countries, football (soccer) is the most popular sport for both young men and women (Swedish Sports Confederation, 2010). In Norway, playing football is also experienced as part of the 'normal' gender scripts of girls (Strandbu and Hegna, 2006). This is in contrast to somewhat older women football players in four different European countries who saw themselves as 'tomboys' (Scraton et al., 1999). The latter study maintains that this did not redefine hegemonic notions of femininity or masculinity. Both studies point to the importance of the organization of sport, in addition to its promotion of female participation, as a way of explaining changes in girls' and women's experiences of sport. Although these studies provide valuable insights into how girls and women *talk* about experiences of being active female subjects in sports, they do not explain and describe the ways in which gender structure as a patterned form of belief is pushed, pulled, challenged, but also strengthened in practice. How do girls and women talk about this in real-life situations, beyond the interview context? How do they act in practice? Through ethnographic research, which can highlight what people actually *do*, this article examines these questions.

Despite the growing academic interest in board sports (for example Atencio et al., 2009; Beal, 1996; Heino, 2000; Kelly et al., 2005; Thorpe, 2005, 2010; Wheaton, 2000; Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998; Yochim, 2010), little research has been done on female participation and the way femininities are negotiated in skateboarding. Therefore, this article sets out to fill this void by exploring what it means to skateboard as a young woman in Sweden. This article contributes with new empirical findings on how girls and young women convey femininities in a skateboarding context and how skateboarding is formed as a participant-driven organization for girls and women. Furthermore, it elaborates on theoretical conceptualizations of gender manoeuvring (Schippers, 2002, 2007), which may prove to be useful not only for explaining the relationships along sociological parameters in youth and music where it originates, but also in sports (see Finley, 2010) and other arenas.

In Sweden, all-girls skateboarding events have flourished in recent years. These activities are formed within a national network of women skateboarders and supported by feminist arguments. To study how girls and young women talk and act in these settings may show how gender is performed and negotiated on both a cultural and an individual level. It may reveal power relations along the lines of gender and how these are established or disrupted. At the same time, it may show how feminism as a political standpoint is developed and used as it 'has provided a previously non-existent analytical framework and language to young women for interpreting their worlds' (Aapola et al., 2005: 218). The explanatory value goes beyond studies of sport as similar structures are found in a number of areas.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to explore how young women in Sweden negotiate femininities and manoeuvre in relation to gender in their skateboarding context. This will be done from a theoretical feminist perspective (Hall, 1988; Schippers, 2002, 2007). It is a standpoint that implies negotiations of power in a hierarchical gender system (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). In order to do this, there is first a review of previous literature on female participation in sports written from a feminist perspective, with a particular focus on male-dominated sports and board sports. Related to this review, there is a discussion of a theoretical framework on alternative femininities that illustrates both inter- and intra-gender relations at different levels and in various contexts (Schippers, 2002, 2007). This theoretical framework is then used in the empirical section of this article. Prior to the empirical part, my methodological ethnographic standpoints are presented and a brief overview is given of the empirical material. In the empirical section, which is divided into three subsections, I discuss the relationship between femininity and masculinity in the hegemonic gender structure of Swedish skateboarding. This is followed by a discussion of the three most apparent femininities, 'the tomboy', 'the bitch' and 'the lesbian', that I find in the material I analyze for this article and how these femininities sometimes give rise to gender manoeuvring and sometimes not. The third subsection is devoted to the context of gender manoeuvring, which, in this case, has to do with how gender manoeuvring is formalized in the national network for women skateboarding. Finally, in the conclusion, I argue that an organization with a feminist agenda may have the potential to transform the hierarchical gender structure, but that femininities and masculinities supporting the same structure are simultaneously reproduced.

## **Feminism and Female Inroads in Sports**

The scholarly works focusing on women and sport have a long tradition internationally of echoing the historical roots of sports as a male preserve (for example Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 1995). However, several developments in the past four decades have increased female participation in sports. Among these are the feminist movement and the health and fitness movement (Theberge and Birrell, 1994). Within European and Anglo-American social and academic work, this has led to the questioning of sports as a male arena and has also challenged masculine hegemony.

Physical activity for women was not only legitimized, it was also distinguished as an important medium for empowerment (Whitson, 1994). Whether sports have a liberating potential for women to transgress traditional and constraining gender norms (for example Castelnovo and Guthrie, 1998; Dowling, 2000), or whether women's sporting endeavours continue to be thwarted by structural systems that either sexualize them and/or characterize them and their activities as marginalized and trivial (for example Cole and Hribar, 1995), or if these processes occur simultaneously (for example Markula, 2005) is still the subject of considerable scholarly investigation.

The relatively new 'action' sports, including board sports, such as skateboarding and snowboarding, have raised expectations of providing a breeding ground for more liberal gender relations (Rinehart, 2005; Thorpe, 2005).<sup>1</sup> For instance, Thorpe (2005: 95) suggests that 'a new gender order is on the horizon and females are onboard and making fresh tracks towards achieving this goal'. However, Heino (2000: 188) notes that while snowboarding welcomes and celebrates female participation, skateboarding 'is a tough, street sport whose membership is limited to males'. In line with the cultural notions of skateboarding being a tough street sport, risk and sport have been linked to certain types of masculinity (Donnelly, 2004; Kusz, 2004). The female inroads in male-dominated sports may thus be characterized by negotiations of space and power. Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) describe examples of reproductive agency in terms of avoidance, downplaying gender and highlighting benefits, and resistant agency in terms of emphasizing worthiness and collective strategies as women negotiate space on men's turf in skydiving and snowboarding. Correspondingly, Sisjord (2009) distinguishes different typologies of femininities among Norwegian women snowboarders who employ various position-taking strategies. Interestingly, in relation to the work for this article, female snowboarders in the Norwegian Snowboarding Federation have founded the Powder Puff Girls to promote female snowboarding both within and outside the federation. Both Sisjord and Laurendeau and Sharara emphasize negotiations between men and women that are active in different contexts. By relating, instead, to an imagined other femininity, skateboarding girls in Canada saw themselves as participating in an alternative girlhood. The alternative way of being a girl opposed the norms of emphasized femininity (which is the most culturally valued form of femininity, although not always the most established) and resisted oppressive discourses of sexism and girlhood (Kelly et al., 2005).

