

Brendan Myers

Dr. Bednar

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### Thom Browne's Male Skirt as a Mode of Gender Expression in Hybrid Masculine Bodies



The male skirt featured in Thom Browne's 2022 fall runway collection may be considered a productive site of analysis firstly on account of its individual value in challenging gender norms but also in the potential for any conclusions to be extrapolated and applied to other similar features. As a singular object, Browne's male skirt is inherently interrelated with gender normativity simply on account of its name; within the context of dominant culture, a skirt is understood as a signifier of femininity, so by adding the 'male' qualifier to it the concept

becomes oxymoronic and deviant from said dominant culture. With respect to similar objects, discourse surrounding Thom Browne's male skirt will be significant in its relatability to traditionally queered features like painted nails, makeup and other articles of clothing and how they are understood to signify gender and sex orientation.

The immense publicity of Thom Browne's male skirt, both in fashion-specific contexts and pop culture, may be understood as a catalyst by which the 'male skirt' as a general object was transformed from existing only in a queered capacity. More than that, though, in following this line of thinking one may find that this phenomenon has significant bearing with respect to newer, more modern articulations of masculinity, most notably hybrid masculinity. To facilitate this study, this paper will seek to find answers to the following questions:

How might precedent for a new norm be established by a catalyst not apart of dominant culture? In understanding high-fashion as an exclusive subculture, what is the functionality of fashion houses' divergence from gender normativity as a mode of advocacy for gender fluidity? How might a redefinition of gendered fashion affect queer intelligibility?

By discussing the research object in a manner that addresses these questions, one may find that while Thom Browne's 'male skirt' may be aptly categorized as an agent of hybrid masculinity, the nuance attached to the piece affects its standing as such and stimulates thought of masculinities tangential to hybrid masculinity.

Referring to the manner in which Browne's male skirt will be discussed, this paper will firstly perform a brief comparison between Browne's piece and another notable iteration of the male skirt to contextualize the distinction of Browne's male skirt. Following this portion will be a more in-depth presentation of the previously mentioned questions that will segue into a richer

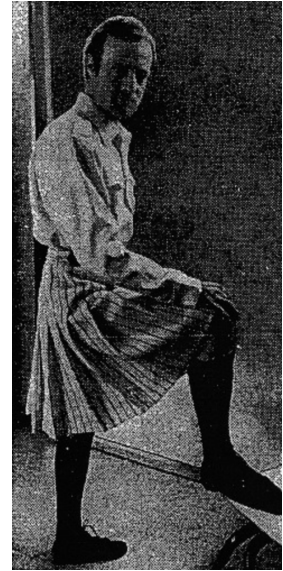
discussion the male skirt's history and current literature pertinent to this paper's subject matter. Finally, this paper will frame Thom Browne's male skirt within the context of hybrid masculinity and gender performativity with the intent of deriving a conclusion regarding the value of Browne's piece in gender and identity expression.

### **A Brief Introduction**

Broadly speaking, skirts have been present in societies since prehistoric times. Moreover, in countless cultures the skirt has been associated with both masculinity and femininity, respectively, and even removed altogether from gender or sexual signification on account of religious ritual. In America, though, the skirt is regarded as an exclusively feminine and/or effeminate object by heteronormative culture, and as such is reserved for women with minimal tolerance for use by men, such use being understood as an improper performance of masculinity. In omitting explicitly queer sites, however, the most prominent use of the 'male skirt' may be found to be the fashion world. Albeit classically intertwined with queer culture, the use of 'male skirts' in high-fashion situations has been removed from its value in gender and sex coding and instead is utilized as a means to gain viewership by appealing to the novelty and shock value of non-dominant gender representations.

