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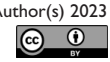

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LGBT+ ballroom dancers and their shoes: Fashioning the queer self into existence

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Abstract

This article examines the role of dance shoes in LGBT+ ballroom dancers' identity formation and expression on the dancefloor. Applying Entwistle's (2015) 'situated bodily practice' to an analysis of ethnographic field notes and 35 interviews, I highlight that dancers' performative constitution of subversive identities through reiterative mobilisation of the traditional symbolic values of dance shoes is influenced by the material. The article makes a key contribution to sociological knowledge on performativity through an introduction of materialities of place, bodies and artefacts into a close reading of reiterative acts. I argue that a closer look into performative acts is necessary for determining whether and how resistance is constituted, recognised and reproduced, taking into account how materialities interweave with discourse in order to give credit to subversive agents emerging in the micro-moments.

Keywords

Ballroom, dance shoes, embodiment, LGBT+, materialities, performativity

Dancers and their shoes

Dancers spend a significant proportion of their lives in dance shoes, their relationship with shoes often making or breaking a performance. Renowned American ballet dancer Eleanor D'Antuono described in an article in the *New York Times* how shoes are integral to her characterisation in the dance and the process of choosing shoes as a 'rite' (Tobias, 1975). D'Antuono's ritualistic practices with dance shoes draws attention to shoes being not merely material artefacts involved in dancers' transformation, but also

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symbolic objects integral to dancers' identity constitution through social relationality. In my ethnographic fieldwork in ballroom dance studios and competitions across the United Kingdom, I witnessed a similar treatment of dance shoes among competitive dancers whose everyday professional lives are inherently bound to shoes. Ballroom dancing is a partner dance traditionally constituting a male leader and a female follower, moving synchronously around the dancefloor in a close hold position (see Figure 1). Many dancers (myself including) consider a pair of snug, flexible, fitted shoes to serve both functional and symbolic purpose as a means of identity expression. At first glance, distinctive stylistic differences in dance shoes traditionally worn by male and female dancers make them appear only as a means of 'constitut[ing] the illusion of abiding gendered self' (Butler, 1990; 1999:140). What is less evident is the powerful social relationship ballroom dancers have with their shoes, after having invested significant physical and financial resources into customising a pair to achieve their desired balance between comfort, mobility, aesthetics and social desirability. Despite its significance to dancers, no empirical studies have to date taken dance shoes as the key object of investigation.

This article bridges the knowledge gap through a focused case analysis on the dance shoe choices of LGBT+ competitive ballroom dancers in equality[1] (non-traditional) dance partnerships (see Figures 2 and 3) in the United Kingdom, asking dancers how gender performativity is achieved through shoes. Such a query which uses dance shoes as a prime object for interrogation aims to make a twofold contribution to sociological knowledge on performativity. First, I seek to expand knowledge on the performativity of sexuality and gender by moving beyond material bodily fleshiness to interrogate material objects as central to processes of identity materialisation. Second, highlighting the agency of inanimate objects such as dance shoes in the materialisation of dancers' identities, this article suggests that performative constitution may be understood through interrogating the multilayered interactions between human and non-human agents. I argue that integrating materialities into a sociological focus on the discursive affords for a holistic understanding of the interplay between the symbolic and material contexts of performativity.

I first present a broad overview of the scholarship on shoes, highlighting gaps in the sociology of shoes and material culture literature to justify my mobilisation of Entwistle's (2015) 'situated bodily practice' as an analytical framework. I then position equality dancers' footwear practices within the established norms and culture of the classical ballroom dance form in the United Kingdom before outlining the study's methodology. The analysis draws on equality dancers' narratives and my personal experience as a dancer to illustrate shoe choices as being informed by multiple, at times conflicting, dimensions such as the (1) desire to express the dance as it is classically appreciated, (2) need to give voice to one's gender and identity politics and (3) motivation to leverage the functional purpose of shoes to enhance movements. I highlight how the symbolic meanings attributed to dance shoes interact with its materiality to inform dancers' performativity of subversive identities, and how this resistance in turn assigns new agency to material artefacts. The concluding discussion develops an approach to performativity, which treats the discursive and material aspects as inextricably linked.

Figure 1. Standard dance couples in the 2016 British National Dance Championships. A traditional male/female couple is in the foreground, and an equality (same-sex) male/male couple is in the background.
Photo credit: Oli Scarff/Britain-Entertainment-Lifestyle-Dance via Getty Image.

