Performing Gender through Bowling, or, "I Was in Shock Other Girls Could Bowl"

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PERFORMING GENDER THROUGH BOWLING, OR, “I WAS IN SHOCK OTHER GIRLS COULD BOWL”

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Eleanor Hasken

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PERFORMING GENDER THROUGH BOWLING, OR, "I WAS IN SHOCK OTHER GIRLS COULD BOWL"
For Tony Byron – more than a great coach, you were a great friend.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In this thesis, I explore how bowling frames a gendered understanding of the world. I examine style, ball weight, and relationships, and others areas to discuss the ramifications of a binary understanding of gender as it is conceived in bowling centers. To complete this examination, I use interviews and personal observations from a year of fieldwork in Louisville and Bowling Green, Kentucky. I also rely on my personal experiences with the sport to provide contextual information. Drawing primarily on scholarship from Judith Butler, Richard Bauman, and Ann K. Ferrell, I theorize about gendered performances occurring in the bowling center. These performances regularly highlight the disparities between men and women; not only are there two distinct genders, but performing outside one’s ascribed gender has negative social ramifications. I conclude with an examination of the current state of the sport and the reinstitution of the Professional Women’s Bowling Association, which occurred in 2015. Taken together, this thesis questions the binary gender system and offers insight into the ramifications of a traditionalized gender performance. This work also provides a necessary examination of recreational folklore, as that area of scholarship is not explored academically to the same degree that it is a predominant factor in the lives of many people.
Introduction

With more and more bowling centers closing in Kentucky, the remaining lanes are doing what they can to become “entertainment centers.” In the past year, Bowling Green’s own Southern Lanes added laser tag and bumper cars to their already wide array of offerings, including billiards (an adult and a children’s section), an arcade, miniature golf, Keno draws, karaoke, cosmic bowling, air hockey, batting cages, and a snack bar and liquor bar. If you wander into Southern Lanes on any given day, you will most likely see families and friends bowling together or heading into the arcade to try to win prizes. Competitive leagues take place in this “entertainment center,” although most of the customers probably do not understand the extent to which individuals invest their time and energy in the sport of bowling. More importantly, many of them may not even consider bowling a sport.

Until I was 14, I was one of those individuals. When I entered high school, a friend of mine convinced me that if we had a “sport,” we would look like more engaged students when it came time to apply to college. We had specific criteria: the sport had to be one that did not cut people who were not athletic and it could not require more than a minimal commitment. After much debate we settled on bowling. I showed up at the tryouts without any clue what I was doing or what I was getting into. I tried to emulate the people around me and throw the scuffed-up house ball with the most spin on it that I
could manage. Whatever I was doing, it worked. I made the cut for the team (admittedly a relatively low bar). Fairly soon after, I was told I would need my own bowling shoes. This was something I did not know was an option. Not long after that, I got my first bowling ball, a whopping 16-pounder,\(^1\) which I carried in and out of the center three days a week.

As the years went by, I became more and more invested in bowling. I started to buy bowling balls, arm gloves, and shoe covers. I learned about oil patterns, the differences in bowling alley material, and the importance of not using the bowling balls you see on shelves all over the alley. I bowled on teams, in leagues, and in tournaments. I traveled all over Kentucky to bowl in various tournaments and matches. When I went to college, however, I left that life behind. Instead, I told myself I wanted to focus on school.

Bowling remained a fun party trick, one that I could talk about with strangers when we were going through the ice-breaking stage of a friendship. It always amazed people to hear about how much effort goes into getting a high score. I also think that they loved knowing that their low scores were more than a product of lack of skill, but grew out of lack of equipment and knowledge. Whenever I would go to matches that my still-bowling friends were in, they would talk to me about the current drama from the old-friend group: who was dating whom or who might be purposefully bowling poorly.

I never conceived the study of bowling as an academic pursuit until arriving in Western Kentucky University’s Folk Studies program. Now I have a hard time thinking of it any other way. Last spring, while reading a paper that detailed how female farmer’s feel about their hands (Trauger 2004:301), I thought back to my hands as a female
bowler. The farmers felt as though their hands were not feminine hands, as they were covered in dirt and other markings (Trauger 2004:301). My own rough calluses are now long gone, but the memory of comparing them with my male bowling friends’ calluses remains. Because many of them threw the ball differently than I did, the distribution and location of these calluses on their hands was much different. The calluses were also a matter of concern to my female friends. They wanted rid of them, but knew that if they did it would hurt to bowl. Judgments of all kinds can be made based on calluses alone: how long you have been bowling and how you throw your ball, for example.

The more I pondered this, the more intrigued I became. Moving from thinking of calluses, I considered all of my personal judgments about gender and bowling. Then I compared those thoughts to what my friends told me when we were bowling together. It was clear that men and women have unique styles of bowling that they are different enough to be distinguished by a number of factors. These two styles are important, too, because they also became indicative of one’s skill level. But why did I see a difference based on gender? Bowling, unlike many sports, pits men and women against each other in direct competition. Yet, there are still distinct differences in the way that men and women are perceived to perform. In a sport that seems as though it is an equal playing field, why is there a masculine style and a feminine style of bowling?

**Research Questions**

Last spring, I wrote a paper for Dr. Ann K. Ferrell’s Women’s Folklife course for which I interviewed four individuals with whom I bowled from 2007 through 2010. Those interviews were a great starting point, and for this thesis I have expanded the types
of individuals whom I have interviewed. I will reference interviews conducted with 13 individuals, some of whom I have bowled with, and some I have not. All of the more recent interviewees were active bowlers during 2007-2010, and some of them still bowl in a quasi-competitive manner (unlike the four I interviewed for Dr. Ferrell’s course). All of the interviewees are my peers, and all but one are within two to three years of my age. That one exception, and she is introduced in the conclusion. Although I understand the limitations of only interviewing my contemporaries, I feel that it was both necessary and appropriate for this project. It is also worth noting that all of my interviewees identified themselves to me as heterosexual and cis-gender. They are also from middle-class families. Those I have spoken with have referenced events and individuals that I am familiar with, which allowed me to ask more in-depth and explanatory questions. Their responses have helped me garner a better understanding of how gender is performed in the bowling center.

For this thesis, my primary research question explores how my interviewees understand the differences in their gendered performances and those of their peers. After working with these individuals, it has become clear that not only do they have a binary understanding of gender, but in asking my questions I, too, demonstrated that I understand bowling to function within a binary framework. A binary gender system functions as a means of separating humans into two distinct genders, male and female. According to philosopher Judith Butler, this binary system is flawed. According to Butler, gender is a “stylized repetition of acts” (1988:519). These acts are based in everyday performances that demonstrate the performer’s understanding gender based on byproducts of historical social influences. These enactments are culturally driven and
inscribed. As such, performers may be unaware that they are even performing, but instead are enacting society’s expectations of the gender they are told they are at birth. These performances are enacted through the body as a carrier of the individual’s understanding of appropriate gendered performance. She argues that these performances are created every day through an individual’s actions and historical influence, so that two “distinct” genders are in no way natural, but rather constructed. According to Butler, “the authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions, whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (1988:522). This “naturalness” that we have constructed is where our understanding of what is “distinctly male” and what is “distinctly female” originates. This binary system is problematic, because it alienates anyone who does not fit in with what is determined to be “feminine” and what is determined to be “masculine” in a particular community. Anyone who transgresses these boundaries is subjected to varying negative ramifications, while performing within the ascribed boundaries simply furthers the belief that gender is indeed a naturally stable, binary system (Butler 1988:528).

In working with my interviewees, it became clear that they ascribe to this gendered binary, or at least they do when they are bowling or are within the bowling center. In my research, I have endeavored to understand what my interviewees consider to be masculine and feminine as framed within the bowling construct. This led to what I regarded as a basic question, is there a style of bowling that dictates when someone is throwing the ball “like a man”? “Like a woman”? My interviewees responded to this question with a resounding “yes.” The bowling community sees two distinct styles and they are defined by different expectations, especially in terms of skill. The more skilled
bowlers are thought to bowl the most aggressively, and their balls move at drastic angles across the lane (this is the masculine style). Bowlers who are considered less skilled throw their ball directly at the pins (this is the feminine style).

Another topic which has been of interest to me is how sexism is employed in the bowling alley as a means of enforcing gender expectations. This was a concept acknowledged only by my female interviewees. My male interviewees frequently denied that sexism was employed in the center, even when they presented examples of sexism that they either directly witnessed or participated in enacting. One male interviewee not only denied that this was an issue, but fervently blamed feminists and other social-rights activists for thinking it might even occur. His, and my other male interviewees’, denial of sexism could be attributed to male privilege, in that they are free from the worries of sexism because their gender is perceived as being superior to females. However, many of them described instances that are sexist, including one interviewee discussing how his team made fun of him for “bowling like a girl.” In this instance, the binary understanding of what is feminine was detrimental to a male enacting that gendered performance. I believe that the male interviewees did not wish to label the bowling center as a place where sexist interactions occur because they themselves do not wish to be labeled sexist, a title that they seemingly wish to avoid.

Overall, in examining my interviewees’ responses and relevant research, my hypothesis is that bowling centers serve as a venue for imposing and enforcing a gendered perspective of the world, where being a man is the ideal and being a woman is not desired. Simultaneously, bowling centers also serve as an area for young people to try new gendered performances, with varying degrees of responses from peers. The variety
of options that one has to engage in at the bowling center, from leagues to tournaments, gives young people the opportunity to perform in a more stereotypically masculine or feminine role. A woman may choose to bowl in a masculine fashion, such as two-handing the ball down the lane, or a man may choose to bowl in a more feminine style, described as “down-and-in” by my interviewees. Many times, these performances will be commented on, and potentially degraded, by peers, thus reinforcing traditional, binary gender roles.

Background and Methodology

My own relationship with bowling deserves more discussion. Throughout high school I bowled at least three times a week, however during my sophomore year I bowled six days a week. At the peak of my bowling career, my average was 192 for a brief span during one summer. I have bowled in various leagues: a youth/adult league in which I bowled with my older brother; two team leagues, one with three team mates, one with two; and various sport shot leagues. I bowled in scholarship tournaments all over Louisville, placing third in a collegiate tournament as a 15-year-old. I have also bowled in tournaments in Campbellsville, Owensboro, Frankfort, and Northern Kentucky. I bowled in the state championship tournament in Frankfort, where I placed first in three categories: team, singles, and doubles. During all of this, I bowled for my high school team, and we would practice twice a week beginning in August. The high school team had weekly matches for four months beginning in November. My high school had enough female bowlers for both an A and a B team, where the A team typically had the players with the higher averages. The B team was typically composed of the new
bowlers, or women who viewed bowling as more of a social venture (discussed later). As mentioned, I left bowling behind upon graduating from high school.

After I completed several of the interviews for this thesis, I realized that it was time to unearth my bowling balls from their resting place in my parents’ basement and try my hand in the center once again. In the fall of 2015, I joined a bowling league at Southern Lanes, Bowling Green’s only bowling center. At the time of writing this thesis, we are almost at the end of our bowling season, and my team is decidedly in last place. I bowl with two older men, whom I have not interviewed for this thesis. Although most teams in the league are formed from pre-existing social relationships, I knew neither of these men before bowling with them, and our team is a product of mild coercion by the bowling center administrators. Being in this league provides me a refreshing perspective on bowling, one not tinged by adolescent views. I occasionally draw upon experiences that have occurred during this league for examples of concepts discussed in this thesis.

The bulk of my data is garnered from 13 interviewees who I have worked with over the past year. I will also be using my own experiences as a bowler to provide context and elaborate on terms. This reflexive analysis will also illuminate the process by which this information was obtained (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982:2). As someone who was deeply enmeshed in bowling for a period of years, it would be challenging to completely remove myself from all aspects of this analysis. Thus, by inserting myself at key moments, I will be rendering myself as an intentional participant and observer (Myerhoff 1982:6). I will primarily defer to the opinions of the interviewees, but in instances where I can, I will provide information from my personal experience. Four of the interviewees were interviewed during the spring semester of 2015 for Dr. Ferrell’s Women’s Folklife course.
while eight others were interviewed over the course of summer and fall 2015. Most of the interviewees have spent a portion of their life bowling competitively. All of them have bowled in leagues and on high school bowling teams. Most of them have bowled in tournaments throughout the state and country. Eight of them bowled at the collegiate level, with only one still actively doing so. All of the interviewees were identified as willing interview candidates through either personal relationships with me, or through relationships with mutual friends. I have personally bowled at a competitive level with nine of the interviewees, either in leagues or in high school bowling matches.

Of great importance is the gender distribution of individuals surveyed for this thesis. I interviewed five males and eight females. I believe that the slight skew to female interviewees is in large part due to my personal time as a bowler, where most of my bowling was done on an all-female team. Thus, I have personal relationships with a greater number of female bowlers than male bowlers. Although I tried to even the numbers, an additional two male interview subjects ultimately did not make themselves available for interviews. I do not believe that this slight skew in favor of female subjects shows a bias on my part as a researcher, and I do not believe it will affect the overall findings.

**Literature Review**

In addition to drawing upon my personal experiences and information shared in interviews, I also compare my data to previously completed research by folklore scholars and scholars in related fields. As bowling straddles the line between a recreational hobby and a serious sport, it is important to grasp an understanding of play. To do so, I turn to
scholar Gregory Bateson’s concept of play frames. Bateson describes playing as the act of or state of being “engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat” ([1971] 1995:179). Playing is introduced with a particular frame that sends a metacommunicative message that “either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, ipso facto gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame” (Bateson [1971] 1995:188). It would follow that these metacommunicative messages may also carry other communicative signals, including when play is not occurring. Play frames thus come to represent social communication, most importantly the messages we send to others about our behavior.

Bowlers see a (sometimes blurry) line between those who take the sport seriously and those who do not. This line can be gauged and understood using play frames. By recognizing and understanding the importance of this division, a tension between serious and play bowlers becomes apparent. People who view bowling as something that is fun, or frivolous, do not enter the same play frame as those who do take bowling seriously. Most importantly, those who do take bowling seriously frequently respond to this tension, and integrate it into their understanding of what is considered a “serious bowler.” In understanding the community’s self-conscious creation, bowling as performance can be understood. Richard Bauman adapts Bateson’s ideas to form his concept of the ethnography of performance (1975).

Bauman describes performance as a type of “communicative interchange” interpreted by the audience so that the “performance sets up, or represents, an interpretative frame within which the messages being communicated are understood”
His use “of frame” is derived from Bateson’s concept discussed above. Performative interactions require the audience to have “communicative competence” (Bauman 1975:293), which means the audience understands the messages being transmitted by the performer. The audience can judge the performer as being able to effectively transmit these culturally appropriate messages through their performance. When a performance is occurring, heightened attention is being paid to the performer, as the audience must pay them special regard to receive the transmitted messages.

Metacommunicaton is employed throughout performance as a means to display competence in “culturally conventionalized” understandings (Bauman 1975:295). Particular communities have their own set of understood communicative norms that one must understand to be a competent performer (Bauman 1975:296). Bauman goes on to describe the emergent quality of performance that “resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence and the goals of the participants” (1975:302).

One key difference between my research and Bauman’s article is that my work deals with a physical performance event, rather than verbal performance. This may appear as a drastic difference, but I believe his research is applicable to much of what my interviewees have expressed. There are elements of verbal performance to bowling, particularly when bowlers are experiencing downtime between throwing the ball. In those moments, bowlers display communicative competence and understanding of cultural norms. But, bowling is also a theatrical occurrence, because when one is bowling in a match, tournament, or league, you are the only person bowling on your pair of lanes. Most bowling center’s lanes are a few inches above the rest of the ground, so that one
must physically step up and onto the lanes to bowl, setting oneself apart from those who are not bowling. At Ten Pin Lanes, the bowling center at which my high school regularly bowled, the lanes are ten feet below the rest of the bowling center. One must descend a set of stairs to enter the bowling area. At the top of the stairs are rows of chairs where parents and friends can sit and watch bowlers physically perform.

Judith Butler, too, has a description of performance that is central to this thesis. Yet, it is quite different from Bauman’s, primarily in that Bauman is presenting the performance of particular genres while Butler is presenting the performance of a gendered self. I have already touched on Butler’s notions of gender performativity in this introduction, and I do not intend to repeat myself here, but rather to expand upon previously introduced ideas. According to Butler, gender is a “stylized repetition of acts” (1988:519) that is carried out by the body. Because the body acts as a vehicle for our current notions of gender, we must look at the mundane actions that “constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1988:519) which includes many subtle gestures or bodily movements that we may view as unconscious. Each individual has a specific way of performing their gender. These nuanced actions are “done in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions” which prevents them from being a “fully individual matter” (Butler 1988:525). These sanctions and proscriptions are social in nature and our performances of gender “[render] social laws explicit” (Butler 1988:526). It is vital to understand that these performances are connected to historical understandings of gender, these “[acts have] been going on before one arrived on the scene” (Butler 1988:526). If one does drastically deviate from social conscriptions of what gender is and what gender
is not, then a set of culturally prescribed punishments could be enacted (Butler 1988:528).

Combining both Butler and Bauman’s concepts of performance, Ann K. Ferrell describes gender as “traditionalized performance” (Ferrell 2014:43). Ferrell importantly notes that not all performances are framed, as Bauman suggests, but rather, like Butler, some performances are ongoing and may not be consciously entered (2014:44). Conceiving gendered performances as “traditionalized helps to illuminate the active process involved in enactments of gender” (2014:44). In her article, Ferrell applies these notions of gender to help better understand periods of transition in the tobacco farming industry. Although the bowling community is undergoing change, especially in terms of how rapidly bowling centers are closing, many of my interviewees have not been bowling in recent years. This lack of current connection to the community leads me to believe that their observations and narratives may not deal directly with the changing bowling community. Yet, understandings of who is a bowler are still clear in my interviewees’ minds. As such, these performances are traditionalized to the extent that even former bowlers are able to recall with ease what constitutes gender, as well as share stories about inappropriate behavior. Ferrell’s combination of Bauman and Butler’s notions of performance is important when looking at the enactments that follow culturally understood gender binaries.

*Chapter Organization*

This introduction provides a preview of the important concepts that will be referenced throughout this study. I build off of previously presented ideas in the first
chapter, in which I examine the material culture of bowling. An in-depth look at objects like bowling balls, oil patterns, and gloves should be the first step in preparing to fully appreciate my interviewees’ views of gender. Such a survey provides a basis for understanding how each individual uses these objects to directly display, outwardly, their self-ascribed gender that specific performance. I also use a survey of the material culture of bowling to better explain the mechanics of bowling, a concept that is necessary to later grasp the intricacies of the sport. To understand this, I draw from my interviewees’ explanations of the sport in terms of their physical experiences on the lanes. I think that one will be surprised to learn how complex bowling and its accouterments are, especially if one is only familiar with house balls and house shoes.  

In Chapter Two, I look at the dynamics of play versus sport that are present in the bowling center. Although this may not seem directly related to gender, I believe that the interplay between those who view bowling as a sport and those who view it as recreation is challenging for bowlers. Their verbalized expressions about what it takes to be a “serious” bowler also reveal how the community views gender.

In Chapter Three, I examine what “style” means to bowlers. My interviewees spoke at length about the stylistic differences between men and women, many citing physical differences in skeletal structure that lead them to bowl differently. Yet, even when physicality comes into play, men still occasionally “bowl like women,” and vice versa. A bowler’s style leads to assumptions made by other bowlers about their skill. If a bowler has a certain form and follow-through, he or she will be automatically judged as more skilled, no matter what that bowler’s actual score. Since it appears that style and skill are both tied to gender, it is crucial to look at the connection between the two. If a
particularly gendered style leads one to conclude that a bowler has more skill, could that potentially lead to an overall distinction between genders?

Chapter Four focuses on the gendered interactions between male and female bowlers. For much of this chapter, I examine specific narratives that have been shared by my interviewees. I also discuss their opinions as a means of exploring the various personalities acted out on the lanes. Many of my interviewees view their peers as overly competitive, something that is revered in the community. Men and women alike are presented as overly aggressive and forceful when they are bowling. “Women as aggressive” is a category fraught with implications and one that I examine as it is expressed by my interviewees. I examine the consequences of men as competitive, either with other males, or with potential women partners. By questioning who bowlers consider competition, a designation not solely based on final scores, it becomes clear that women frequently do not make the cut (that is until they prove themselves as manly).

In this chapter, I also look at general gendered interactions that take place on and off the lanes. The interactions that men and women have, not only across gender, but also between individuals with the same gender identity, are sometimes regarded as highly negative. Dramatic narratives shared by my interviewees about these interactions are important, as they frame the reality of their experiences on the lanes. Adult bowlers engage in the same behavior, so it is not just drama fueled with high school excitement. Most of the interviewees with whom I spoke also bowled on single gender teams. The stories about the interactions within the team are socially complex, especially when women are on the same bowling team. These stories present some of the best examples of
gender enforcement that were shared by the interviewees. By and large, the interviewees reserved the most critical comments for members of their own gender.

In the Conclusion, I look at contemporary views of bowling and gender. Most of my interviewees were active bowlers from 2007 through 2011, although a few do still bowl competitively. Over and over, the female bowlers I spoke with emphasized the lack of options for professional women bowlers several years ago. Prior to 2015, a woman who wanted to become a professional would have to bowl in the men’s professional association, the Professional Bowling Association (PBA). However in 2015, the Professional Women’s Bowling Association (PWBA), which had previously ceased operating, became active again (PWBA 2014). The momentous nature of this occasion is not lost on my female interviewees, or on me. They are now excited that women bowlers have the opportunity of going pro, even though they all feel as if they are no longer eligible to do so. The Conclusion includes the reflections of a former professional bowler, Sharon Smith, and how she understands the bowling community to function. I comment on some of the televised games she bowled in and how they compare to men’s tournaments from the same period. I will also discuss the only female bowler who has won a national title, with examination of how the male commentators discussed her victory. This commentary will help contextualize my study within the larger community of bowlers.

Conclusion

I am positioned to examine these interactions because of my “contextual knowledge” that includes, “an understanding of the conventions for aesthetic production”
The aesthetic decisions made by my fellow bowlers and me throughout our careers illuminate many of the gendered disparities that women and men are perceived to have. I have highlighted much of this in my Introduction thus far. Understanding these disparities and their effect on those around us helps us better understand the consequences of a gendered view of the world, particularly one dictated by a binary view of gender. By encouraging a binary understanding of what is and what is not, we limit ourselves to a small and confining view of the available world. In the realm of folklore, these binary divisions have long led us to decide what is and what is not folklore, and have determined what we should and what we should not look at. I hope to challenge us to expand our definitions. My research for this thesis has revealed how little literature there is about recreational folklore, and I believe I can help fill that void.