It is noteworthy, though, to mention that there have been few instances of the 'male skirt' presented as a genuine means to redefine gender norms, the most notable American occurrence of which being a series of skirts designed by Elizabeth Hawes in 1967 (Woodard). Hawes was overtly public in their rebuke of normative culture as it pertained to gender, stating that men should replace their traditional wardrobe with something "narcissistic, homosexual or bisexual, [with the] freedom to feel and move, [and practice] nonconformity in clothes and social and

political thoughts” (Chi). Because Hawes chose to use the ‘male skirt’ as the means by which they could challenge gender norms, the ‘male skirt’ in turn became more explicitly associated with redefining normative culture, and more than that became understood as a conscious agent in that front. While Hawes’ action gained great traction in media of the time, the ‘male skirt’ was unable to transcend its novelty as a feature of the fashion world, nor have any other iterations of the male skirt prior to recent history. As such, the ‘un-queered male skirt’ existed almost solely within the context of the extremely niche high-fashion subculture, un-present in pop culture and in turn maintained as deviance from gender norms.



In 2022, however, included in American fashion house Thom Browns’s fall runway collection was a ‘male skirt’, presented as a part of a full suit ensemble. Despite the aforementioned queer roots of fashion and history of ‘male skirts’, this was immediately understood as noteworthy and reported on as “[defying] gender constructs and societal norms” and “pushing the garment into the mainstream of menswear” (Chi). At this point though, coverage of Browne’s male skirt did not reach beyond fashion-centric outlets, nor was it received by a non-specified audience. It was not until its sponsorship and use by various celebrities that Thom Browne’s male skirt was thrust into the forefront of mainstream media as a catalyst for discussion of gender normativity and fashion. Donned by the likes of Pete Davidson, Lil Nas X, Odell Beckham Jr., David Harbour and Oscar Isaac, Browne’s male skirt gained immense notoriety across social media platforms and news outlets (Chi). This attention was further enhanced by the aforementioned celebrities’ variety of occupations; because each of them are involved in their own ‘worlds’, the male skirt in turn became present in each of those spaces.

During this time of popularity for Thom Browne's male skirt, discourse regarding the piece was centered on gender normativity and performativity. As such, critiques of the piece became tantamount to aligning oneself with heteronormative culture while support affirmed the redefinition of such culture.

There has yet to be significant scholarly discussion of Thom Browne's male skirt specifically, however there have been many publications discussing other instances of the male skirt or simply the skirt in general.

Prior to gaining its viral popularity, Thom Browne's male skirt would have been categorized solely as a queered object, together with other features and pieces of clothing that traditionally signify non-masculinity. Upon its heavily publicized appearance on several cis-gendered celebrities, though, the piece's associated gender came in to question. More than that, it became conceivable that the skirt, and in turn clothing in general, could be non-gender specific. In turn, the virality of Thom Browne's male skirt may be understood as a catalyst by which the object was transformed from existing only in a queered capacity to having presence in what Bridges and Pascoe call "hybrid masculinity" (2014).

Further represented by painted nails and makeup, hybrid masculinity refers to the use of "aspects of marginalized gender expressions in the gender performance or identity of privileged men"(Bridges, Pascoe). In applying this concept to the male skirt, one may additionally posit that the piece gained value in allowing its wearers to distance themselves from traditional gender norms as they are enforced in clothing while concurrently reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. By essentially appropriating a piece of queer culture, a privileged man is effectually minimizing the intelligibility of the queer community. As such, a conundrum arises: while the 'male skirt' seemingly presents value to the queer community by way of challenging traditional gender

norms, is its use a signifier of progress towards dismantling gender normativity or is the male skirt an agent of the continued repression of the queer community? Moreover, one may question the value of the gender qualifier in 'male skirt' and how it could be problematic in nature.

## **Research Questions**

This research will be centered around the 'male skirt' presented by the fashion house Thom Browne in their 2022 fall runway collection. In situating this object within the context of communication studies, one may find that even the unspecific, conceptual 'male skirt' has multifaceted significance. That being the case, Thom Browne's variation presents additional unique nuance which may be adequately evaluated in discussing the ensuing questions.

Firstly, and in understanding high-fashion as an exclusive subculture, one may question the functionality of fashion houses' divergence from gender normativity as a mode of advocacy for gender fluidity. This line of thinking will seek to discuss how the aforementioned situation might present any benefits or hindrances to the progress of redefining the gender norm as it is communicated in clothing, a concept with great social import within our current culture. This will be done by way of evaluating previous instances of the male skirt with respect to their public reception and existence within their corresponding dominant culture. Additionally, in discussing this question this paper will reference any differences between a given male skirt and this paper's object of research, in turn demonstrating any potential for variation between the two.