Footwear, embodied identity and symbolic representation

Scholarship on the sociology of footwear is limited, with existing literature examining embodiment and identity construction in everyday shoe choices (Gillath et al., 2012) through a postmodern feminist lens. Scholars note the significance of shoes across one's life course and its key transition periods (Belk, 2003; Hockey et al., 2013, 2014; Pond, 1985) in informing everyday identity formation (Belk, 2003; Braithwaite, 2021; Braithwaite et al., 2013; Dilley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2015). Belk (2003: 1) described 'footwear [as] an extension and expression of [wearers] themselves', showing its intricate link with one's perception of the self and others. Sociological scholarship on footwear focuses on the constitution of social identities as an evolving and socio-relational process, with material artefacts only significant as instruments through which social identities are developed and negotiated. In Hockey et al.'s (2013: 11) examination of dance shoes as a part of several participants' shoe collections, a sense of loss, both of a loved one and an embodied activity, was associated with past ownership of 'proper dance shoes'. Similarly, Belk (2003: 31) described the transformative potential of ballet shoes through a participant stating that her new ballet shoes 'make me want to be a great dancer'. In these discussions on dance shoes, the materiality of bodies takes precedence over the materiality of artefacts. A sociological approach to embodiment leaning on the

Figure 2. A couple in the women's Latin category of the 10th gay games in Paris; the leader is in flat shoes and the follower is in stiletto heels.
Photo credit: Lucas Bariolet/Sports-Fra-Gay-Games-2018 via Getty images.

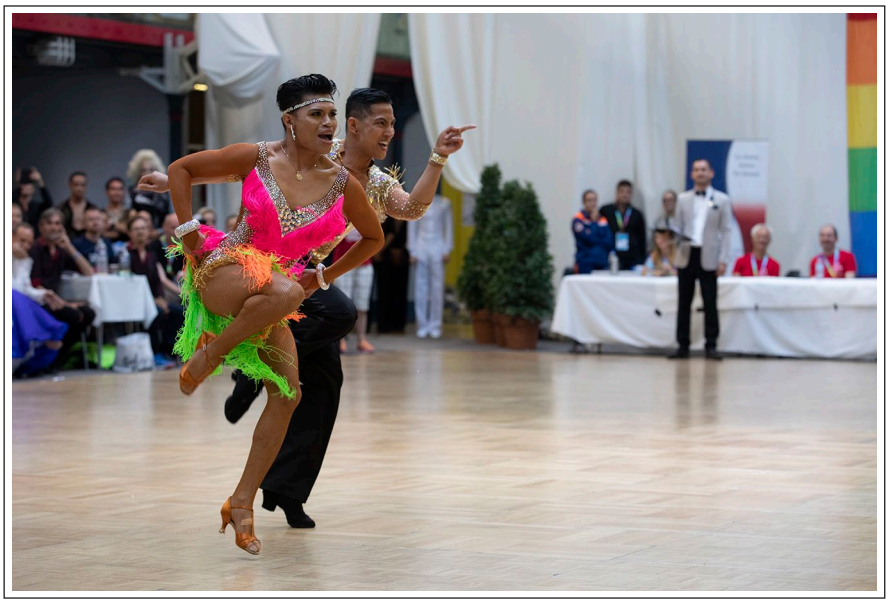

Figure 3. Couple in the men's Latin dance category in the 10th gay games in Paris performing a Jive; the leader is in flat shoes and the follower is in stiletto heels.
Photo credit: Self.

work of postmodern body theorists is drawn on to illuminate the changing ways in which identities are constituted through footwear, such that the ownership of dance shoes across one's lifetime shifts one towards or away from an identity as a dancer. Such a treatment of dance shoes as engaged in the discursive production of social identities through Judith Butler's (1990; 1999: 33, 1993) 'repeated acts within a highly regulated frame' downplays the significance of matter in constituting identities. Questions pertain as to what the symbolic values and materiality of mundane objects such as dance shoes afford for identity constitution and what material artefacts tell us about the cultures of those who embody them, such as what dance shoes tell us about the relations of power within dance cultures.

Similarly, in health and illness studies, sustained investigation into the physical and mental health implications of footwear choices draw attention to patients' embodied experience of footwear in relation to health and well-being and identity management. Studies on therapeutic footwear (Jarl et al., 2019; Paton et al., 2014; Tan et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2007, 2010) assume that shoes are 'a symbol displayed by owners to reinforce their self-image' (Gillath et al., 2012: 424) and focus on investigating patients' emotional and physical experiences and the impact of such footwear on their gender identity and self-perception of illness. Along a similar vein, studies (Brenton-Rule et al., 2019; Goodacre and Candy, 2011; Tehan et al., 2019) examining the choice of retail footwear among people with foot disabilities focus on its influence on desired identity presentation. Goodacre and Candy (2011) report that the restricted shoe choices of women with rheumatoid arthritis limit self-presentation. Returning to the materiality of bodies, Seferin and Van der Linden (2012) make a distinction between the physical and psychological, pointing to the complex interactions of both in informing feelings of comfort and associated footwear choices. This limited sociological and qualitative studies on footwear focus on the discursive production of bodies among people with health conditions and the consumption of retail footwear for everyday use, with inquires on ballroom dance shoes and the material contexts of footwear absent from these inquiries.