Although I swore after high school that I would no longer be involved in bowling, I find myself excited by this topic. I wanted to quit because being a woman felt too challenging. We were taught that in many ways we would never be as skilled as the men who bowled, and looking around, that was easy to believe. I still struggle to maintain a high score, something that seemingly is easily achieved by my male counterparts. I cannot get the speed behind the ball that male bowlers can achieve. I acknowledge that working with this topic has helped me regain a lot of power I felt I had lost in interactions with bowlers. I know now that I can contribute in other ways to bowling, and that I have control over how I want to enact my performances in the center.
Chapter One

“Some People Have Blood Cells, I Have Bowling Balls”: Objects and the Gendered Bowling Experience

Everyone who calls him or herself a bowler owns shoes and a bowling ball. Most bowlers will own other accessories, like wrist protectors, shoe covers, rosin bags, shoe brushes, towels, and baby powder. Knowledge of how to use all of these items can be pivotal to bowling a high score. The focus of this chapter is how bowlers view the material culture that is necessary to their sport and how that material culture actively genders the experience of bowling. Although there are many different objects that bowlers interact with on the lanes, my interviewees primarily focused on bowling balls. Consequently, this chapter will mainly examine bowling balls, but there will also be brief discussions of other equipment.

In the preface to Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore, Susan Tower Hollis, Linda Pershing, and M. Jane Young discuss how folklore is frequently divided into verbal art and visual art (1993:xi). This division frequently categorizes visual art as material culture, which is “generally focused on nonlinguistic, product-oriented genres” (Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993:xi). While bowling does not focus on creating a “product,” beyond a score on the board, the act of bowling itself involves a variety of necessary products that are foundational to the very concept of the sport itself. Simon J. Bronner highlights that “objects…remind us of who we are and where we have been” (1986:214) and that objects are personalized to reflect the owner or creator. To Bronner’s point, my own bowling equipment has personalized touches throughout. My shoes have
hand written notes from friends, my arm glove has a sticker that a friend placed on it, and my bowling balls have colored thumb slugs\(^1\) that I chose for aesthetic purposes (black to contrast with a red ball).

Objects used by bowlers, like bowling balls, function as modes of communication, and as such are “elements of ongoing processes of exchange and interaction” (Musello 1992:37). As material goods become symbols for social interactions, they serve as a means for communicating and maintaining ideas regarding gender. Importantly, objects are remnants of beliefs, ideas, and personal viewpoints. They serve as placeholders for internal value systems and communicate to outsiders what the owner/creator values. Christopher Musello states that objects assume significance “from owners and users,” and as such, are “malleable resources, formed and reformed again within the events of daily social life” (Musello 1992:38). Objects are continually imbued with different meanings by those who own them and those who interact with them. These objects can only assume significance from our continued interactions with them, which means that objects can only have social significance if we discuss them with others. In this way, objects can become symbols for gender. For example, when one thinks of the word “purse,” it may call to mind a particular style of bag used by women, yet purses are not necessarily a female accessory (many men in Europe and America use small bags for carrying daily objects). However, a search for academic articles on purses reveals article after article on purses as women’s accessories (e.g. Harris 1997). Purses, thus, become a symbol for womanhood. In purchasing and using a purse, one is displaying femininity, even if it is unintended. For bowlers, there can be unselfconscious displays of femininity. Objects used by bowlers, like shoes, balls, and gloves, are
interacted with for the duration of the physical activity; these objects, too, are given gendered significance.

The material culture of bowling is central to the physical experience, since working with objects dictates what happens on the lanes. When I spoke with Claire, a young woman who bowled from 2006-2013, she briefly described the bowling experience:

I stand about [clears throat] five to ten boards from the right side of the lane. So, I usually go by the dots, they'll have dots where you stand, and that way whenever you throw the ball it'll go up the right and then curve left into the pocket. If that makes sense. … I guess don't really know how to describe [how the ball feels]. It really depends on how long you've been bowling, because I remember when I first started bowling it kind of felt uncomfortable, cause a lot of people, when they bowl just for fun, they'll have a deeper hole that they stick all their fingers in there, but when you start bowling, like on a team or as a sport, not necessarily just for fun, you get a fingertip ball so it's uncomfortable at first, having your fingers in there and you feel like the ball is going to fall off your hand at any moment. Uhm, once you get comfortable with that, it feels—uhm, I don't—pretty normal?

When asked to describe her experience bowling, Claire focuses on her interactions with the bowling ball itself. She does mention her bodily presence in relation to the lane, yet quickly changes to focus on her feelings toward the bowling ball and her bodily response towards it. This quick shift, I believe, highlights the centrality of material culture, primarily that ball itself, to bowling. It also centralizes the importance of material culture to the very experience of bowling; it is integral and necessary to understand how the materials of bowling define the very experience of the bowler on the lanes.
When I (or anyone) walks into a bowling center, I normally first take notice of the variety of bowling equipment publically displayed. There are brightly colored bowling shoes behind the counter where you pay and neon colored bowling balls on shelves surrounding the lanes. When bowlers talk about the publically displayed equipment they will vocally add the word “house” before each object, e.g., “house” shoes and “house” balls. Peers often degrade bowlers who regularly use house equipment. One of my interviewees, Tee, proudly stated that she was “never allowed to touch alley shoes and alley balls” when she was growing up. Tee has been bowling since before she could walk, and was given her first bowling ball at birth. This first occasion she used house shoes was May of 2015. Tee describes the experience:
They’re horrible. I never realized how disgusting they feel. … I’ve never worn them, so I really feel really bad for even allowing you all to put those on. Any of you all. Trust me, I bought my own bowling shoes, A.S.A.P.

This distaste for house equipment was expressed by many of my interviewees, and it is something I have experienced myself. Individual who own their own bowling shoes usually own shoe covers that can be placed over the sole of their shoes when they leave the lane area. As the soles of bowling shoes are typically made with a soft, felt-like material, shoe covers prevent the sole of the shoe from coming into contact with any substance that could prevent a nice smooth glide down the lane. Bowlers also change out of their shoes when they go to the restroom, so as to avoid stepping in water, which can ruin the bottom of the shoe. These precautions are almost never taken with house shoes and individuals even wear them outside, a big no-no for bowlers with their own shoes. Throughout the winter, Southern Lanes had a large, hand-written sign by their door that read: “Do NOT wear bowling shoes outside.”

When I bowled as a teenager, my female peers referred to shoe covers as “shoe condoms,” for they offered a certain degree of protection from an unwanted result (ruined shoes if stepping in something sticky or wet). Although female condoms exist, by and large condoms are associated with male genitals in terms of protection from an unwanted pregnancy or an STD. Calling shoe covers “shoe condoms” was always a humorous experience for the women I bowled with, leading me to classify this behavior as joking. In an effort to avoid a psychoanalytic interpretation of the reasoning behind this widely-shared joke, I asked Claire why she believed we used this name for shoe covers.

I forgot about that. Pretty sure we thought it was funny. Not because we hated penises. But who knows for sure? … My thought process back then: “Lol it goes on my foot. Like a condom on a penis. Hilarious.”
According to Carol Mitchell, women tell openly aggressive jokes around other women, because they “feel more comfortable releasing these tensions in groups of other women who also feel the same restraints about showing hostility” (1996:183). Although this joke does not seem openly aggressive, it does indirectly challenge the notion of manliness, by comparing a male’s penis to a shoe on a foot. Mitchell also describes hostile jokes as “obscene” (1996:183), a category in which I have included this joke. Although I am sure there are instances where men have overheard or participated in this name for shoe covers, my interviewees did not mention any such instances. This difference could be due to societal institutions that dictate differences in masculine and feminine joke telling thereby limiting this joke from being shared openly (Mitchell 1996:185).

House shoes are not the only piece of house equipment deemed inferior by bowlers; house balls, too, are degraded by the bowling community. This type of ball is made of plastic unlike the reactive resin used to manufacture most bowling balls. Plastic is not the material of choice for most bowlers because it does not hook across the lane. House balls are conventionally drilled, meaning that one’s fingers can slide all the way into the ball. The holes are large to accompany the diverse range of hands that use the balls day in and day out. However, most bowlers prefer the fingertip drill over the conventional drill. A fingertip ball is characterized by “D” shaped plastic plugs that are inserted into the finger holes and these special inserts are designed to keep only the first part of the middle and ring finger in the hole, rather than the whole finger. Michelle described her preference for style for a fingertip ball:

I like fingertip balls, actually a lot better. Because, usually, with the house ball or whatever, you’re doing this, you have—it’s very big holes and they
are not fitted, whatsoever. It’s easy to just stick your whole hand in there and you know it’s going to come right back out… but with fingertip balls, it’s great because you have more control with the turn of the ball if you will, or your release. And also, it takes a lot less effort. You don’t hold it or grip it like you would.

Once bowlers have procured their own balling balls, they do not use house equipment unless in a pinch and unable to access their own bowling balls. This preference for non-house balls was universal among all my interviewees.

Although house equipment is readily available to bowlers, serious bowler avoids it at all costs. This is due to the ability one has to fashion her own bowling balls as highly stylized to an individual’s particular bowling style (as I will discuss in Chapter Three).

Figure 2. Fingertip inserts before they are glued into bowling balls. The different tubes correspond to different size finger holes. Other bowling alleys have more selection, including different sizes and colors. Southern Lanes (where this picture was taken), only carries one style of inserts and they only come in men’s sizes.
Individualized bowling balls serve as a status symbol in the bowling center. Speaking from my own experience, when I go to Southern Lanes to practice during open lanes, I generally receive a significant amount of attention from neighboring lanes, and not because of any perceived skill, but rather because of the fairly extensive unloading of equipment (fig. 1). Among serious bowlers, bowling equipment carries a particular amount of prestige. One of the most serious bowlers whom I interviewed, Daniel, has had 120-130 bowling balls over his bowling career. Daniel, like Tee, likes to say that he has been bowling since he was born. While another interviewee, Justin, is one of the least serious bowlers, he still has had 6 bowling balls. To further support this conclusion, another interviewee, Max, purchased his second ball because he perceived that more serious bowlers had multiple bowling balls. While the number of bowling balls that one owns is not information that is visibly available, there is a clear correlation between time spent dedicated to bowling and number of bowling balls owned.

Bowling balls are extremely versatile pieces of equipment. They can be ordered in a variety of colors, weights, cores, and grips. Getting one’s first bowling ball normally involves a large monetary commitment, ranging anywhere from 100 to 300 dollars. Justin first began bowling at 14. It took him awhile to purchase his first bowling ball because, according to Justin, “it takes awhile to justify spending that kind of money on something you just learned how to do.” Justin says this about getting his first ball:
It wasn’t really anything fancy. It was blue. I got it on Christmas. I was really excited to get it and everything because, of course, [it was] a bowling ball. It was awesome.

Justin spent a lot of time researching which bowling ball he would start with. In our interview, he spoke about how easy it is to get “kind of lost in it” when you first learn about what the different bowling balls are capable of doing. Similarly, Claire enjoyed the experience of receiving her first bowling ball: “It felt good. Because you’re like, ‘Oh, I’m a bowler now.’ Like you get measured and they drill it for you and you’re like, ‘Yeah.’” However, some of my interviewees were given balls because they had connections with people who worked in the pro shop. Max was one such person: “It was like a used one in the back of Ten Pin that they pulled out for me. I didn’t even have to pay for it.”

Bowling balls come in a variety of materials. Each material creates a different reaction on the lane, thus giving each ball a different purpose. Some material will cause the ball to make a drastic turn on the lane, giving it a rather large “hook.” Other material will not react with the lane at all and the ball will glide straight down it. Bowling balls will also react differently at each bowling center. This is due to oil that is placed on the lanes as well as differences in lane material. Lane material is now made out of synthetic wood, rather than real. This switch was made because real wood lanes are expensive to maintain and have to be replaced every few years, causing the bowling center to close portions of their lanes for days. There are still some bowling centers throughout the state that have real wood lanes; however, these are becoming more rare as bowling centers replace their lanes with synthetic wood. Bowlers who grew up on real wood lanes prefer them to the newer, synthetic material. Daniel found it beneficial to grow up bowling at a house that had wooden lanes, as it made him a more consistent bowler.
…Rose Bowl, up until, gosh, it was like 2001, they had wood lanes. Which is what bowling centers were more made up with until the middle to late 90’s when synthetic lanes came out. So, I would say that long term practicing at Rose Bowl helped more because these days there are still wood lanes out there… There are a lot of kids growing up today that only practice on synthetic. And there are little intricacies that can cost you one hit here, one hit there… I knew what was going to happen on the lane because I practiced on wood for so long and I was able to keep from losing that hit and I had more success.

None of my other interviewees state that practicing on wooden lanes made them more consistent, most likely because none of them grew up at bowling centers that had wooden lanes. I can personally attest to the vocalized dread that my teammates displayed when we were going to have a match at a bowling center that still had wood lanes. It also causes the bowling center to have a distinct fumigation smell. Wooden lanes are also harder for bowlers because the wood quickly soaks up the oil used to lubricate the lanes.

Figure 3. Southern Lanes bowling center lanes. They have synthetic wood lanes, which you can distinguish because of the patina on the wood; normally synthetic wood lanes are lighter in color.

Bowling centers have a different “house shots,” or a particular oil patterns distinctive to that house. For example, Southern Lanes has a 39-foot house shot, while
most bowling centers will have a 40-foot shot. Bowling balls create friction on the lanes, and using oil to diminish that friction causes less damage to the lanes over time. Oil patterns are extremely diverse, but are typically set up so that the outside of the lane is dryer than the inside of the lane. Oil patterns can also run long or short, which means that the oil will extend further down the lane. Bowling balls with reactive exteriors and cores only begin to hook on the lane when they are no longer in the oil.\textsuperscript{9} The placement of oil on the lanes dictates the way that the ball reacts, causing it to slide further down the lane before beginning to hook towards the pins, or breaking early in its trip down the lane and hooking drastically across it. Every ball that moves down the lanes changes the oil pattern bit by bit, by causing a change in the oil distribution. Balls that have been thrown for multiple games usually have a sheen that runs in a line across the surface caused by oil picked up by the ball each time it is thrown. This oil sheen leads many bowlers to carry towels onto the lanes with them, so that they can wipe off the oil.

Every bowling ball reacts in a distinctly unique manner when thrown down the lane due to the core within its center as well as the way that particular ball is drilled. Drilling a ball in a certain way can cause a change in the position of the core relative to the lane when the ball is thrown, thus changing the reaction between the ball and the lane. The angling of the drilled finger holes also makes the ball more or less reactive. Because they do not have an interior core, plastic balls (fig. 4), like house balls and spare balls, are made with the intention that they will not react on the lane and will slide in a straight line. However, one can make a plastic ball hook if one is on lanes without oil and by turning the wrist in a flicking motion as the ball is released. Plastic balls are primarily used as “spare” balls, meaning to pick up spares\textsuperscript{10} for most bowlers. Balls with cores, as opposed
to plastic balls, have a plethora of potential outside materials. According to one of my interviewees, Robyn, some balls are even made with diamond exteriors now. Balls with cores are weighted to force the balls to spin in a certain manner when they come in contact with the lanes. Some balls will hook significantly, while others will barely hook at all.

Figure 4. This is my spare ball, a 15-pound Ebonite. It has no interior core, and thus will go straight on the lanes. By using a spare ball, I am able to “pick up” (knock over) single pins with more precision.

Gender and Bowling Balls

Bowlers have a variety of balls to choose from with each game. Their decision about what ball to use depends on their particular style of bowling and on the lane conditions at that moment in time. For example, an individual who bowls in my current
league will go through two to three balls per night to find a ball that works best for him under the current conditions. Individuals may choose to purchase their balls based on brand, core, or style of throw. Bowlers often make different selections of bowling balls for each bowling event. Robyn carries her 12 bowling balls with her, but she has a particular ball with which she starts each game.

I have a benchmark ball, which is a ball that I’ve had for a couple of years. It’s very predictable. It’s not either end of the spectrum. It doesn’t hook a whole lot, but it does hook some. And that’s usually the ball I throw first.

Like Robyn, Tee also has a ball that she has kept for several years. Tee calls her ball “old faithful.” Both female bowlers emphasize the predictability of their reliable bowling balls as desirable traits. Justin, on the other hand, prefers his favorite ball because it is versatile.

It did whatever you wanted to do. It didn’t matter what you did. If you wanted it to go completely straight, you could supply enough to handle a little bit and it’ll go completely straight...if you wanted to hook from 7 to 10 you can do it. It didn’t matter what you did. It would just do it.

Max, who likes his primary ball because it can also function as his spare ball, echoed this preference for versatility. The way the ball works on the lanes depended on how he released the ball off his hand.
Figure 5. Rodger, who is in charge of the pro shop at Southern Lanes, drills into a new bowling ball I purchased. This ball, unlike my others, is highly reactive. I chose it because of this, in the hopes that it will cut through the heavy oil at this house more easily.

In terms of versatility versus predictability, the number of times bowlers drill new bowling balls appears to have a gendered association. The male bowlers who I interviewed on average are more likely to drill new balls. I have found that the men have consistently had more bowling balls than women, if the time spent bowling is comparable. While speaking with Tee about what kind of bowling balls she preferred, she brought up this disparity.

Tee: Guys like to drill bowling balls, use them for a couple of games and then scrap them. That is like a guy thing to do.
Author: Really? And women are more like…
Tee: Women, we do our research, we get our bowling ball and then we fall in love with it. Almost like it’s our pet. Guys don’t get that connection.
Over the course of her bowling career, which is most of her life, Tee has owned about 30 bowling balls. Her comment also demonstrates the repercussions of a binary gender style of thought, where generalizations and assumptions are made based on gender alone, because Justin labored over research for his first bowling ball. However, Daniel emphasizes that he does frequently drill up new balls and he has had over 120 bowling balls drilled for him.

Proving yet again that basing assumptions off of examples based on binary thought is misleading, Daniel stated in our interview that he prefers predictability in his equipment. This statement runs contrary to the prior-presented evidence that men prefer variety over predictability. However, to deconstruct the binary system and suggest instead that he does prefer a degree of predictability, especially compared to his male teammates, is necessary to see the dangers in a gendered understanding of bowling. According to Daniel, bowlers “who are skilled enough” will get a new bowling ball every week. Noticeably, Daniel only names male professionals while listing his examples of those who are able to engage in this practice. Instead, Daniel chooses to not get a new ball every week, but only gets a new ball a couple of months in advance of a tournament (or another time where a new ball would be beneficial) because he “need[s] time to figure out what that bowling ball likes.”

To demonstrate how important it is for a bowler to understand how particular equipment works, I present a story Daniel told me, in which his collegiate bowling team changed sponsorship, which drastically affected their skill level. After the new sponsor was declared, the team had one semester to use their current bowling balls, while preparing to move to solely using that company’s brand. Although their team had a
winning history, the move to the new brand, according to Daniel, actively prevented the team from winning any more tournaments that year. Although this could be due to unfamiliarity with the new equipment, Daniel believes that it is more than that.

It wasn’t just the familiarity of the equipment. It was the fact that different golf clubs, different angles on the club head can affect how a golfer plays. And one golfer might like more angle. One golfer might like less angle. Well, with bowling balls it’s a similar thing. Bowling balls are made of different materials…my game translated the worst to [that brand’s] equipment.

Daniel disliked that brand of equipment so much that he opted to not join the bowling team for his senior year. Daniel was the only one of his team who actively chose to not return because of the new equipment. This story, too, proves the generalizations associated with the gender binary may not always be accurate for it demonstrates that men are not always willing to use whatever is the newest equipment. It is much more personal than that. In this instance, Daniel’s rejection of the change in bowling equipment had a negative social repercussions, as it did not allow him to continue to bowl on his college bowling team—even though it was his decision to not return.

As mentioned, Daniel works hard to figure out “what the bowling balls like,” thus anthropomorphizing the balls themselves. He is not the only bowler who thinks of their balls as beings with personalities. Tee, too, emphasized that both men and women like to name their spare balls. Named spare balls frequently have a gender. In her case, Tee’s male spare ball is named Sushi and is patterned with a dragon. She then mentioned Daniel and told me that he has a pink spare ball, which he has named Bessie (something that he did not mention in our interview). Tee also described a male bowler with a pink Hello Kitty branded spare ball that he named Kitty. Tee shared a short vignette about that bowler: “He got mad at me when I was like, ‘Man grab your ball.’ He was like, ‘She is a
living being.’” In Tee’s examples, the gender of the ball is understood as the opposite
gender as the owner of the ball. I cannot help but wonder if this is a commentary on
domination through ownership and control, but again, I do not wish to psychoanalyze my
interviewees. When I asked Tee why she names her spare ball she said that she does so
without any particular reason.

Some of the examples thus far, particularly Tee’s, Justin’s, and Claire’s,
exemplify that my interviewees are not sure why they prescribe to the cultural practices
they do, I think it is beneficial to remember once again, what Butler has to say about
gender performances: “the act that one does, the act that one performs, is in a sense, an
act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (1988:526). This means that
one may not be self consciously performing their prescribed gender, especially since the
“actors are always on the stage” (Butler 1988:526). In these moments, these individuals
may be acting out underlying social constructs that may not be explicitly stated in the
community.

This anthropomorphizing of bowling balls does not stop at naming; bowlers take
the humanization of their bowling balls into the mortal realm by experiencing the “death”
of their bowling balls. This death can result from natural or dramatic circumstances, such
as cracking or breaking. Tee described one instance where her ball unexpectedly broke.

I bowled in—I want to say Lexington—in a college tournament, they had
wood lanes and I had my—I remember this, I was a freshman and I had
my Wicked [type of bowling ball] and that was a ball that I shot all my
huge scores in—I had the front five and it went down, hit a nail head in
the back end and got stuck in the ball return because the pin got—it was a
mess. And what did they want to do? Well, we can give you a new ball,
but we have to take this one.
Tee’s example is a chaotic narrative, one that according to Diane Goldstein, “lack[s] an apparent order or organization and [is] unpredictable and confusing” (2012:183). Although Goldstein uses the term to refer to people who have experienced psychological pain or trauma (2012:184), I believe it applies to a lesser degree here, demonstrating the pain associated with the “death” of Tee’s bowling ball. An unexpected ball breakage is not the only way that a bowling ball can die. The more you bowl with the same ball, the more the oil from the lanes seeps to the core, which is why it is important to wipe the oil streaks off the equipment. As this happens the core will begin to weaken causing the ball to be less reactive. This is the most common way a bowling ball “dies.” Similar to humans, it is possible to take drastic steps to bring bowling balls back to life. One way is by resurfacing the bowling ball. However, individuals like Daniel do not seem to be too thrilled with bringing balls back to life, but rather feel that once a ball extends beyond its natural life, it is time to tell “old reliable, like, well, we had a good time, but off to the dumpster for you.” Tee however, does not buy into the notion that balls can permanently die and says that people who think that a dead ball is no good can “kiss my butt.”