The skateboarding girls and young women in my study clearly interact towards both imagined other femininities and towards a hierarchical gender structure. Therefore, I needed a theoretical framework that has explanatory value in both these directions. It was, in other words, important to be able to explore and theoretically explain both inter- and intra-gender relations.

## Theoretical Framework

The male-dominated field of skateboarding in Sweden historically shows many similarities with the gender structure of mainstream hard rock music as described

by the American sociologist Mimi Schippers (2002, 2007). Like hard rock, skateboarding has largely been a male-dominant cultural form. These (historically) legitimated structures need to be taken into consideration when exploring contemporary formations and negotiations of gender. Schippers' ethnographic studies on gender, in what she calls 'alternative hard-rock music', a subculture of hard rock music, show 'how both women and men deploy different strategies of cultural gender manoeuvring to replace the sexist, male-dominant, mainstream culture with something else' (2002: xiii). Her studies of gender manoeuvring greatly resemble what the research participants in my study are doing in that they challenge the male dominance through intricate negotiations of valued and gendered action.

Schippers (2002) introduces the concept of gender manoeuvring as a way to explore collective strategies to transform sexist culture into non-sexist and, at the same time, encourage others to follow. Gender manoeuvring may be both cultural (referring to the manipulation of relationships between masculinity and femininity as patterned beliefs) and interactive (referring to the manipulation of such relationships in brief moments of situated interaction). What the concept of gender manoeuvring adds to the previous theoretical conceptualization is that it allows for thinking about relationships between genders as actively *negotiated* in face-to-face interactions and everyday practices (Schippers, 2002). Schippers (2007) develops a model drawing on Butler (1990) and Connell (1995) in which hegemonic masculinity is ascendant in relation to hegemonic femininity, but the latter is, in turn, ascendant to other femininities and, importantly, it serves as the preservation of the gender order and male domination. Alternative femininities (and masculinities), on the other hand, are disruptive, as they do not 'articulate a complementary relation of dominance and subordination between women and men' (Schippers, 2007: 98). Instead of labelling certain femininities subordinate, Schippers proposes the term 'pariah femininities' as this set of characteristics is considered to contaminate the relationship between masculinity and femininity (Schippers 2007: 95). Conceptualizing masculinities and femininities, according to this model, may serve to understand 'the operation of gender hegemony in local, regional, and global relations of inequality, and identify local, regional, and global ways to challenge gender hegemony' (Schippers, 2007: 101). This article is a contribution to such theoretical and empirical work.

Central to the theoretical work in the field of gender and sports is the development of the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', which has been used to describe and explain male social dominance through cultural practices (Connell, 1987, 1995; Messner and Sabo, 1990). Important for this work is the notion of multiple masculinities. As an answer to the critique for trait concepts of gender and for treating hierarchy in one-dimensional terms, a more complex model of gender hierarchy is presented along with a call for more scholarly attention on femininities and an emphasis on the interplay between different levels and contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Building on the conceptualization by Connell, whose original term hegemonic femininity was later renamed emphasized femininity because of its inferior position in the gender system, Schippers (2007) proposes to reclaim

the original concept. Hegemonic femininity allows for a configuration of multiple femininities without reducing femininity to the practices of women and masculinity to the practices of men as it distinguishes femininity from subordinate masculinities (Halberstam, 1998; Schippers, 2007). In a Nordic context, Ambjörnson (2004) has elaborated on the conceptualization of 'normative femininity' drawing on the work of Skeggs (1997). These ideas of a middle-class-based feminine norm, comprising a moderate, tolerant, compassionate femininity, correlates, to a certain extent, with what Schippers calls hegemonic femininity although the explicit class perspective is less developed in her work.

The symbolic meanings of the categories 'man' and 'woman' are abundant in contemporary Western societies. Schippers (2007), in contrast to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), argues that it is in the quality content of these categories that we find the hegemonic significance of masculinity and femininity. (Note, however, it is through practice that we can distinguish sex categorizations.) According to Schippers (2007: 92):

Embodiment of masculine and feminine characteristics by individuals is embodiment or display. Embodying and producing the relationship between masculinity and femininity in social interaction is 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), and the extent to which the hierarchical and complementary relationship between masculinity and femininity is institutionalized is gender structure.

This conceptualization allows people occupying the *social location* (in contrast to Connell's *place*) of *woman* or *man* to engage in practices or embody characteristics defined as masculine or feminine.

## Empirical Material and Methods

An ethnographic approach has the potential to describe an array of social and cultural aspects, including power relations in sports and other physical cultures (for example Bolin and Granskog, 2003; Markula, 2005; Pink, 1996, 1997; Theberge, 1993). In fact, it may be particularly well suited for examining the relationship between 'experience, identity, politics, and power' (Wheaton, 2002: 261), with reference to Griffin (1996: 181).

