DERBY DAMES AND FEMME FATALES:

A QUALITATIVE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EMPOWERMENT,

CONSUMPTION AND REPRESENTATION

IN ROLLER DERBY

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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With the help of such performers as Drew Barrymore and Oscar winner Ellen Page, roller derby as a pastime and athletic competition is becoming more than a subcultural phenomenon. Roller derby holds an important symbolic role and social importance for participants. Through the use of ethnography, participant observation and discourse analysis, this thesis fills a void in subcultural and feminist studies by infusing a political economic argument to existing research. This study shows that through the organizations "DIY" structure, the sport may overcome the de-politicization and commodification of feminism that is common in the third wave, "girl power" trend. Still, while empowerment and agency are important to participants, male hegemonic views of femininity and sex appeal may create a culture of consumerism. This study has implications for feminist researchers and sheds light on situations in which apparent feminist empowerment belies a consumerist agenda.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

STUDYING ROLLER DERBY

BACKGROUND

My interest in roller derby started about five years ago when I went to my first bout at Roy Wilkins auditorium in Minneapolis, MN. I had heard about the sport from a few of my feminist friends and was interested to see what an event would look like. After the initial period of confusion over rules, and how the participants found ways to break them, I knew this was a sport I wanted to be a part of in some capacity. The sense of inclusion drew me in immediately. These were not cover girls or models skating around in costumes. These were women who looked like me and were not afraid to show off their bodies and their skills. They didn't need to be a "36-24-36" nor did they seem to want to be.

I continued to follow roller derby in Madison, WI and considered joining the team there, but I left the city before trying out. I tried out for the team in Eugene, but was not able to afford the gear, costumes, insurance, and fees. I realized that there was certainly more to being a "derbygirl" than tenacity and a desire to perform. It is yet another sport that contradicts cultural norms but is still confined to socio-economic restrictions (Yeo, 1999). Still, I saved up enough money to buy the skates (my grandmother even pitched in to help get me on the track!) and about six months later when try-outs rolled around again, I found myself back on skates with a group of 30 or so women who looked as determined (and nervous) as I must have looked. I quickly stated my dual purpose of practicing with the team and researching for this project, and immediately began asking

questions about their goals and reasons for trying out. In addition to participating in suicide drills and pacing exercises, I started writing about my own experiences and observations about becoming a derbygirl.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

> We didn't do it to be feminist because I don't give a shit what people have to say, I can do anything I want... I never really wanted to be mean and aggressive, I wanted to be fun and sweet and hit people at the same time.
>
> ~ La Muerta
> Original "*She*-E-O"
> *Texas Lonestar Roller Girls*

Women's Flat Track Roller Derby is a sport as well as a subcultural activity, that has exploded in many cities throughout the U.S. in the last decade. Roller derby is a team competition played in which points are awarded for team members passing opponents on an oval-shaped track, on roller skates. The World Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) is the ruling body for the non-profit sport; its participants are all women, and its owners are the players themselves. Derby's roots can be traced back to the 1930's when it was a co-ed competition, with team ownership by one family. Team managers traded players, similar to today's professional sports. The idea for today's derby was sparked by a man in Austin, TX, but teams are now owned and operated by women, for women. Some men's groups are being formed in some locations; in these instances women lead and train male members. With the fundamental organizational change from co-ed to women-led, and with its emphasis on "girl power", identity, and empowerment, many consider "the new derby" to be steeped in feminism.

Roller derby culture is a unique and rich area of study for several reasons. For one, the sport markets itself as a place where women can be bold and strong, where they can "be themselves," but also where they can play with sexuality, performance, and identity. It does not fit neatly into ideas about women's traditional roles, at the same time, some feminists argue that because of the provocative outfits often worn by players (including underwear, fishnets, tutus, low-cut shirts, bras, and sometimes chains or "S&M" style clothing) that the sport is simply another form of female objectification. Because women make the rules, run the show, train new players, and *choose* to wear corsets and fishnets, derbygirls do not critically judge the sport in this same fashion.

Roller derby is still a new sport, and it is constantly undergoing changes that are voted on and enacted by its members and governing boards. Recent changes have included a new focus on athleticism and a professionalization of the sport. Some teams now allow women to abandon their alter-egos and stop using fake names, many have switched to standardized uniforms instead of tutus and corsets (though most still wear tights, including fishnets are still worn by some women). These changes have brought a new focus on uniformity, which helps the derby leagues market the sport to local businesses (in order to gain sponsorships) and to families (in order to sell tickets). Not all the "bad girls" have reformed, however. They still skate that fine line between prurient and professional, and women continue to wrestle with their images.

Thanks in part to the movie *Whip It* (Mendel, et. al., 2010), roller derby has become more than just a subcultural phenomenon. It is praised as a space for the representation of a "new" feminism. Whether it is called "girl power," "lipstick

feminism," or "free-market feminism," it is sold to young girls and young women as a way to assert individuality and empowerment.

Derby participants are bankers, students, and waitresses in their day-jobs. The cost of participation in terms of time and money excludes many lower-income individuals and women with family obligations. Often, skaters save money for a significant period of time in order to be able to afford the safety equipment, health insurance, and membership dues that are required for participation. The "scene" is derivative of a punk subcultural mentality; it is largely a "white woman's" sport. On the track, skaters' identities draw on non-mainstream humor laced with double entendre and violent overtones. Players are not just misfits rebelling against the status quo— they are rhetorical actors engaging in a system of commodification and meaning.

Roller derby holds an important symbolic role and social importance for participants. Group members state they are motivated by feminist themes such as empowerment and sex-positivity, but participation in the sport is more complicated than it might appear. Derby members attach cultural meanings to their participation in the sport, they praise the sport as being a "lifestyle" and way of life, it is not just a hobby to many. Participation requires closely adhering to the norms of the sport and projecting a certain *kind* of feminism; therefore, questions must be raised about the consumption of culture and how derby participants produce, negotiate, and communicate their identities.

Roller derby is situated within a third wave feminist construction of complexity and paradox. It imagines a fluid relationship between empowerment, sexuality, and the discourses between these terms, which will be discussed further in chapter three. Roller

derby resists incorporation into mainstream ideas of feminism and heterosexual femininity, while still relying on both, to varying degrees. It relies on feminist ideas of equality, athleticism, and inclusion, but many do still spend a lot of time and money on attire that emphasizes a feminine image, including hair, makeup, and skirts or other sexually-charged clothing. Complications and contradictions abound within this subculture. Roller derby employs irony as a tool to shine light on gender inequality, but in so doing, may serve to undermine female empowerment and conform to old patriarchal codes and stereotypes set forth by the fashion and beauty industry (Tyler, 2005).

SIGNIFICANCE

This research fills a void in critical feminist study by answering questions about how female athletes create their own structures and resist the machinations of mainstream sporting culture. It includes a discussion of how people involved in alternative sports create shared meanings with the structures of capitalist discourse, and how they reconstruct and reinforce ideas of gender, femininity, and empowerment. It discusses roller derby as a subcultural activity and examines themes of empowerment, identity and the de-politicization of feminism.

The research questions that guided this study are:

RQ1.) How do roller derby players, as female subcultural practitioners, construct and communicate empowerment?

I address this question through participant observation of roller derby and field notes taken during training and bout performances. While empowerment and agency may be important to participants, I learned that male hegemonic views of femininity and and power roles appear to be reinforced in some ways, perhaps further de-politicizing feminist claims.

RQ2.) To what extent does the World Flat Track Derby Association empower and constrain its participants?

Roller derby is not a case of a cultural activity that is simply either co-opted or resists commodification. It represents a constant battle, a conflict between these processes. I address this question through in-depth interviews with participants, coded for the presence and absence of feelings of empowerment. I also address this question through my discussion of the rules, training regime, and discourse coaches employ when training new players.

RQ3.) Is flat track roller derby a de-politicized feminist activity?

Recent changes in roller derby indicate that resistance to co-option and de-politicization may be weakening. To addressed this final question I discuss roller derby in comparison to other feminist groups such as Riot Grrrl and the Suicidegirls.

This thesis may shed light on other situations in which apparent feminist empowerment can belie a different agenda. If roller derby is viewed as a commodity

rather than simply a source of entertainment, I may gain new understanding about the role of feminism in popular culture.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Further research on how class and race factor into group membership would likely yield interesting and more detailed data. Although the World Flat Track Derby Association has administered extensive fan and player demographic surveys for the last two years, it does not ask derby participants about what race or class they most associate with. [1] It is not included here because of time and access limitations. I did ask this question in my own small survey of thirty new derbygirls, all women who participated categorized themselves as "white" or "Caucasian."

This study would also have been benefitted if I had participated as a derbygirl for a longer period of time, so I could have gained access to funding and marketing models used by the organization, but a knee injury during training prevented further participation in the sport. Despite this, I have seen the sport of roller derby transform in the last year, most notably in the last few months. Because of the timing of this research, many of my own observations about the very recent professionalization of the sport could not be corroborated by team managers; further research into the reasons for the change to standard uniforms, the new flexibility in rules that allow players to get rid of skater names and use their given names instead, and a comparison between teams regarding these changes would be an excellent case for future study of professionalization and uniformity in subcultures.

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[1] For a detailed look at WFTDA's yearly demographics survey, see appendix.

Overview

Following this introduction to the topic, its significance, and the questions I will answer through my analysis, chapter two presents a rich history of roller derby, which spans more than 80 years. The next chapter focuses on labor in the entertainment realm, the importance of DIY philosophies to the resistance of commodification, gender maneuvering, and hegemony. Chapters four and five present a more detailed discussion of research questions and methods used in the study, including a narrative of practices and derby performances, and analysis of interview excerpts. The final chapter presents the results of the study, analyzes how the research questions were addressed, and discusses topics for future research.

CHAPTER II

HISTORY & CONTEXT

THE OLD DERBY & THE NEW

This chapter discusses the four main eras in the history of roller derby and its current organization. The history and context of roller derby is an extremely important place to start for this research. This in-depth overview of derby's past helps frame the sport's contemporary organization. There are a great many interesting corollaries between past incarnations of the sport and the sport as it is now played and seen by audiences today. Marketing strategies, media's role in helping the sport gain an audience, the roles of men and women in the sport, and the sport's meaning to athletes are just a few examples.

1930 - 1949

During the 1930s, various events and stamina races became popular in the United States; roller derby was one of those events. It started in 1933, when Oregon entrepreneur Leo Seltzer was losing money at his movie theaters and began to look for a new event to promote. When he learned that 97% of the American population had roller skated at one time or another, he decided to try to capitalize on the phenomenon (Coppage, 1999). Popular derby lore claims that he wrote his idea on a restaurant napkin. The purpose was always to make money for the owners of the sport by charging fans to view the events. Seltzer's first incarnation was a marathon-style roller skate race dubbed, "Transcontinental Derby" held in Chicago in August, 1935 (See Figure 1). After witnessing people's reactions to players falling down or tripping one another, Seltzer

decided to turn the marathon into a team competition that pitted “professional” skaters against one another.

Figure 1. Opening night at the Transcontinental Roller Derby in Chicago, August 13, 1935. SOURCE: http://windymanrd.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/transcontinental-roller-derby-opening-night-august-13-1935.jpg

In Seltzer’s version of the game, men and women skated on a “banked track” (a graded track – lower on the inside lanes and elevated on the outside lanes to counter the effects of centrifugal force on skaters, allowing them to skate much faster and also experience more dramatic crashes). Skaters trained at a facility in Los Angeles, received a salary of $250/week which was negotiated by an informal players union (Deford, 1971). They were also provided food and shelter at the tracks where they performed. Audience members often offered food, housing or jobs to players, especially the women, because they felt sorry for their having to work to play the sport (Coppage, 1999). Most skaters

were young and unemployed and saw derby as a way to travel around the country (Cohen & Barbee, 2010). They had no control about which team they would be assigned to, and were often traded, because team leadership decided their shift to a new team would cause friction between fans and other players, or so that their presence could boost sales for another team. Managers expected skaters to follow a strict code of conduct and practice several hours a day. While men and women played on the same teams, they did not compete against one another. Men competed against men and women competed against women in alternating rounds. The scorekeepers combined the scores at the end of each round to determine which team won the bout.

While women and men played on the same teams, women's participation was held in higher esteem because of the novelty of women involved in physical competition. Women were paid about 2/3 of the salary that men were paid, however. Seltzer was one of the first sports promoters who recognized that he could attract women audience members by including women as athletes (Golden Sports Inc., 2009).

Seltzer used women's bodies as a marketing strategy to sell the sport to women and men from the beginning of derby. Advertisements for derby bouts sometimes featured the famous women skaters sitting on the laps of their male teammates, or posing between one another's legs (See figures 2, 3, and 4). Seltzer consciously recruited women who were attractive, (but not "too attractive"), so he could entice housewives to be audience members and consumers (Mabe, 2007).

While women's sexual appeal was certainly a part of promotional materials, the strength and tenacity of women skaters was also referenced by commentators and fans, as

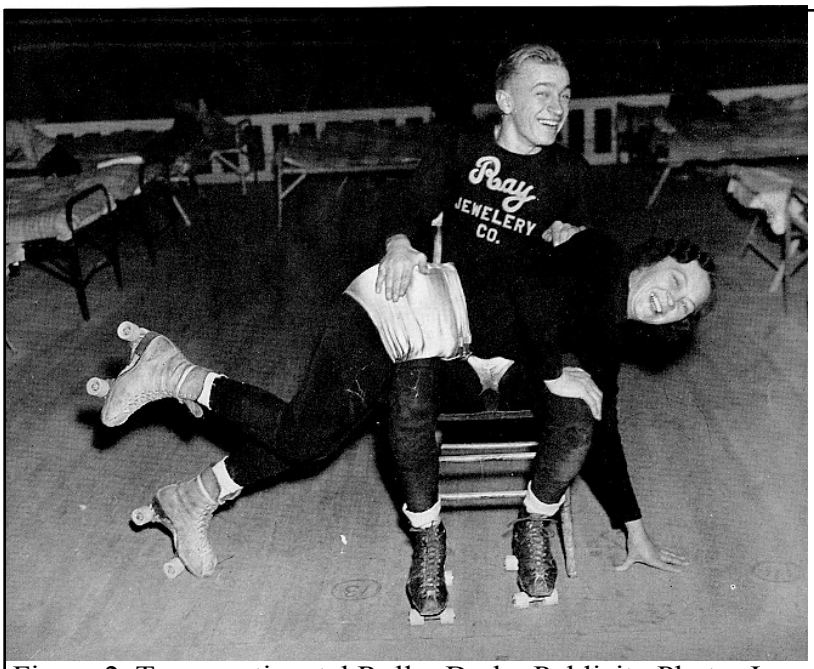


Figure 2. Transcontinental Roller Derby Publicity Photo. Josephine “Ma” Bogash & son, Billy, seen here in an early Transcontinental Roller Derby publicity photo. 'Ma' Bogash was the game's first marquee skater and also its first female Hall-of-Famer. SOURCE: http://www.rollerderbyfoundation.org/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderpictures/BillyMaBogash.jpg

Figure 3. Robert Smith and Lyle Morse of the Los Angeles-based T-Birds pose for a publicity shot, circa 1970s. SOURCE: http://www.rollerderbyfoundation.org/id3.html)

something of an anomaly at the time (See figure 5). The marketing strategy included discount tickets that were sold at Sears, grocery stores, and fabric shops, because these were places women frequented (see figure 6). Seltzer cornered the roller derby market at

Figure 4. Roller Derby Mania
Through Seltzer's "walkathons," hundreds of unemployed people participated, the competitions grossed $6 million in three years. SOURCE: https://encrypted-tbn3.google.com/images?=tbn:AGcReqWM7TYISwX6ClqagoL9qiJxHakZR1b8yjSXg6mZheR7bTr85

Figure 5. Unidentified photo, April 1949.
The published caption read: "Pileups like this occur when some of the ladies are brash enough to attempt a scoring drive. Shortly, helmets may be flung off and (the) wooden wheel contest might turn into (a) hair-pulling match." SOURCE: Chicago Tribune

Figure 6. "Discount" ticket for Transcontinental Roller Derby bout, circa 1956. Tickets were advertised as discounted when they were sold at department stores, but the price was not actually reduced.

the time, there was no other competition from other team owners. Because of this, he could change the rules to permit elbowing, tripping and other track-shenanigans whenever he felt like the sport was becoming too stagnant. People incited players from the stands by shouting at them, and players were heroized or villainized for their reactions. As the sport gained an audience, play became more akin to today's World Wrestling Entertainment (W.W.E) matches. The stunts were often scripted and the fights became more common as players tried to showcase their skills as entertainers and showmen and women (see figure 7).

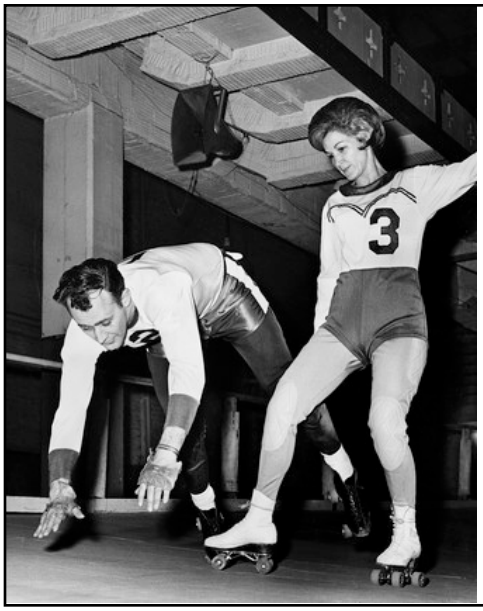


Figure 7. Derby Training.
20-year veteran roller derby, Mary Lou Palermo took on the roll of teacher at this training school in Chicago in 1964. Here, she trips teammate Bob Venter. SOURCE: Chicago Tribune

There were many accusations at the time that the bouts themselves were fake or scripted, but derby participants always denied these arguments (Shields, 2008). Part of Seltzer's plan to generate hype for derby centered around developing back stories and emotional connections between players and fans. In the days before television, much like sports' marketing strategies of today, Seltzer built elaborate stories about players and wrote to newspapers about tension among teammates in order to get coverage for the events. Although Seltzer often said he thought roller derby would one day be an Olympic event, the antics of players and the participation of women meant that roller derby was generally considered entertainment, not a sport (Coppage, 1999).