The 15 Pound Gender Divide

One of the crucial ways that bowling balls create a gendered experience at the bowling center is their weight. The legal weights for bowling balls fall anywhere between 6 to 16 pounds, with the standards set by the United States Bowling Congress (USBC), bowling’s governing body. When one is bowling at a young age, he or she will start off with a 6-pound ball. As they age, they will typically move up one ball weight per year, maxing out anywhere from 12 to 16 pounds. The final weight a bowler decides upon is
solely dependent on that individual. According to BowlingBall.com, women and seniors typically bowl with a 13- or 14-pound ball, while men bowl with a 15- or 16-pound ball (Carrubba). Although the difference between feminine and masculine ball weight is one that I have personally heard over and over, the women that I spoke with for this interview all bowl with 15-pound balls.

When I asked my interviewees about this divergence, I received several different responses. Everyone acknowledged that this disparity does exist, yet several had different explanations for the reason. Bobby, a young man who has bowled most of his life, blamed it on coaching.

Honestly, I’ve never been surprised by a woman that could throw a 16-pound ball. And in reality, it has everything to do with just the way you throw it … I can see coaches saying that, “Oh, you girls don’t throw a heavier ball.” But, like, in reality I don’t think—honestly, if you’re smooth in your swing, it really shouldn’t matter how big your ball or how much it weighs as long as you’re smooth and can deliver the same way every time. As far as that goes—I really don’t—there is a divergence, but I don’t feel like there has to be.

Like Bobby, Tee initially blamed women’s low ball weight on coaching.

That also depends on the coach and how they push weight … Every female I know, they’re like, “I’m too weak to hold a 14-pound ball,” and again, they start throwing it, it’s like, I need a 16, or a 20. I put that on the shoulders of coaches rather than on the actual player.

Tee’s comments provide an acute commentary on a social enactment of the gender binary. Women feel as though they are not capable of throwing a heavier ball because the community has constructed the notion of women as unable to lift heavier weights. This is then reinforced by coaches who are ascribing to community standards of what is appropriate for women. A former belief that women are only capable of throwing lower weight balls has dictated coaches’ understandings of what is appropriate for future
feminine bowlers. In this instance, a lower ball weight has been ascribed as more feminine and as such, is appropriate for female bowlers to use.

In our interview, Tee provided a caveat that it is not a cultural problem that creates the weight disparity between men and women, but is rather due to science: “This is anatomy, genetics, men have more upper body strength. That’s just genetic…Gender should have nothing to do with much of all of these.” In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explains that similar to gender, sex is also a social construction ([1993] 2011:xii). Butler states that sex “is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time” ([1993] 2011:xii). Rather than a biological stability, it is a “process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms” ([1993] 2011:xii). If sex, too, is a social construction, then genetic masculine upper body strength is an ideal created by historical notions of what constitutes the male sex. This understanding is then continually reinforced by actions and commentary in daily lives, and thus, what is “normal.” Tee’s comment demonstrates that she perceives there to be a difference in gender and sex, where sex is a scientific notion and gender is a cultural construct. Tee, however, bowls with a 15-pound ball (as do I and all the women I interviewed). When I asked women about their ball weight they would offer commentary about why that weight is beneficial or annoying, while men would simply give me a number and not offer any further information. These men are bowling with a masculine ball weight (all bowl with 15-pound balls), while the women are outside the boundaries of what is considered “normal” for a female. The remainder of this chapter looks at the comments offered by my female interviewees about their ball weights, including some that demonstrate the challenges of transgressing a gender binary. I will also use an
example provided by a male bowler, who did not comment on the weight of his 15-pound ball, but instead commented on his switch to a 15-pound ball.

When I asked Michelle about her ball weight she explained that from a scientific standpoint a 15-pound ball is best for knocking down the pins. Michelle herself transferred from a 12-pound ball to a 15-pound ball after she had been bowling for a few months. She welcomed this change because of the scientific reason she provided. Although I did not ask for a reason why her ball weight was changed, Michelle provided one right away. This indicates that she feels the need to justify why she should have a heavier ball, demonstrating that transgressing a created boundary necessitates an explanation to be culturally accepted. In Michelle’s case, she chose a scientific one.

Like Michelle, Max transferred to a heavier ball weight, something he viewed as necessary. He does not provide a reason why the 15-pound ball is better, but instead provides a reason why the 13-pound ball he initially had was inferior for his needs.

I needed to get the second [ball] because the first one only weighed like 13 pounds, so it wasn’t a heavy enough ball to really crash the pins. So I had to get—I got a 15-pound ball.

The subtle shift from blaming the first ball to expounding on the second shows that Max does not have to justify why 15 pounds in acceptable, but rather why a lower, not masculine ball weight was unacceptable.

Michelle went on to describe how she felt after she had been using a heavier ball, the scientific reason gave her an explanation why she should be using that ball weight. She commented: “I must be very strong to be able to use this…it was great. I liked it.” Michelle’s commentary, again, demonstrates how the women I interviewed view their heavier ball weight as exceptional, rather than the standard for women. Although men are
given this ball weight as something they should have, women who use it perceive themselves as strong.

Similarly, Claire spoke about what happens when her non-bowling friends pick up her bowling ball.

I get a lot of comments whenever I go bowling with people I don't know. Like, "Oh, how much does your ball weigh?" "I don't know, fifteen or sixteen?" "Oh my gosh, that's so heavy! How do you do that?" It's not really about using muscles to lift, which is a lot of confusion, I guess, for other people who haven't bowled before. They just think you just have to throw it, but it's really controlling how it falls, if that makes sense.

Claire’s quote contains two thoughts that need parsing. The first is that her friends she goes bowling with comment on her ball weight as being different from what they perceive her to be able to handle. As Claire and I are friends, we have spoken on multiple occasions about stories like the one above. How friends who do not bowl pick up our bowling balls and comment on the weight being “so heavy.” I have also had instances myself where male bowlers have picked up my bowling equipment and have made a noise as though they are lifting something unexpectedly heavy, while I know they themselves bowl with similarly weighted balls. Most recently, a male bowler was watching me during my league. When I was walking off the lane, he stopped me to inform me it would be beneficial for a “girl” like myself to bowl with a lighter ball, rather than the heavy ball I was using. I believe that these instances contain a comment on what women are capable of handling, in terms of strength, and a comment on what Claire and I look as though we are capable of lifting.

The second thing I would like to parse out of Claire’s quote is her compensation for explaining why it is okay for her to have a ball that weight. By saying that she is just “controlling how [the ball] falls,” she is directly removing the agency of her actions on
the lanes. Instead, she describes the ball as actively creating its own path, while she attempts to nudge it in the correct direction. She is not a strong woman, throwing a heavy ball down the lanes, like Michelle, but instead is a woman trying to control the way a weighted object falls.\(^\text{15}\)

**Conclusion**

The gendered binary in bowling, made visible through objects like bowling balls and shoes, can be parsed out by understanding the constructed notions of gender actively occurring in bowling centers around the world. Thus far, I have endeavored to examine the objects central to the material culture of bowling, primarily shoes and balls. By looking at these objects, one understands that a gender binary of male/female does exist in this community. By acknowledging that this binary does exist, and beginning to look at the ramifications of it, one can begin to examine other aspects in-depth. In this community, the binary has expectations that determine what is appropriately masculine and what is appropriately feminine. Once one becomes either implicitly or explicitly aware of these expectations, one may begin to act upon them in their daily lives, perpetuating beliefs about what is masculine and what is feminine.

As bowling balls are one of the most integral pieces of equipment to bowling it is not surprising that they carry the most gendered understandings. In fact, bowling balls are so important to bowlers that they receive names and personalities. As was demonstrated, bowling ball weight has become one of the clearest ways that bowlers have created a gendered view of the world. Ball weight is dictated by gender, with women being perceived to bowl at a lower ball weight, the same as seniors. With coaches reinforcing
that women need lower ball weights, it is easy to see why individuals may see a disparity among the sexes, particularly when heavier ball weight is considered superior. As my observations demonstrate, the community’s understanding of gender is not always accurate to what is happening on the lanes, where women are using heavier ball weights regularly.

In the next chapter of this thesis I take a closer look at the sport of bowling. By discussing what makes bowling actively a sport, rather than play, I render visible the necessary hallmarks of what constitutes a bowler. This illumination also draws to light what a bowler is not. As will be demonstrated, the unmarked category of bowler defaults to the notion that what is “bowler” is also “male.” Women who wish to be considered as part of the category of “bowler” have to make decisions about how they present themselves in order to be considered one of the group.
Chapter Two

*Male Bowlers versus Everyone Else*

When I was a sophomore in high school, a new bowling center opened on the far side of town. It was one of the first bowling centers in Louisville that took seriously the challenge to be an “entertainment” center. It featured “cosmic” bowling\(^1\), live bands, and karaoke. This bowling center quickly received a reputation among my bowling team of being “easy.” The design of the oil patterns made getting a strike easily achievable rather than something that was earned through skill.

An even more subtle difference was that the bowling lanes leveled with the regular floor. No longer did one have to physically step up and onto the lanes, but rather a bowler could just walk onto the lane directly from the surrounding floor. Unlike other houses in the city, this bowling center did not emphasize bowling as a sport others might watch; with the removal of the step onto the lanes, the demarcation between performer and audience was removed as well. At this house, bowling is not something that is watched as a sport.

This bowling center is not for “serious” bowlers, but for “open” bowlers. Although “open” bowler is a term that technically refers to people who are bowling without association to a tournament or league, it is frequently used as a reference to people on the lanes who do not take bowling seriously. With terminology denoting people who do not take bowling seriously from those who do, another type of binary
becomes apparent. The dichotomy between individuals who view bowling as a sport and those who do not creates an opposition understood by the community to consist of all serious bowlers versus the other, open bowlers.

**Bowling as Play, Bowling as Sport: Bowlers versus Open Bowlers**

In the bowling community, there is a constant negotiation between what is play and what is sport, where sport is the superior attitude towards bowling. To better understand the bowling community, in this chapter I look at what sport versus play means to bowlers. I also explore the expectations that bowlers place upon each other in order to qualify as a “serious” bowler. When looking at what the community considers to be a bowler, it becomes clear that some women are not even able to meet the standard criteria to qualify as a serious bowler, especially the criteria placed upon them by their male peers. In defining “serious” bowler, this community has constructed a marked category of “female” and an unmarked category of “male,” especially when “sport” becomes a decidedly masculine term. These categories are not inherently a conscious construction, but rather the byproduct of the gender binary.

I have endeavored thus far to offer insight into the physical act of bowling, mainly in terms of material culture. This analysis provides not only insight into the terminology and rules of bowling, but also serves as a primer to some of the considerations that will be examined in the remainder of this thesis, particularly how bowling is gendered. The remainder of this thesis will focus less on the material culture and more on the community’s social interactions and conceptions of identity. It is still important, however, to recognize material culture, as integral to the very act of bowling. I will use verbiage
defined in the first chapter to talk about bowling. My interviewees frequently use their insider terminology unknowingly, as it is integral to the very act of bowling.

Monetary investment in equipment is a definite measure of how the bowling community is constituted. Balls, shoes, and bowling bags can be very expensive if purchased often or indiscriminately. Beginning bowlers may be put off by the purchase because they may not perceive bowling as a worthwhile pursuit, or something that merits being taken seriously. Once one invests in bowling it is no longer play, but rather a serious experience, a sport.

Only one interviewee shared a story reflecting this transition from play to sport. However, in this example, the investment deals not only with financial concerns, but also with mental focus. When Daniel was a young teenager, he was in a league for bowling on Saturday mornings with some of his friends. One Saturday morning, he became upset with how he had bowled and had the following exchange with his father:

But I spent the whole morning screwing around with my friends. Running around and playing and not focusing on bowling. Dad said, “Look,” he said, “You can’t be mad about how you bowled if you’re going to go into there and not take it seriously. That’s not fair to yourself. That’s not fair to the game. So, you need to pick. Do you want to take this seriously or do you just want to have fun? I’m fine with either one.” And I don’t remember this. But that was a Saturday morning.

The following Sunday night, he was sitting on the couch and he said I walked up to him and said, “Dad, I thought about it.” And he had no clue what I was talking about. Now, he said, “What son?” I said, “I want to take bowling seriously.” And from that point on he said, “Okay.” We started putting money into my bowling and to traveling for tournaments.

It is clear to Daniel that bowling transcended an activity where he could goof off with friends or run around the lanes. Instead, it became an endeavor that warranted being taken seriously symbolized with monetary investment.
Although Daniel initially spent his time “goofing off” on the lanes, he decided that bowling was going to be a serious pursuit in his life. Subsequently, he won the Junior Gold tournament, earning him the accolade of one of the best bowlers in America. However, before he decided to take bowling seriously, being in the center was a time to play. These moments, when one was is playing, are examples of periods of time bounded by signals that indicate one is playing, what Gregory Bateson calls play frames ([1972] 1995). Play frames mark periods where signals, often communicated nonverbally, indicate, “this is play” (Bateson [1972] 1995:179). They are bounded by messages that indicate, implicitly or explicitly, when the frame has been entered and when the frame is no longer in place (Bateson [1972] 1995:188). These implicit or explicit messages are important for understanding when one is engaged in play and thus dictate how a string of actions should be interpreted and responded to. But, to be within a play frame, one must understand what “playing” entails.

Bateson describes play as being “engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit of actions or signals [are] similar to but not the same as those of combat” (Bateson [1972] 1995:179). While at first I did not find this definition applicable to bowling, on further thought, it could be argued that bowling does include combative symbolism. Bowlers try to throw their bowling ball at incredibly high speeds, similar to a cannon ball being shot out of a canon. However, bowlers are not typically combative with each other. In the introduction to *The Study of Games*, Elliot M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith define play as a type of behavior, one used as engagement for fun and only for fun (1971:5). They go on to discuss the blurring of lines between the notion of play and game, in that we “play a game.” There is one notable exception, that game “implies some
opposition or antithesis between players” (1971:7), even in games with just one player. Avedon and Sutton-Smith also include sport in their definition of game, as synonymous. For most sports, these definitions are accurate. Sports such as football and basketball actively associate the idea that game and sport are one-and-the-same. Professional matches in both football and baseball are called “games” by players and fans alike, but both are considered to be “sports” by the same group of people. One reason for this could be the institution of rules and referees. In bowling, rather than one individual dictating what falls within the accepted boundaries, bowlers regulate each other and informally teach other rules, like making sure the ball does not bounce into the gutter and back out onto the lane. Bowlers with whom I spoke, however, take issue with these definitions, since they do not feel that they fit the understanding of the bowling community of sport versus play versus game. Rather, bowlers see their participation at the bowling center as neither game nor play, but as sport. They associate “game” with “play,” and regard both terms as referring to the same frivolous social activity as opposed to the sport of bowling.

Tee told me in an interview that she is “too deep into the sport side. [She] can’t see where people are like, ‘That’s just a game.’” By adding “just” to her phrasing, Tee complicates the notion of game. One reading of her statement could indicate that bowling is a game as well as something more important than a game. By limiting bowling to being “just a game” one is denying it the reverence it deserves as a complex sequence of events. Tee’s statement could also be interpreted to read that individuals belittle bowling in general. “It is nothing more than a simple game.” Contextually, Tee’s statement aligns with the latter. To Tee, and the community I have worked with, bowling is perceived as something greater than “just a game.” It is a sport.
Throughout all of my interviews, bowling is frequently compared to other sports. Daniel and Michelle both compared bowling to the National Football League. Drew said that “everybody compares [bowling] to golf and they’re not wrong.” These comparisons highlight the community-perceived inequality between other sports and bowling. This inequality fuels statements like Tee’s. Tee also explained that she finds it “disrespectful when people associate bowling as something other than a sport because you see people playing volleyball and drinking beer at bars. Why do they even consider volleyball a sport?” Similarly, Robyn discusses her experiences as an avid softball player throughout high school. When she had to miss conditioning for bowling practice, she frequently received pushback from her coaches as they questioned whether bowling practice could be “more important than [their] conditioning?” She answered:

And I was like, “Yeah, it is. You know, bowling practice is just as important as your softball practices.” And it was hard for them to realize that it’s a real sport and [it is] just as hard on the lanes as on the field.

Robyn’s story highlights many of the interactions that my interviewees experienced when it came to explaining that they were participating in an actual sport. When Bobby had to quit high school wrestling for health reasons, but remained a bowler, he faced ridicule from the wrestling community. According to Bobby, one of the primary reasons for the ridicule was because the wrestlers did not consider bowling a sport.

Drew offered several explanations for why the public does not always consider bowling a sport. Bowling at the high school level is considered a club, rather than a sport. Bowlers’ are on a club team, and as such bowling is represented as a club at high school recruiting events. At the college level, women’s bowling is a sport (under Title IX), while men’s bowling is a club. Drew believes this is because bowling is not considered all
encompassing, like football and basketball. Rather, “it depends on how hard you push yourself” and you can still get by with less. Another reason he offered is that bowlers can drink and smoke while playing, which prevents people from taking it seriously. But, as Tee pointed out, this does not prevent activities like volleyball from being considered a sport.

Every bowling center that I know of has a snack bar offering food for purchase. I have not known a bowler to order and eat food while bowling, although I am sure that it has been done. Throughout high school practices we were not allowed to purchase food while we were bowling, a habit that has stayed with me to this day. Rather, in my time as a bowler, I have only seen open bowlers order and eat food while bowling. Like Drew, Tee blames the inclusion of food and drink as one of the reasons that bowling has slid into the realm of entertainment. According to Tee, the stereotype of bowling is that “it’s beer, greasy food, and drunk guys with cigarettes or cigars.”

The bowling community views open bowlers as promoting this stereotype about what bowling is. For example, Tee and Robyn blame open bowlers for the decline of bowling centers. Rather than bowling centers catering to Tee and Robyn’s preference for leagues or tournaments, bowling centers are choosing to serve the open bowlers and raising prices per individual game. Robyn points out that having one group of open bowlers coming one time for the price of 4 dollars per person makes less profit than a weekly league that charges 3 dollars per person.

Open bowling denotes a period of time when anyone can use the lanes. During tournaments and league play most—if not all—bowling lanes are unavailable for use. When a bowling center has open bowling anyone from a “serious” bowler to an open
bowl may pay for time on the lanes. During open bowling bowlers are encouraged to stay on one lane, while in league or tournaments it is more common to bowl across two lanes (that share a ball return), alternating lanes on each throw. Justin spoke about some of the challenges encountered when practicing during open bowling times at bowling centers. If he does have to practice during open bowling, he prefers to practice on lanes along the wall of the house, rather than the middle. If you are not given a lane on the end you are sandwiched between groups of open bowlers.

And then you did have the situations where you were open bowling and you only have one lane, which throws you off to begin with, and you got somebody next to you who has no idea what you’re doing, [they have] all house balls…. And they’re screwing up the oil. And it’s extremely frustrating. So you learn to stay away from them.

Open bowlers are frequently unaware of bowling etiquette, particularly what to do when a bowler is standing on the approach in an adjacent lane. Rather than waiting for the bowler to complete their throw, an open bowler will often run down the approach and throw their ball. If a bowler is trying to pick-up a ten pin, this could potentially injure one or both parties.5

Daniel also discussed his dislike for open bowling. When I was asking him how he responds to friends who want to go bowling for fun, he interrupted me and said, “I don’t do it.” When I asked him to clarify why not, he told me that all of his friends bowl, but even when they have the option of going to the bowling center during open bowling they choose not to go: “We all have the same thought [about] going open bowling, there’s no reason for us. There isn’t.” Daniel’s dislike of open bowling mirrors his dislike of interacting with non-bowlers about bowling. He has found that open bowlers in general do not have an appropriate response to his bowling career. I asked him how people
responded when they found out he is a bowler, and he mentioned the reaction of female non-bowlers. According to Daniel, they just “didn’t get it.” He found that he would “have to get ten minutes of their time to explain what kind of bowler [he is]. And it’s not worth that.” However, when he spoke to a female bowler who was aware of his reputation, things were different.

And so I could look at a girl who bowled for, I don’t know, Florida State, and go, “Yeah, I’m on Junior Team. I won gold medals.” And the perks of that would come.

Daniel did not clarify what he means by “perks,” and the conversation shifted after his comments about female non-bowlers. I can only speculate that he means these women would treat him with added reverence and respect or perhaps he meant sexual “perks.”

Daniel’s story about open bowlers not acknowledging his prowess with the appropriate respect is similar to Bobby’s experience of quitting wrestling. Daniel found that women did not understand, or care to understand, bowling, while Bobby faced ridicule for choosing to bowl over choosing to wrestle. Their stories highlight examples where the dominant cultural understanding of what constitutes masculinity is privileged. For Bobby, that meant that the male wrestlers did not view bowling as a pursuit worthwhile of being considered a sport, especially since it is seen as physically less involved than wrestling. Daniel was unable to receive the respect he believes he deserves because women do not understand that bowling is an appropriate manly pursuit, worthwhile of affection. Both stories exemplify the importance of recognizing multiple masculinities. As Ann K. Ferrell discusses, the gender binary has privileged one type of masculinity as the ideal masculinity, that masculinity is then unique to each community or context (2014:41). By understanding that there are multiple masculinities (not just one)
it is possible to look at the how one masculinity has been privileged as the most masculine over the others in that particular context or community. In Daniel and Bobby’s stories, their chosen brand of masculinity has been deemed inferior to the culturally understood notion of masculinity. As such, they faced cultural snubbing.

Bowlers versus Bowlers

The tension between open bowlers and bowlers is a strong delineation that separates people who take bowling seriously from people who view bowling exclusively as play. It would follow that bowlers as a community would then unite over their common acceptance of bowling as important. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Among members of the bowling community, there are even more minute standards that dictate exactly who qualifies to be a bowler.

Thus far in the chapter, I have examined open bowler versus (serious) bowler. To a bowler, the term “open bowler” has become a marked category. In Amy Shuman’s article “Dismantling Local Culture,” she adopts the linguistic terms of marked and unmarked categories to examine the idea of local (1993). Unmarked categories are labels that are default in our cultural psyche, and are what first comes to mind (1993:346). Marked categories require clarification (1993:347). For example, men are an unmarked category in patriarchal cultures, while women are marked (1993:346). I cannot even begin to count the number of times I have been told by older, male bowlers that I am a good female bowler, not simply a good bowler. Shuman points out that these categories, like so much of our culture, are constructions (1993:347). Although not necessarily consciously created, it is important to see understand that marked and unmarked
categories are not universal. Every community has a specific understanding of what must
marked to promote understanding. For the larger community of bowlers, one must clarify
open bowler by adding “open” in front of the term “bowler.” This will then denote a
specific group of people. However, while talking to each other they will just say
“bowler.” As this is the case, the marked category of open bowler becomes a term that
indicates someone who is not a bowler.

But what about people who do not qualify as open bowlers, but do not quite
qualify as “bowlers”? I have found more often than not, women fill this category.
Although it would be logical to assume that women who took bowling seriously would
also fall into the unmarked category of bowler, some women admit they do not meet the
bowling community’s criteria. As my personal example illustrates, men frequently
remind women that they do not meet the community’s criteria. The unmarked category of
a gender neutral “bowler” instead refers to male bowler, while “female bowler” is a
marked category.