My field is multilocal and mirrors the shifting locales of present-day Swedish female skateboarding. The empirical material was gathered between 2008 and 2010. For a year, I followed the weekly routine of girls who skated on Monday nights at an indoor skatepark. Three hours per week in the street area are exclusively for women's practice. Apart from the fieldwork done there, I have, for instance, attended contests where women participated (four), all-girls skate camps (two), one all-girls skateboard tour and taken part in formal meetings aimed at discussing how to promote female skateboarding. The participant observations central to ethnographic work and the process of jotting down, organizing and writing up the material follow Emerson et al. (1995) as well as Pink (2009), which means that written field notes

were taken on every occasion, but vary in relation to the circumstances of the event taking place.<sup>2</sup> The empirical material consists of field notes (in written, auditory and visual forms).

This text draws mainly on the participatory part of my fieldwork, as this is where the negotiations actually were most visible. I particularly refer to two intense events where I took part on the same terms as the other participants, i.e. round-the-clock socializing where the sleeping quarters were often classroom floors in schools. The first event was an all-girls skate camp, which was held at an indoor skatepark over a weekend (Friday to Sunday). It was attended by 25 people, aged between 12 and 35. All were fairly skilled, and there were no absolute beginners. The second event was an all-girls skateboard tour, which visited six cities in Sweden in 12 days. The nearly 40 participants aged 15 and upwards travelled the country in four minibuses. Among the participants on this tour was also a team of women skateboarders from North America.

Ethnography has been recognized by sport and leisure scholars for its useful ability to produce valuable insider statements (Wheaton, 2002). In terms of defining myself as a skateboarder, my own position in this fieldwork has never been that of an insider despite my long personal experience. This is my second extensive ethnographic study, and my interest in the field comes from having skateboarded myself in the late 1970s. The key participants in the study called me 'NN the researcher'. In other words, my participation as a researcher was never doubted nor questioned. On the other hand, when leaving the field, I was referred to as 'one of us', even though my practical skills were limited.

I have encountered numerous people who have been of relevance to this study in different ways, some only very briefly and others over a longer period. Sixty-four people gave their consent to participate in the study. They were mainly Swedish citizens, predominately white, middle class (according to their education and occupation, or their parents'), urban (now living in an urban environment), women (90 per cent) aged between 12 and 36. In this text, I draw mainly on the interaction with 10 of these research participants who are described in further detail in Table 1. They are all Swedish citizens and have actively skateboarded for at least three years; the only (advanced) beginner at the time was Esther. Both Ally and Jolene also snowboard. Within the ethnographic framework, I have, following Mishler (1986), as well as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), also conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 people. Four of the 10 key persons for this text were interviewed in these digitally recorded face-to-face verbal interactions where I directed the conversation to find out more about my interviewees' thoughts about predefined themes, such as gender.<sup>3</sup>

Context is crucial to this study since femininities are localized (Schippers, 2002, 2007) and because ethnography is a method that heavily draws on its environment (Emerson et al., 1995; Pink, 2009).<sup>4</sup> The study has a national scope, namely the Swedish-speaking board-sport media, but most of the fieldwork was done in two of the country's largest urban areas. The reasons why these areas were chosen are that they both have a thriving skateboard scene and serve as nodes (Hannerz, 1992) for expressions of skateboard culture.



**Table 1.** Description of Included Research Participants

Name	Age	More than Three Years in the Sport	Engaged in National Network	Coach	Participation in		Semi-structured Recorded Interview	Occupation	Sponsorship
					Camp	Tour			
Ally	26	Yes	Moderate	No	No	No	Yes	Design assistant	No
Angie	24	Yes	Moderate	No	No	No	No	Administrator	No
Carro	16	Yes	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Student	Yes
Cecilia	27	Yes	High	No	Yes	Yes	No	Administrator	No
Esther	36	No	Low	No	Yes	No	No	Researcher	No
Jolene	27	Yes	Moderate	No	No	No	Yes	Nurse	Yes
Karolina	25	Yes	High	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Photographer	Yes
Mia	23	Yes	High	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Project leader	No
Molly	20	Yes	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Administrator	Yes
Pernilla	19	Yes	Low	Yes	No	No	Yes	Student	Yes

**Source:** Author's compilation.

## Analysis and Discussions

Cultural gender manoeuvring, according to Schippers, is a specific kind of interaction ‘when one or more people manipulate their own gender performance or manipulate the meaning of others’ gender performance in order to establish, disrupt, or change the relationship between and among masculinities and femininities’ (Schippers, 2002: xiii). These manoeuvres have political implications. Ultimately, it is about transforming the gender organization of everyday life and the more general social structure ‘with our bodies, our activities, our interactions, and in the broader distribution of resources and power’ (Schippers, 2002: 189).

In her work on alternative hard rock, Schippers (2002) takes her personal story of shifting her focus from baseball to hard rock in her teens as the starting point. It is a story of growing up, of emerging sexuality and of rebellion against her family. Like most stories of growing up, it has multiple layers. This story is also about the joy in the power and overt sexuality of hard rock music and how this, despite its sexist cultural content, could serve as a vehicle for questioning the same content and the inherent gender order. This article similarly displays how the masculine cultural content of skateboarding becomes a springboard for feminist work as part of this physical activity.