Sociological emphasis on identity, expressivity and choice chimes with a focus on individuality in the consumption literature. However, unlike sociological studies which concentrate on how shoes are embodied by users underpinned by assumptions about what they stand for, consumption studies (Cox, 2004; Halsted, 2006: 104, Persson, 2015; Semmelhack, 2006, 2008; Small, 2015; Steele, 2006; Steele and Hill, 2012) are concerned with the symbolic aspect of cultural representation, illuminating how shoes come to be gendered, and heels metaphors of femininity, sexual identity and power, in and through the consumption process. Lomas et al. (2011: 295) describe shoes as a coding component in the queer community, as 'clothing objects animated by actions, choices and performance, as well as part of cultural idiom'. With a similar focus on queer aesthetics, Geczy and Karaminas (2013: 139, 2021) illustrate the history of cultural meanings assigned to apparels (including shoes) through its mobilisation by queer individuals to disrupt 'cultural presumptions about sex and gender orders' and 'reframe[e] meanings of gender'. Consumption scholars examine the feminine consumption of everyday shoes to the exclusion of men's footwear and consumers' embodied experience of shoes. An analysis of high heels in relation to men is either situated within the historical through an association of male nobilities with heels as a symbol of power (Parmentier, 2016; Small,

2015) or the performative where the association of heels with femininity is used to highlight 'the artifice of gender' (Shaw, 2000: 55). While material culture studies narrowed the literature gap through a historical analysis of men's everyday footwear (MacCormack, 2017), there appears to be a similar treatment of footwear as everyday object with a focus on the symbolic. MacCormack's (2017: 461) historical analysis of the elite male boot finds the material artefact to be 'markers of gender, class and national identities' through its association with military and equestrianism. The limited material culture literature on dance shoes focus on the symbolic values of the ballet pointe (Foster, 1996; Harris, 2003). This emphasis on the symbolic in consumption and material culture studies draws attention to mundane materials as a part of social practice. Miller and Woodward (2012) highlight the importance of addressing ordinary objects which often go unnoticed as they are deeply embedded in tacit, embodied routines constituting everyday life. Integrating a material culture studies approach into the sociology of footwear can emphasise the significance of mundane, neglected objects such as shoes as a part of the negotiation and materialisation of social identities.

Interdisciplinary studies combining sociological and material culture approaches to highlight the materiality of shoes and those that embody them are limited. Sherlock's (2014: 46) analysis of the Clarks brand everyday footwear demonstrates how the symbolic meaning of shoes 'mediate' the process of identity construction. Similarly, Tenner (2004: 51) illustrates how technologies of shoelaces and buckles are not merely artefacts imbued with meaning and created for everyday wear, but agentic objects having the ability to transform human interactions with the social and physical environment. Harman (2019: 69–70) draws attention to the symbolic meaning of dance shoes as signalling one's intention to become a serious, competitive dancer, adding that its material consumption brings about 'embodied sensations that helps people to feel "like a dancer"'. Integrating discourses and materialities into its analysis, the above studies provide a more holistic understanding of what shoes are for the bodies that adorn and animate them. Yet, an aspect which remains lacking is the recognition of shoes as not only symbolic but physical matter having an implication on the physical movements and hence performative constitution of users.

This article continues the momentum generated by these studies through an empirical analysis of equality dancers' embodiment of sex, gender and sexuality through ballroom dance shoes, making a key contribution by interweaving material and discourse to demonstrate the agencies of animate and inanimate objects as inseparable in dancers' visceral and 'multi-sensorial' experience (Törnqvist and Holmberg, 2021) of partner dancing. I adopt Entwistle's (2015) 'situated bodily practice' as a starting point for interrogating the interplay between the symbolic and material aspects of ballroom dance shoes. Highlighting the importance of the everyday in dressing, Entwistle (2015: 39) calls for an analysis which shifts between

> on the one hand, the discursive and representational aspects of dress and the way the body/dress is caught up in relations of power, and on the other, the embodied experience of dress and the use of dress as a means by which individuals orientate themselves to the social world.

I question (1) how equality dancers mobilise the symbolic meanings of dance shoes to enact Butler's (1990; 1999: 33) 'repeated stylisation' in a discursive constitution of identities, (2) the material affordances of artefacts in enabling reiterative performances and (3) the ways in which dancers' fashioning of themselves into existence generate new representational meanings and agency for shoes.

Symbolic representations of ballroom dance shoes across time

Ballroom dancing serves as a visual expression of societal structures and a non-verbal communicator of socio-cultural trends and values. Since the early beginnings of ballroom dancing in the English royal courts of the late 18th century (Rameau, 1728), dance footwear developed significant interest as symbols of what Nye (1993: 21) described as proper 'manners and comportment [. . .] in a highly refined atmosphere'. Jenyns (1729: 7) dismisses boots as improper ballroom dance footwear, describing thin-soled and low-heeled shoes to be acceptable as it symbolises humility, agility and lightness:

> Thus each Man's Habit with his Bus'nefs fuits; Nor muft we ride in Pumps, or dance in Boots. But you, that oft in circling Dances wheel, Thin be your yielding Sole, and low your Heel.