1949 - 1972

During World War II, about half of the sport's skaters enlisted in the war effort. Seltzer cut the league down to just one team, that primarily was used for the entertainment of soldiers during the war. Roller derby hit its peak in 1949 when Seltzer managed to negotiate a contract with *ABC* for $5,000 a week (Deford, 1971). Roller

derby was a perfect fit for the new medium. Seltzer benefited by finally gaining a national audience for his sport, and derby quickly became an important filler for the emerging television network as well. *ABC* demanded that skaters perform 52 weeks a year, with no off-season. Seltzer complained about this and asked that games only air on Friday nights and Sunday afternoons. But the network told him that no sport would ever play on a Sunday. In 1952, Seltzer pulled derby from the air on *ABC*, hoping to get more money and a better contract from another network, but both CBS and NBC refused to pick up the sport. Television viewers had lost interest in the live bout coverage now that there were more options in television programming available (Deford, 1971).

While the Derby World Series attracted 82,000 people to Madison Square Garden in 1951, by December of that year, Seltzer could no longer support the league, and players often did not receive paychecks. Thus, Seltzer gave ownership and control to his son, Jerry "The Commissioner" Seltzer, who used his business and media savvy to get fans into the stands again. Jerry Seltzer used television coverage to lure people to the events. Instead of live derby bouts, video tape became available, and beginning in 1960, Seltzer sold the derby bout coverage to local stations in syndication. During bouts he instructed directors to cut to commercials just as a fight would break out, while announcing that "all the action could not be contained". Viewers would need to come to the derby venue in order to take it all in (Mabe, 2007). The movie, *Kansas CIty Bomber,* starring Raquel Welch helped increase the popularity of the sport, and producers hired real skaters for many of the stunts. Still, audiences declined and support for the teams diminished.

Two key factors signaled the end of the Seltzer's roller derby dynasty in the early 1970s: labor issues and international politics. Players became angry over the salaries of top skaters, who received more money for their showmanship and track shenanigans, while new skaters were being brought onto teams without proper training, and without the skills needed to compete. For instance, the uncontested "King of Roller Derby", Charlie O'Connell, made close to $60,000/year around this time, while the average salary was about $12,000 for men, and $10,000 for women. Skaters threatened to strike in 1972, but a bluff from management got them back on the track (Golden Sports Inc., 2009). Finally, the OPEC oil embargo in 1973 prompted Seltzer to finally give up the sport, as domestic travel for teams became virtually impossible because of high fuel prices. While Seltzer enjoyed a monopoly on derby for the first 20 years in business, another league had sprung up to compete with Transcontinental Derby by 1972 and Seltzer sold the league to that rival. The final bout for Seltzer's derby was December 8, 1973.

1973 - 1998

The end of the transcontinental derby league was catastrophic for many skaters. With few skills other than their skating abilities, skaters had limited options for employment. Many skaters from Roller Derby tried briefly to cross over to their former rival, the "Roller Games" league, but complained about the overly sensationalized tactics and absence of athletic competition (Golden Sports Inc., 2009). The owners of Roller Games closed the league after two years. The skaters themselves tried to re-invigorate the sport at this time and started their own league with a training center in Los Angeles. This league received some television coverage on local cable access television and had some

success during the 70s and 80s with very localized coverage. Fans of the Los Angeles Thunderbirds, for instance, were very supportive of their local team, when programming was scarce in other parts of the country, but the training facility for the skaters closed in 1985 due to financial reasons.

The sport enjoyed brief return as "RollerJam" in 1998 (it lasted one season) with cable television broadcasts featuring outrageous stunts, fictionalized background stories and constructed drama between players and teams (Joulwon, 2007). Turner News Network (TNN) picked up Roller Jam and re-built the sport as a television series featuring athletic entertainers on rollerblades. It was not intended as a legitimate sport, but again catered to spectacle, drama and the sex appeal of skaters.

2001 - 2012

As documented in the movie *Hell on Wheels,* an unemployed drifter sparked the idea for a new kind of roller derby (Mabe, 2007). A bit like Seltzer's entertainment philosophies, Dan Policarpo's dream of derby was similar to a circus performance rather than a competitive event, with flame-eaters and other antics performed during breaks. He gathered four women in Austin, TX and recruited them to be team captains and represent four of the popular bars in the city. Each team was to have its own unique punk or pinup-girl style and flair. According to players, Policarpo soon abandoned the project and left town with much of the money that had been raised to start the league. The four captains continued to recruit new members under the name "Bad Girls, Good Women Productions." They chose to skate on a flat track surface because it cost less, was easier to set up, and could be housed in local skating rinks and community centers. The bouts

still featured some unique antics: a “penalty wheel” that a derby player would spin after being penalized by referees. Some of the penalties on the wheel were arm wrestling matches, pillow fights between opposing team members, and spankings that were administered by fans. The team also hosted a women-only mud-wrestling competition to raise money for charity.

Ownership and control disputes between the captains and the players split the league in early 2003 (Campbell, et. al., 2008). Players demanded more control over league decisions and more than half of the women walked out and started their own league. The rift produced the “Texas Rollergirls”, who later became part of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). “Bad Girls, Good Women Productions” captains changed their organization’s name to the “Texas Roller Derby Lonestar Rollergirls” (TXRD), bought a warehouse facility and built a banked track. After the split, both organizations adopted a more communal decision-making process, but the banked-track league, TXRD, remains more devoted to a business model and marketing strategy that emphasizes entertainment and sensationalism, similar to Seltzer’s original idea.

While the Austin, TX rollergirls were building their league, other women around the United States were starting their own leagues. Through personal connections, seeing posters, or zines, the women gradually heard about each other and formed alliances. Women from the more established flat track leagues traveled to other communities to help women start their own leagues. The organizations grew and became models for leagues all over the country. The Texas Rollergirls began selling their organizational rules

for one dollar to other women interested in starting their own organizations. This allowed groups in other cities to form quickly and easily. In 2004, participants founded the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTA), which currently includes 147 all-women run organizations around the country;[2] there are about 800 organizations registered worldwide and 67 more leagues are in "apprenticeship" stages in 2012 (WFTDA, 2012).

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

> "The emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press."
>
> Hebdige, 1979

Roller Derby's history and success owes a great deal to media use, coverage, and the emergence of new technology. As previously stated, primetime television catapulted the sport into American homes beginning in 1949, video taping and syndication were key to keeping the sport in the public eye, cable coverage and reality television played a big part in creating nostalgia for fans and renewing interest among supporters. In the new derby, the Internet plays a very central role in helping participants organize, communicate, support one another, and advertise league events.

Derby organizers for the new derby use technological tools on a regular basis, but media representations are of concern to some scholars. The WFTDA's motto sets a tone for roller girls: "Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary." (WFTDA, 2010). As the organization strives to appeal to a broader public, the media representation of roller derby

[2] When I began researching this topic in 2009, there were 78 organizations.

should also be considered. Several types of media are utilized to bring roller derby to mainstream consciousness. Participants take part in interviews with mainstream media organizations including print and television outlets. The Internet is also used extensively by the organization. Each team within the WFTDA hosts a website that features individual players, businesses that sponsor the leagues, community outreach, and often, highlight mainstream media coverage.

Because of roller derby's subcultural characteristics and punk style, mainstream media organizations do not cover the sport in sporting sections, but instead continue to represent derby as a lifestyle or hobby. League-sanctioned bouts played by flat track teams are recorded by volunteers and broadcast live on an Internet channel, the WFTDA's Derby News Network (DNN). DNN is an important part of the roller derby world, but it is an insular project, produced by roller derbygirls for roller derbygirls and their fans.

In print and on television, women's sports are often thought of as pastimes, featured on the back pages of "Lifestyle" and "Entertainment" sections, not posted on the Sports pages with the rest of the male-dominated sporting events. When a new team is organized, local news sometimes covers the story, placing it with other entertainment stories, or in the "kicker" block (traditionally the third or fourth section of the newscast, toward the end of the show), but *not* within the Sports coverage.

The new roller derby has been featured on several network news programs, including *Nightline: (*July 2011), *NBC Evening News* (n.d.), and *The Today Show* (July, 2007), as well as in print publications as varied as *Bitch* and *The Washington Post* (October, 2007). The message of this coverage is often not about empowerment or

feminism, however. Often messages glorify the sex appeal and spectacle of violence between women. A derby article in *Newsweek* (Leland, 1999), suggests in a picture caption, “Everyone likes to see two women fight.” A billboard for one sponsor of a team located in the Pacific Northwest reads, *“Hot chicks, padded gear? We’re a fan.”*

Most recently, Drew Barrymore made her directorial debut with the movie, "Whip It" (Mendel, et. al., 2010). The movie starred Ellen Page, and it effectively whipped derby culture back into popular American consciousness. The movie’s tag line was, “Be Your Own Hero,” and pits a young “Bliss Cavender” (Page) against the conservative “pageant-culture” of the South. The costume world of pageants for young girls, with the perfect hair and makeup, along with the over-emphasis on beauty and “being a lady” is normalized by many, but the costumes and culture that are central to the derby world are not deemed appropriate according to traditional gender expectations and roles for young girls (Thompson, 2007). Cavender must find her own way to “fit in” by rebelling against the traditions of her mother. The movie has been criticized for being a watered down version of what actually goes on in derby culture. There is little mention of gay and lesbian members, and there is not much representation of women of bigger sizes, that many derbygirls state is an important part of feeling included within the sport. However, others claim that it is as good of an introduction to the sport as the subculture could hope for (Kelly, 2009). The organization released a statement about sport’s portrayal:

> “Perhaps more importantly, the film does a pretty good job of demonstrating how meaningful the derby community can be for its members. Modern roller derby provides a unique opportunity for the thousands of people who've become involved as skaters, referees, stats, and support crew to live without labels and do something bold.”

(Derby News Network, n.d.)

In this mainstream look at derby, a male coach is the leader of the team. This practice occurs in some leagues, but is not the norm. Further, the sexual appeal of female skaters performing violence is used as a marketing strategy for the movie. To promote the film, Barrymore and lead actress Ellen Page kissed for the camera in the *Marie Claire* (October, 2009) cover story (see figure 8). In another instance, the women pose straddling one another on the skating rink (*Us.* Magazine: September, 2009). By posing on the cover in this manner, Paige and Barrymore resort to their sex appeal or play the "lesbians are hot" card in order to fill movie seats and derby bleachers.

Figure 8. "Whip It" promotion
SOURCE: Marie Claire, October, 2009.

GROUP ORGANIZATION

In the current version of the sport, it is a point of pride that the organizations that make up the World Flat Track Derby Association are all-female owned and operated

(WFTDA, 2010). Roller derby leagues that are tied to the WFTDA organization are categorized as non-profit organizations. Today's roller derby is promoted as an inclusive space for women of all shapes, sizes, races and sexual orientations (in 2012, the league ruled to allow transgendered women to skate with teams). Participants pay league fees, insurance and WFTDA fees. They are responsible for supplying their own equipment, and for volunteering for community projects sponsored by the organization.

Team rules for leagues associated with the WFTDA are proposed by members and elected representatives. Positions of power within the organizations typically include President, Vice President, Secretary, Public Relations coordinator, and Treasurer; these positions vary from team to team within WFTDA. Teams also elect other members to sit on the boards. Representatives sit on a board of directors and attend regular (usually monthly) leadership meetings. The board of directors proposes rule changes and organization legislation to the membership, who vote on the measures through Internet polls and surveys, often using freeware websites such as www.SurveyMonkey.com. Representatives serve one-year terms, if a member has to step down or retire before her term is over, the board of directors solicits resumes from interested derby members and appoints a new representative to serve out the term.

New league rules make extreme violence illegal activities. "Clotheslining" and tripping, both popular in earlier incarnations, are now penalized (WFTDA, 2010). The league emphasizes sisterhood, sportswomanship and legitimate competition. Although some fans may prefer the violence and theatrics that characterized earlier roller derby, most of the players are focused on competition and rankings.

The new derby relies heavily on local business support for sponsorship. This practice serves the dual purpose of situating the sport within the local scene and consciousness, but it also makes the sport beholden to those business interests. Derby members state their desire to be considered a legitimate sport, but it seems that successfully securing business sponsorship is at the heart of changing attitudes that favor professionalization. Derby bout producers hang banners and logos of sponsors on the walls surrounding the track, and throughout the bouts announcers thank the businesses by name. For instance, at one local bout, sponsors included a tattoo parlor, an independent chiropractor (whose clients are often rollergirls), the local Urgent Care emergency room, a video game creator, and a local microbrewery. The microbrewery even sponsored the "jammer line"[3] for the evening, meaning the brewery's name was mentioned 13 times in the span of the two-hour game. Audience members buy tickets to the event, and are encouraged to purchase merchandise and apparel featuring team logos and slogans. Proceeds from the events are used to fund future events and to pay dues to WFTDA, the parent organization.

WFTDA leagues, while run by derbygirls themselves, use marketing strategies that emphasize women's sexualized bodies in order to garner attention for the sport (see figure 9). Fundraising events are often competitions in which women put their bodies on display, in the form of wrestling competitions, beauty pageants, car washes, or (for the Austin, TX league) a strip club act at a lesbian bar. The event organizer stated that the

[3] The line at which the jammers (the point-scorers) stand, to begin the bout.

Figure 9. Promotional photos for "new derby."

team would not have hosted the same fundraiser at a male-oriented club, but a lesbian bar was deemed to be a "safe" space for the event.

ROLLER DERBY RULES

The rule set for roller derby is currently 43 pages long, and new rules are evaluated and added about once a year, after going through a testing period. Rules for the league are voted on by all league members. A board of directors deals with league oversight and is composed of volunteers who are voted into office by league members.

In the new derby, the competition is called a "bout". Play is divided into "jams" that are no more than two minutes long.[4] A bout lasts an hour and is divided into 30 minute halves. There can be any number of jams per 30 minute half. At the start of each

[4] See diagram, Appendix A.

jam, the eight “blockers” (the pack) line up on the “pivot line”. The two jammers on opposing teams line up 30 feet behind the eight blockers. The jammers are the only players on each team who score points, they start skating once the last player of the pack crosses the pivot line. Once the jammers catch up and pass the pack for the first time, they attempt to pass as many opposing team members as possible to gain points. The opposing team’s blockers try to keep the jammer from passing other skaters. The first jammer to pass all players on the opposing team the first time around the track is designated the “lead jammer” by the referee. She can call off the jam at any time by placing her hands on her hips. If she does not call off the jam, it will last for the regulation time of two minutes.

SUMMARY

Roller Derby’s history provides important context to this research and helps explain how the sport came to exist in its current form. This background shows that the sport has always been situated on the fringes of mainstream, despite its moments of popularity over the course of the last 80 years. It is interesting to note that derby’s rise and fall seems so closely intertwined with broader historical events. According to Swidler (1986) culture can be seen as a “tool kit” of symbols for constructing “strategies of action” (p. 276). In other words, perhaps the sport’s popularity coincides with broader historical moments when oppositional or divergent past times are used to help people express meaning in their lives (Curell, 2005; Swidler, 1986). Some argue that roller derby’s re-emergence suggests that people are once again looking for diversion from economic hardship or social concerns (*Newsweek*, 1999).

The spectacle of women performing in athletic events has been an issue with roller derby from the sport's earliest years. Media coverage, whether print, television, or Internet, has played an important part in helping the sport to gain an audience. The sport's current structure, while it stems from original incarnations of roller derby, is distinct in many ways and is in constant evolution. The ways the new derby are different include an emphasis on identity production, subculture, and media representation. Having explained the key terms I will employ throughout this thesis, I now continue by looking at relevant literature and outlining the theoretical framework I employ in my study.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK &

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

The following chapter discusses the important literature surrounding feminism, commodification, subcultures, hegemony and gender maneuvering. It provides the foundation for the study, and uncovers some of the ways that roller derby can be analyzed through a critical feminist lens. I then present how the two positions may work in tandem to gain a fuller understanding of both frameworks.

Because roller derby is often associated with the third wave of feminism, I include a brief history of the feminist movement in order to highlight the contradictions and complications within this discipline. A more detailed explanation of subculture situates roller derby firmly within this area. Finally, I include a discussion of hegemonic masculinities and femininities to illustrate how some derbygirls relate to, and may fail to resist, gender norms and stereotyping.

"DERBYGIRL"

Roller derby participants call themselves "derbygirls," but, the use of this term is not apolitical. The "girling of femininity" is a term used to describe the tendency to de-legitimize women's power through pejorative language (Tasker & Negra, 2007). While some feminists take issue with the use of words like "girl" to describe women, derby participants interviewed for this study either do not critically analyze their use of the

term, or, when asked about its use, state that their aim is to reclaim the term, along with other words they use to refer to one another in practice and performance (such as "bitch" or "slut"). These terms, it is important to note, are used *by* derbygirls *for* derbygirls and close friends – outsiders are typically not encouraged to use these terms. This practice acts as a sort of cultural glue, a social structure and a way of communicating membership in the organization. This discourse between players will be analyzed in later chapters.