This paper will also seek to ascertain how precedent for a new norm may be established by a catalyst not apart of dominant culture. To answer this question, this paper will examine examples of the adoption of new norms into dominant culture, specifically those in which clothing is at least a focal point. This pursuit presents value in that it may provide insight into

what factors could be especially effectual in the presentation of the male skirt to pop culture. Moreover, in identifying contextual and material differences one may find any limiting factors that could inhibit the male skirt's assimilation into dominant culture.

Finally, this paper will pose and investigate the question of how a redefinition of gendered fashion might affect queer intelligibility. In this case, the term redefinition refers to a broadening of the scope of socially acceptable gender performance features that subsequently impinges upon queer culture. Whether or not this impingement would benefit or detract from the queer experience is ultimately what addressing this question will pursue. This inquiry is significant in that it facilitates an exploration in to the ethics of the male skirt becoming socially viable.

### **Discussing the Male Skirt**

The male skirt has been present in public discourse for several decades, its initial introduction having been spurred by the work of then-radical fashion designers in the 1950s and 60s. Upon designing a skirt for men in 1985, though, Jean Paul Gaultier became relevant in 'male skirt' dialogue (Cole). Although his piece found nominal popularity almost exclusively in "young gay men...seen in the clubs of London and Paris," it failed to garner any significant representation in or acknowledgement from pop culture (Cole). But again in 1988, in seeking to "[toy] with notions of masculinity and the appropriate forms of dress for men to wear," Gaultier produced another 'male skirt' that was



featured in their Autumn/Winter collection (Cole). In this instance, Gaultier's attempt at "[dismantling] cliches of masculine styling" received much more recognition in mainstream consciousness on account of it having been modeled in a widely renowned show (Cole). Similarly to Gaultier's first male skirt, however, this piece was unable to gain any traction in terms of being deemed acceptable by dominant culture. This inability to penetrate dominant culture may be attributed to the same features that distinguish Gaultier's 'male skirts' as different from those of Thom Browne; Gaultier being publicly gay, their brand was also replete with homoerotic stylistic features in both its marketing schemes and actual products (Cole). As such, both Jean Paul Gaultier as an individual and their namesake brand were publicly understood as queered and inherently othered in pop culture.

This facet is significant in referencing Thom Browne's 'male skirt' in that it presents an affective difference between the two. While dominant culture was able to disregard Gaultier's attempts on account of the brand's queered nature, the Thom Browne fashion house, whose collections are characterized by precisely tailored suits in traditional navy and gray wools, presents an image of classical masculinity that coincides with modern hegemonic masculinity (Ben et. al.). So, upon Browne's 'male skirt' being thrust into the national and international spotlight, the piece was unable to be dismissed in the same manner as Gaultier's as a result of Thom Browne having been understood as an implicit facilitator of hegemonic masculinity and in turn, dominant culture (Ben et. al.). Moreover, Browne's male skirt was both initially introduced to mainstream media and enabled to maintain its existence on such platforms while uninhibited by the generalized understanding of fashion as queered on account of the piece's widely publicized use by several gender-conforming celebrities (Vänskä). This is another significant difference between Browne's piece and Gaultier's: Gaultier's male skirt was presented in a queer



space, by a queer brand, on models who were presumed to be queer and thus was unable to be removed from its queer categorization. Thom Browne's piece, on the other hand, was unaffected by any of the aforementioned features and became present in dominant culture as certainly different, but potentially socially acceptable.