Hillgrove (1857) describes appropriate footwear fashion in royal balls to constitute the pairing of 'white satin shoes [. . .] with light coloured dress, and black or bronze with dark ones' for ladies, and 'gaiters, pumps or dancing shoes' for gentlemen. This emphasis on low heels reflects influences from ballet dances traditionally performed in royal courts, where significant transitions in dance technique and style in the 18th century led to heeled shoes being 'exchanged for supple cothurns or soft, gloving-fitting slippers' to avail more athletic, aerial movements (Collins and Jarvis, 2016; Winter, 1974: 3). The transition to flat soles for ballroom dancing coincides with shifts in the cultural representation of high heels, falling out of men's fashion and ceasing to be symbols of masculinity, high status and wealth among European aristocrats from the mid-18th century (Parmentier, 2016). The aforementioned changes created new affordances for low-heeled shoes which constitutes agile displays of 'refined manly character' among dancers, characterised by 'grace and elegance' highly valued by the upper class in the 18th and early 19th century England (Adams, 2007: 872), leading to its adoption in court balls.

The radical shift away from heels in 18th-century Englishmen's dressing following ideas of rationalism from the Enlightenment (Parmentier, 2016; Semmelhack, 2018), and subsequent feminisation of high heels through its association with eroticism (Semmelhack, 2018), provocation and seduction (Small, 2015), manifested in the footwear fashion of ballroom dancers. In the late 19th century and interwar years, a democratisation and feminisation of ballroom dancing occurred through rapid commercialisation and increasing independence of women leading to their growing pursuit of ballroom dancing as a social activity (Nott, 2015: 299–300). Despite democratisation, competitive ballroom dancing continues to reflect the 'English Style' dress codes of the higher social stratum, with the 'maintenance of a relatively stable class system' (Fiske and Hartley, 1993: 41) accomplished by modern dancers through the borrowing of aristocratic fashion codes

characterised by heightened gendered divisions. Competitive ballroom dancers are 'not what they appear to be pretending to be' (Fiske and Hartley, 1993: 42), as female dancers give the appearance of glamour through brightly coloured gowns with sequins, feathers and jewels, hair swept back into buns, intense makeup and slender high heels, and men in black tuxedoes or sequined spandex black tops and polished black low-heeled shoes (Harman, 2011; Marion, 2008) (see Figure 4). This 'aesthetic of Dancesport [which] demands that the illusion of conventional gendered roles be played out' (Picart, 2012: 90) in part through gendered metaphors around dance shoes, informs the shoe choices of equality dancers.

Unlike mainstream dancers, equality dancers are less bound by representational conventions around costuming, opening up possibilities for the materialisation of diverse identities. However, since gendered appearances of modern dancers continue to define the art of ballroom dancing, transgressions of dichotomous gender and sexual categories is often limited by equality dancers' desire to achieve Revill's (2004: 16) 'idealised body with specific social attributes as the stylistic basis of authentic performance'. Equality dancing presents a rich case for interrogating the materiality–discursivity dialogue in dancers' performative constitution of social identities.

Methodology

Building directly on the sociology of footwear literature, my empirical study adopted ethnography to facilitate an examination of the ways lived histories and affective knowledge shape how dancers perceive the cultural meanings of dance shoes and constitute their identities through footwear choices. Leveraging my ethnographic sensitivity developed through my 8-year participation in the UK ballroom dance scene, I draw on personal experience with dance footwear, personal relationships and informal conversations with other dancers, and observations as a spectator in dance competitions to inform data collection and interpretation. The choice of equality dance field is in part informed by my competitive experience as a non-binary dancer in mainstream and equality dance events. Having struggled with the naturalisation of gender segregation in mainstream practice, I perceived equality dancing to be entwined with body politics due to its transgression of these gendered norms. Conducted through non-traditional partnerships characteristically formed within, albeit not exclusive to, the LGBT+ dance community, equality dancing affords wider exploration of genders and sexualities through movements, clothing and footwear choices.

I adopted Charmaz's (2008) constructivist grounded theory to expand my inquiry based on the lived experiences of LGBT+ dancers, such that data collection and analysis emerged from shared relationships and experiences between me and my participants. Having been active in the field for several years as a dancer, spectator and photographer, I developed shared experience, knowledge and relationships with others which will inevitably influence my interpretation of dancers' narratives. A constructivist grounded approach to ethnography opens up space for embodied fieldwork, enabling me to reflect on my dance experience, place it within the broader socio-historical context and wider experiences of others and give voice to diverse dancing bodies from the positionality of a perceiving, experiencing body.

Figure 4. Classical appearance of a modern standard ballroom dancer.
Photo credit: Self.