HEGEMONY

Historically and culturally, order is maintained by dominance and informal consent of power imbalances. Gramsci's (1971) articulation of hegemony is a process of creating "ideological common ground, or a degree of collective consciousness" (Steeves, 1997, p.2). This collective consciousness becomes accepted and adhered to as if it were common sense, or "the only way" of thinking or engaging in social, personal, and political activities. Hegemonic processes work by convincing people to act and think in certain, socially acceptable patterns – as established by those who control political and social capital. Marginalized groups consent to established power relations, even if subcultural practices and activities appear to disrupt the status quo. When an ideology is enforced through hegemony, force is not needed by those who control capital in order to control behavior.

The media have an important role in producing meaning in favor of dominant ideologies, while downplaying or de-emphasizing the actions of subordinate actors (Steeves, 1997). Gramsci's theory of hegemony in relation to cultural production is

especially useful to include to this research in order to discuss resistance to power structures in gender relations. Gramsci further discusses the politicization and depoliticization of movements through a process of acceptance and rejection (by controlling actors) of certain aspects of a subordinate group. A subcultural group often is not generally rejected outright, but certain aspects of the group are incorporated into the mainstream, thus maintaining a power imbalance.

Foucault (1972) and Potter (1996) discuss the idea that the creation of identities that appear accepted, average, and agreed upon is part of the process of reproducing meanings and establishing authority in social practices, as cited by Mean and Kassing (2008). Hegemonic gender relations are notions of what it means to be a man or be a woman within a culture. Hegemony in this instance works through the production of exemplars of heterosexual femininity and masculinity; symbols that have authority despite the fact that most people do not fully live up to them (Connell, 1987). It is important to note that there is not one particular masculinity or femininity, but several different "masculinities" and femininities. These different ways of producing gender relations are hierarchical, however (Connell, 2000). Finley (2010) defines hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities to indicate the imbalance of power associated with gendered norms in society. Emphasized femininities are those hegemonic ideals of female action, the roles that women embody that are culturally supported and work within hegemonic structures: those actions and attitudes that comply with gender relations and stereotypes of femininity (Finley, 2010).

Besides emphasized femininities, scholars have categorized alternative femininities, which actively disrupt relations of male dominance, and "pariah" femininities, which are often disregarded, or relegated to the fringes of culture. An example of a woman who may be seen as exhibiting a pariah femininity would be a woman who is a boss or manager, who is described as a "bitch" when she exhibits characteristics of strength or assertiveness in a job setting. Her behavior may have been received as entirely appropriate if she were a man, but as a woman, her actions and attitude may be unwelcome (Finley, 2010). Roller derby is interesting to study in this context because it positions females in power roles even though they adopt transgressive identities in the process of "doing" derby. Roller derby participants appear to disrupt hegemonic gender relations, but through through the performance of sexuality, through their marketing of the sport, and through their understanding of their participation, they may also be engaging in a naturalization of gender order.

Discussions of hegemony in feminist study are important because they situate practices within a hierarchical structure. Schippers (2007) classifies femininities in categories based on whether they threaten hegemonic gender relations or are subsumed within those relations. "Pariah" femininities like roller derby are stigmatized and therefore "less threatening to hegemonic gender relations" (Finley, p. 362).

Marchart (2003) argues that subcultural politics lack a crucial macro-political component, meaning collective resistance is to hegemony is unlikely through subcultural practices, particularly because there is too great a focus on what Hebdige (1979) calls "resistance through style" or "resistance through rituals. In the following section, I

determine whether roller derby can be classified as a subculture, and further explicate the relation between hegemonic resistance and subcultures.

SUBCULTURE: IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE FISHNETS

The analysis of subcultures is valuable in taking a closer look at how people try to resist dominant social, political or economic orders and whether they may successfully ever live "outside" of hegemonic norms. While many authors (Hall, 1997; Hebdige, 1979; Riordan, 2002; Thornton, 1997) have studied subcultural groups, a clear definition of it is still elusive, and many of these authors' research focuses on male-dominated subcultures; this study adds to current research through its focus on a female-dominated subculture.

Hall's early work defines a subculture as any group that exists outside of the hegemonic idea of culture (Hall & Jefferson, 1993). These hegemonic values include idealist definitions of what it means to be male and female --values that are rarely attainable, but instead are built on traditional ideals, fantasies and desires (Connell & Masserschmidt, 2005). Hall argues that subversive societal, political, cultural and personal desires are often overlooked or dismissed as unacceptable by the mainstream.

"Mainstream" sports are described here as any sport, including Olympic events, that are broadcast by "the big three" (television networks). I consider mainstream sports to be those that are broadcast on sporting channels, and not classified in news coverage as

an exotic, or "lifestyle" activity. Before Title IX[5] was enacted, the mere inclusion of women in a sporting event was uncommon, and generally turned discourse around the sport into a focus on flashy entertainment, not competition. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) is the national governing board for public school sports and academic competitions. For this study, oppositional or "alternative" sports such as roller derby are categorized as those which are not listed in the NFHS list of athletic and fine arts activities (NFHS, 2012). Through these structures, I classify roller derby as a subcultural sport. More discussion of subculture and theory occurs in chapter three.

Mosco (2008) identifies work to be done in developing how social movements use new media to as a tool for activism and resistance. Movements, he states, are much more able to come together in virtual worlds and through virtual spaces, they are more able to get their message out to a scattered audience if they have access and knowledge of website development. DIY practitioners, Suicide Girls (a subcultural website, business and Internet community that is sustained through merchandise and membership sales, and paying some women to submit nude and semi-nude photos of themselves), Riot Grrrls and Derbygirls have taken over media for themselves in order to disseminate not only their messages, but also their products, to a larger audience. While there is a struggle to gain access to these tools (truly subversive groups may not be allowed access to these forms of communication) Hardt and Negri argue that technology does not just serve capitalism, it *can* significantly disrupt it "because of the relatively low cost of some

[5] Title IX is an amendment passed in 1972 which outlaws all forms of sex-based discrimination in federally funded schools, including athletic programs.

technology, and the ability of small pockets of people to join in resistance to capitalism on larger scales" (Mosco, 2008).

Representation As Discourse

Hall (1997) discusses the importance of shared meanings in determining how participants of a particular culture make sense of the world through representation, words, images and media. Studies of constructed meaning and gender also prove useful in understanding how derby participants' outward appearances act as a kind of social glue that serves to bring women into the culture of derby. Studies indicate that the body can be used as communication. The seemingly simple act of skating and participating on the track in the performance of derby is a non-vocal form of communication and ritual, directly related to establishing cultural norms (Yerian, 2002). Additionally, the costumes worn in roller derby fit Hall's analysis of subculture because they create shared meanings for members of the teams. He states that language in many forms help people produce, exchange, and make sense of their experiences. Thus, the derbygirl's body is a tool for communicating strength, sexiness, femininity and power.

Empowerment

If one believes advertisers and marketing strategies, it would be easy to believe that to gain empowerment, a person simply needs to flex her credit card muscles. If one can exercise empowerment simply by owning a pair of shoes that makes one *feel* powerful, strong, and in control of one's life, the discourse of empowerment would be simple indeed. This thesis discusses how ideas of empowerment are often translated into

sexual agency or superficial feelings of empowerment, without disrupting fundamental power relations between men and women.

Empowerment cannot be understood without its relation to power. Rowlands (1995) states that confusion over the term arises because "power–is itself disputed, and so is understood and experienced in differing ways by different people" (p. 101). Rowlands further discusses different relations of power: "power over", "power to", "power with" and "power from within." These relationships all produce differing conceptions of

Table 1: Empowerment Dimensions. SOURCE: Rowlands, 1995.

Personal	Relational	Collective
Empowerment through developing sense of self and individual confidence, undoing effects of internalized oppression.	Empowerment through developing ability to negotiate and influence nature of relationships and decisions made within it.	Empowerment through individuals working together to achieve more extensive impact. Includes political action. focused on cooperation, not competition.

empowerment. Personal, relational and collective empowerment are key terms, or dimensions to identify and define as well (See Table 1). Rowlands discusses these dimensions of empowerment as personal, relational and collective. Personal empowerment is individualistic and internalized, whereas relational and collective empowerment involve individuals working together on micro and macro levels in order to gain empowerment locally or institutionally. For the purposes of this thesis, I am interested in understanding whether roller derby empowers women personally, relationally, or collectively. Keller and Mbwewe (1991) state that empowerment is:

> "a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination" (Rowlands, 1995).

This definition maps well onto the activity of roller derby, including how derbygirls participate, organize and produce roller derby bouts and entertainment, but women speak of their participation in terms of sexual agency and empowerment, so this definition does not fit perfectly to what is happening within the sport.

Empowerment, according to McWhirter (1991), must be *understood* in the particular situation in order for collective action to be defined as empowering action. While derbygirls frequently discuss empowerment through their actions, some comments lead one to believe that they are not fully aware of power dynamics at play in their particular subcultural activity. The discourse of empowerment is easily used in a capitalist system in order to sell individual empowerment. When this occurs, the term may become meaningless.

HISTORY OF FEMINISM: A CLASH OF THE WAVES

Placing feminism in the context of history is important to understanding how the field became more closely associated with cultural studies (McLaughlin, 1999). I believe that this shift in attitudes removed an important discussion of power and control. By bringing this emphasis back to the field through this research, I hope to uncover some of the hidden wheels that help the subculture to function. There is a great deal of disagreement among feminist scholars as to how to break down the field. The term

feminist has been in flux from the moment it was first coined in France in the 1880s. Then, it described a movement and cause for the support of suffrage and political initiatives (Freedman, 2005). The term was controversial even at the time, and people often associated it with radicalism. While there is no consensus on what it means to be a feminist, or to not be a feminist, there is the basic idea that supporters of feminism acknowledge inequality and demand change in attitude and legislation that serves to balance equality in gender relations. Feminists acknowledge the privilege granted to males in many cultures and work to close that gap, along with the growing gap between rich and poor (Zerilli, 2005).

Feminists often voice opinions that challenge prevailing gender relations, including issues related to civil rights, education, ecology, and socialism-- this list is certainly not exhaustive. Further, many women who, in their daily actions may follow feminist ideals, wish not to label themselves as feminists for a variety of reasons, including the politicization of the word, the perceived lack of inclusion of racial issues, and the idea that the goals of the previous generation's feminists do not mirror or reflect the lives of contemporary women (Zoonen, 1994; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000).

The different eras or historical periods of feminism are discussed as being a part of different "waves." Even this conceptualization is contested (Siegel, 1997). McRobbie (2009) argues that waves are inaccurate in discussing feminism because it assumes a certain beginning and end, and it blurs the overlapping aspects of feminism and how ideas and people interact with one another without artificial barriers of time and space. It's important to be aware that these waves were not coined during the time in which the

feminist activity was taking place, but instead in retrospect in order to organize the time periods. I employ the use of waves in this discussion because it is effective in situating feminist research themes of today, while still acknowledging the work of feminist theorists from the past.

The so-called first wave is generally characterized as the period leading up to, and following suffrage movements for women in the United States and other countries in the developed world. It has strong ties to the abolition of slavery as well. First wave of feminist activists did not generally champion the freedom and suffrage of all women, but instead focused their action on mainly white women's rights. The quest for equality did not stop after women won the right to vote in the United States. The second wave is largely associated with the anti-war era and Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70's. In the middle of the 20th century, feminist theorists and humanitarian workers sought economic independence for women. Women demanded acknowledgement for their contributions to domestic work and to be included in civil rights legislation that affected hiring practices in male-dominated fields. Legislation regarding rape and domestic violence were pushed through as well.

The cause for reproductive liberation of women went hand-in-hand with fair labor practice demands (Braithwaite, 2002). The "sex wars" of the 1980s produced yet another rift in feminist theory (Glick, 2000). So-called "sex positive" feminists clashed with some radical feminist ideas of sexuality and objectification through sexualized images and actions of women. Sex positive, or "anti-censorship" feminists argued that women were not simply disempowered actors or objects, but instead were active meaning-making

subjects: the personal, had become, the political (Hanisch, 1969; Butler, 1990; Glick, 2000). “Pro-sex” feminists theorized on how the sexual liberation movements of the 50s and 60s shaped feminism, commodification of sex (through new magazines such as *Playboy*) and counterculture. This pro-sex feminism included gay, bisexual, and transgender issues; it also provided a bridge to the next wave of feminism, with which roller derby participants often identify.

In the 1990’s a new shift, or perhaps more accurately, a transition, in feminism emerged. Walker (1995) first spoke of the need for a “third wave” feminist philosophy. The new wave indicates a change in goals perceived by feminists of the first wave, feminists of the second wave, and those of the next generation. The author states that terms like “feminist” made women uncomfortable; they wanted to distance themselves from negative connotations of “angry women,” “bra burners,” or “hairy lesbians.” The author writes that a new generation of women wanted to be more than fighters, constantly needing to hold on to and champion their cause; they wanted the ability to choose marriage, sex (gay/straight/trans/bi/queer, etc.), or family but still be acknowledged for remaining loyal to the ideals of feminism (Walker, 1995). There is a distinct ideology in the movement toward using sexual freedom to discuss women’s struggles against oppression (Glick, 2000). This agency has become foundational to 1990s discourse on feminism, including that of Butler (1990). Many feminists discount Walker’s claims regarding third wave feminism, largely because many acknowledge that the goals of second-wave feminism had not yet been fully achieved (Heywood & Drake, 1997). The third wave embraces contradiction, it is more explicitly inclusive of women of color and

of the queer community (Siegal, 1997). It muddies definitions of what it means to be women, men, and transgendered people (Kelly-Dewitt, 2005; Renegar & Sowards, 2009). Women who employ third wave feminist ideas are generally younger women; there is a distinct generational divide between some feminist advocates and others (Heywood & Drake, 1997).

In the introduction of *To Be Real* (1995), Walker writes about her own issues with following in the footsteps of so many big-name feminists, including her mother, Alice Walker, and godmother, Gloria Steinem:

> For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad. (p. xxxiii).

Walker's definition of a feminist is, "a family of people conscious of advancing the feminist cause in whatever direction its adherents choose." Third wave feminists generally oppose dichotomized views of gender. Critics of the third wave ideals argue that the movement lost sight of more concrete advancements of women; they argue that the third wave is too focused on women being sexually free and not concerned enough with equality in work and home lives (Heywood &Drake, 1997; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, Siegel, 1997).

POSTFEMINISM: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

A fourth branch of feminism that also receives a great deal of attention and argument is postfeminism. The term postfeminism was coined by the media and popular culture in the 1990s to discuss the relationship some women have with feminism: that it is seen as a negative ideology, and the feminism of the past does not, and cannot account for the progress women have indeed made in public and private sectors (McRobbie, 2004). Postfeminism, and those who describe themselves as postfeminists, (or sometimes "anti-feminist feminists") describe feminism as a dated concept that champions victimhood for women at the expense of equality (Bean, 2007). Postfeminist theorists state that while third wave feminism is situated as coming after second wave feminism, postfeminists argue that it is *not* founded on second wave feminism (Genz, 2006). "Post-theories", as Genz articulates, entail "exploiting the in-between spaces and transitory space of the other. Not here or there, but both."

Postfeminism is interrogated because critics argue that it ignores the structural inequalities that most women face on a daily basis and it constructs feminism as a radical ideology, rather than a scholarly field of criticism. McRobbie (2008) argues that postfeminism and popular feminism have supplanted feminism, and that this trend has serious consequences for young girls who are encouraged and expected to participate in the practices of consumerism in order to be normative members of the female community. While women may not be pushed out of jobs and back into their homes, postfeminist discourse subtly indicates that feminism is no longer needed (McRobbie, 2009). Critics of both the third wave and postfeminism argue that the groups lack focus

or a clear statement of goals, that feminists of all waves have consigned themselves to the "intimate sphere of home and family" (the private) and have ignored, or balked at research that is focused on politics, economics and civil society (the public) (McLaughlin, 1999).

SUBCULTURE REVISITED

In order to define roller derby as a subculture, one must first define the term. Hebdige (1979) wrote extensively on subcultural membership and commodification of subcultural style. While his work on subcultures is male-centered and may be dated due in part to the emergence of new media, his work is still important as a foundation for this study. Once removed from their private texts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise.

Hebdige, 1979, p. 96

While Hebdige discusses subcultures' tendency to draw the attention of the media, to "become a catalyst for moral panic" and finally to become co-opted and incorporated into the mainstream, this does not always occur, and may occur less in a female dominated subculture. Hebdige further describes subculture as representing "interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media" (p. 90). Thus, subcultures are often regarded as groups that distance themselves from the mainstream, usually associated with, "the establishment" or what is normative and accepted in popular culture.

Gelder (2007) and Thornton **(**1997) provide very useful criteria for identifying subcultures. Gelder bases his characterization on six basic ideas, which intersect well with the action of derby participation (See Table 2).

Table 2. Gelder's Subcultural Characterizations &Application to Roller Derby

Subcultural Characterizations	How Roller Derby Relates
1. Usually evaluated negatively in terms of relations to labor. (signified by descriptive words for activity such as "idle" or "leisure")	Many roller derbygirls talk about how their jobs and families are a barrier to playing roller derby. Others say they quit or cut down their hours, or spend less time at home in order to be more active in derby.
2. Group members deviate from their own class background and come to disavow their class affiliation.	Many women come from largely white, middle class families. Career and education levels vary greatly.
3. Located at 1 removed from property ownership. Group members tend to territorialize rather than own their space.	Derby leagues rent space in public or private event centers. They schedule meetings in bars and common areas of members' apartments.
4. Subcultures come together outside of the domestic sphere, away from home and family. Usually involves initial denunciation from home and adjustment into new subculture.	Women express satisfaction in having a space to vent and be themselves, outside of home and work environments. Often discuss past negative encounters from childhood that they believe led them to view themselves as "different" or "outsiders" and search for an accepting space.
5 Subcultures are usually equated with excess and exaggeration.	Costumes and bedroom attire are common in bouts and practices. Heavy make-up and cleavage are often part of the "uniform".
6. Subcultures usually are in opposition to what they see as banalities of mass cultural forms.	Derbygirls often cite the "meanness" and frivolity of mainstream girls as pushing them toward the subculture.