One interviewee, Sarah, admitted that she did not take bowling as seriously as
some of her peers. Sarah viewed bowling more as an “enjoyable, slightly competitive
social hobby.” Later in the interview she does contradict herself, and refers to her time
bowling as a sport, not a hobby. Sarah’s initial rejection of bowling as a sport, and then
implicit acknowledgement that it is a sport, could be due to context. Sarah did indeed
bowl quite frequently, all throughout high school and for a few years in college. While in
high school, Sarah bowled on the more social team that privileged companionship and
fun over bowling prowess. In leagues, she primarily bowled with friends and family.
While in high school, Sarah suffered several injuries that prevent her from physically
bowling, but she would still come to practice to hang out with her friends. That being said, Sarah did spend a considerably amount of time bowling in matches while in high school, and in her time on the B team she became a privileged and well-respected bowler. Needless to say, the social aspect was much more defined in her bowling experience, as she could not bowl for periods of time. While I do not mean to contradict her perception of self, her later comments reveal that she may implicitly consider herself a serious bowler.

Her interview was conducted with a friend and fellow bowler, Sydney, present. Sydney, unlike Sarah, describes herself as taking bowling “pretty seriously.” As Sarah and Sydney continued talking about this dynamic, Sarah commented:

How I met [Sydney] was bowling and how serious [she] took it actually intimidated me at first. My mom was like, “Look how good, Sydney [is].” I was like, “Oh my god.” I was like, “I’m not that good.”

Sarah’s standard for judging whether or not someone is a good bowler is by how seriously they take it. This mimics the open bowler versus serious bowler dynamic, where skill level is based on attitude. However, because Sarah does not take bowling as seriously, she explicitly regards herself as not quite a bowler and not quite an open bowler. Sydney further explains in her interview that she thinks about bowling and then compares her attitudes to how a man conceptualizes bowling. In this manner, in contrast to Sarah, she aligns herself with the unmarked category of male bowler, where she thinks of bowling as a man thinks of bowling.

While discussing what women must overcome to be considered bowlers, Robyn shared a story from a bowling tournament she attended last year. There were multiple
instances where she was not taken seriously until she proved herself as a “bowler” instead of a female bowler:

So, we’re bowling in this venue and a lot of the—we had a practice day and some of the ball reps would come out and they’d watch me bowl in there. They’re like, “Oh, I didn’t know you bowl that well. You wouldn’t tell looking at you.” And I was like, “I don’t look like a bowler? What exactly am I supposed to look like? I’m wearing a bowling shirt? I’m [using] your company’s ball.”

It was only when Robyn threw the ball that she was considered worthy of the title of “bowler.” She had to demonstrate that regardless of how she looked (female and young), she was able to throw the ball well enough to be considered a bowler. Robyn does not openly state it, but I believe the ball representatives were unable to tell she was a bowler because she was a woman, not a man. She also says that she looks young for her age, so it seems a young woman is even more of a threat than an older woman. She had a similar experience at an auxiliary tournament while in Texas for the National tournament.

I got some funny looks from the guys, like, “This is a girl.” And I look like I’m 16. So they’re like, “What’s this kid doing on our lane?” And there are lanes broken down and it was like 100 degrees. So the tournament director felt really bad and we were the first squad of the tournament. So, she didn’t want her tournament to get a bad reputation so she bought us all a round of beer. And, I’m over 21. So, I was like, “Yeah. I’ll take a beer.” And, so, I think there was definitely a change in the guy’s perception when they saw me sitting there drinking a beer like they all were. And then, they’re like, “She’s a pretty good bowler.” And then, one of the guys was like, “You’re beating all of us.” And these guys are probably in their 40s to 60s and they’re like, “This girl is beating all of us, didn’t you know? Did you see her throw her ball?” And I could hear whispers behind me. They were completely shocked. They didn’t see me as a threat at all until halfway through our 40 frames … and that’s when they kind of accepted me into their group.

This example dramatically highlights the perceptions of bowlers about bowlers, that women (especially young women) do not meet the general criteria that are necessary to be considered a bowler at first blush. As will be discussed in the next chapter, there are
two styles of bowling and both of them have gendered associations. Robyn’s style of bowling consists of a more “feminine style” of bowling called “down-and-in,” not the masculine style called “cranking.” In this instance, the only way that Robyn was considered a good bowler was by actively scoring better than the male bowlers. This demonstrates that the standards of acceptance into the community are much higher for women than for men. Robyn was able to meet the necessary criteria to be considered worthy of the unmarked category of bowler, but I cannot help but wonder about the women who do not meet this categorical assignment. Thankfully, Marissa helped answer my question.

When she was in high school, Marissa’s school did not have enough female bowlers to constitute an all-female bowling team. Instead, the women and men bowled together on a co-ed team. The co-ed team did not strictly bowl co-ed teams, but instead bowled against all-male teams. Rather than mixed-gendered teams deciding if they would like to bowl against all-female or all-male teams, they automatically bowl against all-male teams. This indicates that mixed-gender defaults to all-male, rather than all-female. Because Marissa is a talented bowler, she was frequently placed in a pivotal position on the lanes. When this happened against all-male teams, as was usually the case, she received a negative response.

And some guy on the [guy’s team] was like, “Wow, you’re going to put the girl in to be, yeah, to be the anchor? Like, I bet you can’t even do it,” or something like that. And then, I think, I either got two strikes or three, or I did something because we ended up winning. And I was like, “In your face!”
Although Marissa was able to prove that she could hold this position on the lanes and perform at the level of “bowler” so as to be worthy of these male teams, she frequently felt frustrated by the treatment of women on her co-ed team.

Marissa: What I would see in co-ed teams, it seemed like guys would always be more noticed than girls, or they’d actually be in the lineup and girls wouldn’t be.

Author: And do you think that the girls who weren’t playing, do you think they that they were in the practice lane or were they more like the cheerleaders for the team?

Marissa: That’s a good question. I know some teams, some of the girls just did it like to just have fun, just to be on it. So, they were kind of like, “Woo.”

Author: Yeah.

Marissa: But some of the girls I know, like when I was coming out of high school, I knew some of them actually were pretty good and so they would switch out like guys, the guys and these girls are going to switch it on and off playing. But it didn’t seem like the girls got as much playing time as the guys did.

Marissa’s perception that female bowlers were either there just to have fun or to cheer on the team also highlights this notion that women are somehow inferior, or incapable of meeting the requirements to be considered a bowler. This appears to be mostly reinforced by the coaches, woman receive less playing time than male bowlers, even on a coed team.

The stories about female bowlers moving across the culturally constructed boundary from “female bowler” to simple “bowler,” involve an elevation of status to something more desirable—an unmarked, all-male category. The construction of female bowler as marked is an undesirable state, while bowler (which assumes a male bowler) is the best or most desirable choice. With female bowler as an unwanted state of existence, femininity becomes associated with the negative and women feel as though they need to prove themselves as worthy of the bowler category. Men are also the only people capable of classifying a woman as a bowler. In each example, women are endeavoring to prove
themselves to men and revel in being able to demonstrate that they are as good, if not better, than them. That these women endeavor to prove themselves to men, according to Butler, is a negative cultural imperative. It denies that the category of “woman” is a construction (Butler 1993:523). It also denies that the elevated category of “man” is a construction. Most importantly, it does not acknowledge that the perceived difference between genders is anything other than culturally constructed. Thus, society has not only created the category of “woman” and the category of “man,” but it has also created the notion that women are lesser.

Conclusion

The bowling community has created a set of binary oppositions to establish what is and what is not a bowler. Among these binary choices are whether someone is an open bowler, a female bowler, or just simply, a bowler. The worst association that one may have is that of open bowler. By being described as such, individuals are marked as not taking bowling seriously and are then disliked by the bowling community. The most favorable of all these options is to be considered a “bowler,” which by the community’s standards indicates a male who takes the sport seriously and dedicates time and finances to being a bowler. The easiest way to gain entry into this category is to be male. Barring that, one must prove that they are capable of either acting openly male (like drinking beer) or capable of surpassing the skills of a male bowler.

Thus far, I have only presented examples of women transgressing the boundary to enter the unmarked category of bowler by demonstrating their skill on the lanes. None of my male interviewees presented any examples of being accepted into the community as a
bowler. Skill, as presented by women’s acceptance into the community is typically dictated by style. And like all other aspects of bowling examined here, there is a binary of masculine style versus feminine style exists. When men utilize the feminine style rather than the masculine, cultural repercussions ensue.
Chapter Three

“It’s Kind of Sexist and I’m Just Going to Say it Out Loud”: Bowling Style and Gender

Browsers approach the lane with pre-planned positions, stances, and a walk that defines not only her or his movement on the approach, but the bowling ball’s movement down the lane. The experiences on the lane are unique to that individual, and is determined by coaching, ball core, bowling shoes, arm gloves, and that bowler’s unique aesthetic decisions. Turning attention back to Claire’s experience, some of which is presented in Chapter One, bowlers negotiate these decisions each time they step onto the approach.

So, majority of people I know are right handed, so they stand on the right side [of] the lanes. I stand about five to ten boards from the right side of the lane. So, I usually go by the dots, they’ll have dots where you stand, and that way whenever you throw the ball it'll go up the right and then curve left into the pocket. If that makes sense. … I guess I don't really know how to describe [how the ball feels]. It really depends on how long you've been bowling, because I remember when I first started bowling it kind of felt uncomfortable cause a lot of people, when they bowl just for fun, they'll have a deeper hole that they stick all their fingers in there, but when you start bowling, like on a team or as a sport, not necessarily just for fun, you get a fingertip bowl so it's uncomfortable at first, having your fingers in there and you feel like the ball is going to fall off your hand at any moment. Uhm, once you get comfortable with that, it feels... uhm, I don't-pretty normal… Another thing that a lot of people [don’t] know, or ask me about, whenever I go bowling is where to throw it. Where do you aim it? Do you aim it somewhere else? Usually just aim it at the arrows that are about half way down the lane and so I'll probably aim for the second arrow from the right and usually a good angle for me, but it really depends on how you throw it and what kind of curve you can get.

Trying to figure out exactly where and how to throw the ball so that it will interact well with the amount of oil on the lanes presents one of the most challenging aspects of
bowling. For example, if one wants to have a big hook and is a right-handed bowler, one will stand on the far left and throw the ball to the far right, forcing the ball to spin back towards the pocket.\(^1\)

![Dots on the lane](image)

**Figure 6.** The dots on the lane represent markers where bowlers can orient themselves to the lane and their position. The dots at the top of the photograph are closer to the lane and will be used by shorter bowlers. The far left dot is the 35\(^{th}\) board and the dot on the far right is the 5\(^{th}\) board. Bowlers have a position from which they typically throw their first ball. I begin at the 22\(^{nd}\) board towards the back of the lane, which is two boards left of the center dot on the bottom row of dots.

The interaction of these elements—stance, ball core, weight, etc.—forms a bowling style, or a unique throw and stance that is stylized on an individual basis. This chapter examines the two most widely recognized styles of bowling, “down-and-in” and “cranking.”\(^2\) Individual variations on these two styles are found within the bowling community, and the two styles will sometimes have different names, but they each consistently incorporate the same elements no matter the name. Down-and-in and
cranking are frequently understood as gendered, with down-and-in regarded as a more feminine style and cranking as more masculine. Bowlers also regard style as a visual indicator of skill. This chapter examines how style has become synonymous with skill, especially when the associated scores are not necessarily indicative of a more skillful bowler.

**Styles in the Bowling Community**

Style as an analytical term is frequently associated with visual or artistic pursuits. Robert Layton defines style as referring to “the formal qualities of a work of art” (1981:1). Layton’s definition relies heavily on the visual, suggesting that style has the capacity to be a broad term that can apply to incredibly general categories, as seen in his application of style to the term “art” (1981:1). Although bowling could be considered an art form, I do not endeavor to make that argument here. Keeping Layton’s definition of style in mind, I will turn to Timothy Evans’ definition of style, which is that style is a “collection of attributes which, when combined, make a consistent overall pattern” (1998:17). For bowling this collection of attributes includes the actions of bowlers from the moment they pick up the bowling ball until the ball hits the pins. These actions include, but are not limited to, when a bowler decides to put their fingers into the ball, which fingers they place inside, where they rest their hand under the ball, how they pull their arm back, where they release the ball in the arc of bringing it closer to the lane, and where they throw the ball on the lane. Evans goes on to say that “each attribute has a range of possible variations within which the [individual] may manipulate elements” (1998:17). Evans’ definition of style is most useful for this thesis, as individual bowlers
will manipulate attributes of down-and-in and cranking to suit their needs and aesthetic preferences. However, the major elements present in each throw of the ball down the lane will be the same for all bowlers. Every bowler has a stance, a place on the approach (fig. 6), a walk down the approach, a throw, and a ball reaction on the lanes, but each will be performed in a unique manner which gives every bowler a personal style. Unfortunately, style can be problematic as a method of analysis. As Layton observes, style “can be used to pass judgments of relative value” (1981:9). By describing what is style, it can be easy to claim that other things do not have style (Layton 1981:9). Indeed, style can also be a way to differentiate between groups of individuals (Evans 1998:17-8). Creating new ways to categorize and differentiate leads to separating elements into areas of evaluation. In claiming that some individuals have style, it is possible to then state that others do not. I have been in conversations with bowlers where personal aesthetic preferences have led to the conclusion that some people have style while some do not, even when this is not the case.

In the examples of bowling style examined in this chapter, I will combine Bauman’s idea of performance and Butler’s notion of performative gender. I am not the first to suggest that these concepts are complimentary. Ferrell introduces this in “Cutting a Thousand Sticks of Tobacco Makes a Man: Traditionalized Performances of Masculinity in Occupational Contexts.” By combining these two conceptions of performance she acknowledges that performative acts are ongoing, particularly as seen in gendered performances (Ferrell 2014:44). To better understand the interplay of Butler and Bauman’s ideas, Ferrell introduces the term “traditionalized performance” to specifically reference gender and how it interacts with tradition (2014:43). By directly
connecting gender and tradition, she illuminates the connection that gender has to history (Ferrell 2014:44). By applying the notion of traditionalized performance to the styles of bowling, I will provide a more in-depth analysis of the role of gender in determining bowling style.

According to comments by my interviewees, bowlers are actively performing gender through bowling style. While cranking is associated with masculinity, all of the male interviewees I spoke with bowl down-and-in style. Clearly, the notion of tradition in this folk group is strong, so strong that to ignore the impact of the traditionalized styles (cranking and down-and-in) could potentially threaten the community’s understanding of gender. Rather than accept that there is no such thing as a gendered style of bowling, one where men and women can use the styles interchangeably, this bowling community decided that cranking is associated with masculinity. Cranking thus becomes the ultimate masculine ideal, one associated with strength, skill, and performance. Male players who do not attain this ideal will be made fun of by their peers—something that most of my male interviewees experienced, leading them to question themselves, going so far as to defend their “feminine” style even when not challenged. Women see the masculine style as unattainable, thus many women feel as though they cannot meaningfully compete with masculine bowlers.

To better understand the rest of this analysis, I shall describe the two main styles of bowling in-depth. The down-and-in approach is characterized by bowlers remaining upright through the chest with their chests facing the wall in front of them. They will only draw the ball back as far as it does not cause their shoulder or chest to dip towards the lane. Upon releasing the ball, down-and-in bowlers bend severely into their standing
leg to create an almost lunge-like position, while swinging their opposite leg behind themselves as a counter weight (fig. 7). Down-and-in bowling gets its name not because of the throw, but because of the ball placement and reaction on the lanes (fig.8). The ball goes far down the lane before breaking into the pocket. Bowlers who bowl in this style do not throw their ball at severe angles to create drastic hooks. Instead they stand in the middle or slightly off center and throw their ball straight (or almost straight) down the lanes to create only a slight hook at the end of the ball’s journey down the lane. These bowlers are less likely to use overly reactive balls, and instead use own only slightly reactive balls. The very slight hook causes fewer revolutions of the ball while it is spinning down the lane.  

Figure 7. An example of the typical down-and-in throw immediately after release.
The term cranking is called such because of the visual appearance of the throw. Crankers drastically dip their shoulder down to the lane while they are preparing to throw the ball. While doing so, they pull the ball back above their heads to create more speed and torque behind the ball on the release. By dropping their shoulder, crankers are less likely to bend their standing leg into a lunge-like position and instead will stick their hips out to the side. Crankers typically stand as far to the side of the lane as possible, and throw the ball all the way out to the opposite side of the lane. Their balls hook drastically while on the lane, necessitating the drastic angle of the bowler. If they did not do so, the ball would not stay on the lane and instead would go right into the gutter. Crankers have much more reactive bowling balls than down-and-in bowlers. Their ball also has more revolutions as it spins down into the pins.\textsuperscript{5}
Figure 9. Chris Smith demonstrates a close version of cranking, where the ball is pulled up past shoulder height and he is standing to the far left side of the lane. The drastic angle of his wrist facilitates more hook on the ball. Although it is not the “true” style of cranking, Chris’ ball throw is similar enough to cranking for demonstration purposes.

Figure 10. The moment as Chris releases the ball it is to the far left of the lane.
While learning how to bowl, I noticed very early on that the way I was throwing the ball was quite different from some of the men with whom we shared the lanes. While they were pulling the balls back above their heads, I was barely getting the ball back above my hips. Their ball speeds were edging on 19 miles an hour, while mine was barely hitting 10 miles per hour. I was throwing my ball in a down-and-in style, as I had been taught by my coaches. When I asked my coaches about these different styles, they told me that these men were crankers, but that down-and-in bowling is scientifically a better style of bowling. When looking at the men bowling around me, I found that hard to
believe. Some of the other women on my team said they felt the same, but none of us attempted to change our bowling style to adopt a cranking style of bowling.

All of the people I interviewed for this thesis also bowl in with a down-and-in style. While I tried to track down crankers to interview, for a variety of reasons I was unable to set up interviews with them. This is not ideal, as I would prefer that the community were vocally represented in this thesis.

As I tried to track down crankers to interview, I realized that there are fewer people throwing the ball in this style than I had previously imagined. As will be discussed, this style of throwing is so demonstrative that individuals who throw the ball this way stand out in the bowling center. As I have completed further research and analysis, it has become clear to me that the two bowling styles exist on a continuum with down-and-in on one extreme and full-out cranking on the other. Many bowlers exist somewhere between the full expressions of these styles, and those interim styles, too, have their own names. However, most-extreme style of cranking is only enacted by male bowlers, as it is associated with a masculine style of bowling. But not all male bowlers bowl in this fashion. Male bowlers who choose not to crank, or those who only slightly crank, are made fun of by their peers for bowling “like girls.” But why did all of the men I spoke with (five) not bowl in this cranking style?

After speaking with them, it became clear that the reason they did not bowl as crankers is because of their coaching. Both Bobby and Daniel’s fathers coached them to be more down-and-in bowlers. Although all of the men I interviewed tried to crank the ball for at least a short time in their bowling development, their coaches corrected them and encouraged them not to bowl in this manner. Women, too, were frequently
encouraged by their coaches to bowl in a down-and-in style. In fact, coaches made great efforts to have their bowlers switch to a down-and-in style if they were bowling in any other style. For example, Marissa had been a back-up bowler\(^9\) prior to being coached by Tee’s mother, Barb.\(^{10}\) When she began to be coached by Barb she was encouraged to bowl a different way.

\textbf{Marissa:} That’s how I started. And so, at that time, I had one ball. I was throwing [back-up], which is not a bad way to throw it, but, like, I was just so young that I was kind of just like, doing my own thing.

\textbf{Author:} Yeah.

\textbf{Marissa:} And Barb would coach me for sure, but I was just—Like I was growing. … I think I was a sophomore in high school when …I switched to throwing it to almost normal…

Barb’s decision to work with Marissa to change her bowling style led Marissa to throw the ball in an “almost normal” way, rather than the back-up bowling she had been doing. That Marissa calls the switch to down-and-in “to throwing it … almost normal” demonstrates that not only is down-and-in a style that is preferred by these coaches, but it is also a style that is associated with femininity. By changing Marissa’s bowling style, Barb sent the message that Marissa’s prior bowling style was not ideal. Coaching was integral in determining what style these bowlers would use to throw the ball. Deviations from this style caused the coaches to correct the behavior. These coaches were in positions of authority in these bowlers’ lives and as a result their advice is taken. Women are willing to adopt the feminine style with their coaches’ encouragement, and but still look to the crankers as powerhouses at the bowling center. Men also follow their coaches advice, but they still feel defensive about heir “feminine” style of bowling.
“I Wanted to be the Flashy Guy Who Hooked the Ball”: Men Bowl Like Girls But Wish They Didn’t

The men I interviewed for this project all bowl in a down-and-in style of bowling. They said throughout the interviews that down-and-in is the more feminine style of bowling, yet their male (and female) coaches taught them to bowl in down-and-in. The men acknowledge that they are different then the men that bowl around them. Not only that, but they will regularly characterize themselves as bowling like women (“girls”).

My interviewees frequently described bowling as a gender-neutral sport in which all are given equal preference and treatment. Indeed, men and women regularly compete against each other in the competitive bowling arena, something not seen in other professional or semi-professional sports. Most leagues are mixed gender, as are most tournaments. As discussed in the last chapter, even some high school teams are mixed gender. Yet, even in the face of this quasi-equality, there is a perceived difference between how women and men bowl. According to Daniel:

I think that’s one of the great things about bowling, is it’s an equal playing field. You could look at the way that I throw the bowling ball. I throw the ball—If we’re going to break up, like a girl, and like a boy, I throw it more like a girl. Lower ball speed, lower rev, very straight…

Daniel’s comment highlights that although there is a desire in the bowling community to describe bowling as an equal playing field, his concluding comments point to the contrary—bowling is not equal. There is a masculine and feminine style of bowling, and he bowls “like a girl.” To better understand how he bowls “like a girl,” I asked him to describe how one bowls “like a boy.”

A lot of boys, when they’re young—I wanted to do this—they want a back swing that goes up to the ceiling and they want to turn the ball as much as possible and hook the lane this big and some of us can’t do that. And some
boys that turn into men still do it, even though that’s not the best way they should go about the game. And I think that women are smarter about that.

Daniel’s description of bowling “like a girl” and bowling “like a boy” perfectly mirror down-and-in and cranking styles. Thus highlighting that feminine bowling is considered to be down-and-in, while more masculine bowling is cranking. Daniel believes that women are smarter for not bowling in this fashion, yet he too does not bowl in this fashion. Is he attempting to align himself with women in general? Or, rather, is a certain masculinity assumed to be synonymous with masculine bowlers? I asked Daniel to elaborate on his experience of “bowling like a boy” during his efforts to bowl as a cranker.