Törnqvist (2018) adds that using interviews in ethnography encourages the emergence of multidimensional perspectives and facilitates an interpretation of data from both within and without the field. In-depth interviews comprised a significant component of my collected and analysed data, with 35 interviews lasting between 90 and 120 minutes with LGBT+ equality dancers between the ages of 28 and 68 years. Two recruitment phases were conducted, the first 10 participants through convenience sampling for initial scoping (Richards and Morse, 2007) and the next 25 through theoretical sampling. Knowledge from my prior participation informed the application of a homogeneity/heterogeneity trade-off through geographical homogeneity in the United Kingdom and heterogeneity in participants' genders, sexualities, ages, occupations,

dance backgrounds and affiliations to dance schools/associations. I leveraged my insider status for knowledge co-production, employing Guba and Lincoln's (1989: 88) self-disclosure through reciprocal sharing to support the co-construction of meaning such that it becomes 'impossible to separate the inquirer from the inquired into'. Participants were invited to share personal information such as pronouns, gender and sexual identity to avoid mis-representation. Participants represented diverse genders (17 female, 13 male, 4 (trans)non-binary,[2] and 1 edging towards non-binary), and sexualities (13 gay, 12 lesbian, 5 bisexual/pansexual, 2 queer, 1 homosexual, 1 heterosexual and 1 unlabelled), a selection in part informed by my personal knowledge of participants and intention to maximise diversity.

Collected textual data consisted transcribed interviews and field notes. Data analysis involved first developing and refining themes/categories, concepts and their tentative linkages through comparative analysis of data collected from the convenience sample and field notes (Hodkinson, 2008: 86). Seven concepts within the theme of costuming were identified and guided theoretical sampling, 'so that the data gathered reflects what is occurring in the field' (Glaser, 1978: 38). Simultaneous data analysis was conducted with the remaining 25 interviews, enabling an 'analytically driven inquiry'(Meadows and Morse, 2001: 193) through emerging categories and their relationships, with depth acquired before breadth. Applying Meadows and Morse's (2001: 193) 'step-by-step' saturation, I achieved 'theoretical saturation' after 35 interviews. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-step process for grounded theory coding was adopted to minimise preconceived notions from prior field involvement. I practised Charmaz's (2008, 2017) reflexivity, relativity and 'self-consciousness' throughout coding, reflecting on my embodied experience as a dancer and its influence on the interpretive process.

High heels through the lens of second-wave feminism

Among female equality dancers, lived histories of different waves of feminism contributed to different attributions of symbolic meanings to heels. Many older (over 50 years of age) women who identified as lesbian grew up in the United Kingdom with lived experiences of second-wave feminism. Second wave feminists perceive fashion as a means of objectifying and restricting women, constraining them to inauthentic forms of gender presentation (Scanlon, 2009). A stand against fashion choices consisting of high heels, cosmetics, miniskirts and feminine clothing was made by second-wave feminist leagues, connecting these fashion items with mediums of oppression (Groeneveld, 2009; Scanlon, 2009). The symbolic attribution of high heels to oppression and restriction among second-wave feminists appears to have influenced the footwear choices of several older female dancers. Aly (female, early fifties) considered the thin stiletto heels of the classical ballroom dancer to be 'part of the whole oppression of women', adding that the heels make female dancers 'less stable because they've got this silly tiny high heel, then they kind of need the strong man to hold them'. This narrative suggests that materialities (the heels) and bodies (dancers) interweave in the performative constitution of an oppressed female dancer. Drawing on Butler's (1990; 1999: 33) theory of performativity, a 'repeated stylisation' of high heels within the 'rigid regulatory frames' of traditional ballroom dancing governed by norms and power discursively constitutes the dancer as a

subversive female follower. Materialities such as the heels, space of the ballroom and presence of male bodies contribute to these moment-to-moment iterations, with heels influencing the micro-movements of female dancers, creating a constant feel of instability and need for support from other bodies (male partners). Adopting Warnier's (2001) notion of motricity, Hockey et al. (2013: 134) point to movement as a means through which 'embodied subjectivities come into being'. It is through considering the high heels in movement that we can understand how values of oppression are embodied, with Aly's use of the word 'stability' hinting at how this happens. Making an association between power and shoes, Stewart (female, early sixties) described her material experience of dance heels as having a psychological effect on her:

> affects me psychologically because [. . .] when you really want to feel powerful, you have both heels on the floor, and you are standing with your legs apart, and you are full on, that is your powerful position. When you are like this, on your tip toes, up like that, that is not a powerful position right?

Stewart describes this fashion code of the modern ballroom dancer in 'these shoes, makeup, dresses, hair [. . . as] all very stereotypical' and 'has a whole load of history'. My informal conversations with older female dancers led me to interpret Stewart's remark as pointing to the classical ballroom dance form with its long history institutionalising gendered fashion codes and movements which binds female dancers to the normative display of Connell and Messerchmidt's (2005: 183) 'emphasized femininity' and supports male dancers' performance of Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity. The embodied experience of being unstable and on tiptoes when in heels was for Stewart a disempowering feeling. Juxtaposed against the image of the modern ballroom dancer with gendered dance shoes, the unstable, high-heeled female dancer is perceived by second-wave feminist dancers as creating opportunities for men's expression of chivalric masculinity through acting as a pillar of support. The different material affordances of dance heels and flat shoes in terms of movement and mobility, interweave with the symbolic association of heels with a femininity coupled with subversiveness, to inform second-wave feminist dancers' agentic claims to their feminist lesbian identity through a rejection of the heels.