Source: Gelder, K. (2007)

The first criterion for a subculture is that it is "usually evaluated negatively in terms of relations to labor." The subcultural practitioners are often ridiculed for being lazy, hedonistic or self indulgent. Often subcultural activities are discussed with an attitude of condescension. For instance, when a subcultural activity is covered in the news, it is often framed as, "look what these crazy kids are doing now," rather than discussed as a legitimate activity (Hebdige, 1979).

A second criterion of subcultures is that group members have often "deviated from their own class background and come to disavow their class affiliation." This is an important factor, because many roller derbygirls say that they strayed away from their own families and formed a family within roller derby. Thirdly, the subculture often does not own property, but territorialize space– an interesting idea in relation to roller derby, as the space where many teams skate is rented, and bars, coffee shops and shared spaces of apartment complexes often become the meeting places for group members. A fourth classification includes coming together outside of the domestic sphere. While roller derbygirls talk about their fellow team members as "sisters" and bouts are advertised as family-friendly events, many derbygirls often talk about their involvement as something "outside" of their family lives-- an outlet outside of their homes or places of employment. Other derbygirls make roller derby a family event, with girlfriends, boyfriends, and even children taking part in one capacity or another. Fifth, "the subculture is equated with excess or exaggeration." There is certainly a "look" that is associated with roller derbygirls, although some are moving away from

extreme costuming as team members discuss the importance of gaining legitimacy from the sports establishment. The "scene" is still a very important aspect to roller derby participants; it is built by all those involved in watching and creating the spectacle. Finally, the group is seen in opposition to mass cultural forms. Group members renounce the objects of mainstream desires to join this different but cohesive subcultural unit (Gelder, 2007).

Hall and Jefferson (1993) discussed how punks in Britain construct their identities, noting that subcultures are defined by dress, dialect, and other characteristics. From punks in Britain to "goths" in Germany to "hipsters" or "slackers" in the United States, the same people who break off from the "mainstream" to assert their individuality or to be separate from others still look to group membership to find acceptance and to build social capital. Thornton (1997) bases her analysis of social capital on Bourdieu's (1984) exploration of culture, but builds on Bourdieu's work to include a definition of *sub*cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, social capital is understood not by "what you know, but who you know, and who knows you." Thornton states that subcultural capital is a subjective view of being "in the know." However, when subcultures are commodified by mainstream media representations, meaning is taken away from the subculture, which often results in certain members leaving or abandoning it altogether. This makes the commodification of subcultures slightly more complicated than the commodification of mainstream culture.

> "Although it converts to economic capital, subcultural capital is not as class-bound as cultural capital. This is not to say that class is irrelevant, simply that it does not correlate in any one-to-one way with levels of youthful subcultural capital" (Thornton, 1997: p. 203).

Subcultural capital often is fueled by rebellion against the dominant class.

While joining a subculture in order to defy others may seem counterintuitive, it is nonetheless an important part of studying countercultural or alternative activities. Roller derby subculture is somewhat different than other subcultures because of the age of participants. Derby participants are 21 years or older. The average age range for participants is 30-35 years old (WFTDA). This age demographic is not always the one that comes to mind when thinking about those who become part of an alternative culture.

HEGEMONY & GENDER MANEUVERING

> The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.
>
> Marx & Engels, The German Ideology (1956)

Trautner argues that on a very basic level, sexualized depictions of women feed in to objectification by reinforcing the traditional assumptions of what men want in a woman (Trautner, 2005). Trautner further states that this structure is ultimately grounded in class and socioeconomic norms and constrictions. Their choice is limited to forms of expression that are accepted by sponsors of the league, as well as fans and audience members. While derbygirls have the agency to choose their own attire, they are aware that others may consume their images within a sexually-charged environment. The derbygirl may feel equality with men through enacting violence or sexual empowerment, even if she does not feel solidarity with men.

Choice is an important component to the study of roller derby and empowerment as well. Duits & van Zoonen (2006) discuss girls' clothing decisions as a space for scrutiny, usually alluding to sexualized violence from outsiders and sexual deviance of girls. The authors argue that women's choices are understood or misunderstood not as authentic, autonomous acts, but as being made through external influences. On the other hand, the authors state that boy's clothing choices are usually framed within a less complex discourse of free speech or expression. This puts representation of girls and women "in a moral, rather than political discourse, such that girls are rarely recognized as 'doing politics' in the ways that they dress" (Gill, 2007). Further research into the roller derby phenomenon deals more with hegemonic expansion, which allows for the dominant culture to adopt the ideas of marginalized subcultures. While it does force the dominant culture to change, it may fail to *decenter* the dominant culture (Wilkins, 2004).

Other researchers (Lamb, 2010) argue that feelings of sexual agency are not necessarily signs that a woman is empowered. Empowerment is not merely an individual's "subjective sense" but it must be judged "in terms of power and control over resources" (Peterson, 2009). To be clear: there is still a stigmatization of women's free sexual expression, in the terms used to describe women who employ sex as a mode of their own empowerment.

Because sports have historically been male-dominated, hegemonic masculinity is an important part of understanding women as athletes and competitors, especially in non-traditional sporting events. Previous studies in sports sociology have found that identity construction of female athletes "remained subject to traditional gendered hegemony

requiring the negotiation of heterosexuality and femininity" (Mean & Kassing, 2008). These male hegemonic values include dominating on the field, showing no mercy toward competitors and emphasizing fashion, hairstyle and accessories for the female athlete. One example of this is within the sport of Olympic boxing. A women's competition is to be included in the London 2012 Olympics, but not without extensive discussion over whether to require the boxers to wear skirts (Douglas, 2011).

Although females are central to roller derby, and even though males are often excluded from roles of power in the organization (although some teams do have male coaches), participants still manage their identities, and either enforce their femininity through their performance or assert their athletic superiority through their actions. They accomplish this complex navigation through the masculine space by building new identities and adopting garish interpretations of what strength entails, that is, what is essentially male. The women will often embody the role of the "tough" competitor: her game face is intimidation, her body and mannerisms are often stereotypically male representations.

By problematizing topics of women in sport, long after Title IX has opened the field for female athletes, it is argued that we simply perpetuate the issues that women face in and out of competition (Cahn, 1994). By discussing women's ability to be more than one identity at any given time: to hold the title of mother, entrepreneur, worker, and athlete-- some argue that women further distance themselves from men, rather than including themselves into sporting culture without employing and highlighting these distinctions. How often, for instance, does a male athlete throw a pitch or score a goal

and think to himself, “I really acted in accordance with the gender roles set forth for me by society on that one, didn’t I?!” How often would a sportscaster acknowledge an athlete’s “manliness” after shooting a basket? The allusion to “being a man” or “taking it like a man” pervades in sports for both female and male athletes. “Throwing like a girl” still means that a person is not as athletic as they are supposed to be (Jhally & Alper, 2002). Female athletes in sports such as tennis, basketball, hockey and rugby face harsh speculation about their sexuality and often receive little coverage from mainstream news organizations. They must satisfy a male standard of athletic competence, but are still subject to the feminine standards of appearance and interaction (Jhally & Alper, 2002). The double-standard female athletes are subjected to and the lens of scrutiny they face over their sexuality while competing in mainstream sports (basketball or hockey for instance) is similar to the outside criticism roller derby participants face as strong females. Inside the roller derby world, however, the LGBT community is celebrated and accepted, a person’s sexuality is not considered deviant.

Women’s sports competitions and players are often covered in “Feature” sections of newspapers. Rarely do they lead sportscasts in local news shows, and they are all but non-existent on sports-oriented stations like ESPN. Unless the athletes or the stories that feature them are discussing their domesticity or sexuality, female players’ athleticism often takes a back seat in mediated messages (Shockley, 2005). When a woman is featured in sporting events in print ads or press coverage, the focus is most often on her sexual appeal and body composition, not on her athletic achievements (Jhally & Alper, 2002; Carty, 2005). This means that it is much more important for women to be aware of

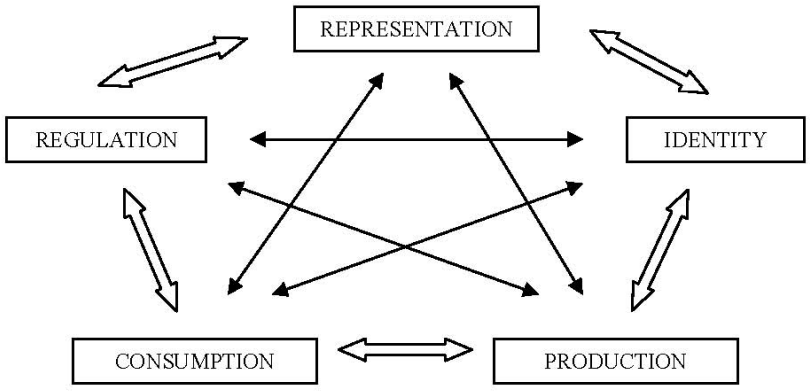
how they are representing themselves and how others are representing them than are men in similar situations.

CONSUMPTION AND THE CIRCUIT OF CULTURE

Du Gay, et. al. (1997) define five major cultural processes. Representation, Identity, Production, Consumption and Regulation. Together, the authors state, these processes constitute the "circuit of culture." The framework was developed to describe the interconnections between political and economic forces, while still including culture as integral to the study of these relationships. The circuit shows that each moment of articulation of a particular cultural (or subcultural) action or artifact relies on the other processes. I will be discussing roller derby as a subcultural feminist phenomenon from the points of production and consumption, how these processes help to create and often mask representations of empowerment and identity (See table 3).

Table 3. Du Gay et. al.: Circuit of Culture.

CIRCUIT OF CULTURE



(du Gay et al, 1997)

Feminism has historically been used as a tool to further capitalist interests. Maxwell (2001) notes that even the employment of Rosie the Riveter, the "We Can Do It" woman of the war, as a feminist symbol was not focused on women's equality (although that was a by-product), she was incorporated into culture as a tool to keep production and labor, and therefore capitalism, moving. McRobbie (2009) researches the intersection of popular culture and politics; her work lends a great deal to this research. McRobbie argues that feminism has become an instrument for neoliberal economies and corporations, thus turning the discourse of feminism into a popular sideshow and appropriating feminist praxis through consumerism. The use of the female body as a commodified sexual object is nothing new. Friedan (1963) deplored "the sexual sell" in *The Feminine Mystique*. The sexualization of women in popular culture has not ceased, in fact it has arguably become even more central to mediated culture. As empowerment becomes watered down in order to mean something to everyone, corporations capitalize on a commodified image of female beauty. Butler (1990) likewise warns of activities that are easily watered down or de-politicized. She cites a need to "distinguish between truly subversive parodies and those which are likely to be incorporated."

The new roller derby is a useful sport to study using the circle of culture. It is one of the few spaces where women own, operate and control all aspects of the organization. The processes of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation are all interacting with one another. In terms of production, roller derby is steeped in a "Do-it-yourself" (DIY) attitude reminiscent of the Riot Grrrl scene of the early 1990s– in participants' appearance as well as their demeanors. Riot Grrrl was a

musical movement made up of women from several groups centered in Olympia, Washington and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest. It was steeped in punk culture and brought specific attention to gender and feminism through music, zines, and as an underground collective of women (Thompson, 2004). Roller derby does actively follow several of the tenets outlined in the Riot Grrrl Manifesto (1991), including the desire to "take over the means of production and create our own meanings." The Riot Grrrl "look" is the most obvious comparison to roller derby. Band members and fans' outfits often were reminiscent of schoolgirls with ripped stockings, permanent marker tags on skin that read "slut" or "whore". Riot Grrrls say they chose to wear these items not necessarily to "take back" the names, but to reinforce fantasies existing at the level of imaginary into material and symbolic form:

> Your (symbolic) reality depends on imagining (fantasizing) that all girls and women are sluts, whores and bitches? Look then at your fantasy in symbolic form, in corporeal form."
>
> Thompson, 2004

Williams (1976) discusses fantasies and "repressed desires" as one of the reasons that subcultures exist in the first place: Subcultures are, put simply, impulses that the current mode of production cannot satisfy. Much like the Riot Grrrl movement, roller derby participants value their own efforts, the roller derby community, and their marginal status as sports participants above being controlled by an owner. Derby is unique in this aspect; as women continue to participate in athletic events of all types, there are still very few organizations where the controlling members are women (Messner, 2002).

Women's participation in roller derby goes far beyond skating around the track. Women are involved in all promotions and media releases, they sell the tickets (with the help of some local businesses), they organize fundraisers for the league as well as for other non-profit organizations in their communities; they "set-up" and "take-down" the track at the facility they are performing in, they are in charge of all rule-making, coaching, training and safety procedures in practice and bout atmospheres. Overall, skaters are much more involved in all aspects of production and organization than players of most other sports. If alienation from the production of a commodity is a problem with capitalism, roller derby stands in stark contrast to the neoliberal model of production (Beaver, 2010). In roller derby, because of its very distinct "DIY" aspects, there is resistance to its incorporation into mainstream culture. Ferreday (2008) discusses a DIY attitude as not only important, but necessary if a subculture aims to resist incorporation by mainstream culture.

McRobbie (2008) notes that the appropriation of the term "girl" by corporations leads to "quasi-feminist" marketing that equates female freedom with gender equity. Indeed, Chasin (2000) in her research linking the commodification of gay and lesbian political movements, warns of the inherent risks to progressive action when dealing with identity-based activities. The question must be raised whether the sport of roller derby and participation *in* roller derby has been de-politicized, and has been incorporated into the realm of "lipstick feminism" and "spice girls empowerment" (McRobbie, 2008).

Riordan (2001) states that feminism has sacrificed the movement's goals of equality for a cute pair of heels. When this de-politicization occurs, it becomes difficult to

tell if a particular subculture such as roller derby is indeed empowering women, or simply serving as a distraction. Further research on oppositional subcultures discusses how women navigate sexualization and empowerment while arguably reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. The Suicide Girls markets itself as feminist pornography in large part because many of the women are tattooed or pierced, or photographed kissing and being intimate with other women. The site is a commercial endeavor, started by a woman and man in Portland, OR "just to see hot punk rock girls naked" (www.suicidegirls.com). The owners of the website encourage women to not just post pictures of themselves gratis, but women who are paid by the company are required to regularly post blog entries, topics range from feminist-themed critiques of culture, to questions about sexuality, tips, and daily musings. The Suicide Girls in an example of an almost entirely commodified postfeminist activity, despite its claims at empowerment, there is very little political action fostered through the site or its members (Magnet, 2007).

Wilkins (2004) analyzes how members of Goth subcultures navigate the nightclub scene. The author posits that while women in the Goth subculture may view themselves as being independent and able to make the choice to sexualize themselves, they are simply falling into traditional roles set for them by patriarchal mores of sexual encounters. In her research, Wilkins finds that while those within the Goth scene make claims to sexual freedom for instance, very few women are involved in the practice of having multiple male partners (though having another female partner is often acceptable), stating that their male partner would not approve of such an arrangement. Meanwhile, men often were allowed or encouraged to engage in sexual activity with more than one

female partner. Wilkins argues that women's *choice* of wearing corsets, fishnets, dog collars and other constricting garments is simply a case of women playing along with male hegemonic values of submission. Wilkins also notes that these garments are tools of oppression, but that because women say they choose to wear the clothing, they state that they are in control, that they are acting independently of larger societal expectations of women.

In the case of some subcultural activities, "no matter how alternative or subversive an activity may feel, it is held to fail as long as it is capable of being (mis)read as a reproduction of normative sexuality." (Ferreday, 2008: 8). When women's participation in a sport requires them to buy (and buy into) a certain aesthetic, the site of empowerment treads on commodity feminism. Women are encouraged to "be a feminist, or just dress like one" (BUST, 1993; Groeneveld, 2009). While "feminist" may not be a label many women identify with, "girl power" themes are everywhere. Companies use the ideology of empowerment to sell products, movies, and entertainment to women. Television shows such as *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002)*, Sex and the City* (1998-2004)*,* and most recently, *Girls* (2012) characterize the "postfeminist singleton" in this struggle to be career-woman, sexy woman, and relationship woman; to be everything to everyone-- the shows indicate that do so may be as simple as wearing the right shade of lipstick (Genz, 2010). This "free market" feminism relies on the image of the strong woman, an individual who makes her own choices, focusing on her own personal freedoms instead of structural oppression and collective action. "It's no coincidence," writes Manzano (2000) "that the

marketable, media-friendly, Third-Wave feminist emphasis on individual action dovetails nicely with our capitalist economy's prescription for success" (p. 2).

The theme of power and inequality is central to this research. Van Zoonen (1994) defines feminist theory as made up of two fields: gender and power. It is important, however, to move beyond the idea *that* women may not hold positions of power in many situations and focus on what can or is being done about it. To quote Marx (1845): "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however is to change it." This study of roller derby as a feminist subculture will answer whether the nature of the sport changes or reinforces power imbalances through the structure of a women-only subcultural community.