Another noteworthy instance of a 'male skirt' is that which was designed by Elizabeth Hawes in 1967 as a part of the previously mentioned work of then-radical fashion designers. Hawes has been characterized as believing that "men needed to be freed from the constraints of bulky woolen trousers and allowed to wear skirts," and was quoted in saying that "by 1976, American males will be as free as females to dress to their personal pleasure"(Woodard). As such, one may surmise that Hawes was not only opposed to the presence of gender normativity in clothing but also actively challenged it, a characteristic that has qualified them as revolutionary by today's standards. This motivation creates difference between their work and that of Thom Browne, however. The challenge presented to gender norms as a result of Browne's male skirt may hardly be understood as intentional activism. Rather, Browne was motivated by the propagation of individuality, as may be evidenced in an excerpt from an interview done at their 2022 Fall/Winter runway:

"I think it's important to remember—whether it's a skirt or whatever it is—if you want to wear it, why not? You should just do it regardless of what anybody thinks. That's really the message of tonight's show. It's just being true to yourself and being confident in just being your own self. It is easier said than done, but it's important that you eventually, in your life, do find yourself" (Chi).

This quote demonstrates that Browne's presentation of a 'male skirt' was not explicitly done to the end of dismantling gender norms or advocating for the queer community. In turn, one may

posit that any results of Browne's piece would differ from those of Hawes' piece; where Hawes was met with extensive public backlash, with columnists including anecdotes from community members sharing their displeasure, Browne's 'male skirt' was hailed as progressive and admirable (Woodard).

This difference in reception could easily be attributed to the different times in which each moment occurred as Hawes lived in a far more marginalized, prejudicial environment. However, one may also reference Hawes' stances on sexuality and gender as contributing factors to their failure in effecting change. As is articulated by Woodard, Hawes believed that "men should toss out the shirt, vest, collar, tie, coat, trousers, and hat in favor of something 'narcissistic, homosexual or bisexual...[and practice] nonconformity in clothes and social and political thoughts.'" Hawes sought to completely erase gender normativity in fashion in favor of queer styles, which were enabled to include both feminine and masculine pieces (Vänskä). Moreover, Hawes promoted the erasure of gender normativity in social and political spaces as well, which effectually removed them from existing solely in the fashion world, a culturally understood queered space that as such received leeway in producing queered concepts, and stamped them as a radical (Woodard). Consequently, Hawes' works, namely the 'male skirt', were associated with the radical label and were treated as modes of attacking society and the social status quo, exacerbating any negativity the clothing would have received. As for Browne's 'male skirt', though, the brand's lack of activism attached to the piece has allowed it to remain un-politicized, existing solely in social settings. Because of this, any attacks on Browne's 'male skirt' have been seen as unwarranted and as blatant homophobia, in turn serving as a sort of defense mechanism while additionally bolstering the piece's value in activism.

## **Gender Performance in Clothing**

The skirt, separate from any gender qualifier, is understood as a signifier of femininity within the context of dominant culture (Lindemuth et. al.). In adding the qualifying term ‘male’, however, the piece of clothing becomes explicitly gendered in contradiction with its signified value. As such, one may question the extent to which an object may truly be inherently gendered if a simple alteration in language can completely redefine its gendered nature. Moreover, this line of thinking lends itself to the idea that gender conceptions are imposed upon things as opposed to being innate, an idea discussed extensively by philosopher Judith Butler. In their book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler posits that gender is a social construct shaped both by discursive forces and oneself (Butler). Furthermore, in discussing their concept of performativity, Butler states that “an act is performative if it produces a series of events” (Ton). In characterizing gender as performative, one must insinuate that there can be no gendered identity before the gendered acts, because the acts are “continuously constituting the identity” (Ton). More succinctly, that gender is performative means no person or thing has an inherent gender, but instead one that is imposed upon them and continuously reinforced.

In applying this idea to clothing, and more specifically the skirt, one may conclude that while they certainly have a publicly understood gender association, skirts are perceived as feminine because those who are declared to be women are indoctrinated by dominant culture such that they perform their gender consonant to that culture, in turn perpetuating the cycle of gender normativity. With regard to the ‘male skirt’, gender is only prescribed explicitly on account of the feminine connotation attached to skirts. As such, despite its literal gendered nature

the 'male skirt' is a rebuke against the previously mentioned system of gender; by placing a non-queer man in what is culturally defined as a woman's garment, as Thom Browne did, the 'male skirt' demonstrates that gender can be individually maintained without respect to dominant gender norms.