For Aly, the rejection of dance heels for flat shoes was not a difficult decision, not least because her dance role as a leader made flat shoes the more obvious choice. What seems ironic is that in disrupting the symbolic association of heels with femininity and submissiveness through the choice of flat shoes as a dance leader, Aly appears to be strengthening and reproducing the traditional association of leaders in flat shoes with masculinity, power, and dominance. Such a contradiction was noted by Aly herself when elaborating on costuming choice, as she highlighted the importance she attributed to disrupting the image of a dominant leader and reflecting an equal power dynamics which was reflective of her life partnership with her dance partner. Aly described her desired language of equality to be achieved in part through her dance partner's choice of flat shoes despite advice from their dance teacher, who 'is trained and brought up in mainstream world' to wear heels. The socio-relational nature of footwear choices is evident in Aly's narrative, as alignment in footwear preferences within the dance partnership

contributes to meaning making since the pairing of two flat shoes came to be symbolic of equality. In a resistance against the gender normative symbolisation of the heels, material artefacts and bodies are enmeshed together in a complex process of co-constitution, giving rise to resignifications and new affordances for both dancers and shoes, a process further elaborated through the Cuban heels.

Reinventing the Cuban heels as symbol of gender-neutrality

Cuban heels were used for dance practice or teaching by female dancers for comfort during long hours of wear and considered inappropriate for the mainstream competitive dancefloor. My first experience in a mainstream competition when I was policed for wearing Cuban heels was documented in my field notes:

> A silver fringed Latin dress with cut outs on the sides, hair in a pony tail, some colour on my eyes, a pair of Cuban heels, all set for my first competition. Is this really me reflected in the mirror on the wall on the other end of the changing room? [. . .] 'Looking gorgeous, do you have a pair of heels? You shouldn't be wearing practice shoes for competitions, they don't match your costume, the colour and the big heels, you will be marked down' remarked my dance teacher as I strutted towards the edge of the dancefloor.

The Cuban shoes was the only element in my costuming as a Latin dancer that I felt I could embody as it retained my everyday masculine self which I felt was suppressed by my presentation as a female classical ballroom dancer. In choosing the Cuban shoes with its chunkier and flatter heels, I was not only drawn to its symbolic association with masculinity but also its ability to help me move around as I would have in my everyday routine, which I felt was impossible with heels. Despite being able to embody the Cuban heels both materially and symbolically, my choice led me to be perceived as being subversive of the classical look rather than as having confidently embraced and embodied my gender presentation. My aforementioned experience is unlike equality competitions where dancers who valued the expression of gender neutrality and equality in their dancing described confident rejection of high stiletto heels for its symbolic association with the classical female follower which creates a clear leader/follower distinction within the dance partnership. For example, Raven (male, late twenties) expressed his preference for the image of a dance follower in Cuban heels 'because they are a bit more neutral, I think I am not a fan of heteronormative clothing'. On a similar note, Raven appeared to be less appreciative of female leaders adopting the classical male dancer look, adding that

> wearing the [flat] shoes is really trying hard to be masculine, I think in the clothing. Because this is man's shoes. But you don't need to be you know, you can always wear a suit, and then you can have women's shoes.

Raven's illustration draws attention to dance shoes being sex-categorical, with the mobilisation of its gendered symbolic meanings alongside clothing choices creating opportunities for equality dancers to disrupt West and Zimmerman's (1987: 147) sex and sex

Figure 5. A dance couple in Cuban heels.
Photo credit: Self.

category, facilitating a broader spectrum of gender expressions, which subverts the traditional binary image of the male leader/female follower. This performative resistance against the traditional look through mixing and matching the Cuban heels with other costuming elements informed a re-symbolisation of it as a marker of gender-neutrality within the material context of equality dancing. Materialities of dress, bodies and place are thus entangled in a re-symbolisation of the Cuban heels, in the process giving rise to new possibilities for its mobilisation by equality dancers of all genders for the discursive constitution of subversive identities. For example, Sam (female, early thirties) illustrates 'two male dancers with one wearing [Cuban] heels but wearing trousers too' as a way 'to show the leader/follower', a form of articulation which resists against the gender normative representation of a modern ballroom dancer.

Despite being associated with gender neutrality, the Cuban heels remain a symbol of the dance follower when paired with flat shoes within the partnership, demonstrating a persistence of the classical aesthetics of the female follower in informing equality dancers' re-symbolisation of the Cuban heels. As such, the expression of partnership equality through the symbolic meaning assigned to Cuban heels may only be achieved in a socio-relational manner, where both parties in the dance partnership choose to adorn it (see Figure 5). In the words of Alan (male, late twenties),

> if I walked out in a studded heel and [X] in Cuban, they will look and there will be the assumption that [X] is my leader and I was the follower.

Alan's narration suggests that rather than a symbolic gendering through the image of a classical dancer, equality dancers attribute symbolic values to dance footwear based on dance roles, with these values ranging across a spectrum, such that flat shoes are symbolic of leaders, high heels of followers and Cuban heels bearing some degree of fluidity,

interpreted through its contrast with the footwear choices of dance partners. A subversion of the traditional symbol of high heels led to the attribution of new symbolic values to Cuban heels and wider possibilities for its embodiment among gender non-conforming dancers, demonstrating how subversive acts of identification through material, relational and discursive encounters with material artefacts contribute to meaning making and the refashioning of queer practices into existence.