Jhally (2006) argues that culture is not something that people demand, but something that must be sold. He argues that sports can act as a contemporary "opiate of the masses", as a cultural artifact that serves to "divert, to distract, and to amuse people away from the alienation and drudgery imposed by capitalist work relations" (p. 51). Apart from being a convenient diversion, cultural works can be commodified. In reference to the commodification of gay culture, Chasin (2000) discusses the large number of social groups that received acceptance into mainstream culture by promoting their visibility and struggling for enfranchisement. She notes the pattern between an "identity group"'s efforts to gain political legitimacy and, having "arrived" at some form of acceptance, the frequency of marketing campaigns to seize the message for a profit. She concludes that this market co-option of an identity group, while it is combined with grassroots activism, still constrains political activity. Jhally also notes that cultural

industries do not challenge people to critically analyze their actions, in large part because turning people *on* to the reality of the production of culture could persuade people to try to turn *off* or turn away from the cultural artifact itself.

SUMMARY

This chapter brought together the literature that informs this study in various ways. Several researchers in the field of feminist studies state the need for different perspectives to rely on one another in order to deal with the various complications of real life application, including sites of resistance in subcultural communities, and how new media is used in these communities. The previous section showed the unique points of intersection between the studies of subculture, hegemony, and feminism. It showed how DIY attitudes employed through feminist praxis helped can shape and strengthen a group's resistance to commodification. The next chapter will weave together these concepts with the data collected, in order to come to a more thorough understanding of the research questions.

CHAPTER IV

METHODS: ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH & DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

This next section discusses how I used my methods to answer the research questions I outlined earlier:

RQ1. How do female subcultural practitioners (in this case, derbygirls) construct and communicate empowerment?
RQ2. How does the World Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA)'s organizational model empower or constrain its participants?
RQ3. Is Women's Flat Track Roller Derby a de-politicized feminist activity?

I examined the above questions through the use of two methods of analysis: ethnography, using participant observations and field note analysis; and critical discourse analysis, using open-ended semi-structured interviews. Following a discussion of how I gathered my data, I present the literature concerning ethnography and explain how my participation helped answer the first research question. I then present the literature that informs critical discourse analysis, including how I used the data to uncover instances of empowerment and a detailed account of the organizational structure of the league. Next I present my data: the narrative includes an analysis of my field notes and observations, the critical discourse analysis outlines key themes and how they were discussed in the discourse of roller derby participants.

...

I gathered eight interviews of participants in roller derby. This practice provided an important understanding of how the derbygirls perceive themselves, their sport and themselves in relation to the sport. The names used in this thesis, except where noted, are variations of those adopted by Roller derbygirls themselves, and do not reveal the participant's identities. The choosing of a derby name is an important part for many women in "becoming" derbygirls. The names have symbolic meaning for the women and in many cases reflect the women's attitudes about their participation. Because of this, I endeavored to make up names that were similar to the style of the individual roller derbygirl and tried to derive the new names *from* the women's own names. Most of the women I interviewed did not require anonymity in order to participate, however I created pseudonyms in order to comply with IRB standards.

The main source of interviews were from a Pacific Northwest league that was no more than two years old at the start of my participation. I chose this group for two main reasons: [1] because they were a newly organized club in the official WFTDA league, they were still learning the sport's structures and organization, and [2] because I was able to participate with them without geographic limitations. I also was added to the group's email listserv, which allowed me regular access to mass emails, notices of rule changes, volunteer and fundraising events, and personal advertising.[6] This study could have benefitted from a larger sample of derbygirls, including derbygirls from cities of varying populations, and those with a more racially diverse demographic base. This was not feasible for this study due to geography, time and resources available.

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[6] Often derbygirls sell skate gear, furniture, and sublet opportunities through the email group-- akin to www.craigslist.com).

The transcribed interviews yielded data directly from derbygirls about their participation; I view these interviews as documentation of the discourse of roller derby participation. The use of participant observation situated the interviews within the practice of doing derby, by "being there" I was able to corroborate and interrogate the derbygirls' discourses, and also to witness the process of becoming a derbygirl, within which women begin to formulate their ideas about participation and empowerment within the sport. The interviews also bring understanding of the significance that roller derby members grant to their participation in the sport. McCracken (1988) encourages the use of open-ended interviews not only because they allow the researcher to see the world from the interviewee's perspective, but also to help the researcher understand the cultural context of a phenomenon (McCracken, 1988; Strauss, 2010). I structured the interviews so that derbygirls would be comfortable with the questioning, but also allowed them freedom to discuss difficult philosophical questions about the nature of roller derby, empowerment and feminism. I chose questions that would highlight *how* roller derbygirls enacted their femininity, sportswomanship and athleticism on the track. This technique is encouraged by Katz (2001) in order to help interviewees become comfortable with the interview process, he also states that the technique helps interviewees to give fuller answers to questions, and helps the researcher to analyze richer data that is collected.

I solicited interview subjects on a volunteer basis. To begin, I surveyed the training squad to gain an understanding of the demographics of the new women (called "fresh meat" by "original girls, or "O.G."'s). I asked for contact information from all the survey participants who indicated that they would be interested in taking part in an open-

ended, recorded interview conducted by myself. Interviews with derbygirls lasted about an hour each, but could have gone on much longer had I not been trying to be respectful of the participants' time. I had no difficulty getting the women to speak about their role and motivations for joining once they began answering questions. I did encounter challenges in fitting interviews in to derbygirls busy schedules. Several interviews had to be rescheduled for a number of reasons. It was not difficult convincing any of the women that their stories were valued or meaningful; they were happy and excited to talk about derby.

I recorded these interviews with a digital video recorder as well as audio recording device. I also typed notes during the interview in order to make sure I recorded the information I needed. I followed the same basic interview technique throughout the interview process. I did however change some of my questions, as individual derbygirls brought up new ideas that I wanted to explore. As I became more involved in the research process and learned more about the structure of the organization, I expanded my interview scope to include the women who started "the new derby" in 2001. I contacted the Texas Lonestar Rollergirls and one of the original "She-E-O's" responded to my interview request, along with several other women involved in banked track roller derby. I chose two of those women to speak with. I used Skype to conduct the interviews with the Austin, TX based women and recorded the interviews with Windows Quicktime screen recording software.

Two of the participants, La Muerta[7] and "Squeak" are members of the banked track roller derby group in Austin, Texas. I included them because their participation is similar to WFTDA participants, but their team's organizational structure is slightly different. Although group decisions are made by elected representatives from the larger group, they run a more business-like model. They are considered a for-profit corporation. Participants become part-owners and do not pay dues once they are drafted onto the team. There is a profit-sharing model that means players can receive money when they exit the league.

One participant in my interviews tried out for a newly-formed team in the midwest, but decided to not continue practicing after a short time. I include her as an interview subject because she can speak to the motivations of joining derby, but she does so without having "drunk the kool-aid." Her perspective on roller derby helped me to understand that the women who stay involved in derby may have found what they were missing, but that roller derby may not fill that same void for all women. Two of the participants were "fresh meat" (beginning skaters who train and learn basic skills in order to pass assessments and be drafted onto one of the local teams.) Two are long-time members of the league, who joined the local team two years ago. My interview participants were largely representative of roller derby demographics as a whole. Two participants identified as gay, four identified as straight and one identified as bi-sexual. All identified as white and middle class.

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[7] La Muerta is one of the original 4 "She-E-O's" of roller derby. I do not code her name, as she is well-known in the derby world and speaks with authority about the beginnings of "the new derby."

My notes and memos regarding the interviews yielded interesting ideas that underlie derby participants' participation in the sport. To analyze the data I used an open coding process as discussed by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Open coding is a technique used to break apart data in order to consider all possible meanings. In addition to giving me ways to analyze and gain understanding from my interviews, the process laid out by Corbin and Strauss also allowed latitude in the interview process. I took what I learned in one interview, and used some of the information to guide subsequent interviews. I began the coding process by color-coding each interview for a few key ideas, which I will describe in detail.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Different objectives of ethnography abound, but as a researcher, I am interested in learning to understand the world from the standpoint of its members. Schensul et. al. (1999) define ethnography as a scientific approach to "discovering and investigating social and cultural patterns and meaning in communities, institutions, and other social settings." The qualitative methodology of ethnography allows the researcher to understand other perspectives more deeply (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In order to gain access to derbygirls, I chose to participate in roller derby briefly. When I tried out for the team I stated that I was a graduate student, doing research on roller derby for my master's thesis. This period of participant observation helped to frame my research in its beginning stages. Geertz (1973) discusses the importance of experiencing the world of those people whom we are studying, teaching or interacting

with– in order to understand the subtle difference between "the blink and the wink (p. 6)." Through participant observation I was able to get to know participants on a more personal level, and many were thus very willing to participate in my interviews. In addition to learning from the derbygirls in a practice setting, I also attended a movie screening for "Brutal Beauty: Tales of the Rose City Rollers", an independent documentary about the Portland, OR Roller Derby team (Mabry et. al, 2010). Several members of the Pacific Northwest roller derby team I interviewed were present, including the movie's director. In this setting I was able to witness the reactions of roller derbygirls to seeing other women who participate in their sport; I also spoke with the director about his connection to the women and how the film was made.

I have extensive field notes of personal observations gathered at local derby bouts, as well as by practicing and conditioning with a team. My field notes include observations about my own transformation (both body and mind) into the role of rollergirl. I had the same sore muscles, the same peaks and valleys as other girls who were also struggling or succeeding in the sport. I was able to watch their transformations and listen to them talk about their personal motivations for joining, as well as learn much more about their lives outside of roller derby. I was also able to participate "behind-the-scenes" of a roller derby bout to see the care that is given to performance, including hair, make-up and determining which "boutfit" to wear for the night of competition.

I observed organizational aspects of derby: including frustration from board members about how they managed and made decisions for a large and diverse group of "strong-willed" women. This experience gave me a better understanding of what women

mean when they talk about "finding a space" for themselves in the structure of roller derby. During interviews I made a conscious effort to avoid discussing my own experience or voicing any opinion or judgement in regard to my participation in roller derby. Through participant observation, I weave field notes with analysis of themes. I use the same coding process and coding scheme for my field notes as I used for the interviews in the discourse analysis portion of this thesis. I also gathered together four peers to perform an inter-coder reliability exercise. We discussed the themes present in the field notes. I used these themes to help focus my analysis of the notes.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

This research relies on critical discourse analysis to illuminate how roller derbygirls discuss meaning and empowerment in their social sphere. There are several definitions of discourse analysis; but for the purposes of this thesis, I settle on van Dijk's (2006) definition of discourse analysis in relation to how "ideologies are expressed and generally reproduced in the social practices of their members" (p. 115). in other words, how they are confirmed and perpetuated through discourse. The use of discourse analysis is further analyzed by Mills (1997). Van Dijk relies on Fairclough's (1992) use of discourse as a framework to linguistic analysis, but both add a political component, a context that involves the real practice of struggle and change enacted by individuals. Both van Dijk and Fairclough, and by association, Mills, rely on not just the spoken and written language texts "but the major role of discourse in the constitution of social subjects" (Mills, 1997). This method works well for the project of empowerment in the

context of roller derby, and is why I chose to work with the interview texts in this manner. Mills further discusses the ways that feminists, discourse analysts, critical discourse analysts and post-colonial discourse theorists have appropriated the term developed by Michel Foucault (1972) for use in other contexts, and contrasts this to the way the term has been used by linguists.

I chose this method because it allowed inclusion of not just the text of what derbygirls say about their involvement in the sport, but puts the interview answers into *con*text within a critical feminist perspective as well. In a sport like roller derby, and especially within the realm of third wave feminism, contradiction and conflicting ideas are embraced. Critical Discourse Analysis allows the researcher to question these contradictions and gray areas, to learn how the discourse surrounding roller derby and third wave feminisms produce an "effect of truth," meaning that women discuss these concepts so freely and consistently that the contradictions may be hidden and thus they are not analyzed critically by participants (Foucault, 1972 ; Rose, 2007). Walsh (2001) writes that this type of research allows for a fuller understanding of interview subjects. It "leads away from global statements and stereotypical explanations" (p. 34). This is not a study of linguistics; rather, it is a study of the ideologies of the subjects. As Walsh writes, "ideologies determine not only discursive content but also the way discourse is analyzed." (p.16) A critical discourse analysis allows the researcher to focus on what the interviewee's words say about other aspects of her life (Oliver, 2005).

Fairclough, et. al. (2004) fine-tune discourse analysis by stating that discourse is "text and talk" but discourse is never an end, it is always already situated in the social,

and must be analyzed in relation to other terms. Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis relies on the real texts– the interviews as transcripts– in order to come to a fuller understanding of power structures. I used Fairclough's style when typing out my transcriptions as well. I used minimum linguistic notations and focused on the content of the words spoken by the interview participant, instead of the mechanics of the conversation (Oliver, 2005).

While Foucault (1979) did not explicitly discuss discourse as it relates to women, Foucauldian analysis is often used in a feminist critique because of Foucault's emphasis on theorizing power (Mills, 2004). Likewise, it is important to note that Foucault did not see power as a necessarily oppressive concept. Because there are many discourses, power is everywhere. Alongside that power there are also opportunities for resistance to power (Foucault, 1979). The performative aspects of roller derby lend themselves to discourse analysis in unique ways. Roller derby can be classified as a "community of practice" in which women, "united by common enterprise develop and share ways of doing things, talking, beliefs and values, in short, practices." (Walsh, 2004, p. 3). Analyzing discourse uncovers power relationships and how they relate to women in subcultural groups such as roller derby. While power negotiations tend to dichotomize subjects into categories of powerful and powerless, it is important to recognize that women are not passive objects and powerless victims in discourse. Smith (1990) recognizes discourse as an action, therefore by definition it is *not* passive; thus discourse has an "interactional relation to power rather than an imposition of power." Other researchers link discourse to power by reason of the impossibility to think or outside of discursive practices. Hook (2001) cites

Young's (1981) discourse analysis of Foucault: "Discourse is constituted by, and ensures the reproduction of the social system through forms of selection, exclusion and domination" (p. 522).

DATA ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

My choice for using two methods comes from Oliver, Serovich and Mason (2005). The authors note, "If... a researcher is interested in meanings and perceptions attached to [a particular topic], it is likely that grounded theory, critical discourse analysis or one of the many variants of ethnography would be more than useful" (p. 1278). While ethnography, and in this case participant observation, is adequate for discussing the culture of roller derby, to get to the core of the practice, this method is not enough. One difficulty with ethnography is moving from the individual interviews to the theoretical implications of the fieldwork itself (Snow, et. al., 2003; Wacquant, 2002). The addition of a critical discourse analysis allows a deeper level of context surrounding roller derby. A critical discourse analysis focuses on the *way* derby is discussed and what aspects of derby are central to a derbygirl's understanding of her participation. Thornton (1997) warns against taking subcultural accounts from participants at face value, however. She states that discourses of subculture are "not a transparent window on the world" (p. 201) but in fact are often filled with specific cultural agendas of their beholders. The use of these two methods helps to bring balance to my research.

THE NARRATIVE

Throughout the interview process derbygirls discuss their desire for empowerment in their lives, and tell me that they found this empowerment through their participation roller derby. Leblanc (1999) writes that she felt empowered by becoming a member of the punk subculture. But, empowered, “to do what?” is an important question. Many derbygirls refer to empowerment in terms of sexual empowerment: not political empowerment, but more the power to be “desired.” Derbygirls express sentiments such as "roller derby saved my soul" in many ways. Some say that the first time in their lives, they feel a bit more self worth, others cite a newfound appreciation for their bodies. They state they like that they now feel they have sex appeal. This feeling of sexiness doesn’t line up with the mainstream definition of sex appeal (here, overgeneralizing "what men want" based on *GQ*, *Maxim* and *FHM* magazine covers). Their definition of sex appeal is built on those images, but those images are re-appropriated to include larger bodies, tattooed and pierced bodies, athletic bodies and un-toned bodies: body types that do not fit in to mainstream magazine sales models.

If one’s first introduction to the sport of roller derby is to take a look at the finished product (the bout), it is quite a surprise to attend the practices and see the building blocks put in place to make a roller derby performance what it is. When I first imagined this research study, I really did have a romantic notion of the sport, that it was this place of “badassery” and woman power, grace and sex appeal on skates. I didn’t anticipate the sweat and bruises and sore muscles that go into the process of building a derbygirl.

Roller derby as an organization is hierarchical: the longer a derbygirl stays with the sport, the more respect she has with other members. Despite its practice of democracy in regard to rule-setting (each member gets to vote on rule changes, bout decisions and season organization), women with more seniority on the league do direct some decisions (i.e., the league's decision to get new standardized uniforms and the traveling team's decision to allow players to use their given names instead of skate names.) Try-outs are a requirement for every WFTDA approved team. This means that in order to become a part of roller derby, each individual member must be accepted into the group. Through the socialization into the sport, the derby participant "becomes" the thing she is observing and imitating. Derby is one of the few sports where women are the sole organizers and competitors, yet even in an all female-run organization, contradiction abounds. The contrast between femmes, jocks and punks exists very noticeably and there is still great pressure to be a "tough girl in a skirt." In the beginning though, on the first day of try-outs, the women standing around me huddled together in groups or wandered about looking, almost longingly, at other women to catch an eye and start up that first, awkward conversation.

...

When I showed up to try-outs, I was immediately greeted and told to fill out several liability and insurance forms. I was handed a handbook of the rules and expectations for joining the league. I was given a number for identification, which was written on both arms in permanent marker. There are about 35 new recruits. The

"welcome" for this stage of derby is not particularly warm. In fact, the "OG's" behave and relate to "fresh meat" in a rather distant manner for several practices, before they decide who is going to be staying with the group and who is not going to be making roller derby a priority. This is a recurring theme and possible contradiction within roller derby. While sisterhood is often emphasized, there is a high level of seriousness and professionalism that many women exhibit when they are elected to higher roles of responsibility within the organization. Indeed, the derby girls I observed acted much differently in weekly scrimmages and bouts than they did in practice. Whereas in practice they are building skills and exhibiting camaraderie, in scrimmages there are several instances where a derbygirl will dispute a call made by a ref, or express frustration at her teammates' or her own performance on the track. Of the 35 women who tried out that day, I learned that all but two made it on to the training squad. Clearly the try-outs are less about knowing specific skills and more about setting a standard and providing an initial expectation of work from women who want to participate.