I really wanted to [crank]. So, I tried with all my might. And my dad\textsuperscript{12} said, “Daniel, that’s not the way you should throw the ball.” “Dad, I can do this.” “Daniel, I’m telling you.” “No Dad, I can do it.” And my average dropped like 15 pins in 4 weeks. And he let me do it for two months and finally my average went from 180 something down to 164. He said, “Are you ready to do it my way.” And I said, “Yeah.” And I wanted bad to be like one of the big boys because I knew that my game was different. It’s not a bragging point. But when my dad built my game, he built it from a textbook style. And I’m a very textbook bowler. But when I was younger, I didn’t want to be that. I wanted to be the flashy guy who hooked the ball because that’s what all the cool kids did.

Daniel is not alone in calling down-and-in a more textbook style of bowling. My bowling coaches, Barb and Tony, both described the down-and-in style as being the superior style of bowling because it is taught in bowling textbooks. This style of bowling is also associated with the more “traditional” style of bowling, one that has been in the bowling community before ball cores and hooking were introduced. I use traditional in this sense because the community has specific notions of what qualifies as “traditional,” here it refers to bowling prior to the introduction of new materials in the late-20\textsuperscript{th} century. I hesitate to use the term “traditionalized” in this context because bowlers have reframed
what was once a gender-neutral style of bowling. Prior to the introduction of this new technology, there was only one style. With the introduction of new ball cores and exteriors, men began to bowl differently. With this, we see the creation gendered styles, as well as the institutionalization of “traditionalized” notions of what is a feminine and what is a masculine style of bowling.

Tee, too, compared down-and-in to a textbook style of bowling. In doing so, she made this observation about Daniel: “Textbook, yes, I know many men that bowl like girls. Not being offensive at all, but Daniel, he has a very feminine style of bowling.” Tee’s qualifier that she is not trying to be offensive, indicates that there is a potential for offense to be taken from her comments. Tee’s qualifier is made with good reason, because indicating that a male is performing “like a girl” can have negative social repercussions in American society. Although Ferrell was discussing male tobacco farmers, her description of the term “girl” as referring to “not only females but also to males who are perceived as inadequately performing masculinity, in the widespread tradition of using feminine labels for derogatory purposes” (2014:47), is particularly pertinent to the bowling community. Tee’s statement is also important because she is associating the traditional and the textbook with the feminine style. Bowling in a more “traditional” style is thus a more feminine style.

Daniel is not the only male bowler to bowl in a self-proclaimed feminine style.

**Bobby:** I was always told that I throw the ball like a girl.

**Author:** Who would tell—who are the kind of people that—

**Bobby:** You run into these large ego people, especially, the Lord knows how insignificant bowling is in the scheme of things. My god, you run into some cocky people through that. You run into these people that would hook the lane and would be like, “Look how much I just hit. Look at how hard I just hit the pocket.” I was like, “All right. Well, you smashed a 7-10,13 so have fun picking that up.” It was always—I thought it was funny
that everybody was like, “Well, you throw the ball like a girl.” And I’m just like, “Well, I just beat you by 20 pins so why does it matter?” Honestly, the worst thing about it was, is it wasn’t even girl or guy because I knew girls that could hook the ball more than most guys did. Erin is a good example of that, although she looks like a powerhouse. She has shoulders of a linebacker and she’s bigger than me. A lot of times that can come down to how far can you bring a ball back in your backswing without hurting yourself. For me, being as tall as I am, it just wasn’t plausible.

Although Bobby minimizes bowling’s importance (“how insignificant bowling is in the scheme of things”), he spends a great deal of time justifying his bowling style. He also goes out of his way to critique the male bowlers he has interacted with who have, in his opinion, ridiculed his bowling. Bobby describes that their bowling style, while the preferred masculine style, is inferior in result to his down-and-in, more feminine, style. He justifies his “feminine” bowling style by the fact that he out-scores, by a significant margin, the more masculine bowlers. Bobby’s comments about the female bowler who is a “linebacker” and a “powerhouse” and bowls in a more masculine style than he, indicates his gendered view that the only women who are capable of crossing into a more masculine style are more masculine women. Importantly, those “masculine” women deviate from Bobby’s understanding of “normal” women. These women must be superwomen, in that they have to be stronger than average and have shoulders like a man. Bobby and Daniel both focus on why they do not bowl as a cranker. These men try to justify their motives for choosing to bowl “like a girl,” highlighting the clear depiction of crackners as “male” and down-and-in as “female.”

In contrast, female bowlers make no effort to justify their use of the down-and-in bowling style. Their silence is not an indicator of lack of stylistic awareness, but rather a marker that they are not attempting to transgress any social boundaries and therefore have
nothing to defend. For these women, down-and-in is an unmarked category (Shuman 1993), something that does not need justification or clarification, but rather just is. Both Robyn and Claire simply describe themselves as “down-and-in” bowlers, without further elaboration on why they bowl that way or how it is the “textbook” style of bowling. Tradition supports that they are bowling in the proper feminine style, rather than challenging any social boundaries. They have no need to defend their stylistic choices, so they simply bowl the way that the bowling community has dictated is appropriate for their gender. For men, on the other hand, they have to justify bowling down-and-in because it is marked as feminine. The style defaults to female, and as such, the men must make it a marked category (Shuman 1993), and actively claim it as their own and not the feminine style. Men, like women, do have an unmarked style of bowling, and it is cranking.

“Flapping Your Feathers and Making a Big Show of Things”: Demonstrations of Strength and Skill in Cranking

When the conversations turned to cranking, both women and men had plenty of thoughts to share. Most of my male interviewees had tried, and failed, to be crankers. As discussed by both Bobby and Daniel, cranking was something they saw taking place in the bowling center and something they aspired to copy. Max, too, regarded cranking was a more desirable style of bowling than down-and-in.

I remember wanting to be a cranker or whatever they call them, and like trying to hook my elbow. And being like, “That’s not how you do it!” And being like, “Then, how the hell do they get so much spin on the ball?” And I don’t understand how they get that much torque around their wrists. So I would try so hard. So that’s what I tried to be…
Although Max was never able to master cranking, he really wanted to be able to throw the ball in that more masculine style. Although he struggled with the technical aspects of cranking, he admits that his continued attempts to be a cranker led his scores to drop regularly, eventually causing him to abandon that effort. Clearly, men look at cranking and recognize it as a desirable style of bowling. But why is it so heavily associated with men?

In the views of most of my interviewees, cranking has become synonymous with masculinity because of its aggressive, showy nature. According to Drew:

Drew: Which I definitely think, you could start to draw conclusions about how much you hooked the ball and some sense of masculinity.

Author: Why do you say that?

Drew: It’s almost like a competition thing, not unlike masculinity in the wild. Flapping your feathers and making a big show of things. It’s instead of making a ball hook 5 or 10 lines, it’s hooking 30 to 40. It’s a bigger ordeal, it seems—and maybe it’s just a psychology, of watching it all that maybe it’s a stronger strike. It seems like there’s more pin action that also has to do with how fast you’re throwing the ball…

Drew’s focus on the aggressiveness of the hook as a psychological explanation for cranking’s association with masculinity is a unique explanation that I had not heard before. However, the “more pin action” is the showy connection that is most often heard in any discussion of cranking. Cranking, to many bowlers, is a demonstrative way to say, “Look at my prowess and skill.” The connection between cranking and “making a big show of things” conveys a feeling of being overtaken on the lanes. When one watches someone crank the ball down the lane, the aggressive raise of the arm and the power behind the throw seem—and indeed are—very powerful and overwhelming.

This idea that cranking requires superior physical strength is presented as one reason why women do not crank. According to Drew, women do not crank because
“they’re not strong enough.” Michelle also commented on this disparity, “I think men’s bowling muscles give the ball a lot more power and they have a lot more revolutions.” The idea that men are stronger than women and are therefore superior is not uncommon. In fact, in bowling, women have to find ways to make up for their innate lack of physical strength as compared to the average male. Marissa’s coach approached that this way: “Barb used to make me lift weights when I was older, so I would gain upper body strength. I don’t know. I think naturally though, guys just throw it harder.”

As guys “naturally” have more strength than women, they are capable of throwing the ball at higher speeds. In order to replicate this “natural” strength, women must lift weights and become more “like men.” The belief that men are “naturally” strong, also carries the implication that women are “naturally” weak, or at least weaker than men. This understanding of strong men and weak women demonstrates the commonly-held idea that sex and gender are natural, not constructed, categories. However, not appreciated by Marissa, is the fact that men are also lifting weight to bowl better. Drew and Bobby’s high school bowling team began to lift weights to improve their bowling scores by gaining the extra muscle to throw the ball harder. Even the perceived strength associated with male bowlers is fabricated—in part due to the idea that men have to be stronger and more powerful on the lanes. These can be seen as constructed, and not entirely natural, categories, that arbitrarily and erroneously associate strength with skill.

The strength that men are putting behind the bowling ball can be a deterrent for female bowlers. When women do not feel that they can bowl in the same style as men, they tend to feel inferior. Some women bowlers feel that men are so superior in strength
that they are incapable of bowling against them. While speaking with Sarah and Sydney, they had an exchange about men’s strength.

Sarah: …But the reason why I couldn’t see myself bowling up against guys, is that they have different technique and a lot of times they have a heavier ball and they throw it like crazy. And they do it super fast. So, I wouldn’t feel personally really evenly matched against a bunch of guys. I would do it and I don’t think if I got paired against guys I would be like, “It’s so unfair,” but I think that might have an effect on it …

Sydney: Yeah. I would have no problem bowling against the guy. Obviously as you’ve said, we have different techniques, obviously, I think anyone in the world would have different techniques. But even if you can throw the ball harder than I can, if I aim it at the correct pin I’ll get a strike, so I think it’s—

Sarah: Toucheé. Touché.

Sydney: You strike either way. No matter how hard I hit it, I know if I hit it in that spot, those pins will go down. It’s just a matter of getting it to that spot. …

Sarah: I don’t know. It’s just still like in the back of my mind, I feel like it’s just a little bit of an advantage if you can just hit them like with so much power that you’re just like… explode at the end of the lane. To me, it’s like, if I can throw it that fast and that heavy, it doesn’t matter where I throw it. It’s just going to explode everywhere.

Sarah and Sydney’s conversation about whether they would bowl against a man and that they do not feel evenly matched is telling. It highlights two schools of thought on making strikes, i.e., that speed and ball weight are the critical factors, versus proper pin hitting causes the pins to fall down. Scientifically, Sydney is a slightly incorrect. If the ball moves slowly towards the pins it does drastically decrease the chances of a strike. The faster the ball is moving, the more likely it will strike down all the pins if it hits in the proper spot. However, I am not here to judge the veracity of scientific statements and that it is scientifically incorrect, yet still pervasive rhetoric, is important. Like ball weight, women need to justify their speed and revolutions, they are inferior to men for reasons beyond their control, it is due to genetics. Sarah’s reservations about bowling against a male bowler demonstrate the social belief that male bowlers are naturally superior to
women. It is not that she’s afraid of one male bowler specifically, but rather that all male bowlers are seen as a threat. Sarah also points out that the pins appear to be exploding when a male bowler’s ball hits them. This visually expressive descriptor foregrounds the showiness of masculine bowling style (cranking). “Explosion” is also a tellingly loaded word in this context as it could also be associated with forms of combat, violence, and other classically masculine-associated activities.

Another reason that my male interviewees wanted to be crankers is the belief that it always reflects a higher skill level. In part, this is because cranking is challenging to master. So if someone is going to get a strike while cranking, it will be a lot more challenging (especially in terms of the ball staying on the lane). Another reason is that the male crankers who are performing cranking well on the lanes have a reputation for being skilled bowlers. Drew described for me a male bowler that is a cranker; and this same bowler was the first who came to mind for many of my interviewees as a good cranker.

There’s one friend I know that puts the ball over his head, throws it 20 miles an hour. He’s really good at bowling. I like it. Actually, not so much anymore, but that’s a different story. He hurt himself. [He is] about establishing power by being big and ruffling feathers and showing off. [He’s] very showy and his footwork is unconventional, not unlike Fred Flintstone. [He’s] got that twinkle toes, like if you watch his feet. Most people have four steps, he’s got 17—but not really. He’s more like seven or eight, but there are some side steps, unconventional. It gets the job done. He’s got a lot of pin action. He can be loud and obnoxious. That’s not unlike his arm swing. It’s also very forced …

Not only does this bowler have unconventional footwork, but he has a very large arm swing, which is strongly associated with crankers. This bowler visually demonstrates his power for everybody to see. The confidence and power behind his ball throw leaves no room for doubt—he must be good. No wonder everyone wants to be a cranker. He also has an abnormal amount of footwork on the lane, which can cause someone to pause
while watching him throw the ball. Drew’s association with his friend and the popular cartoon character Fred Flintstone indicates that this bowler is one who is worth pausing to watch, as it is equivalent to watching something on TV. His style is “unconventional” and it pays off. In high school I bowled against him in several tournaments and he always drew a small crowd to watch him bowl. Not only is this bowler showy in style, but this showiness is integral to his skill. Drew associates his bowling style as being “really good.” Drew’s description of his friend’s style of bowling really emphasizes how skilled a bowler he is, skilled because he is cranking. Now, because he cannot bowl in this style, he is not as good of a bowler as he used to be. Cranking’s association with showiness and strength has led to a strong perception of higher skill. Bowlers that cannot bowl in this fashion anymore are then demoted to being less skilled than they once were.

**Conclusion**

The perceived stylistic difference between male and female bowlers is the combination of multiple factors, from ball swing to movement on the lanes. What makes style a unique area of analysis is that it is visible the moment a bowler steps on the lane. The male-ness or female-ness of your style is impossible to hide, since it is apparent in the way that you throw the ball, and visible to everyone in the bowling center. These styles, as demonstrated, are gendered and are dominated with cultural assumptions of skill.

The feminine style of down-and-in is perceived as inferior to the masculine style of cranking and the scores can, but do not always, support this perception. Women are
believed to be less skilled than male bowlers. They are unable to achieve the same averages, even though bowling—as stated by Daniel—is an equal playing field.

In the grand scheme of things, averaging all things out, men that can compete against women, women that can compete against men. In the grand scheme of things, if we’re talking statistically, last I looked, men’s averages are a little bit higher.

Indeed, in my current bowling league women consistently average less than male bowlers. The men are on average bowling about 50 pins+ per game higher than the female bowlers.

This performance gap is not lost on women bowlers. Tee spoke out about this disparity.

**Tee:** It’s kind of sexist and I’m just going to flat out say it out loud.

**Author:** Yeah.

**Tee:** Bowlers are not very gender-blended yet because there is such a different—a large gap between women and men bowlers. Men do usually have more revs, higher speeds. Women usually have a softer release and they’re slower, yet more rhythmic. Where a man can take any shot and make it their own, a woman is very—and I’m saying this is very generic because there are women out there that are stronger and they probably have more revs than God knows who, but it’s difficult being a female because of the, how do I put this, these things—the boundaries—the box that we are put in. In order to overcome that, you kind of have to train with the guys which not everyone has that opportunity.

Women are confined to a certain style, down-and-in, one that is seen as inferior to the male-dominated style, cranking. Tee believes, and I agree, that by placing these confines on female bowlers, the bowling community is preventing further growth. Perceptions of strength differentials are culturally constructed differences that should not prevent women from learning and employing this “superior” style of bowling. It is also worth asking: since men are bowling consistently higher scores than women, with some men using the feminine style of bowling, why is there still this disparity? Why are women
bowling at considerably lower scores? As I cannot offer an empirical reason for this disparity, I can offer the view of my interviewees, that the remaining problems are social.

According to Tee, the only way to eliminate the difference between the scores of male and female bowlers is for women to achieve the status of “male.” As was discussed in the last chapter, attempting to seek this elevation as a goal is dangerous. Yet the community continues to intentionally pit male and female bowlers against each other in direct competition. In these encounters, women are left feeling as though they are less skilled, and less capable, than the male bowlers whom they are going up against. As will be seen in the next chapter, bowlers are highly competitive and the competition between and amongst women and men is strong and ferocious.
Chapter Four

“If They’re Really Good, They’re Probably an Asshole”: Social Interactions on the Bowling Lanes

My current bowling team consists of two older males (Keith and Bob) and me. Every week, Keith and I have a standing bet regarding on which frame Bob will change out his primary bowling ball. Bob switches his primary ball whenever he thinks his performance is subpar, and it is not uncommon for him to change his primary bowling ball four to five times per night. When Bob believes the situation to be really dire, which seems to happen on most nights, he begins using his spare ball as his primary bowling ball. Bob’s almost constant ball changes are a result of his view of bowling, it is a competitive pursuit. He also comments weekly about our standing in the league, which is always last. After each match he informs us whether we have won or lost, and his mood differs greatly according to whether the outcome is positive or negative or if he is bowling poorly. Bob characterizes himself as highly competitive, yet acknowledges that he is a much calmer bowler than he used to be when he was younger. Even though our bowling team is in last place by 17 games, he visibly and vocally displays his dismay when his performance is at a level he perceives as poor. In fact, one of Bob’s favorite sayings (which is always accompanied by a smile and a snicker) is “Here, we highly approve of words that begin with ‘c’, ‘b’, ‘d’, and ‘f.’ And even encourage them!” Poor pin action and poor ball throws always translate to cussing from Bob, and he encourages the same behavior from his fellow teammates.
Bob’s visibly aggressive and competitive nature is not uncommon in the bowling community. I can recall several instances in which male bowlers punched a wall or kicked a ball return after a poor throw or female bowlers refused to talk to their teammates when they were not bowling well. For example, when Claire was not bowling well, our team would actively avoid trying to communicate with her, as she would stare at the speaker with a frown.

All of my interviewees discussed how competitive they were, especially during matches and leagues. “Competitive” was the number one most frequently used descriptor of personality traits observed in themselves, as well as in those around them. Although being described as “competitive” is not positive in most communities, bowlers use the term with almost a sense of reverence. For most bowlers, it is a point of pride to be the most competitive or the most aggressive on the lanes. This trait is even used as a way to identify potential romantic partners. By highlighting the social interactions of bowlers in this chapter, the binary gender system in this community is brought to the forefront. For most high school and college bowling teams, men and women are segregated into single-gender teams. Men who do not meet the community standards for masculinity are understood to be women or are viewed as distinctly not male. Women on single-gender teams engage in intra-team drama and competitiveness is heightened. By looking at the way that competition influences social interactions between male and female bowlers, this chapter explores the repercussions of the gender binary in terms of community belonging and organization.
According to Tee, “If you’re a bowler, you’re going to be competitive.”

Throughout bowling in high school, my interviews, and bowling in leagues, I have been told that bowlers primarily bowl against themselves, not other bowlers. Bowling is a mental game, it is incredibly easy to get inside one’s head and overthink a throw, and that causes one to mess up every shot on the lanes. Bowlers are constantly trying to defeat their highest score or get a better average, and each game is a chance to succeed in these goals. This is not to say that bowlers do not view each other as competition—as seen in the last chapter they do—but many feel that, while they still need to beat their opponent’s score, they should certainly out-bowl their own best score.\(^1\) In other sports, a team might ease up once an opponent is clearly beaten (e.g., some basketball teams or football); bowlers continue to throw each ball with the hope that it will be their best. For example, while in a high school tournament in Owensboro, I bowled my high score (a 289). I eliminated the individual I was bowling against, but my motivation was not only to beat him, but to beat my prior high scores.\(^2\) Bowlers are more likely to comment on their own performances (like my commentary above), as well as remember their performance over their opponents.

When it comes to sports, the notion of boys as “more assertive” than girls is “often taken as a given” (Goodwin 2006:vii). Yet female and male bowlers spoke equally about their competitive behaviors. Bowlers vocalize key differences in the way that men and women view competition, as well as how that competition is enacted on the lanes.

When I’m successful, I’m braggadocious. I fist pump on a strike. I’ll slap it out if I scout [score] a ten pin. When I lose I’m not a fun person to be around. … One of the things I inherited from my father is the ability to
throw a bowling ball magnificently. The other thing I inherited is a very hot temper. (Daniel)

Daniel’s admits that he is “braggadocious.” His personality comes alive on the lanes, where he can compete against others (and himself). When he is not competing well, or at his highest level, he acts angry and aggressive. Tee, too, finds herself to “have the worst temper in the bowling world.” “You can ask anybody,” she adds. Tee gets so aggressive on the lanes that she cannot be around others, like Claire. Yet the way that Tee, Claire, and Daniel choose to display how competitive they are is different.

The bowling community universally qualifies men and women as, respectively, externally competitive and internally competitive. There are variations depending on individual personalities, but all men and women act “in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions” (Butler 1988:525) the community dictates either implicitly or explicitly. As such, people may have their own way of “doing their gender,” but it is not a “fully individual matter” (Butler 1988:515). Tee and Claire, as women, both display their aggression inwardly, while Daniel displays his outwardly. When talking about an individual who is competitive, women are more likely to comment on the behavior of men on the lanes than men are to comment on women’s behavior.

I’d say if anything what I’ve witnessed over all is when girls take it super seriously and freak out, it’s more internal. Like, they might cry or do something and get really upset. But when I’m seeing guys get upset, there’s screaming and stomping and it’s just much of a more noticeable display. But yeah, I’d say it’s even, they just express their frustrations differently. (Sarah)

Similar to my explanation in Chapter Three of the cranking style, men are again described as trying to outwardly perform in a showy fashion, and women as inwardly focusing their aggression. As the community’s understanding of gender dictates
individual style, it clearly also has implications on behavior as well. In this community, women are expected to internalize their emotions, while men are allowed to outwardly display all of their emotional zeal. At other sporting events (not bowling) as well, men are much more likely to outwardly yell or scream at football or basketball teams, while women are much more likely to internalize their feelings.³

Women may not outwardly express how competitive they are, but it is clear that the generally held belief that women bowlers are somehow less competitive than men bowlers is flawed. What is more, competitive personalities are not only a common trait among bowlers, they are preferred. Men and women, such as Daniel and Tee, both brag about how competitive they are. For men, it serves as a way to bolster masculinity, where being the most competitive, indicates that they are also the manliest.⁴ By being the most competitive, men were “cooler.” Even men who did not view themselves as by-nature competitive recognized its benefits at the bowling center. Max is one such man and his time at the bowling center led him to feel as though being competitive was beneficial.

I mean for a moment there it was definitely—it seemed cool to get into the competitive edge. Sometimes on league nights when I was bowling well, I would feel more competitive, I guess.

According to Max cranking and competition are directly correlated.

Yeah, it’s funny to keep bringing up the cranking, but it just seemed like those were the guys who were also more competitive. It was just those select few, like four or five dudes—males. And they were just always like, going crazy over there. A strike, like “Ahh!”

In a community that privileges masculinity above all else, performing masculinity becomes a point of pride. Drew, too, pointed this out.

I think [bowling] definitely draws more of a personality that’s focused on being aggressive and I think when that comes into play, the hooking of the
ball, the showmanship—just how aggressive—you are placed into the mind game between the match play and one-on-one bowling.