The following analysis is organized in three parts. In the first part, I distinguish and discuss which characteristics and practices are displayed as manly and womanly. It has mainly to do with the relationship between femininity and masculinity in the hegemonic gender structure, which may seem obsolete in a country that scores a four in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report, thus demonstrating the greatest gender equality in the world together with the neighbouring Nordic countries (Hausmann et al., 2010). Nonetheless, it is relevant because it shows the discursive impact of masculine dominance and hegemonic gender structure among Swedish women skateboarders. In addition to how they resist this through communication on another semiotic level, I particularly look at compassion as a trait of ‘female skateboard culture’ and aggression, which is culturally defined as manly, as ‘normal’ skateboard culture. These characteristics and practices are contextualized and discussed as practices that situate certain femininities as complementary and inferior to masculinity, i.e. what constitutes hegemonic femininity.

In the second part of the analysis, I discuss three femininities that the skateboarding girls and young women in my study take on or play with: the tomboy, the bitch and the lesbian. These femininities were distilled through analytical categorizations of the compiled empirical material, mainly the written and visual field notes and the interviews. How the girls and young women relate to the femininities varies from deeply embodied identifications to playful and detached acknowledgements. The femininities frequently overlap and, apart from these three, other less visible femininities also appear in the empirical material, such as the mother.<sup>5</sup> This last femininity implies nurturing and caretaking in my research context. Two of the aforementioned femininities, the bitch and the lesbian, enable practices that contaminate and disrupt the hierarchical gender order and are significant parts of gender manoeuvring. One of them, however, the tomboy, may be experienced as disruptive on an individual level but reproduces the hierarchical gender order on a structural level.

Schippers (2002) describes interactive gender manoeuvring, that is, practices within relatively short moments of situated interaction, as something used by members of the alternative hard rock subculture to establish and maintain certain rules for gender when interacting with people from outside the subculture, but also for negotiating internal power relations between members of the subculture. Enacting certain femininities may exemplify interactive gender manoeuvring in practice.

The third part of the analysis discusses the organization of this sport in a Swedish setting as well as its promotion of female participation, namely a strategy to change the hierarchical gender structure through making room for more women skateboarders. In this section, I suggest that an elaboration on Schippers' theoretical conceptualization (2002, 2007) would help understand how cultural gender manoeuvring is formalized.

### *Part I: Masculinity and Femininity in the Hegemonic Gender Structure*

As far as my experience goes, unlike the hard rock culture as described by Schippers (2002), skateboarding does not have the same overt sexuality found in rock music. I have, for instance, never heard someone yell, 'Skate that pussy', when engaging in the activity, the way rock lyrics, for example, habitually refer to sexual organs or actions. However, similar to rock music, skateboarding is defined as 'hard' and 'aggressive' (Bäckström, 2005).

These cultural traits have been described as significant for explaining masculine dominance (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Indeed, the hierarchical gender relations and the masculine coding of board sports are visible in the Swedish board-sport media (Bäckström, 2005). Similarly, studies of media representations show that in the early days of North American snowboarding, male snowboarders and the snowboarding media used two overarching strategies to define acceptable and appropriate ways of being a girl snowboarder: (hetero)sexualization and devaluation (Anderson, 1999), and in advertising, gendered images objectify girls and women as a naturalized position and in sexualized ways (Rinehart, 2005).

In my empirical material, the hegemonic gender structure is visible in conversations and interviews where it appears as a discourse of gendered difference. In these conversations, the difference is often explained as derived from sociocultural grounds, and explanations in terms of ontological essence are carefully avoided. It may be argued that these conversations do not question, but, rather, reproduce, the hegemonic gender structure through their discursive constructions of difference, implementing masculinity and femininity as complementary. Parallel to negotiating relationships between femininity and masculinity that serve to maintain the hegemonic gender order, semiotic interaction through clothes and looks also questions this gender order.

#### *Contradictive Communications*

What implications does the male dominance have for girls and young women involved in this sport? When I asked Carro, who has been interviewed several times in the mainstream media, she could not help letting out a tired sigh: 'You always get

that question, and I don't have a good answer.' She has the typical looks of a young woman skateboarder with torn jeans, a loose tank top over a baggy T-shirt and her hair dyed bright orange. Carro eventually tried to answer my question. She has top grades at her upper secondary school, where she is enrolled in a natural science programme, and the answer draws both on this and her sociocultural experiences: 'Girls can't jump as high, but girls can be more technical. It has to do with physics. But it also has to do with the way girls are brought up. To wear pink and not to hurt themselves.' (Carro, aged 16).

In an interview with Ally, she expressed the differences between girls and boys in a similar manner: 'Well, guys always go for it more than girls do. They have that kind of attitude. They don't wait until it's their turn. They just go. We, as girls, are more careful.' (Ally, aged 26).

Carro and Ally give quite representative answers to the question both in terms of what they say in words and with their looks. Through their punkish outfits, they resist hegemonic femininity, much like in Schippers' study (2002) where the women in alternative hard rock use their way of dressing to gender manoeuvre. Carro also elucidates the sociocultural norms that continue to reproduce girls as timid in relation to physical activities defined as vigorous. What Carro does in her answer is to pinpoint the different symbolic meanings of the categories 'man' and 'woman' and how girls occupying the social location of the latter are encouraged not to challenge their physical capacities too much.