There are many moments of doubt and many rookie mistakes involved in the first days of roller derby. Often it is difficult to know who to talk to about issues, and often I felt that my questions were going to be met with disapproval or judgement by trainers and coaches. This is one example:

> I bought skates for this time around [this is my second time trying out], so that I don't have to use the 30-year-old beige high tops with the orange laces again. I put on my elbow pads, the neoprene gasket to keep the knee pads from slipping. Finally I get ready to put on my skates, but I get confused over whether I have the right skates because I don't recognize the logo on the tongue! I also am nervous about putting my padding on

> upside down. I even second-guess whether my helmet is on backwards. Wow, I think-- am I really this much of an idiot?! I still can't figure out my skates and convince myself that I somehow accidentally swapped skates after try-outs and I go up to Pattya Knockers to tell her my "major issue." No sooner do I open my mouth to tell her my problem, I realize that I have the right skate, but just didn't recognize it. I can't determine what her reaction is, but can only imagine it includes a rolling of the eyes at this obviously 'fresh meat' mistake.

And another instance:

> "I immediately notice a difference in my skating with these new skates (I probably should have practiced on them at least once before try-outs-- and standing around in my living room with the gear on, checking myself out doesn't *exactly* count..) My toe-stop is loose, it feels like my wheels are loose and slipping all over the track. Is this just nerves? Am I being paranoid? Should I buck up or ask someone to help? I ask. The trainer looks at them quizzically, but determines I'm full of it. Oh well, I'll work through it, I suppose.
>
> After the knee pads come skates, the wrist guards and finally, my helmet and mouth guard. All of this, is over my work-out clothing, I chose yoga pants and a ribbed tank top. Forgive me if I don't find this to be the epitome of sexiness that I was expecting from roller derbygirls."
>
> Field Notes: 29 April, 2010

This excerpt also illustrates the amount of safety gear that is necessary for playing the sport. It also gives a better idea of what a derbygirl looks like when she is participating and it contrasts the images one often sees of derbygirls as objects of sex appeal. Some of the women wear tights, fishnets, "booty-shorts" and skirts, the coaches

generally do not. They wear leggings and shorts over the top of leggings. They state they do this to protect from track burn during falls.

Sexuality and the performance of sexuality and sex appeal are important parts of people's associations with roller derby, and as ShockTease stated in her interview, they were the driving factors in her desire to join the team, although that motivation shifted somewhat after she was involved with the sport for a longer period of time. This seems to be the case with many of the "original girls"[8]. Below is an example of one potential derbygirl both expressing a form of sex appeal, as well as exhibiting signs of nervousness and not being entirely comfortable. While words express vulgarity, her body language portrayed that she was speaking in this manner as a performance:

> While putting on my skates I am sitting next to another girl, who is pretty loud. She acknowledges to our small group that she went home and tried on all of her gear and looked at herself in the mirror several times after she found out she made the team. Several women nod in agreement. She's also making some comments about pantsing people to Melons. She says, "I only hope no one pantses me when I'm not wearing underwear-- I don't want anyone to see my meat curtains" Melons makes a comment that she usually hears rumors about someone getting pantsed, so she purposefully doesn't wear underwear, saying it's the pantser's problem then. The girl continues to shower Melons with words that mean vagina, giggling nervously.

...

[8] A derbygirl becomes an "Original Girl" or "O.G." once she completes here skills assessments and is drafted onto a specific derby team.

After try-outs we gather in a circle to talk about what we're signing up for. We are warned about how much time being a derby girl takes up and how often we have to choose between real life and derby life, and how derby simply becomes life for many of the girls. It seems to be a badge of honor that these women wear proudly that they spend so much time in derby-related activities. It also seems to be a competition, perhaps a way of one-up-manship among some of the girls. Trainers design practices to be very heavy on physical drills and workouts. Often the calisthenics are performed off-skates. Derbygirls are expected to attend these practices at least three times per week.

Trainers insist that beginning skaters show "correct derby form" on the track at all times. Often they single out women to either show the correct form, or the incorrect form (correct form is when the player is crouched, with her rear end and her chest out). I was one of those who did *not* exhibit good form on many occasions, and so was the object of many trainers' discussions and teaching moments:

> I quickly realize that I do not have a very good concept of "body" when it comes to knowing what my body looks like doing a particular task, compared with the other girls. I feel like I'm doing it right, but keep getting corrected by the coaches. I *think* my back foot is going perpendicular to my body at the end of a skate stride, but apparently it is not. I *think* my butt is up in the air during the "stripper stretch" but I get corrected on this one too. I wonder if being left handed has something to do with this or if my ability to "mirror" people is just backwards. Pattya Knockers seems to have taken a particular interest in making sure my form is fixed, I'm not sure if she sees potential, or just potential disaster in me...

And another example:

> Madame Curves, the president of the organization, came to one early practice, along with another skater from the traveling team to critique our form. Curves pulled me aside and told me she could see me "fighting my skates." She looked at my skates and determined that they are indeed sub-par, and that I really need to make an investment. I spent $100 on the skates, and about another $100 on the safety equipment. Due to my frustration, I start crying. It was embarrassing, but Curves and the traveling coach were extremely supportive-- Annoyingly supportive even. Because now I'm crying like a little baby and they're trying to be extremely nice. They tell me they may have some other skates, they tell me they may have some other wheels. I am grateful, but all I can think of is that I don't want special treatment. I don't want to be "that girl" but fear its already too late. I think I am just extremely nervous and trying too hard to impress the coaches. I feel like I'm in middle school again.
>
> (Field Notes, 1 May, 2010)

This example also provides a look into the price women pay for entrance into the sport and subculture. An average skater will spend $300 or more on her first pair of skates and wheels. I was offered a pair of skates from another player later in practice and noted that the more expensive skates *are* much better quality, much safer, and much more aesthetically pleasing than the cheaper skates.

The practice area for this team is in a community gym, so there are many other events going on at the same time as our practice. A weight room with windows look in on the gym where derbygirls practice, the weight room is mainly frequented by men. Many times during practice I notice different men staring through the windows at us as we

practice drills. Here, I note some of the contradictions between practice and bouts, and the spectacle of roller derby women's seeming appeal to others:

> "Nothing that we do in practice is 'hot' from what I can gather. In fact, a lot of what we are doing looks awkward, silly and decidedly ***un***sexy. In any other situation these men would likely not look twice at many of the women on the track. But here, they do seem to have some sort of allure."
>
> (Field Notes, 1 May, 2010)

...

As the early derby practitioner takes on the habitus of derbygirl, she further reinforces this socialization (Bourdieu, 1990; Wacquant, 2004). She learns to react differently to external events than she would outside of the derby track. Derbygirls are introduced to this socialization from one of the first days of practice:

> We huddle in, and Sister Killya and Girl Whirl make an announcement about "attitudes." Killya says, "we need to talk about attitudes here, I don't know what you've heard or what's been said-- but there are people who aren't getting it, and they may get frustrated with what they're doing." "It takes-- for those who haven't skated before 5 months to get these skills down," Girl Whirl continues. "to learn the muscle memory, to figure it all out. I don't want to hear people having bad attitudes about the girls who it's taking a lot longer time to 'get' these-- we need to be sisters, if you get it, then you need to help the other skaters out. We have a 'no douchebag' clause and we mean to stick by it."

Later in practice, the other girls seem to be much more supportive. This early mention of the "no douchebag" policy is remembered and discussed by derbygirls in the interviews, they take this message to heart very early in their participation.

Once a derbygirl has become a part of the "sisterhood," usually through hard work and an unofficial acceptance by members of the coaches squad and other O.G.s, she is accepted almost entirely by the whole league. After three months on the practice team, and just as I was preparing to exit the league, I received praise from the lead trainer:

> After practice I talk to Bitty and tell her that I have to go back to Minnesota for 3 months over the summer. She says it's still no big deal: "You're going away, don't stress about it, Toews." She also tells me she didn't have to tell me once to watch my form, and that I've improved greatly and have much more control. I told her I wasn't sure if I was better, or she'd just given up on me. She says, "I'd never give up on you, Fiddlesticks." Girl Whirl also comes up to me and tells me the same thing. They both seemed surprised more than impressed.
>
> Field Notes: 21 June, 2010

Trainers and coaches often take on the role of caregiver, supporter, or mentor for new team members. Terms they use are "den mother" "mama" or other familial names:

> Today Pattya Knockers is leading practice. When we arrive they are washing the courts with a zamboni-like device. There are puddles all over the court and it is extremely slippery. Knockers tells the manager of the training facility that this is unacceptable and "her girls" are going to be falling all over the place and it's very dangerous. Knockers is only 23 years old, but she acts like we're her children, from this comment I gather she thinks a bit like a mother as well. We're all working our asses off in this practice. Knockers tells us she biked 14 miles today and that should be

about what we should be doing for cross-training. She tells us that Derby is not a hobby, it's our lives. I think she truly lives this motto. "This two hour practice is the longest practice we've had all year," says Tiny Tricksy at one point and many of the girls in line for the suicide drill we are doing pant and nod in agreement.

Field Notes: 22 June, 2010

...

Injuries are a very common occurrence for derbygirls. A large portion of the money spent in the sport is for health insurance policies that get used frequently. I was one such victim of injury. I received a level 2 sprained ankle when I was trying to learn how to transition from skating forward to skating backward during practice. One of the coaches had advised me to "hop" to make the switch, but I was not ready and landed squarely on my ankle, instead of my skate. This effectively brought my skating career to an end, though I still tried to attend practices and referee at scrimmages. One "benefit" of the injury, however was that it introduced me to a different side of roller derby: that of injured skater. Despite the emphasis on sisterhood, an injured skater is left on the sidelines, and left out of the subculture in many ways. Active derbygirls associate with active derbygirls; injured or sidelined players do not participate fully in the culture or lifestyle. A number of the women I spoke with expressed concern, and talked about the emotional pain of being cut off from derby due to injury.

Past injuries do, however, hold a profound place within the discourse of active derbygirls. Derbygirls use their experiences in the sport as a communication tool and a way to gain access to one another. It is not uncommon for the first encounter between

roller derby participants to be a sort of laundry list of which injuries one has sustained over the course of the training period. These conversations often quickly advance to showmanship of bruising, scars and other physical abnormalities attributed to the practice and performance of roller derby (*Field Notes*, 13 Nov., 2010).

...

Fresh Meat derbygirls are expected to take the sport seriously, and most do once practices begin. It is common for trainers to assess the skills of new recruits and frame practices to help women pass the assessments set forth by WFTDA, as a basic skill level must be met in order to be a member of a sanctioned league.

> Today, Brash Bitty, the lead trainer, tells us that based on our assessments the week before, we need to work on our "AWE": Assists, Walls, Endurance. During the assists, Tasmanian Devil is in my group. She either always has an attitude of contempt or she is really not very patient with less skilled skaters. I am supposed to assist her and everyone (including myself) is doing it wrong at first. I ask her if I'm doing it right and she shrugs and tells me it was fine. She doesn't offer any suggestions. For the Wall drill (two women pair up and skate in tandem, used to block out a jammer from passing the pack.) I pair up with Raggedy Trash at first. Girl Whirl blows the whistle and tells us we need to switch partners. I ask if we can skate one more lap, because I think Raggedy Trash and I have come up with a good working plan, but Girl Whirl says that we need to learn to skate with ALL skaters, and she doesn't let us stay together. This pairing-up thing is a lot like it was when we were in middle school. Everyone looks around longingly, hoping to not catch the eye of the "bad" girls while scoping out the "good" ones. I always feel like the last one picked to dance. I pair up next with the extremely tall blonde girl who was talking about her "meat curtains" at the first practice. She says, "well I guess we

> have to be together" making me think that she is really not excited about this thought. We are, as I imagined, a pretty bad pair. She can't really crouch down enough to accommodate my short height, and I can't really stand up enough for her.

These issues and struggles are not apparent in bouts, in fact showing frustration is looked upon with derision on some leagues. ShockTease states that her team is a "Zen Den," and as such makes it a point of pride that it exhibits a "pokerface" during performances so that the audience does not know from team members' faces or their body language if they are performing poorly. This is certainly a different tactic than was used in earlier incarnations of roller derby, and on many other WFTDA teams. The spectacle of aggression is almost entirely removed from ShockTease's team's performance. She says they are more focused on building skill levels and being a competitive team than on theatrical displays of aggression.

Image is as important in roller derby as it is for women involved in the punk scene. Even in practice, there is a great deal of awareness of one's body in the performance of gender, performance of sex appeal and performance of athletic ability. This is evident in the training sessions and explanations of how to execute many roller derby actions:

> Zombie Xena says that she wants to see good derby form. "Balance is extremely important -- but it's not balance as in, 'half-your weigh on either side of your crotch-- it's about shifting your crotch-weight," she explains. "It's important to not have a straight line from your vagina, you should be shifting so that if some other girl comes up and hits you you're not thrown off-guard and fall down."
>
> *(Fieldnotes,* 13 Nov., 2010)

The changes women's bodies go through due to the physical exertion of practice communicate sex appeal to others as well as to derbygirls themselves. On several occasions during practice women also tell me about the changes they are seeing in their bodies, specifically in relation to how their clothes fit differently and how this sport will give them the ability to feel sexier in their derby "boutfits" as well as other clothing. This idea of "feeling sexier" appears to be a very important aspect of roller derby because it is so often discussed among derbygirls in informal settings such as breaks within practice time or in other social situations (*Field Notes,* 21 June, 2010).

Summary

The act of becoming a roller derbygirl is a remarkably structured process. It involves many hours spent learning from trainers not only how to physically participate in the sport, but also how to act and react as a derbygirl on the track, and in other settings. This process is shaped by both written and unwritten rules. The written rules come from the national governing organization (WFTDA). These rules include the basic skills that a derbygirl needs to learn in order to be on a competitive team. The rules laid out by WFTDA are also enforced through codes of conduct that are practiced and disseminated by trainers and coaches. Some of these rules include actions a derbygirl may or may not take part in in public settings, if she is wearing team gear (for instance, drinking alcohol is expressly forbidden as part of the rules of the local Pacific Northwest team I was in contact with).

The unwritten rules are just as important to roller derby subculture as those that are official. These unwritten rules include ways in which women interact with one another. Derbygirls are encouraged to form close relationships with their fellow "sisters" but are not encouraged to show emotion or express feelings of frustration or anger. When a player causes pain to a fellow teammate, it is not uncommon to hear the refrain, "there's no 'sorry' in roller derby," meaning that a player is not supposed to apologize for the violence encountered on the track. While players are supposed to be supportive of one another, they are not encouraged to show a *need* for that support. Strength is therefore shown through stoicism and being able to administer and handle hard hits.

THE DISCOURSE

Through the discourse of the interviews, I found several key themes and ideas that overlapped and echoed one another between different women. While women used different words to talk about their participation in the sport, many expressed the same sentiments about derby, that it is more than a hobby or pastime, that it is a life-altering practice and lifestyle for the women, men and families involved in the practice. The practice of roller derby replaces other significant relationships for women, it factors into employment choices, and it serves as a diversion.

I coded the interviews for instances in which a derbygirl discussed concepts related to the structure and organization of roller derby, ideas of performance, costume, self confidence, athleticism, nostalgia, "real life" (getting in the way of derby, conflicting with derby, and co-mingling or supported by derby), injuries, super hero-moments,

finding a space, contradiction, complication, gender, sexuality, identity, sex appeal, family, negativity toward women, and sisterhood. By breaking down and naming these phenomena, I made connections and found common themes. These themes are: "Sisterhood", "Performance", "Empowerment" "Real Life" "Athleticism", and "Nostalgia." I chose to link self-confidence, identity, athleticism, hero-moments, and sex appeal to the broader concept of "empowerment." Injuries, athleticism, costume, and gaze were grouped together as "performance" aspects because these are all ideas that show that derby is a "safe" space where women can either be themselves or play with a characterization of themselves. I grouped moments where derbygirls discussed "real life" as separate or conflicting with roller derby with sisterhood, family, and negativity toward women because they indicate degrees of familiarity that derbygirls often state they search for. I grouped nostalgia, and structure and organization of the league into their own distinct sub-categories.

NOSTALGIA

Four of the women joined roller derby after seeing it for the first time in its present incarnation. They witnessed or became aware of derby after 2001. They say they had no idea the sport existed before they saw their first bout, or heard about it from another derbygirl, family, or friend. Three of the women remember roller derby in its earlier years. They talked about seeing the sport and being enamored of its aesthetic from a young age. Whether they saw International Roller Derby (through archive video) Roller

Games or RollerJam, they remember the sport from television: they remember the T0-Birds, the violence and the drama of the performance.

Individual skaters are still remembered for their showmanship and tenacity and the sport itself is discussed as an authentic and exciting event, thirty years after roller derby went off the air. Captain Mal writes,

> I distinctly remember seeing roller derby for the first time when I was about 8 or 9 years old (1980 or 1981). When I saw Sarah Purcell skate with the LA Thunderbirds on the TV series, *Real People.* I thought it was the toughest, coolest, most beautiful thing I'd ever seen a group of women do... I practiced skating at Big Wheel and Skate World, dressed like Olivia Newton-John in Xanadu, and dreamed of moving to LA to play for the Thunderbirds.

Although the sport has changed a great deal in the last 30 years, the notoriousness of the action is an important aspect that gets women out on to the track.