The 'male skirt' also exists in discourse surrounding "hybrid masculinity". Defined as "the use of aspects of marginalized gender expressions in the gender performance or identity of privileged men," hybrid masculinity is a recently established concept that branches from hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe). In understanding gender as an ongoing feature of identity and clothing as a large contributing factor, men's gender identities may be both reinforced as traditionally masculine and redefined as effeminate, and varied between each (Kaiser & Green). The 'male skirt', and especially that of Thom Browne's collection, is especially relevant to these studies as the use of skirts, with the exception of what would be labeled as social deviance, has been reserved for women (Lindemuth et. al.). For Thom Browne to present their piece in a manner completely removed from queer culture is potentially appropriative of a part of the queer community, however it remains to be seen whether or not this appropriation will act as a mode of advocacy for the redefinition of gender norms or as an inhibitor of queer intelligibility (Bridges & Pascoe).

## **Analysis**

Thom Browne's 'male skirt' became a viral sensation following its presence in the brand's fall/winter runway show in 2022. The "shin-skimming gray pleated suit skirt" was seen on various high-profile celebrities at red carpet events and on social media, the likes of which including Pete Davidson, Odell Beckham Jr. and David Harbour (Chi).

Pictured to the right on Oscar Isaac, the skirt is made of wool twill. Sitting atop the hips of a wearer with a classic rise, its waist is without belt loops, complete with an overlapping french fly. Continuing, the skirt falls naturally without overly emphasizing the wearer's shape, stopping below the knee at the upper of the shin. As was mentioned, the skirt is pleated, its pleats being slightly thinner and more frequent than a traditional margin but hardly so unordinary that they propose any potential for stylistic symbolism. The piece also features a dropped



back, maintaining the hem-line for approximately three inches beyond the skirt's front portion. The exposed edge of the dropped back presents an extended version of Thom Browne's logo: from left to right, a red stripe, a white stripe and a blue stripe. Lastly, the skirts were produced in several hues of gray.

Characterized by the assumption of traditionally feminine or queer features by a man, hybrid masculinity is a very recent concept that has yet to substantially proliferate academia. CJ Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, co-authors of a leading publication on the topic, succinctly state that hybrid masculinity exists given the use of "aspects of marginalized gender expressions in the gender performance or identity of privileged men". In this statement there are two important caveats: that the mode of gender expression is originally understood as a characteristic of a marginalized group and that the person assuming the given mode of gender expression both identifies and is recognized by dominant culture as being a man. As Thom Browne's 'male skirt' has publicly been worn by privileged men, and moreover has been described by Browne as

oppositional to gender normativity, the piece satisfies Pascoe and Bridges' stipulations for hybrid masculinity to be engaged (Chi). It is important to note, though, that Browne's 'male skirt' is a facilitator or marker of hybrid masculinity, and itself does not perform the gender identity; the concept refers to a person's gender identity as it is performed by them, but the 'tools' with which this gender identity is constructed are not inherently coded as 'hybrid-masculine'.

Being a facilitator of hybrid masculinity, Browne's 'male skirt' enables its wearer to perform a gender identity incongruent with the gender norms of dominant culture. In turn, it would certainly be understandable that one might label the piece as promotional of gender fluidity. And with a superficial evaluation of the object this assumption would be acceptable, however in analyzing the object more scrupulously one may find that this connection is, in reality, erroneous. Browne's 'male skirt' is not simply a skirt worn by a man; it may more accurately be described as a modification of the traditional, feminine skirt such that it may be worn by men within the current construction of gender normativity. This assertion is evidenced in the formal and stylistic qualities of the piece. As was previously mentioned, the piece was only produced in subdued hues of gray. Moreover, the skirt falls below a conservative length even by traditional feminine standards, additionally featuring a dropped back that emphasizes this length. The contour is generous and leaves virtually no hint at the wearer's form, an effect that is furthered by the wool material the skirt is made out of, a material that is insusceptible to malleability on account of wind or other factors. These characteristics of Browne's 'male skirt' are all indicative of a piece tailored to suit normative masculinity; grays are considered a neutral color, which is preferred in the garb of traditional masculinity, while the skirt's length and contour serve to conceal a man's figure, coinciding with both traditional masculinity and heteronormative ideals (Ben). On account of these features, Browne's skirt cannot be considered to be

advocational of gender fluidity as it was designed such that it could exist within dominant culture, aligned with prescribed notions of masculinity.