Drew highlights that not only are bowlers more aggressive, but the sport itself draws aggressive personalities. Bowlers must be able to have the mentality that they are bowling against a group of people (“match play”) and every other individual on the lanes (one-on-one bowling). These two types of competition exist simultaneously. Even though you are bowling against every other person surrounding you, you are bowling against all personal past performances, too. He also correlates the showmanship of cranking to the aggression that men display on the lanes. By cranking the ball and being competitive, one is performing maleness in the correct culturally ascribed way. For men who already are performing at a lesser level of perceived masculinity, such as men who throw the ball in the down-and-in style, being more competitive is a way of compensating and displaying the correct amount of masculinity. Bobby and Daniel both throw the ball with the down-and-in style and they both repeatedly underscored their competitive traits during our interviews.

Women, too, demonstrate how competitive they are on the lanes, yet their demonstration of competitiveness is turned inward. Women instead refuse to talk, or they stare aggressively at the lane, teammates, or their bowling balls. When women do outwardly express competitiveness, other women criticize them for being so showy.

**Sarah:** … There were a couple of people in high school, too, just the girls that would take it way too seriously and be super whiny they we’re—
**Sydney:** Life or death.
**Sarah:** Life or death.

Sarah and Sydney characterize themselves as competitive and yet they still see female bowlers who express aggression outwardly as equating bowling to “life or death.” When women do outwardly express these emotions, they are described as “super whiny,”
demonstrating that women who decide to move beyond the socially understood norms are perceived negatively. In their brief exchange, Sarah and Sydney render implicit social laws explicit. As Butler would describe it, they are policing the behavior of the women around them. Women are capable of being just as aggressive as men, yet they do not typically express their aggression outwardly. Many women, like Tee and Claire, inwardly focus their aggression by completely shutting down all exterior interaction. Other women who focus inwardly may also talk to themselves. Robyn frequently watches professional bowling and has found that the female professional bowlers are much more likely to talk to themselves than male bowlers.

I think that there can be outbursts from anybody, but I think the men do that a little more. And, I see women talking to themselves more between shots. I have Extra Frame, which is the bowling channel that I subscribe to and it’s got all the PBA and PWBA matches, some big college tournaments on it. And so, I see the guys go bowl and they sit down. I see the ladies bowl and they come back with their hands up to their face and they’re whispering to themselves and they’re thinking about their next shot. And, I don’t see any of the guys have too many conversations with themselves.

Even female bowlers at the professional level turn inward to express frustration or aggression.

While women do not frequently outwardly display their emotions, I have come to notice that most bowlers in leagues and matches will enact an acknowledgement of their errors if they do something wrong on the lane. If a bowler does something wrong on the approach or on the release of their ball, they will perform that they are aware of this error by demonstrating what they have done wrong as they walk off the lane. This could be by pulling the arm across the chest, if they pulled their arm while releasing the ball; flicking their arm behind the shoulder if they have not followed-through on the release; or
dropping their shoulder to the floor if they dipped their shoulder to the lanes. This performance is almost always accompanied by a vocal acknowledgment that they messed up and teammates either confirm that is what happened, or offer their support in fist-bumps and verbal cheering. In these performances, it is clear that bowlers are competitive with themselves and those around them. They want to demonstrate that they know they messed up and that they were not intentionally throwing the ball into the gutter. They want to prove they are competent bowlers. Depending on the specific bowler’s personality, these moments could also be accompanied with an angry face or with a laugh. Yet, the motion still accomplishes the same task, informing peers that one is still a good bowler.

A bowler can enact aggression and competition on the lanes in a multitude of other ways, as well. Bowlers often have a reputation of being more competitive than their non-bowling peers. According to Drew, this reputation stems from being able to perform bowling as an individual in front of a large or televised audience.

You don’t look at bowling as an alpha-male sport. It’s not football or basketball, or whatever. But at the same time, you have a lot of these people that are just self-driven and they’re showy in their own way and they get a chance to do that.

Drew’s comment highlights how bowlers can take the opportunity to orchestrate a specific performance while throwing the ball. This performance is often self-driven and showy, as bowling affords individual opportunity to behave in a personalized way and bowlers do like to personalize their style and equipment. They can indicate through a variety of ways how seriously they take bowling, as well as how seriously they take each other. Those who are not displaying masculinity to the degree of the competitive crankers may take the opportunity to perform masculinity by being aggressive in tone, comment
and behavior. Even women, who do not typically outwardly display their aggression, have the opportunity to perform masculine notions of competition. However, when women do outwardly display their aggression, they are understood by their peers to be “super whiny.” Women who are aggressive talk about their performance on the lane, request assistance from the coach, and perform in ways that are understood to be undesirable, thus they are called whiny, because they are not acting in a socially appropriate way. When they are not on single-gender teams, men and women are given the opportunity to bowl together. These opportunities lead way to another type of performance found between frames, courting.

*Looking at the Girls and their Short Skirts: Men and Women Interacting on the Lanes*

Male and female bowlers have more opportunity to interact than in most other sports. Leagues, tournaments, and some high school teams are mixed-gender. Unique to bowling is the amount of downtime between frames. The more people with whom you bowl, the more time you have to talk to the people bowling on your lanes. In leagues, for example, it is sometimes several minutes before you are on the approach again. The moments between frames are typically filled with conversation, unless it is a high-pressure tournament or you are bowling on a stricter team. As such, young men and women have many opportunities to interact when they are bowling together. In these moments, young people explore how to connect with another gender, with a particular focus on finding a partner. I want to note again, that the bowlers I spoke with are all heterosexual, meaning that they are romantically or sexually interested in members of the opposite sex. This section focuses on young men and women’s responses to being around
the opposite gender, with particular attention to competitive behaviors in finding and maintaining a romantic partner.

Even the high school single-gender team members are given opportunities to interact with the other gender, such as before and after practice, because multiple teams bowl in the same house. For us, and other girls-only high schools, bowling was a rare opportunity to meet and regularly interact with boys. For Daniel, being able to look at the all-female team bowling a few lanes down was a highlight of high school bowling.

I’m not going to lie, one of the best things about practice was looking at the three pairs down and seeing the [high school] girls and their short skirts bowling. Here Daniel exaggerates, as most times the teams were separated by at least ten or so lanes. By exaggerating, I believe Daniel is illuminating the importance of having the female bowlers nearby. He is signaling that he was aware of their presence and wanted to be closer. By acknowledging the presence of women nearby, Daniel is implying that other men are also aware of the women near them. Daniel does not indicate that these women are a distraction for him, but it is clear that he at least spent some portion of his practice cognizant of their presence.

Clothing is a focus for the male bowlers when it comes to women bowling on adjacent lanes. While completing her undergraduate degree, Sarah bowled on her university’s team. One day, she arrived to practice right after class and on that day, she was wearing leggings and an off the shoulder sweatshirt in an “80’s style” with a camisole underneath the sweatshirt. At one point during practice, her male coach approached her to inform her that she had to change clothing.

I was bowling for a while and then our coach came up and he was like, “Can I talk to you?” And I was like, “Okay.” And he said, “I need you to
wear something else.” And I was like, “What? We don’t wear uniforms at practice” And he just said, “Well, your outfit is way too distracting for the boys team and they’re not going to play well and they’re not focusing.” And I’m so… that’s what he said, it was like, “What is this? The Victorian era?”

Sarah became even more frustrated when no one on her team supported her clothing choice. The way that Sarah has chosen to recount her story, through reported speech, could demonstrate that she believes the story to be so impossible, that the only way it could be accepted by an audience is by directly recounting what happened using the coach’s own words as a weapon. She presents what he said directly as fact, and up until her evaluation of the narrative, she is letting the audience interpret his actions. Evaluative statements in narratives provide insight as to the purpose of the narrative, as well as the narrator’s interpretation of events (Labov and Waletzky 1967:33-9). By providing her evaluation of the situation, she renders visible her feelings about the interaction, that the coach inappropriately sexualized her body. The coach’s sexualization of Sarah’s shoulder as unacceptably distracting to the male team near their practice frustrates her. Men are talked about as though they are so susceptible to female wiles that they are incapable of practicing next to women who are showing their shoulders and women are depicted as trying to gain male attention through their dress.\(^8\) The coach’s comment is not completely unfounded, though, as Daniel admitted that bowling near women in short skirts was a highlight of his high school bowling career. Women’s clothing choices are presented in these situations as competition to men’s ability to perform during practice. Men are sexualizing women’s bodies so much that they are detached from the women themselves. Their bodies then become objects of the male gaze, which to the coach means distractions from bowling.
Although Sarah’s coach attempted to police the way that women presented themselves to the all-male teams, women with whom I spoke did not bowl to meet guys. Rather, when these women talk about the pull of men, they talk about other women feeling that pull, not themselves. These women instead see other women as competing for male attention and disparage them for it. This type of competition is seen as unnecessary and as something that should not be done during bowling. Marissa spoke with annoyance about other women who admitted to a dual purpose of bowling to meet men.

A lot of girls, to be totally honest, that I have met--do it to meet guys. … Because they’re kind of into bowling but they’re like, “Oh, I want to meet people.” And I’m like, “Why?” That’s not the sport. I feel like it’s not the sport to do that in. No. No. No.

Women openly disparage their peers who bowl to meet men. More than that, though, they dislike the women who perform the broader cultural understanding of femininity in the bowling center for the pleasure of men, particularly in terms of taking time to do their makeup and hair and making an effort to change their otherwise unadorned appearance. Tee discussed the way women behave around men versus how they behave when men are not around.

…When girls go against guys or they would know they were bowling in the same house or near them, they would wear a lot of makeup, they would do their hair. They would be very girly. And then yet if, let’s say, the genders were split, so men would be in the morning and women would be at night. Throw the hair [up], put it into a ponytail, no makeup.

The women who did their hair or makeup for men were “very girly.” Used in this context, being “girly” is uncomplimentary. This particular femininity is inappropriate, especially because it is only performed for the gaze of men. This could be a reaction to comments made by men, where women who are dressed up will be the victims of men’s unnecessary comments about appearance or clothing. Women who dislike that type of
enforcement by men, and have received it, may view women who try to incite that type of commentary negatively. Sarah, too, dislikes women straighten their hair or do their makeup for men.

Sarah: There would be a lot of girls who’d go like…
Sydney: The extra mile.
Sarah: … above and beyond. Yeah. I would go pretty much with no makeup.

Women who do not wear makeup or do not specially fix their hair express superiority to the women who do. However, these “girly” women are not poorly regarded because they are wearing makeup or have fixed up their hair, but rather because they are perceived as trying too hard. They are going beyond what is as “natural” (as termed by Sarah) simply to impress men. Notably, none of the men with whom I spoke commented upon women wearing (or not wearing) makeup, or fixing (or not fixing) their hair. This could be because men are unaware of the competition taking place among women, where women who try too hard are viewed as lesser by their peers. Instead, men privilege another aspect of female bowlers—their skill.

When male and female interactions become more than platonic, male bowlers privilege competitive partners and high scores. Men and women who talk about dating other bowlers frequently talk about the competition to date the best bowlers, particularly the best male bowlers. Indeed, in high school the bowler with the reputation for being the best was never without a girlfriend and frequently other women would attempt to be the one he would date next. I cannot recall any male bowlers dating a non-bowling female. Daniel, for example, found that he could not date “regular girls.” Realizing that open bowlers do not understand the intricacies of bowling, he chose to only date competitive,
female bowlers. In fact, he is currently engaged to a bowler who he met at a bowling center.

She was working behind the snack bar and she saw this cute boy bowling in the Wednesday night summer trio league. And he had on a red hat. And at that time I had my glasses on. And she texted her best friend, Kayla, and said, “I call dibs.” That’s what they did. They would see a cute boy, “I call dibs,” knowing full well that they would probably never talk to me—as if I were someone on TV or someone in the mall.

Daniel objectifies himself, from his fiancé’s point of view, as someone unattainable, someone “on TV.” Thus, when they started dating and eventually became engaged, Daniel is a privileged being, the unattainable attained. Unlike every other story shared during our interview, Daniel told portions of this one in the third person. This shift in narration could indicate that Daniel is telling this story like the modern conception of a fairy tale, one with a happy or romantic connotation—think boy meets girl. He reflects upon a happy memory from the point of view of an outsider, romanticizing the events in a palatable or favorable light. Daniel only spoke briefly about his engagement at the end of his interview, but he did share a story about a recent occasion where his fiancé decided to go bowling with him. He made a point of reporting that she did well and bowled high scores throughout the night. In this story, he defines his relationship with a bowler he deems worthy of his skills, which is not an isolated event. Bobby too, met his now-fiancé at a bowling center. She does not regularly bowl anymore, but she did in the past. Bobby made a point of saying that the last time she bowled with him she had a high score.

Unlike men I spoke with, women did not reference or speak of their male partners as bowlers, although I know that some are dating, or married to, other bowlers. Instead, only men talked about their partners as bowlers and only discussed their relationships in the context of bowling. To these men, the women they are dating or engaged to are...
women who are also good bowlers, not just women they love. By bragging about their loved ones, they indicate that they are lucky; they found women who bowl well. By stating what these women are, they are more importantly stating what other women are not—good bowlers. By finding and dating women who are capable of competing at a higher level, men privilege partners who are potential bowling competition. Women in general did not comment on male and female bowlers actually dating (beyond trying to get the attention of male suitors). Yet, men stated that male bowlers marry female bowlers. I take this as indicating that men value finding female partners who are talented bowlers, more than women do.

One of the ways that the bowling community continues to perpetuate gender ascriptions is by bowlers marrying other bowlers. Bobby, Daniel, and many of the other male bowlers have dated and married female bowlers. As discussed, they frequently frame their partner’s lives in terms of their bowling exploits. I am uncertain why none of the female-bowler interviewees mentioned they are married to or dating other bowlers. If male bowlers are marrying female bowlers, clearly there are women are doing the same. However, drawing on a comment made by Bobby, it seems as though male bowlers are more frequently associated with settling down with female bowlers.

As far as the stereotypical guys? You get the female and male that probably met in the bowling alley and are now married with kids. They’re bowling on a Sunday night league now, because the kids are off school and they found a sitter for Sunday night.

Even in Bobby’s statement there is the implicit commentary that men and women bowlers who marry are competition for one another. They marry because they can bowl together, and do so successfully. The children of bowlers do frequently grow up to become bowlers, as many of the people I know are children of bowling families. When
Bobby was growing up, his sister took up bowling independently of any familial influence, only to later learn that her father bowled regularly before either of his children were born. When asked, most of the people whom I interviewed learned how to bowl from their parent or close family member. Only a few people (Claire and Max) picked up bowling without any familial influence. As bowlers marry and have children, their descendants are going to learn community values, especially dominant ones like what it means to be competitive. Young people have other opportunities for learning what it means to be competitive, as well, particularly during single-gender teams during high school.

*Insults and Drama: Interrelationships on Single-Gender Teams*

There are actually few occasions where bowlers are isolated by gender. Female bowlers most often only bowl against other women during single-sex leagues, tournaments, and on college and high school teams. This may seem like a lot of opportunities, but it is actually very limited. I have only heard of one tournament that is women-only and there is only one league at my current house that is for women only. Similarly, I have only heard of a couple occasions of male-only leagues and single-gender college teams. Women can, and do, bowl in the professional men’s association (as will be discussed more in the conclusion), in men’s tournaments, and (as seen in the last chapter) on men’s high school teams.

During single-gender activities, men who do not meet the community standard for masculinity are feminized. Max would frequently visit Bobby while Bobby was at high school practice. Bobby, unlike most of the men on his team at that time, would bowl in
the more feminine style. As a result, he was frequently feminized by his teammates. But, when Max visited, the feminization would escalate.

**Author:** So, did you go and visit Bobby at the bowling alley?
**Max:** Yeah.
**Author:** And what was it like when you would go visit?
**Max:** Oh, it’s hilarious, because everyone’s like, “It’s your girlfriend.” And I’m just like, “I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me right now. Yes, I am as good of a friend to him as a girlfriend would be, we just don’t do sexual things. So like, what is that? So, I’m not sure what this is supposed to entail.”

Max is good-humored enough to not be bothered by the intentional barbs utilized by Bobby’s teammates. Max and Bobby’s close relationship led to the male bowlers implying that they were homosexual. More than that, this implication was meant as an insult, one that indicated Bobby was not manly enough to date a woman. Yet this perception that Bobby, who has a good male friend and bowls “like a girl,” is somehow more feminine than his other male peers, indicates that the community would rather that all men perform masculinity all the time. Bobby has told me that the perception that he is homosexual has been long standing, since he and Max were young teenagers at the bowling center. Bobby also believes that this perception stems from his bowling style, as he constantly had to push against his other teammates’ ridicule. It is implied in his team’s explicit comments about Bobby’s bowling style and the “insult” of homosexuality that he is not performing masculinity to the standard that the community has determined is appropriate. Bobby and Max are policed by their peers for their undesirable social behaviors, particularly through negative commentary. Where Sarah and Sydney were policing the women around them for their negative behaviors, Bobby and Max are experiencing the results of those actions.
Although I asked for the male interviewees to elaborate about their time on all-male teams (if any), they spent most of the time speaking of their ball throws, rather than the emotional responses and intra-personal relationships necessary for working together on a team. The women who bowled on all-female teams discussed, at length, the emotional drama ever present on those teams. Since I bowled with many of these women on our high school team, I can personally attest that drama was a consistent undercurrent throughout many practices and matches. I do not believe that women are dramatic while men are not, but rather that their tendency toward drama is a by-product of the gender binary dictating how women should and should not behave. It could also be that as a woman my interviewees were more willing to discuss these events with me. Clearly, both men and women have dramatic responses to their bowling performance, as men are outwardly displaying their distaste for how they are bowling either verbally or physically, while women are turning inwards. Rather, the drama here centers more on intra-personal relationships, where people create or enact dramatic responses to potentially negative social interactions. As I worked more closely with female bowlers, I can attest that there was much speculating about how people interacted with each other, and who said what about whom. Bowling frequently affords downtime between balls, and as such, there is more time to talk about how people are bowling, specifically how bowlers that are loved, or hated, are doing compared to their peers. For bowlers, the presence of a gender binary has created a structural system that prefers a certain type of female bowler. If one does not meet these requirements, there are cultural repercussions—policing.

In order to recognize and move beyond the binary, “we need to consider how females can create power asymmetries with females” (Goodwin 2006:ix). Unfortunately,
“studies of how power is displayed by females in same-sex encounters” (Goodwin 2006:15) have not been completed to the extent of male-female encounters. This examination helps to illuminate some potential power structures in female hierarchy, for the bowling team has a complex social hierarchy that dictates which women will be privileged and which will not. To understand this hierarchy, I must explain the structure of bowling matches, as well as the team itself.

The St. Mary’s team was divided into an A and a B team. Barb, the A team coach, acted as de facto leader over all of us during tryouts, practices, matches and tournaments. Barb also had the first choice of bowlers for her A Team. The B team was coached by Tony, and was composed of individuals who were not considered good enough to bowl on the A team.

Bowling practices were held twice a week, beginning in August or September of that school year. The practices lasted, on average, about two hours. During practice, the lanes are turned on, but computer does not keep track of scores. Doing this forced players to focus on the ball they were throwing, not on their pin count. Yet, players still worried about their scores and pin leaves. Most of us kept mental tallies of points or, at least, the amount of strikes. Most practices have a theme; for example, we might only focus on the ten pin. Matches were once a week, normally on the day in-between the two practices. During matches, our team bowled against another team for three games, and then we bowled three bakers (which will be explained in detail). For the games, there were four lanes, each with four bowlers on them (eight for our team, eight for the other). The most skilled bowler was placed in the last position, known as the anchor. The second most skilled bowler was leadoff, and it was her job to set the team on a good foot for the
remaining balls. The players who were not bowling could either be down at the practice lanes (two lanes where all non-bowling players could practice for the next game) or they cheered for the people who were bowling.

The term “bakers” denotes a unique style of game, only found in bowling. I am unclear why all high school bowling matches include this game, but every bowler I have spoken to (who bowled in high school or college) has bowled a baker. During bakers, the other team members cheer as loudly as possible. Unlike matches, during a baker, everyone’s attention is focused on one bowler trying to mark. To bowl a baker, each school’s team is set up on a lane, but the lanes are on the same pair. The lanes are set up with one game, ten frames each. The teams choose their five best players and each player is assigned a position. Like regular games, the second-best player bowls first, as they set the tone for the rest of the game. This bowler also leads off in the hope that they strike, which could set the baker up for a 300 score. Then three other bowlers who have scored well that day bowl a frame each. On the fifth frame, the best bowler throws a ball, this position is again called anchor. This sequence is repeated so that each bowler throws two frames. The best bowler is last because the anchor is responsible for the tenth frame, and the eternal hope is that she strikes three times. According to Michelle, this position carries a “lot of weight.” For each of the three bakers, coaches have the option of changing the line-up, in hopes that the new set-up will out-score the last. At the end, the scores are compared to the other teams. Whichever team has the highest score wins. During regular matches, the coaches would try to divide their time between the eight active players, but during bakers coaches would pay attention to whoever was on the lanes. Bowlers will frequently look to their coaches before they step on the lane, for
advice or encouragement. In these moments, it becomes clear how important coaches are to the sport and how much players rely on them.

In this section I do not wish to solely focus on the A team’s coach, Barb, or the B team’s coach, Tony, but I do think it is important to acknowledge their roles in creating and maintaining the team dynamic. In looking at the way that these coaches handled the young women who were on their team, it is clear that they had different conceptions of what it means to be competitive. As such, the women who bowled under them, too, had different ideas about what it meant to be competitive. These adults, explicitly and implicitly taught the young women whom they were coaching what it meant to be a bowler, and how bowlers treated each other. Their actions directly influenced the team’s conceptions of itself, especially in terms of competition. I am also using these coaches as examples, not because their coaching was idiosyncratic, but because the lessons they instilled in their pupils were commonly seen in other bowlers as well. Although Barb was a rare female coach, her coaching style was not rare, and the women she worked with developed similar mentalities as their peers with male bowling coaches.

Within the teams, the bowlers commonly perceived Tony as more laid back than Barb.

There was one practice to better yourself, which we’d do what we wanted at that. Everybody would have a good time and better themselves, but the other one was much more competitively focused, as far as don’t down play your game to another team and it was the focused one that one. …It was great. You wanted strikes. I think that the B team was great though because it helped people not feel that pressure and just be like, “I like this, this is a lot of fun.” (Michelle)

Tony’s practices were fun and taught the women he was working with that having fun was okay. Bowling could be fun. Unlike Tony, Barb was personally commanding. She
would work with you if you wanted to become a better bowler, and she expected results. She taught her players that being competitive and feeling the drive to improve was more important than anything else. The team talking between ball throws did not bother Tony, but it did bother Barb. To her, bowling was not a time to socialize. It was a time to think about your ball throw, and your ball throw alone. Women who bowled predominately with her were more likely to turn inwardly when they were not bowling well. While the B team would frequently cheer louder if they were bowling poorly.