SISTERHOOD

The idea of sisterhood came up many times throughout every interview conducted. I grouped the idea of sisterhood with its opposite, the concept of "negativity toward other women." The women I spoke with all talked about becoming like family with other derbygirls, forming close friendships and sometimes exclusive relationships with other participants. Hermione Danger spoke extensively about the mentoring aspect of roller derby, about how she felt like everyone on the team trained her, not just the official trainers. KiKi Kaboom emotionally described her sisters being there for her when she talks negatively about herself and her body.

She says she does not see sisterhood as the norm for women outside of roller derby. She says about the inclusiveness: “It was probably the one area where I had seen that women were getting together to empower each other rather than eating their own--which is something we typically do.” This discourse of women being cruel to one another outside of roller derby came up in other interviews as well. It is as if the idea that women are “catty” or “bitchy” to one another is an assumed and understood part of being a woman.

> “I was nervous at first [about joining roller derby]. Women are catty, women are backbiters, we’re awful-- I don’t know what the deal is... we have struggles and like to gossip, that was one of my fears: how is that going to work with 150 women there’s got to be drama.”

She says she found the opposite however in derby. She says she found respect and encouragement and an acceptance of the different personalities and desires of the women involved in the organization. Despite realizing that her viewpoint of this particular group of women may have been wrong, KiKi did not change her perspective on women who are not her roller derby teammates.

Despite these bonds that are forged through derby, several people talked about the difficulties they found in being involved in an organization that is run by women, in which a majority of participants are women. Squeak noted the drama involved in decision-making and league meetings. She says that people sometimes say things that may hurt other’s feelings, or that certain players may escalate tensions by making negative comments or personal attacks on other women. When this happens, however, she says that the organization deals with this drama much differently than the way her

full-time job would handle the situation. Even though she says there is a lot of drama in derby, and some of it is unnecessary, she does think that it makes the organization stronger. In roller derby, she says she's treated like a human, an equal, and a needed member of the organization (which she calls a business.) The decision-making process in derby deals more with participants' feelings about a situation or action item. If there is an argument, she says roller derbygirls are more likely to try to work through it and think outside the box, to be open to new ideas, and make amends or excuses for angry behavior. For instance, instead of being hasty, members try to be more understanding. Instead of thinking, "She's just a bitch," they would think, "Val's having a bad day, tomorrow everything's going to be fine."

An interesting aspect of the idea of sisterhood is that roller derbygirls, while they have struggles with one another, they often project frustration with women who are not a part of roller derby. These "other" girls are described as bitchy or catty. Often this discourse comes up when discussing the derbygirls' cliques and friends in their earlier formative years. Derbygirls often state that they never got along with those "pretty girls" (ShockTease) and were members of various kinds of misfit groups in high school. It is important to note, these misfit groups were not always "punk" in aesthetic. Mouse was a self-described "band geek." La Muerta grew up in a strictly religious home was not allowed to associate with many people outside of her religious circle.

PERFORMANCE

Performance is a central theme to roller derby and participation. The theme also gave women the most trouble in how they recognized or came to terms with the contradictions present within the group's structure. Many discussed initial nervousness, and ambivalence relating to whether the performance aspect strengthens or weakens claims of feminism. Included in this theme is, of course, the performance of roller derby in a bout situation. I also considered the performance of gender, performance of "badass", and performance of "sexuality" within this category.

To outsiders, the derbygirl persona is that of unflinching ability to accept (and dish out) pain, but off the track women embrace and support one another passionately, calling fellow derbygirls "sisters" and "family." This is called emotional labor, and within the performance improves audience enjoyment and further solidifies the bond between derby participants (Smith, 2008). Derbygirls say immediately after a bout it's important to go out to the "after-party" and drink with the women they just finished competing against, and possibly having physically hurt. On the track, they state that the aggression and competitiveness is very real, but they are usually able to be "sisters" again when they take off their skates. Through the performance of aggression derbygirls say they show that they acknowledge another player's strength. Squeak says:

> "You have to be respectful enough to hurt them. If they hit you hard they respect you enough they know you can take it. I remember once I flew 6 feet and skidded. She *respected* me."

Along with the performance of aggression, Squeak also noted the importance of the performance of forgiveness. “You have to let things go and you can’t be that asshole... in other words, don’t be a dick.”[9]

Performance is not something that derbygirls simply enact for an audience; they just as often perform for one another. Escalating a situation and impressing one another is part of the culture. Team members bond and compete over injuries, scars, and bruises, for instance. In practice teammates are encouraged to outdo one another in feats of strength. “People escalate everything,” La Muerta says. “If you can [jump over this suitcase] I’m going to do that backwards-- [another girl will say] well then I’m doing it naked!”

The performance of sexuality is another theme that must be unpacked. Women were simultaneously excited and uneasy with this aspect of roller derby. They certainly wrestled with whether their participation was “good” for the feminist cause, but all said that the sport was “good” for themselves, individually. This ambivalence is at the heart of postfeminist debate (Genz, 2010), the women struggled with the dilemma of being female, feminine, and feminist, of “having it all” but struggling with self doubt.

Women who first saw the game after its resurgence in 2001 continually talk about seeing these women as larger than life, of being in awe of their abilities, aware of their presentation of sex appeal and confidence in their body image. Hermione Danger says what hooked her about roller derby is that she didn’t think it mattered what she looked like, or even how fast she could skate– she felt like there was a place for her.

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[9] There is a large amount of discourse between roller derby girls about using male genitalia as slang and slurs. One skater says some skaters try to not use words like “pussy” and instead use the word “scrotum.” This, in Squeak’s words, is how that skater employs feminism and empowerment.

> "We all hate what we look like and it sucks. But derby has done that for her [another skater who she sees as a mentor]. It's shown her what a beautiful strong woman she is and you can't put a price on that."

She noted the contradiction however, between talking about being a strong, beautiful woman and then "strutting around" in fishnets.

> "Derby does a good job of that," she says. "We can be sexual but we don't have to be sex *objects*... we can wear that [fishnets] and booty shorts and still be kick-ass."

At other times, the performance of sexuality is more overt, prurient, and centered on gaining an audience and filling auditorium seats. The performance of sexuality is certainly used as a marketing strategy in both banked track and flat track competitions. Women stage fundraisers at nearby bars featuring themselves mud wrestling, pudding wrestling, and performing in "non-traditional" beauty pageants.[10] Both WFTDA and banked-track derby leagues hire professional marketing strategists to poll fans to find out what brings them out to the bouts, and not surprisingly, the marketing firms found that "People love the tension-- the sports and entertainment," La Muerta says.

> "We have a hostess mentality-- come party with the coolest girls ever and have fun doing it. Our culture is to be welcoming, fierce and beautiful. Everyone is dressed to the nines, everyone wants to look super-hot and there's no difference in that. I mean... you know... what's the difference? It's ferociousness and beauty at the same time."

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[10] La Muerta described the beauty pageant by saying that contestants dressed in formalwear, performed in a talent segment, and won a crown. The non-traditional aspect of the fundraiser was that contestants were understood to be participating "ironically." Alcohol was a prominent part of the evening for judges and participants.

REAL LIFE/ESCAPISM

The time required of participation in roller derby is immense. Derbygirls practice at least two, and up to four or five days a week (when there is a bout) for about three hours each practice. Some state that this time commitment is stressful on jobs, family, and relationships. Others state they use roller derby as a way to "get away" from "real life." Seen in this way, roller derby is a form of edgework that allows individuals to escape from constricting routines of everyday life (Cotterill, 2010).

Part of the escape in roller derby includes donning a character, and roller derby is seen as a safe space for women to play with alternate identities. The names that women adopt are more than just cheeky nicknames. They are alter-egos that participants use to become their new identity as "the derbygirl." Hermione Danger uses her alter-ego to be theatrical:

> It's stepping into a character-- but I get to step into this larger than life thing-- that's part of it being therapeutic-- you get to be loud and aggressive and you throw other girls around-- you don't get to do that in real life.

This "stepping in to a character" is necessary for some derbygirls. Squeak, who is gay, quit her job as a public school teacher after the principal told her that if the children found out, she would be fired. She now works at a hail damage insurance company; she is still not "out" at work. She says being supported and accepted in roller derby is empowering and helped her gain confidence:

> It's a lifestyle, it's something you dress up for... it's a lot like a superhero, you get to have a different personality, you get to take over you and then you get to go back to your regular life later. It's an alternate persona.

Many women who are involved in derby are mothers, and some are single mothers. A few interviewees talked about derby as a space for women to escape the responsibilities of their household labor. Captain Mal couldn't be a part of organized sports in the past because of her work schedule and single parenting obligations. She had lost her job as an assistant manager at a local movie theatre a month prior to joining roller derby. She says roller derby has given her a new way to meet people, outside of her usual social circle. KiKi Kaboom echoed this statement. She states that often women who become mothers stop playing sports, especially full-contact sports, once they have children. She states that roller derby gives them "a chance to do things that nobody said they can do."

Athleticism

The athleticism involved in being a roller derbygirl is an important part to drawing many women to the sport. The practices involve a variety of difficult actions, some on skates, some off-skates. Drills, calisthenics and physicality are all emphasized, especially in practice situations. Women talk about finding muscles they hadn't used in years, about the changes their bodies have undergone due to the conditioning they take part in. While there are a variety of sizes and shapes of women, they are required to work hard in order to perform. ShockTease says successful derbygirls are those who can use their specific body types as an asset on the track.

> I'm pretty hard to knock down, I'm pretty hard to ride out so if you can knock me off my feet before I fall on my own... I'm like 'Wow!' 'Good job!' I appreciate the ability of a smaller person to be able to get me off my feet. I recognize... you know, that's why we're there... it's very satisfying to deliver a legal hit that you train for and stay in bounds and I then hear her gear– that sound of the clunk when someone hits the ground– I find it very satisfying!

Hermione Danger wasn't an athlete before she joined roller derby. She says joining the sport showed her that she could be considered one, regardless of what mainstream media messages may tell her:

> In American society it's hard... Americans have the perception that they have to be certain way, like the models in *People* and on film. Usually those women are not athletic, they have very little muscle tone.. well, and very little fat! A lot of other sports you see women athletes but they don't have power and the men's sports are always followed more...People think you need to be weak and dainty, and that strong women are terrible– but it's easy to be strong and sexy in roller derby, but that's not the case in a lot of sports. I love the muscle I'm building and wouldn't trade it for anything.

Danger also thinks the athleticism shown in derby is one of the few sports that women's bodies may actually be more suited to. She thinks the extra "padding" that women skaters have in strategic places (the butt and thighs) gives bigger women the advantage over men who play the sport.

> Strategically-- women can play better. We have better muscle where we need it, we have... and the way our bodies are built, women can excel more. We can get lower. Men stand up straight a lot and they fall down a lot and they take big hits. Women have ability to get low. It's just more natural and more fluid.

In most situations, the aspects of being athletic and physical in the sport are directly related with how the derbygirl feels about her empowerment through participation in roller derby. Skaters don't discuss the sport in terms of simply *being* athletic, but talk instead about how their participation changes the way they look and feel about themselves. Some derbygirls, including ShockTease, state that their ability to do endurance drills, to take hits, to skate backwards, and do other stunts makes her more able to cope with stresses of her job. She states, if I can do that (the physical things) she can surely handle the frustrations of her job and taking care of her children.

EMPOWERMENT

Every derbygirl talked about empowerment– some overtly, others in more subtle ways. Most stated that they felt stronger because of roller derby, and that fit their definition of empowerment. This final section shows the many ways in which roller derbygirls talked about their own feelings of empowerment. Whether through the building of physical strength, gained self-confidence, or through a newfound sex appeal, the empowerment theme branches out and connects all the above themes in many different ways.

KiKi Kaboom says the sport is life-changing. When she started with the team, she had lupus, and weighed 385 pounds. She says skating helped her lose 185 pounds, and gain confidence in herself.

> And so you get this sense of accomplishment that keeps coming to you and then you get more confident to do things that -- even in derby or regular life-- that you wouldn't normally do. I feel now very comfortable

> in my own skin, which I mean, that's a huge feat at 36 years old: to finally say that, 'I like who I am, I feel good about it.' And it's really been because of derby and these women and this experience.

Skaters talk about roller derby as a way to express themselves in order to feel empowered. Captain Mal likes that the sport is a space that "they can call their own", and when men do enter the rink, women get to act as "experts" and enjoy the rare opportunity to train male players.

Some women feel empowerment off the track. Here's Hermione Danger:

> It's a strength you carry into daily life and a confidence you carry with you. It breaks a lot of people out of shells-- not that being quiet is bad thing-- but confidence lets you have more self assurance. I know friends who are very shy and insecure-- Roller derby would be very amazing for them because it'd force them to be powerful and it's so positive.

KiKi Kaboom likewise finds parallels between derby and work. She quit her day job to have more time for roller derby, and is now training to be a doula:

> Derby is a lot like life. It, um... you get pushed to do things that you're pretty fairly certain you cannot do at all and then you do them and then it-- you can go out and take that feeling and apply it on any aspect of your life where you feel challenged. Because you never thought you could skate 40 laps, you never thought you could throw yourself across the floor and ... and you do it an then you feel really really strong. It's a huge empowering thing. I love it. It's going to make me cry.

Squeak, who plays the more business, "bottom-line" oriented, banked-track derby, sees her own empowerment on a slightly broader scale. She ties the practice of roller derby directly to helping women learn new, marketable skills. She says she learned Public Relations and business skills that she would not otherwise have had the opportunity to learn:

> [It is a] women empowerment sport. The business is run by women, the entertainment is from women, the organization is from women. The men are supportive of *us*. It takes 6 hours to set up [a banked track]. The guys give us a drill, and they say, 'you know how to work this, you're a woman.' They are really great. It's great having people recognize that women can do this and make a bunch of money at it.

Finally, KaBoom believes that her participation in derby will help young girls to respect and honor themselves and their bodies:

> Especially in the day and age we live in where women are objectified in a certain way you have to look a certain way and fit a certain image that's projected on a lot of younger girls. And when they see all of us out there-- and like, I'm 210 pounds and I'll put on booty shorts and fishnets-- and they're like: 'if she's doing it- then I can do it!' So you know they have this example of us feeling empowered and they do it the same way.

One interviewee who is no longer involved in derby says she isn't sure if this empowerment is as real as others may make it out to be. Bethany wonders if the idea of roller derby as empowering is a romantic idea.

> "[There is an] expectation of what women should wear and look like when playing a sport... we put women in these scantily clad outfits, they've always been in these outfits. Really it's taking mud wrestling without the mud, and on skates. And the more these skanky women beat on each other the more attention they get. At the same time I find it a little empowering that if I wanted to, I could beat up other women. I do think that even though it is kind of empowering, we should be able to do this sport and be able to look like a football player, but you can't. It's kind of akin to being a stripper on wheels."

She talks about other people's reaction to her participation as mixed. Women told her they were impressed with her decision and her bravery to try out. Men's reactions were surprising to her. She said she had expected them to make comments about the sexiness of the women, but said instead they told her they thought roller derby girls were scary.

> "I think they like watching them because they are scantily clad, but knowing one in person is intimidating and I don't think guys are comfortable always with women in positions of power like that."

SUMMARY

Through these interviews I gained useful knowledge in order to answer my second research question: how female subcultural practitioners construct and communicate their empowerment. The discourse analysis allowed me to code specifically for themes of empowerment. While the women interviewed spoke about gaining empowerment from their participation in roller derby, it is clearly an individual feeling that *they* have arrived, or transitioned, or transformed themselves into empowered

women. There is very little discourse in broader terms of how their position as women may have worked to *dis*empower them in the first place. There is very little discourse about how they can make the sport more accessible to lower-income or minority populations, or how they can use the empowerment they feel in order to change social relations on a macro level.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

WHERE HAVE ALL THE CORSETS GONE?

When I first began thinking about this topic, power structures were certainly not at the forefront of my mind. I was interested in how roller derbygirls assumed the identity of derbygirl, of how they used their bodies and clothing to represent themselves and be a part of a subculture, and why some women choose to take part in such a physically dangerous sport. But I was asking the wrong questions. Throughout my interviews, themes of empowerment rose to the surface, and from there, I went down the rabbit hole.

To say that roller derby is much more complicated than it would seem is an understatement. The structures and history have made roller derby what it is today, and underlying power struggles outside of roller derby affect how individual derby participants see their role in the sport. Under the surface of each of my interviews was the idea that *something was missing* from these women's lives, and derby fulfilled that role in one way or another. The women of roller derby choose to participate despite the fact that it will not bring them money or fame, despite the fact that many will be sidelined for a multitude of injuries. They participate, sometimes at the expense of their careers, because they have made a space for themselves in roller derby where they couldn't fit anywhere else.

When analyzing the reactions women had to watching "Brutal Beauty," I noted that the scenes that made the most impact to the roller derbygirls were the emotional scenes of discouragement or displays of sisterhood. During these scenes the women

would clap and slap one another on the back, or smile at one another as an indication of "knowing." The women gave varied responses to the movie, but ultimately they connected to their derby "sisters" through shared experience and admittance into the subculture.

This thesis aimed to answer three questions about roller derby. The construction of femininity and concepts of co-option of subculture are complicated by roller derby participants' strong views about their own individual empowerment within the structures of roller derby. Roller derby certainly makes derbygirls feel better about themselves; it boosts self-confidence in their body image and in their views on physical ability and strength. But ultimately the question must be asked, "to what end?" and this is where roller derby may fall short.

The first research question, "How do female subcultural practitioners (in this case, derbygirls) construct and communicate empowerment?" was answered through analyzing the women's answers to questions about empowerment. As demonstrated by literature that discusses DIY and punk subculture, female subcultural practitioners like derbygirls communicate empowerment through their creation and control of a space. That space may be dedicated to performance or creativity, but it is also a space for community. This empowerment does not necessarily change the world, but it does change many individual women's lives, and it *can* provide the tools that could be used to improve the lives of women outside of the subcultural circle of action.