#### *Compassion versus Aggression*

During a lunch break at an all-girls skate camp, the differences between men's and women's skateboarding also appeared along traditional gender lines. Angie said she was even more of a girl-skater than a skater. The hyphen gendered skateboarding for her so that she was even more the gendered variety. A 'normal' skater is, in other words, a man or a boy, as in many other sports. Molly said that skating with girls was very different from skating with boys. Esther, Karolina and Angie were of the same opinion. According to them, the tempo was slower when skating with girls, in terms of fewer people and lower speed. Angie added that girls' skating was more appreciative and encouraging. They talked about boys' skateboarding as more competitive. In a similar vein, Sisjord (2009) describes how Norwegian women snowboarders adopt a more passive attitude and even end up as spectators particularly in male-dominated contexts, and how male snowboarders assume the experts' role in a more or less natural way.

In the lunch-break discussion, traditional female values displaying hegemonic femininity were used to describe what the research participants even defined as 'female skateboard culture'. It is more appreciative, more encouraging and more accepting than 'male skateboard culture'. In this talk, the women define the practice of female skateboarding as different to male skateboarding. This way of skateboarding is however not the 'normal' way of skateboarding, which, rather, is described as aggressive and competitive. Even though the former is, in many cases, highlighted among the girls as 'better', occupying the social location of women in this case touches upon hegemonic femininity as it reproduces its quality content of both

moderation and compassion. In turn, this position complements hegemonic masculinity, which, consequently, preserves the hegemonic gender order.

## Part II: Femininities

Through enacting certain types of femininities, the skateboarding girls and young women in my study negotiated girl- and womanhood through both inter- and intra-gender relationships. In the empirical material analysed for this text, the three most often occurring types of femininities are the tomboy, the bitch and the lesbian. In relation to the typologies of femininities in Norwegian snowboarding described by Sisjord (2009), mine show both similarities and differences. All Sisjord's three typologies, 'babes' (excluded wannabes); 'fast girls' (provocative, included and skilled); and 'invisible girls' (withdrawn observers), may be found in printed Swedish board-sport magazines (Bäckström, 2005).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the current ethnographic work on women's skateboarding brings different aspects to the fore. Only the fast girl finds her equivalent in my material. The various outcomes could probably be explained by the different scopes of the studies.

The tomboy, the bitch and the lesbian are all related to what seemed to be both deeply rooted identification and a femininity to play with, as I show below. Pariah femininities, such as the lesbian who enacts the quality content of hegemonic masculinity in terms of the women's desire for the feminine object, or the bitch who claims authority, are unavoidably feminine in their constitution as *not masculine* (Halberstam, 1998; Schippers, 2007). Pariah femininities may however be enacted and turned into alternative femininities that have the potential to question the hegemonic gender structure.

### *The Tomboy—Reproductive or Resistant?*

For Pernilla, who worked as a coach at the local skatepark where much of the fieldwork was conducted, the experienced difference between women's and men's skateboarding is what makes it more fun for her to skateboard with men than with women:

I think it's more fun to skate with guys because they have another tempo, they push you more.... It's not like girls *are* that way, but it's not the same like 'do it, do it, do it, do it, do it' [*in a forced voice*], it's more like 'take your time, come on, do it, oh you're so good' [*in a sweet voice*]. (Pernilla, aged 19)

Also, Jolene talked about skateboarding with boys as 'tougher' and how she previously was more aggressive as a result of skateboarding with them.

I was tougher before. I was tougher because I was used to skateboarding with boys only. There were no girls in the town. Well, there was one other girl, but, well, I skated mostly with the guys, so I mean, I'm used to that. It's not like I've never skateboarded with guys. On the contrary, that's what I've done. (Jolene, aged 27)

Both interview excerpts reveal two similar themes: (a) acceptance and social inclusion among the boys and (b) a positive evaluation of what is described as male

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skateboarding. Displaying tomboy femininity in this context indicates, in other words, accepted presence. In Norwegian snowboarding, the so-called fast girls similarly experienced acceptance when 'having guts', speed and skills; in short, living up to appropriate behaviour according to male standards (Sisjord, 2009). This is equivalent to previous studies on male-dominated board sports, where women are accepted if they behave like the boys or the men (Thorpe, 2006).

Adopting tomboy femininity does not cause any conflict for the girls or young women in my study; on the contrary, they express pride in their performances and they receive approval from their male peers. For professional women football players in a European setting, being a tomboy, or wanting to be a boy, was similarly a positive childhood experience (Scraton et al., 1999). In correlation with that study, skateboarding girls and young women in Sweden display traits defined as masculine, such as competitiveness, aggression and active physicality. These traits are not only culturally conferred on the tomboy; they are also generally valued in sports.

Scraton et al. (1999) are averse to the possibility of change in the hegemonic gender structure caused by tomboys. 'By perceiving themselves to be "like boys" they reinforce and reproduce, rather than challenge, the power relations between male/female and the binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and men's sport/women's sport' (Scraton et al., 1999: 105). In applying the model that Schippers proposes to the above examples, the category woman is positioned as complementary and also inferior to the category man in that its quality content is less valued. These intra-gender negotiations dismantle hierarchical relationships both between the categories man and woman and between different forms of femininity.

### *The Bitch—Interactive Gender Manoeuvring*

Interactive gender manoeuvring in women's skateboarding in Sweden is visible in a number of instances. Below, Mia enacts the bitch by claiming authority. The skateboard tour can serve as an example. It received extensive media coverage from local newspapers, radio and television. Apart from the mainstream media, the skateboard media also followed the event. The fastest-growing national media of this kind, a web-based magazine, also published pictures, both stills and filmed material, and some text about their tour. The girls followed this daily. After one stop, this web medium, as part of its coverage of the girls' demonstration, included a large number of pictures of a local group of male skateboarders that were put above the pictures of the girls. In the texts accompanying the pictures of the boys, it was said that 'being a skater gets many girls'. The skateboarding girls were described as 'tired', and one picture featured one of the girls and a child, along with the text 'a child is a girl's best friend'.