As mentioned, Barb’s mentality on the lanes led to the team’s construction of self. Again, this is not idiosyncratic, but is seen across most bowling teams. Coaches are known to pick bowlers and privilege them on the lanes. Certain bowlers are frequently picked over and over to bowl in the important position of anchor, regardless of how well they bowled that day. These bowlers received the most time and attention, and had regular one-on-one practices with coaches throughout the week. Most importantly, once coaches display explicit or implicit signals about which bowlers are important for the team’s success and which are not, the team members then used social communication and signals to adopt and reinforce the stature conferred or diminished by the coach’s picks. The young women who were chosen to be the best bowlers, would treat the “inferior” bowlers on the team without respect, mainly in an attempt to encourage them to be better or different than they currently are. The idea that young women treat their peers in a particular way to incite change or express discontent is not uncommon, it is a frequent social tactic for stating which women are valuable to the group and which are not (Goodwin 2006:29).
On our team, Claire was one who did not meet Barb’s standards for being a serious bowler. Claire maintains that Barb mostly ignored her during practice, or at least, displayed her dislike for her openly. Claire explains Barb’s perceived dislike as an amalgamation of her allegiance to Tony and unarticulated factors: “She didn’t coach me, she didn’t like me. She didn’t really talk to me, but I found ways around that. I would go to Tony.”

Claire was a talented bowler in high school; she won several tournaments and did consistently well in leagues. Yet, Barb rarely coached her and this had serious ramifications for Claire’s retention and desire to improve. Claire confided that on multiple occasions she was frustrated by Barb’s coaching style because she rarely was chosen to bowl in bakers, and was never picked to bowl as an anchor during a match. As Claire’s frustration grew, her skill declined. By her senior year she began to bowl poorly. Claire believes this is due to lack of coaching, frustration on the lanes, and increased pressure in school. With her decrease in skill, her relationship with her teammates also became impaired, “I got worse and then I remember, like, girls spreading rumors about me that I was throwing games.” Claire’s teammates spreading rumors about her bowling actually caused her to become apathetic about the sport. By the time she left high school, she became disinterested in bowling, even though she had been selected to bowl on her college’s team. In her opinion, bowling “had a lot of unnecessary… [intra]-team rivalries” and that “really turned [her] off.” Here, the team’s interactions, as fueled by the coach’s conception of what is a serious bowler, directly affected Claire’s interest in the sport. Because Barb dictated what it meant to be a serious female bowler on the team, those who did not meet her standards fell behind. Particularly when the young women on
the team began to mimic their coach’s treatment of players who did not meet her standards. As Claire did not meet Barb’s standards for female bowlers, the social pressures weighed heavily upon her. She no longer desires to participate in something she loves, due to social structures that caused her to become an outcast and because those social structures are tied to conceptions of gender.

My interviewees who are former St. Mary’s bowlers all recognized the prevalence of rumors and drama on the team. According to Tee, the rumors and drama caused the team to disband. She describes it as, “sad times. ... [There were] rumors and turmoil on the rise.” For whatever reason, in the bowling community drama “comes up very easily” (Tee). Although Tee had graduated by the time the team disbanded, she was part of the reason the St. Mary’s team began in the first place; Barb is her mother. Tee describes the inaugural bowling team as being very dramatic, but the drama would be resolved quickly. Tee perceives that “women bowling with women can be bad,” mainly because of the “catty nature” that female bowlers have with each other. In a world where women bowling with men is bad, and women bowling with women is bad, what is a female bowler to do? According to Tee, women take “too much of their personal lives and really put it on the lanes.” The drama and personal value assessments really come to a head during bakers and matches.

When it got to a point where there was no definite individual [to be anchor], then you had people fighting each other for that position. When—If they were put in that position one day and taken out the next day, then there were eight hurt feelings or just, I don’t know, head-to-head issues.

(Tee)

The intra-team dynamics for female bowlers directly correlate to bowlers as competitive—wanting to be the best bowler led to individuals disrespecting each other
openly on the lanes. Tee elaborated on why the perception of an “open” anchor position could cause drama on the team.

Everybody wants the limelight. Everyone wants to be the star. If you think you’re good, regardless of whether you are or not and you don’t get that spot, you’re going to have issues arise.

Although the A team had a dedicated anchor for several years, players would become frustrated if they were not placed in the coveted position, especially if they had bowled exceptionally well that day. In those moments, the frustration with the coach was almost palpable.

As in Claire’s example, there were moments in Sarah’s bowling career where she did not meet the community’s standards. Also like Claire, Sarah discussed those frustrations in terms of how the coach treated her. While in college, Sarah bowled under a male coach, with whom she had several unpleasant run-ins, one of which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Another example of Sarah’s frustration with her coach arose in the context of the players being positioned as anchor. Sarah was considered a less-serious bowler than some of her college teammates, and as a result the coach consistently benched her. On one occasion the coach even used the threat of Sarah as a substitute as a way of critiquing another team member.

[The coach told another bowler], “Well, if you don’t do what I want, I’m going to put Sarah in your place.” Because I was sitting out. And I’m like, “I’m not a pawn.”

Sarah’s coach diminished her value by threatening another team member with the “embarrassment” of Sarah subbing for her. In that moment, he defined the social hierarchy, with Sarah quite far down it. Sarah staged a revolution of sorts, telling the coach and her team member that she was not going to bowl if that was why she was put
in. Sarah interpreted the coach’s actions as equivalent to stating to the other bowler: “Do what I say or else Sarah is going to be going in for you and you don’t want that because she sucks. We need her for the head count or we don’t have a team.” The idea that Sarah was just filling a needed space on the team frustrated her, it made her feel undervalued as a teammate and a bowler. The coach’s decision of not only what the social structure on the team was, but how players treat each other, had an impact on the players’ relationship’s with each other. Here, a player was devalued to the point that having her participate is a punishment. Again, Sarah is only a body, a vessel that can be used in bowling to suit the needs of the team during competition. While in the first example her body was a sexualized object, now it is just an object.

The intra-gender relationships among male and, particularly, female bowlers highlight that even in single-gender settings there is a social hierarchy. This social hierarchy, like so many things in bowling, is based on competition. The team coaches pick the players whom they believe are more valuable, and the team reacts those standards in what is deemed to culturally appropriate ways in the bowling community. Those who are the best are those who are competitive and skilled. For the bowlers who do not meet this standard, there are culturally appropriate ways to reinforce that they are lesser, primarily rumor spreading and bullying (policing). These tactics are used in attempts to regulate undesirable social behavior, like purposefully performing poorly during a match. The social behavior that is deemed undesirable for this community is clearly the failure to value bowling; which results in poor performance on the bowling lanes.
Conclusion

By examining the role of competition in the bowling center, I have illuminated the social interactions of bowlers. Their conversations about each other’s actions give insight into the community’s self-conscious creation. By talking to each other about each other, they are conveying traits that are desirable and deserve recognition (e.g. Hufford 1992). They are also acknowledging sticking points, or moments when views did not align and have resulted in active or passive conflict. These conversations create a group understanding about what is acceptable and ensure that those ideals are passed on. In many of those moments, competitiveness is privileged. As such, the community has come to value being competitive above all else. It is a trait that is looked for in teammates and in partners.

In looking at how bowlers interact in situations where gender is explicit, while using competitiveness as a frame of reference, it becomes apparent that the binary gender system in this bowling community has created a social system that privileges male-ness as the superior state of being, especially when masculinity is tied to competitiveness and aggression. Women are consistently told to behave differently, sometimes at the behest of men around them. Here, as in Chapter Three, coaches help proliferate the societal standards for acceptance and behavior, creating a systematic understanding of how bowlers should behave in relation to the world around them.

In looking at these examples, many of these individuals present stories from their high school years. Although they are not far removed from this time period (at most, they are six years out of high school), they have had time to reflect upon their interactions in the bowling center. By interviewing these individuals about their high school
experiences, I have tried to provide insight into the long-term effects of the gender binary on bowling. The Conclusion will contextualize many of these interactions at a larger scale, by looking at the professional world of bowling and how the gender binary created at the local community level fundamentally shapes the sport.
Conclusion

“I Was in Shock that Other Girls Could Bowl”

I like to tell myself I was aware of gender dynamics and how those dynamics affected me as a teenager. Through bowling, I was learning how men and women “should” behave then acting out that understanding. I tell myself that I saw how men were privileged and how women were taught to be lesser. However, while working on this project, it became clear that my performance of femininity is, in part, constructed because of my time within the bowling community. I throw the ball a certain way, I react a certain way when I am not bowling well, and I treat my peers in specific ways. This is not unlike the broader cultural context, where as a female growing up I was participating in many implicit declarations performances of is and what is not feminine. While bowling, I knew that male bowlers were better than me, and I was given reasons why they were, reasons I accepted without challenging. Every time I would bowl against men, I was reminded over and over that I was not as good as they were. In speaking with other bowlers, I am not alone.

The cultural systems that dictate gendered performances in the bowling center are rarely rendered visible, as they have been in this thesis. The men and women whom I have worked with spent their teenage years bowling, and now, as adults several years removed from their experiences, they have had time to reflect. Their comments and discussions point to a collective association of masculine and feminine ideals within the
bowling community. From ball weight to the way a bowler reacts to their ball action, bowlers mostly perform within the community expectations of their prescribed gender. Those who do transgress the boundaries set by their peers are not only noticed, but are regulated through social interactions.

I liken gender performances to drops of water in a pool. Each performance of gender causes ripples that affect people watching, interacting, and discussing what is happening around them. As Bauman explains, in performance “there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I saw in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey’” (1975:292). Individuals are aware of this interchange and make note of what is appropriate. More than that, they comment to each other about what they witness, as seen in Sarah and Sydney’s conversation. Acting out gender cannot exist in isolation, but instead there must be awareness of how actions can change future performances. One such example plays out in professional bowling. Even though both types of bowling take place simultaneously, professional bowlers and amateur bowlers do not frequently occupy the same social spheres. I only met my first professional bowler just last year. Professional bowlers build on gender performances learned while amateurs, potentially even learned from watching professional bowling. Even though these realms are socially separate, the visibility of the professional bowling league allows amateurs to comment on matches or specific bowlers, much like other professional sports.

For amateur bowlers, the 2003 disbanding of the Professional Women’s Bowling Association (PWBA) was a significant event that has affected their trajectory as bowlers. Although the PWBA was successfully revived in 2015, it has significantly fewer
tournaments than in previous years. This twelve-year hiatus of the women’s professional association left many female bowlers (like Tee and Robyn) feeling as though they were incapable of competing at the professional level. To better understand the repercussions of the gender binary on future performances, I conclude with an examination of the professional men and women’s bowling associations and how male and female bowlers are treated at the highest levels of bowling.

Women in the World of Professional Bowling

As I only came into bowling in 2006, I spent my whole bowling career believing there was only one professional bowling association, the aptly named Professional Bowling Association (PBA). The PBA has many sponsored tournaments throughout the country, where, as I knew, men and women bowled against one another. I personally was not invested in the PBA, so I did not follow any of the tournaments or any of the professional bowlers. It was only in a conversation with Tee that I came to learn that in 2003, the Professional Women’s Bowling Association disbanded. According to Tee, “When the women’s tour dropped off the face of the Earth, we also saw women pros dropping off the face of the Earth.” The reason? According to Tee, women cannot bowl on the same lanes as men consistently, due to shot and speed differences that cause the oil pattern to break down irregularly. As discussed in this thesis, Tee is not the only woman who sees the discrepancy. Cranking and down-and-in are two very different styles that cause different oil breakdowns to different degrees. In short, women cannot bowl at the same level as men. I was unable to find an official reason for the disbanding, but various other women have since told me that it was due to lack of sponsorship and dwindling
interest in bowling. Every publication or official source merely states something akin to the organization being “terminated” (Grasso and Hartman 2014:15).

During, and more so after, our interview, I started asking every bowler I knew about the PWBA. It was a perfect example of a marked category, where adding the “women’s” to Professional Bowling Association made it clear it was for women, while the former (it is now integrated) men’s association had no such gendering. I was given several different reasons for why the PWBA disbanded. Tee offered that it was because of women’s golf, where “the sex appeal of women’s golf won out over the lack of sex appeal of women’s bowling.” Meaning, that in vying for sponsorship and television time, women’s golf and bowling were similarly in danger of being cut. But because female golfers are “sexier” than female bowlers, they were able to keep their sponsorship and television deals. Not only that, “but [these comments were] said by sports announcers.” I have not been able to find any unequivocal proof of Tee’s statements, nor have other bowlers supported her statement. Yet, Tee’s comment still sheds light on the mentality of the American population in general. Whatever has the most sex appeal will have TV time, which also leads to increased sponsorship and funding. I am uncertain why two all-women’s sports cannot be supported, yet I am not here to argue that they can. It is important to note, however, that another women’s sport is the sponsorship competition for bowling, not a co-ed or all-men’s sport.

Although the PWBA was gone from 2003-2015, women bowlers still had an outlet for professional bowling, the PBA. One of the more unique aspects of bowling is that women are able to join the traditionally men’s professional association (this began after the PWBA disbanded). Not only that, but female bowlers can join the men’s
bowling associations at the city and state level as well. Women bowlers may be able to join the PBA tour, but they rarely do well enough to be in the majors. Professional bowling tournaments are structured so that women and men may bowl in any tournaments they would like throughout the U.S. While there are particular tournaments that follow a schedule determined by the association, bowlers are free to bowl or not bowl in any tournament they would like to. Some tournaments, those with larger payouts and bigger titles, are called the “majors.” Majors are also partially televised, which is an important aspect for many bowlers. They are normally only televised once the first three days of bowling have been completed, leaving only six or so bowlers in the tournament. To date, only one woman, Kelly Kulick, has won a PBA major’s title. Even when the PWBA disbanded, there were still opportunities for women to only bowl against other women, particularly at all-female tournaments (the Queens, an all-women bowling tournament, being an example of one such majors tournament). To contrast, Kulick has won six major all-women tournament titles.

The disbanding of the PWBA did not go unfelt by young female bowlers. Robyn, who grew up wanting to be a professional bowler, did not know what to do with herself.

I know, as a little girl, I would always watch the pros on TV and I always watched the local pros in the city, and I was like, I’m going to grow up to be professional bowler. That’s what I’m going to do when I get older. And then, I think it’s about 2005 or 2003, somewhere in there in high school, the tour folded. And it’s why I guess I bowled in college, but then I don’t know what I’m going to do and I really felt like I was at a loss after college because I didn’t know what to do with my bowling. I’d practiced so hard and bowled every day of the week in college. And, then, all of a sudden, my coach was not pressing me as hard.

Robyn’s feelings of being adrift after she stopped bowling in college are not uncommon for women bowlers. As it became clear that she has not achieved the skill level to bowl
with the PBA, her coach stopped pushing her to be better. Thankfully, Robyn still has the opportunity to be a professional bowler, as there is not an age limit on the professional tournaments, as long as someone has the financial means they can join any tournament they would like. Now that there is a women’s association again, Robyn is considering entering more tournaments.

During league one week, I was speaking with some of my teammates about the PWBA and learned that a woman bowling with us, Sharon Smith, is a former professional bowler. I admittedly was not surprised to learn this because her current average in the league is 225, the highest average in the entire league. After bowling against her several weeks later, I approached her to discuss my thesis topic. Sharon graciously agreed to let me interview her about her time with the Ladies Professional Bowling Tour (LPBT), the former name of the PWBA. I have to admit, our conversation left me shocked. Sharon was in agreement with me about the gender disparities I have observed. In fact, so many of her stories were familiar enough that they easily could have taken place in 2015, not in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Clearly, the bowling community’s highly structured ideas about gender have become so institutionalized that little has changed over the past 20 years.

Unlike the other bowlers I spoke with, Sharon’s hometown did not have high school bowling teams. They did have junior leagues in which she was able to participate, but those were not much competition for her.

[The] last year, in high school, or in junior leagues, I averaged 191 and I mean there was not even other girls who were near-Try 1—160. I mean it was just a real big-and I was better than most of the boys, too.

Sharon’s skill level was so high that no woman and few men from the area were competition for her. It was only when she got to college that she realized women could be
bowlers, too. She was “in shock that other girls could bowl.” The college program that recruited Sharon was Morehead State, a small Kentucky school. While Sharon was there, Morehead began building their bowling program. Since then, they have been a consistently strong bowling school, with some of the best bowlers in the country attending on bowling scholarships (including Kulick). During her collegiate years, her team went to college nationals three times, and won first place her senior year. She also won MVP of that tournament and was a bowling all-American.

As a gift for graduating college, Sharon’s parents paid for her to enter the Queens, a national women’s tournament. Unlike those in many other professional sports, bowlers have to pay their own tournament entry fees, unless they are lucky enough to be sponsored. Sponsorships, however, are few and far between. Bowlers who do not have access to significant funds are unable to continue to participate at the professional level. Sharon performed well in that tournament and decided to go on to another LPBT tournament, the Denver Open. Sharon did well enough to place in the top five (as third), which led her to be on the televised finals. Being on television is an important status marker for bowlers. When speaking about tournaments, bowlers qualify how they did with whether or not they were televised. If they did well, they make sure to mention they were televised, and if they did not do well they make sure to state that they were not televised.  

Bowling announcers on the telecasts are also certain to mention that the bowlers on screen are the best of the tournament because they are now on TV.

After speaking with Sharon about her time bowling, I decided to use Google to see if I could find telecasts of the bowling tournaments in which she was a participant. Thankfully, YouTube provided an ample selection. For this portion of the analysis, I
discuss moments witnessed while watching these tournaments as well as a men’s
tournament from that same year. During a telecast of Sharon’s tournament, the two
announcers (one a professional female bowler who lost an earlier round of the
tournament, the other a male announcer) spent a great deal of time analyzing the game as
well as talking about the players. As previously mentioned, there is a lot of downtime
between balls; in professional tournaments this is due to waiting for the ball to return,
rather than bathroom breaks or conversation. Almost every ball throw is replayed in slow
motion during these moments, with the announcers commenting on style or that
particular throw.

Sharon amazed the announcers even though she was an amateur bowler right out
of college who grew up not watching professional women bowlers. That she had not
grown up watching women bowl was something the announcers really fixated on,
implying that she had little knowledge of the idea that women could bowl (which she
actually did not realize until college). Knowing that women are believed to bowl with
lighter balls, it should come as no surprise that the telecasters expressed awe that Sharon
chose to bowl with a 16-pound ball.

During our interview, Sharon discussed changing her style in college. For her,
rather than choosing to bowl with a new style, she simply began to bowl with style.
Although Sharon did not mention how she learned to bowl with style, the telecasters
stated that it was her brother who taught her how to throw the ball that way. Following
those comments, they began to talk about Sharon’s husband. Right after mentioning her
husband, who bowled with her at Morehead, the male telecaster announced that Sharon’s
“offspring” were going to be bowlers, too. As Sharon did not, and does not, have any
children, his assumption that all women have children is clear. I mention, here, the telecaster’s discussion about Sharon because in watching comparable men’s tournaments from the same year there is no mention of the men’s family or home life—let alone the female influences on the men’s bowling style. They are discussing a gender performance they expect Sharon to enact. She is a woman, she must perform femininity in certain ways, particularly ones they have deemed acceptable. In their discussion, these telecasters desire Sharon’s performance of gender to focus more on the home, particularly taking care of family. As a woman, I can attest to feeling the pressure to perform my gender in this way. Although I do not consider myself as an overly domestic woman, a few weeks ago, I brought cookies for a teammate’s birthday. I thought nothing of it, but the men around me clearly did. They began to comment on how great a wife I would make. This changed my performance of support and friendship, bringing the cookies, to a performance displaying appropriate feminine behavior, which was not my intent. More than that, the men I bowl with were commenting on my role as supporter to my male teammates. According to their perceptions, as a woman, it is my job to provide for the men around me, particularly in participating in tasks relegated to the private sphere, like baking. Over the next few weeks, the men in the league focused on these baked goods and my ability to provide them, while the women around me said nothing of it. I cannot claim to explain how these women felt, they may not need to comment on the baked goods, as I was upholding the understood expectation of what a woman should be doing. Or, potentially, by not commenting they are enacting a form of resistance of which I am unaware.
Sharon told me that the LPBT was a challenging career track because she could not support herself and her husband. In fact, she took a year off before quitting for good.

**Author:** Why did you take a year off? Just decided you need a break?

**Sharon:** I just—my head was messed—it's—it's hard life. Traveling all the time. Trying to—you don't make the cut you don't pay your bills. It's a lot of stress and, uh, so I just thought well, I'll go to work. So I got a job with an insurance company or something. Tried to work on my game, get myself back, you know I—just, you know, got really down on myself. I mean, it's just really hard. Really hard for the ladies that have done it all those years, I mean it's pretty amazing, cause it is—it does take its toll on you for sure.

Sharon’s pressure to work and make money, I had at first assumed, was because bowling itself was not lucrative. While watching the 1989 tournament, I could see how one would feel pressured to find outside sources of income. For a four day tournament, Sharon was paid 1,750 dollars (again, she came in fourth [see fig. 12]). As bowling in tournaments requires an entry fee, transportation, board, and meals, bowling is not a cheap endeavor. Bowling in tournaments also takes multiple days to complete. While moving all over the country and bowling four days a week, it would be hard to sustain any of job. If one is not guaranteed income unless they place or win a tournament, it would be hard to justify participating. Sponsorships are also uncommon and bowlers have to find outside sources of income, from donors or other means, to help make ends meet.
Figure 12. A screenshot from the Denver Classic, an LPBT televised tournament, showing the payouts for the winners.

In order to compare the LPBT tournament to its male counterpart, I also watched a men’s tournament from the same year. I had anticipated similar payouts and similar discussions of skill, but I was mistaken. Men had higher cash payouts than women (fig. 13), with the man in Sharon’s position making about three times more money than she did. Another difference between the men and women’s tournaments is that the men’s tournament displayed a count of the 300s scored in that specific tournament (9, with 3 by the same individual). Women did not score any 300s during that specific tournament, even though the telecasters boasted having the best female bowlers in the LPBT.
Figure 13. A screenshot from the Miller Lite Challenge televised tournament showing the monetary wins for male bowlers. I am not certain if the beer sponsorship helped pay for the higher tournament payouts, but I cannot help but wonder if this was part of the reason.

Now that women have the opportunity to bowl in the PBA, women could potentially win similar monetary payouts. However, with only one female winner in the PBA history, it is clear that this is not a reality that will be easily achieved. All of my women interviewees who follow the PBA tour referenced Kulick again and again as a female role model worth having in the bowling community.