High femmes embracing high heels

Unlike older female dancers, younger female dancers who have not experienced second-wave feminism more actively embraced the high heels as an expression of their high femme identity. Laura (female, late twenties), who describes herself as 'naturally femme' and 'passionate about having that visibility as femme women on the competitive dancefloor', chose 'super high heels' as a symbolic expression of her femme identity and femme politics on the dancefloor. Similarly, Erin (female, early thirties), a self-identified high femme, described choosing high heels to express 'two very femme presenting women on the dance floor' as an act of 'validat[ion], it is like I kind of want it back, that is why it feels like a strength for me'. Despite mobilising the traditional symbolic meaning of heels to make visible femmeness, high femmes suggest that their embodiment of femininity, with its associated feelings of empowerment, is different. In the words of Erin,

> the queer culture version of femininity, so it is always different from mainstream femininity. [. . .] I think there is an assumption in mainstream femininity that it is women doing it for men, [. . .] I am almost never, basically never dress in a way that I think would appeal to men. [. . .] So the way I feel about it is just totally different, but the way it looks, I guess might look similar.

Despite mobilising the symbolic association of heels with femininity to embody a femme politics and inhabit a comfortable gender presentation in everyday life, younger female dancers' motivation to resist against Connell and Messerchmidt's (2005: 183) 'emphasized femininity' in the classical ballroom dancer echoes that of older female dancers. Erin's description of her femininity aligns with Harris and Crocker's (2013: 3) 'reshaped femininity' which is 'a chosen rather than assigned femininity', drawing attention to how the embodiment of material artefacts such as shoes within a different context can contribute to a reshaping of their symbolic values. Despite 'look[ing] similar' as described by Erin, LGBT+ equality dancers appear able to differentiate between different forms of femininity symbolised through the dance heels. Some embrace those who express Hoskin's (2021: 8) 'radical invocation of queer femininity' through their symbolic and material embodiment of high heels, while being less supportive of those who mobilise the symbolic value of heels to imitate the classical look but are unable to materially embody it, evident through the discomfort and unnaturalness revealed by their material bodies. Sasha (trans non-binary, early thirties) confesses to being 'judgemental' about people 'dressed in a certain way in real life, and then on the floor they absolutely transform into something', labelling it 'the fake femme thing' because they 'can't walk properly on those high shoes' and are 'putting something on because they think they have to'.

For Sasha, femme dancers who drew on their personal history, dance politics and taste to re-symbolise the dance heels to embody femmeness were set apart from those who merely imitated but failed to reinterpret the traditional symbolic meanings of heels. The social nature of performativity examined in Butler's (2004) later work is evident here, as the femme subject is constituted within and through processes of recognition by other dancers, with the materialities of place (equality dance competitions), bodies (dancers and spectators) and costume (shoes) entangled within and through this subversive constitution of femme identities.

Male dancers' choice of flats over heels

The re-symbolisation of high heels as emblematic of femmeness rather than Connell and Messerchmidt's (2005: 183) 'emphasised femininity' informed its dissociation from female-sexed bodies. However, uptake of heels among male dancers remains limited, with two plausible explanations. First, limited exposure to heels in their everyday lives in normative society contributed to feelings of unconfident in materially embodying the heels. Milo (male, early thirties) pointed to dance heels being able to 'accentuate the curve more in Latin dancing', albeit expressing that he

> 'won't be able to, because I don't know how to. It is not because I don't want to do it, but no, I can't.'

For Milo, while a re-symbolisation of the heels in equality dancing avails men the option of leveraging its functionality for expressing the characteristics of the classical dance form, moving in heels was considered a skill acquired through the physical disciplining of bodies. Milo's lack of confidence in embodying the heels informed his choice of flat shoes. A materialisation of subversive identities which deviates from everyday lived identities may be hindered by dancers' inability to physically embody the material artefact of the footwear. Nonetheless, Milo expressed his 'love to have a follower in heels' as an 'expression of everything you want to be', suggesting that subversive performativity may be socio-relationally achieved through dance partners. Through the material context of equality dancing, material engagement of dance bodies with dance heels informed the emergence of new symbolic meanings decoupling heels from female bodies. These subversive acts of identification created new affordances for the discursive constitution of queer, reclaimed femininities among dancers of all genders.

Second, some male dancers rejected the heels as an inaccurate presentation of their everyday gender expressions, valuing the ability to present their everyday selves on the dance floor over and above maximising the functional advantages of heels as a dance follower. The symbolic association of heels with femininity detracts from male dancers' personal histories and everyday lived identities, as such their inability to embody the heels despite a recognition of its material functionality in enhancing dance movements. Dancers' mobilisation of the symbolic meanings of dance shoes for the production of subversive identities is in part hinged on its alignment with everyday identities, with misalignment relegating subversive acts through material artefacts to Butler's (1993) performance, a playful enterprise falling short of embodiment.