The girls on the tour were furious when they saw this. They immediately called the editor-in-chief and demanded that the texts be removed and the pictures rearranged, which he did. They did not agree that they were tired, that children were their best friends or that their own demonstration should come after a local group of male skateboarders. In addition, they did not want the photographer to show up ever again when they were skating. Nevertheless, he did at their last stop. Mia, one of the tour organizers, confronted him at the skatepark.

The worst thing that can happen to us is to be called skateboarding guys' appendages and that hanging out with children is all we want to do. That is the last thing we do. We are here to skate. It was extremely insulting. (Mia, aged 23)

He apologized profusely and explained that the whole thing was satirical. Neither Mia nor any of the others who had read the original wording of his pieces for the web-based magazine had found it satirical. The attempt by the Swedish skateboarding media is, deliberately or not, an effort to reinforce 'mainstream values such as male dominance in sport; women as passive, adoring observers of men; women as dependent on men; females intended as sexual objects for the gaze of mostly males' (Rinehart, 2005: 241).

In this context, Mia confronted both the editor-in-chief and the photographer of the fastest-growing web-based board-sport media when she experienced unfair treatment. Correspondingly, Mia acts as a spokesperson for all the skateboarding girls on the tour by rejecting the images of traditional motherhood imposed on them in the photographer's caption. She also objects to the claim that she is in the skatepark for any other reason than to skate. In so doing, she negotiates socially and culturally acceptable ways of being a woman, not only for herself but also for all women in the local and national skateboarding community. Mia confirms that her way of being a woman includes skateboarding, similar to the girls in Kelly et al., who collectively 'rewrite the rules of girlhood' (2008: 123).

#### *The Lesbian—Contaminating Femininity*

Sexually desiring other women and being aggressive or promiscuous are among the practices and characteristics that become stigmatized and sanctioned if they are embodied by women. These practices threaten male dominance because they refuse to complement hegemonic masculinity in a subordinate relationship (Schippers, 2007). Similar to the research participants doing alternative hard rock in Schippers' study (2002), the people in mine had mainly an outspoken, open-minded attitude to homo- and bisexuality. Only one of the skateboarding girls in my study has openly declared her heterosexuality.<sup>7</sup> In a heteronormative world, this certainly comes as no surprise, nor does the stigmatization of women skateboarders as lesbians, similar to women athletes in a large number of sports (Lenskyj, 1988, 1994). The stereotypes of the female athlete and the lesbian share the same quality content that is considered masculine, for instance independence and aggression.

Occasionally, during the fieldwork, this stigmatization would appear in different forms. A playful take on it was performed at one stop on the aforementioned skateboard tour. The women had been skateboarding all day, including a demonstration for an audience of approximately 250 people. When this had to be interrupted due to sudden rainfall, everybody moved indoors, where two all-girl rock bands played as part of the whole event. The women were excited, danced around the floor, and cheered. After returning to their sleeping quarters, they were still in a good mood and someone turned the music up loud. The dancing continued. Mia asked the girls, who were partying among the sleeping bags, backpacks and inflatable mattresses strewn across the floor, to listen up. She had temporarily borrowed the key to the showers

at a nearby school gym and there were only two showers not working in the building. 'Who wants to take a shower?' she cried, trying to shout louder than the music. No one seemed interested at this moment, and she reminded the cheering girls that there would be no time to shower later at night or in the morning before leaving. 'Who needs a shower?' Cecilia replied cockily. Karolina picked up on the idea and suggestively yelled, 'Let's get dirty!' The crowd responded by shouting in unison, 'Yeah,' and roaring with laughter.

The lesbian femininity contaminates the relationship between masculinity and femininity, as discussed above. The binary hierarchical relationship between men and women is bound by heterosexual desire, that is, an attraction to, and a relationship of, difference (Butler, 1990; Schippers, 2007). While Schippers acknowledges that far more than erotic desire is relevant for the content of masculinity and femininity, she pinpoints the construction of hetero-desire as 'the ontological essence of gender difference' as it 'establishes the meaning of the *relationship* between masculinity and femininity' (Schippers, 2007: 90).

### ***Part III: Organizing Women's Skateboarding—Formalized Cultural Gender Manoeuvring***

As mentioned previously, skateboarding young women in Sweden have organized a national network that helps participants with different kinds of financial and social support. The inter-gender activities described above strive to establish skateboarding as a 'normal' activity for women and the explicit aim of the network is to no longer be needed. As the empirical examples in this text show, skateboarding is not yet 'normal' for females, in contrast to young Norwegian women playing football who found that 'skills and values, previously identified as masculine, fit unproblematically into ordinary gender scripts for Norwegian girls today' (Strandbu and Hegna, 2006: 122).

Organizing women's skateboarding may be seen as formalizing cultural gender manoeuvring in Schippers' terms. Like the alternative hard rockers in her study, the girls and young women in mine rarely use the word feminism or talk about themselves as feminists. Nonetheless, they 'use feminism as a guide for how to do rock [skateboard] culture differently, and by example, encourage others to go along' (Schippers, 2002: 157). What is similar in both cases is that this is not girls against boys, men against women; it is about performance in interactions with others. Of the three femininities discussed above, it is the bitch who comes into play in the most obvious way in formalized cultural gender manoeuvring. This femininity facilitates claims for space and respect in a powerful and outspoken manner, which explicitly questions masculine hegemony in the hierarchical gender structure.