After [her win], she was like—she was way more respected and they treat her as like, just any other bowler, not like a guy or a girl, but like she could go against literally anybody, which I love. She’s my favorite. That’s why she’s my favorite, especially, like, girl power. (Marissa)

When talking about Kulick, Marissa became excited. Although she talks about Kulick as an individual who transcends the gender binary, it is clear that Marissa still associates her with a female with her comment, “girl power.” Marissa also points out that it was only after the win that Kulick became “way more respected.” She began to be treated like “any other bowler,” something that was not afforded to her until she won. This is similar to
Robyn’s experience described in Chapter Two, where only after she beat the men on her lanes was she accepted into their group as a bowler.

After watching Kulick’s victory match during the 2009 PBA tour, I understood why Marissa said “girl power” in our interview. The opening shot of the telecast pans around the crowded stadium seating, the viewer can see signs being held that read “Girl Power!” When Kulick wins, one of the first things that she says to the crowd is “girl power!” I am uncertain whether this mantra was used by Kulick herself, or if it was adopted by fans as she began to qualify for the final round. By the end of the final match, the telecasters (both male in this instance) really latch onto Kulick’s womanhood as a key signifier. They even say at one point that, “You know, the PBA has been blessed with wonderful storylines this year.” Kulick is not a bowler, but a female bowler, a storyline that can be used by the PBA.

After it became clear that Kulick was going to win overall, one of the announcers said, “Oprah, what are you doing this week? Need someone to book? Let me get you Kelly’s digits.” Although the announcer was trying to be complimentary, he is using Kulick’s feminine identity as a commentary on her, and other women’s, interests. Not only would the story of her win be best suited to a daytime talk show, but a talk show primarily watched by women. It is unclear why the announcer would not want to profile her on his own station, ESPN, especially since her victory as a woman is such a great storyline. It is unsurprising that this announcer would believe that Oprah would be the best outlet to discuss Kulick’s win since he also says that she “came to Vegas to put a whoopin’ on the boys.” More than that, that the announcer’s declaration that he has unequivocal access to Kulick’s number is reminiscent of men attaining women’s numbers
in bars. This announcer’s fixation on Kulick’s gender as her sole identity demonstrates a prevailing theme throughout this thesis—in the bowling community there is a binary perception of gender, like our culture at-large, in which each has very specific performance that must be carried out by community members. Most importantly, it presents Kulick as a member of a marked category; she is not just a professional bowler, but a female professional bowler. This was not lost on her opponent, either. After the match the announcers shared that “Chris Barnes was joking with [them the day before], saying ‘You know, if anybody here can handle losing to a woman, it’s me. I get beat regularly by my wife, Linda.’”

*History Has Been Made in the World of Sports*

As she is about to throw her last ball, Kulick steps on the lane and whispers under her breath that “history has been made in the world of sports.” This powerful statement is not untrue. She was the first women to win the most important PBA tournament and to win tour fee exemption for one year, meaning that she would receive 1,800 dollars a week from the PBA (Branch 2007). Unfortunately, Kulick’s win has not done as much to change the dynamics of professional bowling as some might have hoped. Three years prior to her win over Chris Barnes, Kulick was profiled by John Branch for the *New York Times*. The profile was completed after a big loss in Kulick’s career, in which she had tried to qualify to compete against the men and failed. Kulick did not continue to reach tour-wide success (Branch 2007), that is, until her 2010 win. Yet in the profile, one gets the sense she is the only female bowler in existence (Branch 2007). In fact, the woman that they quote to discuss Kulick on the tour is not a bowler, but the wife of a pro-bowler. Kulick is framed as a woman in a men’s world. She is forced to adjust to their rules
because they are the strongest people in the bowling center (Branch 2007). While talking about her lack of wins she says that she “wasn’t smart enough” to bowl against the men (Branch 2007). They were more experienced on the lanes than she was and were able to make adjustments more quickly to the oil patterns. While she may be talking about herself on an individual level, this sentiment is echoed by my interviewees. Sarah, like other women, does not enjoy bowling against men. She believes she is unable to maintain the same skill level as her male counterparts. The article about Kulick does end on a positive note. Kulick’s legacy has resurrected interest in women bowlers. In the years since this article was published the women’s tour has been reinstated and Kulick beat Barnes. While I personally agree that Kulick’s legacy has been beneficial to the sport of bowling, it does not always appear that the sport has universally adopted this belief.

While looking for a concise history of professional bowling, I found an article titled “The Rise and Fall of Professional Bowling” (Crockett 2014). This article claims to illustrate a detailed portrait of bowling’s professional history, yet professional women bowlers are completely left out of the narrative. The only time that women are mentioned is in this context: After each match, they’d be “flanked by beautiful women who’d seen them bowl on television, or had read about them in Sports Illustrated” (Crockett 2014). Clearly, women are considered objects. Even more disturbing, is a portion of comment left by someone who read the article: “When you've got women and seniors blowing 5-pins like Weber and Salvino did in their heyday, something's wrong” (Crockett 2014). Although I am personally unfamiliar with those bowlers, women, as seen in prior chapters, are compared to seniors. Their skill level is associated with fragility and old age. The statement that women are “blowing 5-pins” is indicative of something “wrong,”
speaks volumes about the perception of women in the community, even five years after Kulick’s win.

A few weeks after I interviewed Sharon, her mother-in-law, Debby (who bowls in the league, too), pulled me aside to tell me about a time when Sharon had just moved back to Bowling Green and had asked to join the women-only league. This was in the early 90s, before Sharon and her now-husband (Debby’s son) were married. The league called a meeting to vote on whether or not Sharon should be allowed to bowl with them. Most of the women decided to ban her from the league, arguing that she should join the men’s leagues and tournaments. Yet, Debby and a few other women stood up to defend Sharon. After much debate, the league decided to let her join. Unsurprisingly, she beat everyone in the league. When I asked Debby if she regretted letting Sharon join the league she said, “of course not! I didn’t know she would be my daughter-in-law, but I’m glad I stood up for her. I told them, ‘We need to be proud of her and her accomplishments.’” I asked Sharon, too, if she remembered that meeting. She had not been in attendance, but she heard about it after the fact. Sharon is glad that they let her bowl with the other women; she did not want to bowl on any of the men’s leagues. Not because they would have been harder for her to beat, for she would have won those leagues by a large margin too, but because she preferred to bowl with other women. Like Sharon, many of the women I have talked to prefer to bowl with other women. In a dwindling sport, like bowling, this is not always an option.

By presenting these interviewees and their views in this thesis, I hope that I have complicated binary gender systems, particularly in the context of bowling. This sport has a lot of room for growth and by discussing complicated topics, like gender, I hope to
forge new directions for bowling and its current and future participants. After my interview with Max, he told me multiple times that he had never thought of bowling in this way before. Max even said that he could never think of bowling in the same way again. That it did not occur to him that bowling was helping to construct and dictate gender performances is not surprising, but now that he is aware of these interactions he can acknowledge their prevalence in his life. In other interviews, like Claire’s and Sarah’s, women were sharing stories with me that they wanted people to know. Leading up to our conversations, Sarah reinforced how much she wanted to share stories of her time bowling. The moment I stepped out of the car at her home, she was telling me how excited she was to share the story about her male bowling coach telling her what she was allowed to wear. By giving these women voices and making explicit their interactions at the border of femininity, I have tried to raise awareness, as well as provide an outlet for them. When speaking with Sharon about the state of the sport, and how bowling is viewed by outsiders, we had this exchange:

**Author:** What do you think about, uhm the—because I feel like there's a misconception as we talked about earlier where people don't consider bowling a sport, is that a thing?

**Sharon:** Let them bowl 52 games and see how you feel about it.

**Author:** Yeah it's like—and I'm wondering like how you—when you tell people that you're bowler what, what do you, what responses do you get? How do you—

**Sharon:** Well now, I don't really, you know, consider myself much of a bowler anymore because I'm not really competing, but when I was competing I would say, you don't understand, there is so much, you know—you have to be in good shape to bowl all the games and that's harder on your body than a lot of sports because I've played a lot of sports and bowling? You got your arm and your knees, your back and you're hands, and that's a lot, too. Very demanding. Now you get to the last block of match play and your body is tired, your hand is worn out, and if you’ve got any injury it just makes it that much worse. And, I went through one swing [set of tournaments] with the hamstring injury. It's like, you know, every slide you're putting pressure on it, trying to get therapy and be at
where you can bowl and a lot of the bowlers, had chiropractic issues while we were out on swing and they just try to get through it because it’s tough because you're driving, riding in vehicles and that's hard on your body too and you don’t—it's hard to eat right when you're eating in restaurants all the time. You try to eat healthy but it's really hard doing that when you travel.

Bowling can take a toll. Mentally, physically, and emotionally, it is possible to feel drained after any tournament. People like Sharon, who have left the professional scene, still bowl in their spare time. It is clearly something that is hard to quit, even when it is no longer a viable source of income. This is in part due to the social nature of the sport, where communities are held together by intimidate connections made off the lanes. That being said, the more you bowl, the more you interact with people, the more you will feel the social pressures of the community. Sharon says it best: “I think all my experience is, you know, anything you go through is going to shape who you are and how you deal with things.” The young people that I interviewed for this thesis, Sharon too, have had their lives irrevocably changed by bowling. In learning about style, bowling balls, and how to display competitiveness, they are implicitly learning gender associations, too. It is ingrained knowledge that one must react in certain ways when the oil on the lane dries, whether that means changing a ball or moving your feet left. Although Daniel and I were discussing how many 300s he has bowled (31), his quote exemplifies how natural bowling can become, as can gendered views of the world:

I don’t get nervous in bowling anymore. I’ve been doing it for so long. It’s like breathing. It’s like blinking your eyes or beating your heart. I don’t have to think about it. I just do it.

Gender is a challenging topic to discuss. But, in examining many of the structures that are creating a hierarchy, where men are privileged and women are left feeling marginalized
and incapable, it is possible to begin to acknowledge and change them. It is only through asking questions about what constitute our communities and acknowledging these difficult issues that we can encourage new mentalities. To close with a quote from an interview with Michelle, as a reminder that bowling influences young people’s gendered performances on and off the lanes:

[Bowling is] a great, I think, for high schoolers—especially if you are still trying to learn the rules of social life and all the stuff, and figuring out how to deal with the other sex—if you will. It’s a great way for them to interact and figure things out and just talk and get to know each other, but also doing something that’s really fun and hopefully they enjoy.
NOTES

Introduction

1. Bowling balls weigh anywhere between 6 pounds and 16 pounds, and young bowlers start at the lowest weight possible. In your formative years, ball weight will typically correspond with your age, with a 9-year-old bowling with a 9-pound ball. However, according to my high school coaches, most bowlers will not have a ball heavier than 13 pounds if they are a female and 15 pounds if they are male.

2. During the fall of 2015 I joined a bowling league for the first time since quitting bowling 5 years earlier. The first few weeks of bowling left my hands raw and sore. I was not used to the grip necessary to hold onto the ball and release it down the lane, and the ball rubbed against my fingers causing blisters and raw skin on the three fingers primarily used for bowling, the thumb, middle finger, and ring finger of my right hand.

3. Unfortunately, this does mean that some of the potential generational differences dealing with gender will be lost in this survey. I do think that this topic warrants further interviews and research, although I hope the reader will find that the 12 persons whom I interviewed provide a fascinating overview. I believe they also will help serve as a foundation for further study.

4. “Two-handing the ball down the lane” is a throwing style where the bowler has two hands on the bowling ball and then twists the hands drastically at the time of release of the ball. This allows for more spin on the ball as it moves down the lane, which propels the ball in a long arc from the far left side of the lane to the far right and then back in again to hit the pins with high velocity and many revolutions. This long arc is typically called a “hook.” Down-and-in style is where, unlike two-handing, the ball travels more
up the center of the lane and spins at the last moment creating a slight hook as the ball collides with the pins.

5. Bowling averages register on a scale from 0 – 300. My current league average is 157 and I am the second highest scoring female. The woman above me is a former pro bowler, Sharon Smith, and her current average is 225.

6. Sport shot refers to a type of bowling that is typically reserved for pro-level bowling. It is where the lanes are oiled more drastically than normal, making for a more difficult shot. Each week, the oil pattern on the lanes is different, which requires bowlers to constantly adjust where they throw the ball.

7. Only one was interviewed in the spring of 2016, Sharon Smith. For most of the following explanation of the interviewees, Smith is an exception. I met her through my bowling league in Bowling Green. Her interactions with the bowling community will only be discussed in the conclusion.

8. House balls and house shoes are free balls and shoes available at every bowling center. Typically these shoes are behind the counter, and the balls are on shelves all over the center.

Chapter One

1. Thumb slugs are not small terrestrial mollusks used in bowling, but rather smooth inserts placed in finger holes that allow for a comfortable grip and release of the bowling ball. They are not mandatory and many bowlers do not have them.

2. For the purpose of protecting her identity, Claire requested I change her name.
3. “House” is used as a moniker because bowlers refer to bowling centers as “houses.” Although none of my interviewees elaborated on why this term exists in bowling, I suspect it is because bowlers typically chose one, or at most two, bowling centers where they frequently bowl. Familiarity with one bowling center over a long period of time made it “home.”

4. My extended family will frequently ask me to go bowling with them when we are out of state. The thought of using house shoes drives me to decline every time.

5. In Benson 1998, there is a discussion about how shoes can serve as a gateway to men’s sexuality, as they are the first place a man will look before peering up a female’s skirt (112).

6. “Open lanes” refers to a time when you are not participating in a league or in a tournament. Rather, bowling lanes are open and available for use by anyone who would like to rent them.

7. Granted, Justin began bowling when he was 14 while Daniel received his first bowling ball at birth. At the time of writing, Daniel is 28, while Justin is 23.

8. The pro shop, sometimes called sport shop, is a storefront available in most bowling centers where people can buy bowling equipment or have their balls drilled to fit their hands.

9. For a bowling ball to react means that it will move across the lane in a hooking motion. This process is driven by the weighted core.

10. For those unfamiliar with bowling terminology, some discussion of scoring may be helpful. Bowling is set up to take place over ten frames per game. Each frame encompasses two throws of the ball. Your goal is to get a strike (where all ten pins are
knocked over) with the first ball you throw. If you do not get a strike, but leave some pins on the lane, your new goal is to pick up a spare (where you knock the remaining pins over with your second throw). If you do not spare on your second ball, you leave what is called an “open frame,” meaning not all pins are knocked down. If you strike 12 times in a row (using the last two bonus balls that come with 10 strikes), you will bowl a 300, the highest possible score.

11. These numbers reference the board numbers on the lane. The first board on the far right is the one and the board on the far left is the 40. Bowlers reference their stance and where they aim the ball by those numbers. For example, my current shot has me standing at the 22 board and throwing to the 10.

12. To “drill” a new bowling ball means to literally drill into one in order to insert finger holes for a particular bowler.

13. This phenomenon is reminiscent of Thomas Adler’s “Making Pancakes on Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition” (1981), where “liberated male cooks are also more likely to spend substantial sums of money on fancy or special-purpose cookware” (48). Similarly, male bowlers are more likely to spend more money on fancy equipment or on more bowling balls.

14. Claire is unsure of her ball weight because all of her bowling balls have been hand-me-downs, and many of them have oscillated between those two weights.

15. While writing this chapter, it became clear to me that an obvious example of gender rendered visible is simply the term “balls.” As Alan Dundes demonstrates in his article “Into the Endzone for a Touchdown: A Psychoanalytic Consideration of American Football” (1978), it is possible to psychoanalyze a sport for all of its potential sexual
connotations. I am not unfamiliar with the bowling balls being used to actively foreground the notion of sexuality during bowling. A joke that I heard often told by women was that a guy should date a female bowler because she knows how to handle balls. However, none of the interviewees I spoke with mentioned any of these jokes, or spoke of bowling balls’ potential relationship to testicles. Unlike Bronner in “Secret Erections and Sexual Fabrications: Old Men Crafting Manliness” (2005) and Dundes, I wish to avoid making claims in regards to the views of my interviewees on this topic, especially since I have not spoken with them about this it directly.

Chapter Two

1. “Cosmic” bowling involves bright, multicolor lights and backlights for illumination, instead of the typical primary bowling lights, and bowlers are “entertained” with loud music, and provided multicolor house balls, that look extra bright while they are rolling down the lanes.

2. As is explained later in this chapter, I will use the term bowler to denote “serious” bowlers, and the term “open bowler” to refer to non-serious bowlers.

3. I have heard one story where a very drunk woman threatened to beat up her husband while at the bowling center. I do not think that this story revolved around bowling, per se, but it did occur at the center.

4. We were also not allowed to sit down if we were not bowling, again I have trouble sitting during bowling matches—even league bowling.
5. Seven and ten pins are the two pins that are opposite each other in the back of the pin layout. If one has to knock one of them down, the “proper” form is to stand on the opposite side of the lane and throw a spare ball on a long diagonal. If the bowler on the lane next to you does not wait until you are finished, they can trip over your leg on the approach, which is something I have seen happen. I have also been run into while trying to pick up a ten pin, because the person on the lane to my right did not wait.

6. Junior Gold is the highest level of youth competition. It is Olympic level. Thousands of individuals participate each year and only 12 (six women and six men) will go to the Olympic training center.

7. This tournament, called Nationals, is a multi-month tournament in Texas that hosts thousands of bowlers throughout the several months it will be running.

Chapter Three

1. The pocket is the space between the 1 and 3 pins for right-handed bowlers. It is the ideal point for the ball to connect with the pins.

2. These terms are the two most frequently used by my interviewees. I will use them throughout this chapter.

3. Although it will not be examined in this thesis, there is a new style of bowling that is becoming increasingly popular called two-handing. In this style, bowlers hold the ball in both hands without placing their fingers inside the drilled holes. When releasing the ball, they use the extra torque from the second hand to place a considerable amount of spin on the ball as it is going down the lane. Like down-and-in and cranking, this style is strongly
gender associated as a masculine style of throwing. Since there are only a few bowlers performing this type of ball throw I will not analyze it in this thesis.

Figure 14. Chris House demonstrates two handing the ball.

4. For an example of down-and-in style, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPRDL9xCgSc.

5. For an example of cranking style, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMiQUBoHyAM.

6. I still bowl a down-and-in style. There are forty boards that make up the lane, I stand anywhere between 20-25, depending on oil condition. I throw my ball down and out to the ten board area, where it has a slight hook and comes back to the pocket (around the 15-20 boards).

7. At one point, I had an interview set up with an individual I believed to be a cranker based on what I saw years ago when we bowled together. Once we began talking about style, however, he informed me that he was not a cranker, but had tried it for a period of time and found it to be unsustainable.
8. Just like all bourbon is whiskey, but not all whiskey is bourbon; all crankers are men, but not all men are crankers.

9. Back-up bowling is a style of bowling rarely practiced (I have seen it maybe a handful of times). Back-up bowling is characterized by twisting the ball to the right on the release, which causes the ball to spin backwards down the lane. Like two-handing the ball, I will not be discussing this style in this thesis.

10. Bobby’s father and Tee’s mother were the two bowling coaches for my high school bowling team.

11. I have placed “girls” in parentheses and chosen to use women instead, because although “girls” was more frequently used to describe those who identify as women, it is belittling and infantilizing to refer to young women or old women as simply “girls.”

12. Daniel’s father served as his bowling coach for most of his childhood.

13. A 7-10 is a split where the pin on the far left and the pin on the far right remain standing. It is the most challenging split to spare on, as you have to keep your ball on the lane, yet hit the outside of either pin just right.

Chapter Four

1. The ultimate goal is to bowl a 300, a perfect score, and each new game affords a bowler the opportunity to do so.

2. I do wish to note here that I went on to lose during the next round of the tournament.

3. My mother, for example, can hardly stand to sit next to my father when the referee makes a questionable call in a close basketball or football game.
4. During one night of bowling in my present league, the men on my lanes were having a competition to see who could throw the ball the “most aggressive.” They were trying to not only out-hook each other, but also trying to see who has the largest backswing.

5. Other sports are on a timer, forcing players to achieve goals in a certain amount of time. Bowling is not dictated by time, but by the number of frames remaining. If a bowler needs to use the restroom, for instance, the bowlers stop bowling until their return. These pauses between frames give bowlers ample time to talk to each other.

6. These single-gender teams share the same bowling house for practice, but the teams are typically separated by pairs of lanes. On one occasion, I can recall my all-girl team being directly next to an all-male team. As a result, our coach had to refocus our attention multiple times throughout that practice.

7. Daniel’s admission comes only after discussing how intense school bowling practice was, almost as though looking at the girls was a respite from the intensity of bowling.

8. It is ironic that a shoulder was the focus of the complaint, when one of the most common outfits for female college bowlers are mid-thigh skirts with a skin-tight polo. It is also worth noting that until the late 90s, the Professional Women’s Bowling Association required all female bowlers to wear skirts and tights.

9. Bobby and his sister later learned that their family was actually a bowling dynasty in the city, and that they could trace their bowling roots back to the first bowling center.

10. This is a pseudonym for the high school that we attended.

11. In these practices, the coach would have the pinsetters only set the ten pin (the pin on the back right). We would have to practice throwing at the ten pin (considered the hardest...
pin to pick up for right handed bowlers) for the duration. Consequently, I can still pick up ten pins even though most of my other bowling skills have deteriorated.

12. Marking means that a bowler will strike or spare. It is related to the symbol that denotes a strike or a spare.

13. A pair of lanes are two lanes that share a ball return.

14. If a bowler strikes on the first ball in the tenth frame, they will have two more opportunities to throw the ball. If they spare on the second ball, they will have one more ball.

15. I want to make it clear that I am presenting the following example not as a means of disparaging the coach or the team, but rather I am presenting it as an example of how intra-team dynamics can affect a bowler’s attitude towards the sport in general.

16. Claire is referring to throwing games as in performing poorly on purpose, not as in throwing a bowling ball.

17. In 2011, St. Mary’s discontinued its bowling teams. They have since resumed, but there were several years when there was neither an A team or a B team.

Conclusion

1. I have denoted this system as cultural, because although anatomy could be a reason why men and women bowl differently, it is not a universal explanation that can be easily applied to all male and female bowlers.

2. Although not discussed, two-handing (a more aggressive form of cranking) causes oil patterns to break down even more quickly. One week in league, we were bowling with someone who two-handed the ball down the lane. I had not shared lanes with someone
who does this before, and found that I was unable to perform consistently, because the oil pattern broke down too irregularly for me to find a reliable shot pattern.

3. To be in a league, bowlers have to pay not only national, but city and state dues. As Bowling Green does not have a women’s bowling association, I am technically a member of the men’s association.

4. My average, the second highest women’s average, is 157.

5. While speaking with Daniel about his bowling history, he qualified each tournament he bowled in as “not making it to televised.”

6. A copy of the televised program can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mk8GH9jkHec, accessed February 24, 2016.

7. An example of this can be found in Pilon 2013, where a woman embodies a supporting role to a male’s narrative and then becomes relegated to being an object to view or desire.

8. This telecast can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BUv0nJTzRY, accessed February 24, 2016.
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