Conclusion

Equality dancing affords for more fluid gender and sexuality expressions, facilitating LGBT+ dancers' performative constitution of diverse social identities through footwear choices. Treating dance shoes as material artefacts engaged in the discursive production of gender through 'repeated acts within a highly regulated frame' (Butler, 1990; 1999: 33, 1993), I highlight how materialities and discourse are intertwined in the performative co-constitution of subversive dance subjects. Drawing on Entwistle's (2015) 'situated bodily practice', I illustrate dilemmas encountered by LGBT+ equality dancers in their choice of three dance footwear types: high stiletto heels, flats and Cuban heels. I demonstrate that equality dancers mobilise the symbolic representation of dance shoes defined by the dominant image of the modern ballroom dancer to embody diverse gender and sexual identities and orientate their dancing bodies to the social world of competitive equality dancing. Dancers' display of repeated 'acts' that reiterate norms in their subversion reinforces Butler's (1993) theory of performativity that one cannot be outside discourses and norms. However, I deviate from Entwistle's (2015: 8) perspective of transgressive bodies as 'likely to cause offense and outrage and be met with scorn or incredulity', arguing instead that a closer look into performative acts is necessary for determining whether and how resistance is constituted, recognised and reproduced.

I demonstrate dancers' materialisation of subversive identities through the reiterative mobilisation of traditional symbolic values of dance shoes to be influenced by the material, making a key contribution to sociological knowledge on performativity through an introduction of materialities of place, bodies and artefacts into a close reading of reiterative acts. Through the example of high heels as femme expression, I draw attention to how the materialities of place (equality dance competitions), time (personal histories and discourses from another period such as second-wave feminism), bodies (dancers and spectators) and shoes (impacts on dancers' mobility and movement) influence the recognition of resistive agents in their struggle for visibility. The acknowledgement of subversive acts can lead to a process of re-signification, such that dance shoes are attributed new affordances for reiterative acts which support the discursive constitution of alternative, queer identities. I conclude that a holistic examination of the performative constitution of social identities needs to take into account how materialities interweave with discourse in order to give credit to subversive agents emerging in the micro-moments. Such an endeavour requires the attributing of agency to both material artefacts and human agents and interrogating the multilayered interactions between them.

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Notes

1. Equality partnerships in the United Kingdom largely comprise same-sex partnerships, with the use of this terminology rather than 'same-sex', to include non-binary and trans individuals partnering cis-gendered people.
2. Non-binary dancers are a minority in the UK equality dance field and, hence, less well-represented in this study.

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Author biography

Yen Nee Wong is an interdisciplinary feminist sociologist working as an ESRC postdoctoral Fellow in the department of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent. Yen Nee's work focuses on the sociology of partner dancing, queer theory, genders, sexualities, embodiment, media and culture. In particular, their work examines the materialisation and expression of genders and sexualities among LGBT+ equality dancers in the United Kingdom, and media representation of same-sex dancing on British reality TV shows. Outside of academia, they ballroom dance both socially and competitively.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el papel de los zapatos de baile en la formación y expresión de la identidad de los bailarines de salón LGBT+ en la pista de baile. Aplicando la 'práctica corporal situada' de Entwistle (2015) al análisis de notas de campo etnográficas y 35 entrevistas, se destaca que la constitución performativa de las identidades subversivas de los bailarines a través de la movilización reiterativa de los valores simbólicos tradicionales de los zapatos de baile está influenciada por el material. El artículo hace una contribución clave al conocimiento sociológico sobre la performatividad a través de la introducción de materialidades de lugar, cuerpos y artefactos en una lectura atenta de los actos reiterativos. Se argumenta que es necesaria una mirada más atenta a los actos performativos para determinar si se produce resistencia y cómo ésta se constituye, reconoce y reproduce, teniendo en cuenta cómo las materialidades se entrelazan con el discurso para dar crédito a los agentes subversivos que emergen en los micromomentos.

Palabras clave

encarnación, LGBT+, materialidades, performatividad, pista de baile, zapatos de baile

Résumé

Cet article examine le rôle des chaussures de danse dans la formation et l'expression de l'identité des danseurs de salon LGBT+ sur la piste de danse. En appliquant la

« pratique corporelle située » d'Entwistle (2015) à l'analyse de notes de terrain ethnographiques et de 35 entretiens, je souligne que la constitution performative d'identités subversives par les danseurs à travers la mobilisation réitérée des valeurs symboliques traditionnelles des chaussures de danse est influencée par le matériel. L'article apporte une contribution essentielle à la connaissance sociologique de la performativité en introduisant les matérialités du lieu, des corps et des artefacts dans une lecture approfondie des actes réitératifs. Je soutiens qu'un examen plus approfondi des actes performatifs est nécessaire pour déterminer si, et de quelle manière, la résistance est constituée, reconnue et reproduite, en tenant compte de la manière dont les matérialités se mêlent au discours pour ajouter foi aux agents subversifs qui émergent dans les micro-moments.

Mots-clés
chaussures de danse, incarnation, LGBT+, matérialités, performativité, salle de bal