There have been women in Swedish skateboarding ever since it became popular in the country in the late 1970s (Bäckström, 2005). Even so, it was not until recent years that women have become more visible, mainly due to a serious and deliberate undertaking by what was initially a loose national network of women skateboarders. The formalized national network of female skateboarders in Sweden has





**Figure 1.** Sign on the Women's Toilet Door in a Skatepark

**Source:** Photo, Bäckström, Å. (empirical material).

been successful in organizing all-girls skate events, such as camps and tours, and making space for female participation at certain hours in the skateparks. In one of the skateparks where the fieldwork was conducted, a visible example of space made for women's participation in this place is the sign on the women's toilet door. A female form of a skateboarder with breasts, a board and a skirt marks this private space for the sex category woman.

#### *Worthiness through Skill*

The overall strategy of the network has been to emphasize worthiness through skill. A catchword for assessing physical prowess among the girls is 'grym', which actually means cruel, but is used in young people's language as a positive description of someone or something really good. In this text, 'awesome' refers to the

positive connotations of this word.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, physical prowess has been termed a key constituent of board sports (Thorpe, 2005; Wheaton, 2000; Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998).

There are many awesome skater girls in our large country who are seen far too infrequently. We put the girl skaters in the limelight and show that there are not only many of them, but they are also really good. Particularly since skateboarding is so male dominated, the women need to be more visible. The purpose is also to make more girls interested in skateboarding. If they see awesome girls and get tips on how to begin, it may inspire them to start skating and make the sport more popular among people, something we all benefit from. (No Limit, 2008)<sup>9</sup>

On the tour discussed above, the girls made the front pages of several local newspapers. The tour was organized in keeping with feminist issues, such as the right to perform an activity in a male-dominated setting to legitimize 'the presence of women as skaters' (Atencio et al., 2009: 15). The all-girls skate camps and the tours were financed both by government funding and commercial sponsors, indicating that the network was helped in turning physical prowess, cultural commitment and risk taking into economic capital, similar to professional snowboarding women (Thorpe, 2009). But instead of establishing their own brands like the snowboarding women in Thorpe's study, the economic capital in question here was mainly for the collective benefit, not personal profit. Through sponsorship, the network was able to finance the trip, prizes for competitions and some food.

When presenting the skateboarders at the demonstration in Stockholm, Carro introduced the group she belonged to with the words: 'We are the best skateboarding girls in Sweden'. This claim of proficiency may be regarded as an admission of their skateboarding value. The speakers repeatedly included the expression 'grymma'. However, it is more than just a struggle for equal rights to perform a physical activity. It is a strong effort to establish female skateboarding as talented in a hierarchical gender structure that positions women as less capable. Thus, it is possible to interpret the girls' actions within the national network of Swedish women skateboarders as part of a collective resistance strategy emphasizing worthiness and improving their sporting prowess, similar to Canadian women skydivers (Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008).

### *Structural Support and Feminist Policies*

As argued above, context is crucial to understanding the way Swedish women skateboarders position themselves as women and how they negotiate and display femininities. In Sweden, sports are largely organized under one national umbrella organization (Riksidrottsförbundet [the Swedish Sports Confederation]), through which government funding is administered. Among other things, funding is used as an incentive for gender equality and health promotion in children and young people similar to other Nordic countries (Stöckel et al., 2010). The dedicated work on gender equality undertaken by the Norwegian Football Association (Fasting, 2003) may, for instance, be credited with the aforementioned expanded gender

script for girls. By Swedish standards, it is important to recognize the Swedish Sports Confederation's promotion of the work on gender equality in sports. Gender equality is an aim included in its constitution and today (2009) women on average account for up to 42 per cent of the participants.<sup>10</sup> This policy work has not explicitly affected skateboarding, as this sport has not been a part of this organization. Therefore, there are no equivalent statistics, nor has there been a comparable policymaking agency.

Historically, skateboarding has never had a national federation within this or any other well-established organization despite a very strong social and political tradition of associations and non-governmental organizations in Sweden.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, skateboarding has mainly been an informally organized activity drawing on the idea of resistance against the adult world and traditional sports, and in favour of accordingly conferred subcultural values (Bäckström, 2005). Nevertheless, there are strong indications that this is subject to change (Bäckström, 2011). The visible cultural alterations relate to the fourth phase in the product life cycle of trend sports (Stamm and Lamprecht, 1998). At an organizational level, this phase characteristically shows the emergence of formal organizations and integration into school curricula. The all-girls events described are examples of, and part of, this transformation as they grow out of an organized national network for female skateboarders.

It is plausible that what we are witnessing now is a response to the positioning of skateboarding *outside* this organization in combination with other widespread feminist policies (Gemzöe, 2002). The skateboarding women (and men) in my study grew up with new material conditions in late modern society, in terms of education, employment and finances, and also with new notions of independence, choice and opportunity, supported by significant changes in law and policy (Aapola et al., 2005). In Sweden (and the other Nordic countries), gender equality has been politically promoted since the 1970s as part of widespread feminist policies (Gemzöe, 2002). Reflecting on gender equality and working towards it are not necessarily a subversive activity, but, rather, a common practice. This, however, does not mean that the question of gender equality has become outdated. As I have shown, existing categorizations of men and women situating femininity as complementary and inferior to masculinity are reproduced along with questioning practices.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how skateboarding women in Sweden use their activities and interactions to strategically disrupt and change the relationships both between and among masculinities and femininities. Cultural gender manoeuvring (Schippers, 2002) by the national network of women skateboarders is a structural effort that strategically emphasizes worthiness through physical prowess. Emphasizing women's skateboarding skills has logical coherence, with proficiency