This distinction may be further applied to the piece's status as representative of hybrid masculinity. As has been mentioned, hybrid masculinities refer to the "selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and...femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities" (Bridges & Pascoe). With respect to the current discussion of Thom Browne's male skirt, it is important to note the piece is firstly not feminine and subsequently not queer; features of non-dominant masculinities, especially those rooted in clothing, have classically also been features of heterofemininity, a concept exacerbated by the ubiquity of the dominant gender binary (Lindemuth). On account of the skirt's masculinized qualities, it may be observed that the 'male skirt' is made to be masculine by more than its male qualifier, and as such is not a feminine object. Consequently, this piece fails to satisfy the facet of hybrid masculinity that the assumed mode of gender expression must initially be included in the gender expression of a marginalized group.

As has been articulated by Judith Butler, gender is a social construct imposed upon things and people, and moreover is performative in nature (Butler). Applying this idea to clothing, and more specifically to the skirt, one may conclude that the skirt's publicly understood gender association is the result of women's indoctrination by dominant culture, which in effect trains women to perform their femininity in consonance with heterofemininity by ways including the use of skirts, creating an environment that both establishes and reinforces heteronormativity. With regard to Browne's 'male skirt', gender is only prescribed explicitly on account of the feminine connotation typically attached to skirts. As such, despite its semantically gendered nature the 'male skirt' is a rebuke against the previously mentioned system of gender; by placing a

non-queer man in what is culturally defined as a woman's garment, Browne's 'male skirt' demonstrates that gender can be individually maintained without respect to dominant gender norms. In further conclusion, this idea shows that Browne's piece is reflexive in nature, that it *can* be used as a mode of gender expression in various identity categorizations.

Returning to the discussion of hybrid masculinity with respect to Browne's piece, it may be deduced that, with respect to gender identity implications, Browne's 'male skirt' operates doubly, both conceptually and physically. The conceptual 'male skirt' has historically been understood as a queered object, and as was previously mentioned works as a facilitator for hybrid masculinity. As Browne's variation certainly belongs to the "male skirt' family", it is able to operate under the pretense of hybrid masculinity. In referring to the literal form of Browne's piece, however, one may find that the stylistic qualities of the skirt prevent its use as an agent of hybrid masculinity, presenting a paradox of sorts. At this point, one may conclude that, albeit obvious, Browne's piece exists at the intersection of its concept and physicality, the implications of which forthcoming. One may posit that the piece has the potential to operate in either of the aforementioned capacities dependent upon its wearer, however this thought begets the adage that intent does not define effect; while a wearer may intend for the skirt to signify some part of their identity expression, this expression as it is understood by others is ultimately defined by how those others individually and in turn collectively decode the piece. This being the case, it is impossible for Browne's 'male skirt' to be removed from either its form or concept. Moreover, this indicates that the social ramifications of Browne's piece are defined by dominant culture, which despite its intentional design Browne's skirt is not a part of.

Given the current social context one may conclude that while Browne's 'male skirt' can facilitate hybrid masculinity, its ability to do so is hindered by its heteromascuine design. This



design does not, however, grant the piece heteronormative standing on account of the conceptual nature of the 'male skirt' lending itself to non-dominant masculinities. So, it becomes evident that a change must occur for Browne's 'male skirt' to be included in society; either hybrid masculinity is redefined such that it accounts for modes of gender expression that, while unaffiliated with any marginalized groups, are not included in dominant culture; an extension of hybrid masculinity or altogether new theory of masculinity be presented that accounts for Browne's male skirt; or a shift in dominant culture occurs that either wholly includes or excludes Browne's 'male skirt'.

As these changes are yet to be, the use of Browne's 'male skirt' is unable to proliferate beyond its value as novelty or outside of the high-fashion subculture. Perhaps, though, and as is my estimation, Browne's 'male skirt' may be understood as a precursor to any of the aforementioned possibilities, in turn qualifying the piece not only as progressive within the context of fashion but also as an indicator of cultural progress.

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