surpassing gender in both music (Schippers, 2002) and sports (Anderson, 2008). The network has been successful in making space for itself in local skateparks and the mainstream media. In face-to-face interaction, network members also confront the skateboarding niche-media representatives to make room for women's skateboarding and alternative femininities. Both this interactive gender manoeuvring and the cultural gender manoeuvring question and give rise to contaminating femininities (Finley, 2010; Schippers, 2002, 2007). Moreover, it may be argued that the girls in the national network of women skateboarders have formalized cultural gender manoeuvring, which could be explained by the influence of feminist policymaking in sport and in other fields of Swedish society. This, I maintain, develops the theoretical model in that it allows for looking at negotiations along gender lines in formalized settings.

In her conclusion, Schippers says that 'neither gender maneuvering nor collective political action alone will dismantle male dominance'; rather, she hopes for 'a resurgence in a collective political movement, along with this kind of micromanoeuvring' (2002: 188). I think that this is what the girls and young women do in the Swedish network. Their negotiations have the potential to transform the hierarchical gender order between and among masculinities and femininities. The sign on the toilet door may be a minor indication of a small step in this direction. As discussed above, enacting the bitch or the lesbian femininities, the skateboarding young women question the relationship between masculinity and femininity and between different femininities. However, simultaneously, among the same women, tendencies to preserve the unequal gender structure through valuing both hegemonic masculinity and femininity become visible. Men's skateboarding is described as more competitive, whereas women's skateboarding is characterized as more appreciative and encouraging. In so doing, physical prowess in terms of daring to incur injuries whilst performing a new trick is measured against male standards. Negotiations where physical skills are active reveal the coding of the practice as masculine as well as the hierarchical gender relations; in short, how skills are gendered.

In this article, I have expanded the notion of the dichotomized male/female hegemonic gender order through using the conceptualization of hegemonic femininity (Schippers, 2002, 2007). This has provided a framework for understanding feminist strategies, here termed gender manoeuvring, on a collective basis as well as on an individual level. These practices are profoundly localized. By way of conclusion, the relationships between masculinities and femininities in the gender structure are both contested and reinforced. It may be argued that skateboarding in this context has a liberating influence on participating girls and young women in that they make room for themselves in spatial terms and in the beneficial social and cultural support of expanding traditional gender scripts. The inhibiting aspect of participating is however reinforced by discursive practices of gender difference and by the enactment of tomboy femininity, which support the hierarchical gender structure. To deepen the understanding of gender manoeuvring in this field, I suggest that further research should address social class in a more elaborate way as this aspect may correlate with gender manoeuvring.

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## Notes

1. These sports have all been discussed and labelled in the mainstream media as well as in scholarly work as extreme, action, alternative and lifestyle. For my own work I prefer the term board sports, which focuses on what the sports basically are—sports involving a board. Another option would have been ‘sideways’ sports to emphasize the body’s position on the board, like Christensen (2001) who has studied snowboarding in Norway.
2. The three aforementioned forms of material consist of 2,512 photographs, 87 sound recordings of approximately two minutes each and my own written field notes (nearly 300 pages).
3. In addition to this material, I have collected relevant media material, such as printed skateboarding magazines, publicly distributed DVDs produced by the research participants, weblog entries and various micro-media material (handouts, stickers, T-shirts, etc.).
4. Sweden is one of the Scandinavian countries and is situated between Norway and Finland in the northern part of Europe. The country has a population of approximately 9.4 million people and the official language is Swedish, which is spoken by more than 90 per cent of the population.
5. When this analysis and the femininities were discussed with the research participant named Mia she was hesitant, as she believed that my analysis was too close to the ‘outsider’s’ stereotype of women skateboarders. Mia feared that my analysis could support further stereotypical thinking. In Mia’s reasoning there are many more femininities amongst Swedish women skateboarders than the three I put forward here. I agree, but I adhere to my analysis of these femininities being the three most apparent in the empirical material analyzed for this article. We both, Mia and I, see these three femininities as occurring more among (a) the older women skateboarders in terms of years in the sport and (b) the more active in the national network. My interpretation of that is that the girls and women who are younger in the sport and less engaged in the network do not necessarily take on the same responsibility for gender manoeuvring and may thus have a different repertoire of femininities.
6. These three categories partly overlap with the four categories that I found in Swedish board-sport magazines published between 1978 and 2001: (a) the invisible—a non-existent woman who helps the continuance of male dominance, (b) the object—she is the one who also reinforces the male dominance and makes it ‘normal’, (c) the friend—she is the one who is accepted but does not challenge and (d) the challenger—she is the one who confronts men and the masculine hegemony in different ways (Bäckström, 2005).
7. Three openly declared their same-sex preference. Sexuality was not an explicit part of this study.
8. ‘Wicked’ was discussed as an alternative translation. ‘Grym’ is related to the English word ‘grim’.
9. All excerpts from the niche media are originally in Swedish.
10. Certain sports have a high participation of women (equestrian sports, 88 per cent) and other sports much lower (ice hockey, 5 per cent) (Swedish Sports Confederation, 2010).

11. In the 1980s, there was a separate organization called the Swedish Skateboard and Snowboard Association. Its dissolution coincided partly with the founding of the Snowboard Committee as part of the Swedish Ski Association in 1992 (Bäckström, 2005).

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