The second question pertained to flat track derby's organizational model, and whether it constrains or empowers participants. While derbygirls address their own

individual empowerment issues, there are other structures of power that may constrain their ability to see real change in the way women are perceived on a larger scale. WFTDA, while run by derbygirls themselves, uses a marketing model that objectifies women's bodies in order to gain attention for the sport. The sport is inclusive of all women's bodies, even women who are large, tattooed and pierced, and do not fit into the mainstream boxes of beauty. As roller derby gains viewers and mainstream recognition, it runs the risk of over-exposure and misinterpretation.

The "new derby" is still very young and is still evolving. With each new group of women who are elected to the national WFTDA board, different values are negotiated and a different vision of derby is realized. The major changes to the game have come at a cost, to individuality of skaters and perhaps to the game as a whole. Some of these changes include the ever-changing rule-set. As players grow accustomed to the sport, they design more elaborate and strategic plays.[11]

But the biggest change in roller derby in the last few years has been the professionalization of the sport. As players push for more recognition, they find ways to legitimize the sport for new audiences. Most recently, many players have opted to use their real names rather than fake, ironic and often risqué skater names. As leagues receive sponsorship from local businesses, they are able to purchase new uniforms, replacing the tutus and fishnets that the sport is notorious for. This professionalization may mean that the sport will be taken more seriously, but it also means that fewer players will be called

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[11] It is not uncommon to watch a jam in which skaters "hold back" and sometimes even skate backwards in order to allow their jammers to catch up to the pack and find openings through a line of blockers. This effectively slows down the pace of the game to a crawl, at times.

"strippers on wheels" (as one former derbygirl phrased it), and may address some of the more problematic arguments about the objectification of women. But it also stifles a great deal of the DIY aspect and the individual creativity that brought some women to the sport. Unlike the WFTDA organization, banked track roller derby (TXRD) has largely continued to emphasize the entertainment and spectacle portion of derby. Athleticism and competition is still present, but La Muerta, who, as founding mother, is one of the permanent members of the board, says there will be no move to professionalize their version of derby. Derby participants, while they acknowledge that they want their league to be successful, state they don't participate for monetary benefit. They appeal to sponsors and advertisers for sponsorship, and in so-doing strive to appease these sponsors and seek mainstream approval. As such, WFTDA leagues are much more widespread and garner much more media attention from mainstream television programming. Meanwhile, banked-track derby teams claim to run their leagues with a goal of making a profit, which they do through appealing to the crowd's desire for a fast-paced, sexually charged environment. In both of these organizations, all proceeds go back in to the club coffers to be used for future promotions, track rental and other league expenses.

Finally, the study addressed the question of whether derby is a de-politicized feminist activity. Women's flat track roller derby was not born of feminism, per se. La Muerta says that she didn't intend the new derby to be "feminist" sport. In fact, she says that the group often doesn't give male fans and volunteers enough credit for their support and acceptance. Without the male fans, roller derby would be a very insular pastime. When La Muerta was approached to lead the Texas Rollergirls, she says she was

searching for something. She was turning 30 and "was up for anything." That "anything" became a business and franchise that has spread throughout the U.S., and to almost every continent in the world.

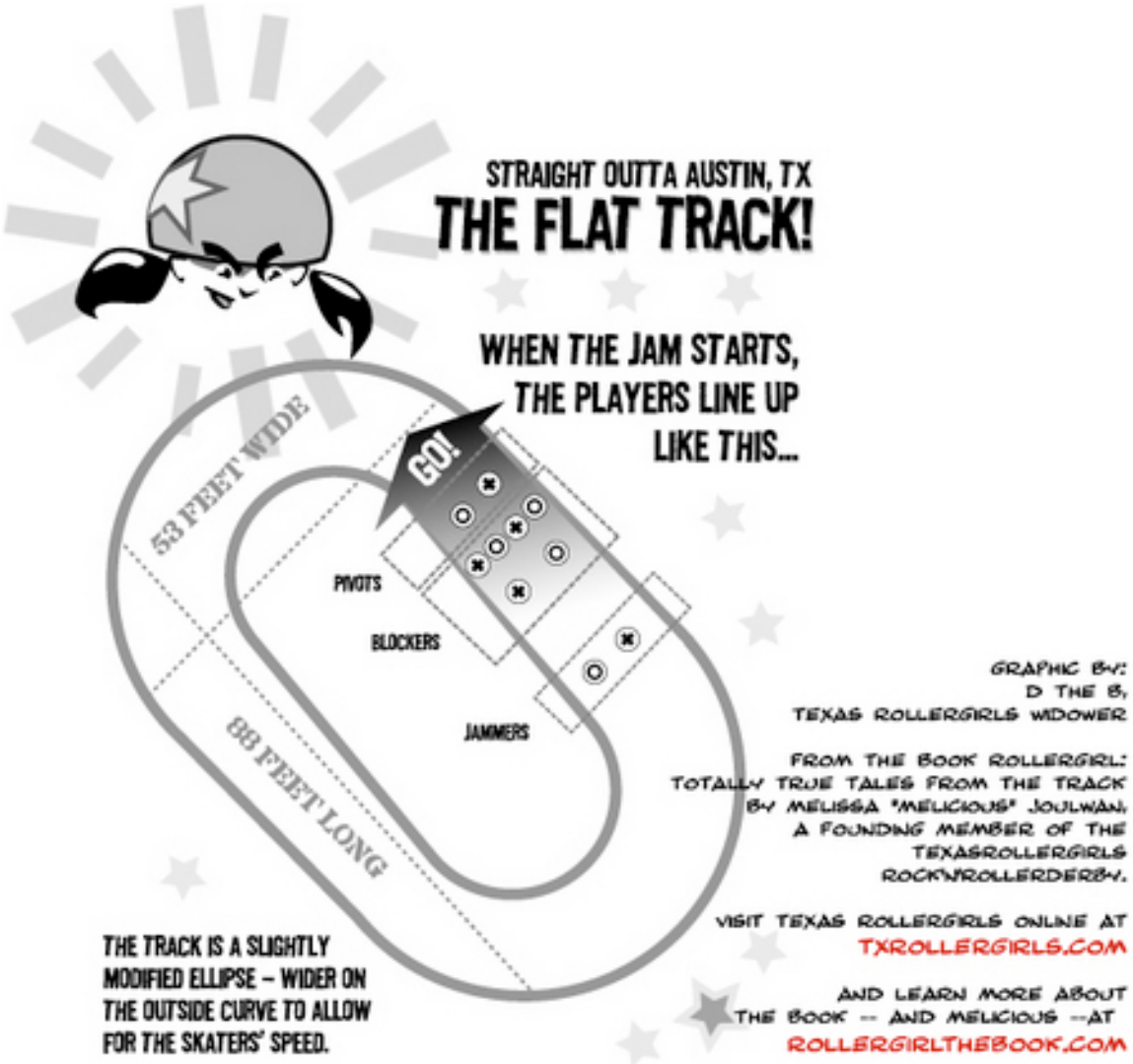
I contest the comparison between the riot grrrl scene and roller derby. While Riot Grrrl explicitly announced a political and anti-capitalist agenda through its manifesto and various other underground publications, roller derby makes no such claims. While the women of Riot Grrrl demanded a media blackout in 1992 because they said mass media attention began to threaten the underground anti-capitalist nature of the community, roller derby leagues actively seek mainstream media coverage and sponsorship. Roller derbygirls do retain control over many of the important aspects of the means of production, and they are very aware that their volunteer labor is what keeps the league going. But they do not own their own facilities, and must follow the rules of the cities and event centers in which they are allowed to perform/compete. Roller derby is not a feminist activity, although its members gain a great deal from participation. One could say that roller derby builds individual self-worth and empowerment within the activity, but it does not necessarily create a different or more accepting world in which women can feel accepted outside of roller derby. In order to move forward, empowering activities must encourage women to act collectively, instead of individually, in ways that displace oppressive power relations.

FURTHER RESEARCH & RECOMMENDATIONS

This topic is extremely rich in ways that it may be researched. With each new detail I learned about the sport and the organization, I thought of new ways the sport could be used as a study of feminism, women in sport, media representations, and political economy. While this thesis focused on derbygirl's ideas of their own empowerment and representation, further discussion that focuses on roller derby from a feminist political economy lens could be explored. Because of the timing of this thesis, several topics could not be analyzed in detail. Another topic of further research would be how subcultural practitioners use the Internet to bring other like-minded individuals together and organize their efforts. Most recently the WFTDA adopted a policy and hired a professional company to record bouts on the Internet. WFTDA officers state the move will bring the sport to even more people's attention.

APPENDIX A:

TRACK DESIGN



APPENDIX B:

WFTDA MARKETING

Why Join the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA)?

The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) is a cooperative effort of all-female flat track roller derby leagues working together to further the sport's worldwide reach. WFTDA was started by skaters from some of the earliest established leagues and was born out of their desire to help get newer leagues started, standardize a rule set for interleague play and make derby even more fun. And WFTDA is still doing all of that and a whole lot more today!

Considering applying for WFTDA membership? Here's some valuable information to share with your entire league regarding the benefits WFTDA membership delivers. WFTDA offers member leagues:

- **A say in the future of the association.** WFTDA operates "by the skaters, for the skaters." This national governing body is made up of representatives – skaters – from member roller derby leagues. WFTDA decisions – including those surrounding rules, specifics of the game, how the organization is run and more – involve all representatives.
- **A way to help mold the rules.** Member leagues develop and vote on standard rules for the game. Anyone can play by WFTDA rules, but member leagues get to decide what those rules will be. In addition, interleague play between WFTDA member leagues adheres to these rules to create a level playing field for all involved.
- **An easy way to reach other leagues.** WFTDA is a great place to challenge like-minded leagues.
- **Opportunities for WFTDA tournament play.** The WFTDA Regional and National Tournaments have already made their mark on the world of derby – and WFTDA members have a chance to help organize, host, and participate in these and other tournaments.
- **Participation in rankings.** Comprehensive team rankings and statistics from every WFTDA interleague bout are maintained within the WFTDA archives and are made available on wftda.com.
- **Power in numbers.** As an association of 78+ member leagues and growing, WFTDA offers insurance brokers, sponsors, media, and equipment manufacturers access to a network of organized leagues, which can be more appealing than a single league working on its own.
- **An easy way to find resources.** Trying to write your league's bylaws? Need advice on recruiting or training? Looking for sample contracts? Member leagues are constantly reaching out to each other and sharing information. Plus, WFTDA is a place to share and ask questions confidentially and get incredibly on-target advice. In addition, WFTDA is growing and with it, so is our pool of resources and information.
- **The chance to help safeguard the future of roller derby.** WFTDA policy and procedures ensure that member leagues protect the image and quality of the sport.
- **Structure with flexibility.** WFTDA honors member leagues as individuals as well as part of the WFTDA whole. Varying league models are respected yet are provided a standardized framework within which they can operate and maintain continuity with other member leagues.

WFTDA is an association in the true sense of the word – it's a pool of some of flat track roller derby's most dedicated players and staff. In short, WFTDA is made up of smart people collaborating to come up with the best solutions and best ideas. And we want more people in that pool!

WOMEN'S FLAT TRACK DERBY ASSOCIATION WFTDA

wftda.com

APPENDIX C:

DERBY DEMOGRAPHICS

ROLLER DERBY DEMOGRAPHICS:

Results from the Second Annual Comprehensive Data Collection on Skaters and Fans

Women's Flat Track Derby Association
Published March 2011

Methodology

Data for this survey were collected online during the month of January 2011. Participants (roller derby fans, skaters, and volunteers/affiliates) accessed the survey via links provided by the WFTDA and its affiliate leagues' websites, social media (Facebook, Twitter), email lists, and message boards.

The 2011 survey data set consisted of 10,403 total responses, roughly half from fans and half from sport participants, including current skaters (female and male), retired skaters, junior skaters, league volunteers, and league business partners. (For comparison, the 2010 survey data consisted of 9,781 respondents, with a similar split between fans and direct participants.)

Survey responses came in from fans around with world, with Americans comprising 91% of the results.

Fans

Basic Demographics
Overall, most WFTDA fans are female (66% to 34% male; 2010 results: 59% to 41% male). Fans 24 years old and younger are more likely to be female (88% versus 11% male). As the ages of fans increase, the gender split decreases; for all fans at 35 years old and over, the female/male split narrows to 57%/42%.

Avid fans (defined as those who have attended three or more bouts in the past year) exhibit a similar split between genders (60% female, 40% male).

Eleven percent of fans are 24 years old or younger. The coveted 25-34-year-old demographic comprises 42% of fans, while 35-54-year-olds make up another 41%. Only 6% are 55 or older. These figures are nearly unchanged from the 2010 survey results.

Four out of five fans identify as straight; the remaining identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or other (a figure unchanged from 2010). Thirty-four percent of fans are single and 38% are married. Eighteen percent live with a partner and 9% are divorced or separated. Less than 1% are widowed.

Roughly a quarter of fans (27%) live with children under 18 in their household.

Eighty-six percent of fans have at least some college education; 63% have earned a degree. Twenty-nine percent have attended graduate school and 20% have a graduate degree. Six percent have a vocational certificate or degree.

The 2011 survey was the first to question fans and skaters about their professions. The most popular field among fans is education (9%), followed by health care, retail sales, and computer systems and projects (5% each). Students comprise 7% of the fan base, and only 1% reported as unemployed. Thirty-three percent are salaried professionals, 14% are employed at a managerial level, and 6% own their own business.

Attracting Fans

Roller Derby is still very much a grassroots sport in terms of attracting new fans. Word of mouth is responsible for attracting the majority of fans, either by having a friend or family member involved (32%) or hearing about it through a friend (22%), both nearly identical figures from the 2010 survey. Print advertisements bring in 10% of fans, and radio or TV advertisements are responsible for approximately 1%. Only 5% of fans report hearing about roller derby through national or local press coverage.

Recent mainstream media attention through films and documentaries such as "Whip It!" and "Hell on Wheels" and/or the A&E show "Rollergirls" was responsible for 12% of fans hearing about roller derby, up from 4% in 2010. The increased presence of roller derby in the general media continues to drum up interest which trickles down throughout the sport community.

Sponsor Interest

Roller Derby fans have spending power. Nearly a third (31%) of fans have a household income of at least $75,000 per year. Ninety-seven percent of all fans agree that roller derby bouts provide good entertainment value for their money.

Businesses would be smart to get the attention of roller derby fans by sponsoring a league. Seventy-nine percent of all fans know the businesses that support their local roller derby league, and nearly 95% hold a favorable opinion of these businesses. Over 72% have patronized businesses that sponsor their local league. These figures all represent increases over the 2010 survey results.

Sports Interest

Fifty percent of fans reported attending two or more sporting events other than roller derby in 2010. Conversely, this means that the other 50 percent of fans are a relatively untapped audience in terms of sports marketing—fans who sports marketers might otherwise find challenging to reach.

Roller Derby fans keep up with sports through several outlets. Within the last year, 69% have watched sports or sports-related programming on TV. Over half (59%) keep up with sports by visiting websites, and just over a third (38%) listen to sports-related programming on the radio. Forty-four percent accessed sports scores or information on their cell phones.

Skaters

Basic Demographics

Even with the emergence of male roller derby leagues, women make up 95% of active adult roller derby skaters (down from 98% in 2010). However, men make up 59% of league volunteers, including referees. The majority (60%) of female skaters are between the ages of 25 and 34. Twenty-five percent of skaters are older than 35, and 13% are 24 or younger.

Seventy-six percent of adult female skaters identify as straight; the remaining 24% identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other. These figures are unchanged from the 2010 survey.

One-third of skaters are single, slightly more (37%) are married, and a quarter (25%), live with a partner. Seven percent are divorced or separated.

Thirty-one percent of skaters live with children under 18 in their household.

Eighty-six percent of skaters have at least some college education and 64% have earned a college degree. Thirty percent have some graduate education, and almost 20% have a graduate level degree. Seven percent have earned a vocational certificate or degree.

Attracting New Skaters

Almost half (46%) of skaters first heard of the modern roller derby revival through a friend or someone they knew who was involved. Eleven percent saw a print advertisement. Seven percent of current skaters saw links or stories on the internet, and 9% met skaters at an event. As with fans, grassroots methods currently shoulder the most responsibility for spreading the word about roller derby to potential skaters.

Level of Involvement

Seventy-eight percent of current skaters attended four or more bouts in the past year, and 98% of skaters plan to attend three or more bouts in the coming year. Two-thirds took at least one 2010 road trip to another city for a roller derby event, with a third of the skaters reporting over five trips in the last year.

Almost 57% of skaters agree that it's important to them that a bout they are considering seeing is a WFTDA bout. Even if it is not a formally sanctioned event, 94% say that it's important to them that roller derby bouts are played under a nationally agreed upon set of rules such as the WFTDA rules set.

Current female skaters show a greater support for men's roller derby than those not involved in the sport. Twenty-eight percent of skaters support men's roller derby at least on an equal level as women's roller derby, significantly more than the 13% of fans who express equal or greater support for men's roller derby.

Only 6% of skaters agree that they would enjoy roller derby more if skaters used their real names.

Forty-three percent of the adult female skaters polled reported an intention to buy *Jam City Rollergirls*, the first WFTDA-licensed console game for the Nintendo Wii (from Frozen Codebase, released in early 2011). Thirty percent of fans declared the same intention.

Careers

The most popular careers among current active skaters include education (10%), health care (practitioners and technical) (7%), and office and administration support (6%). Four percent of skaters report careers in accounting and financial operations, arts and design, food service, health care (support), retail sales, and homemaking. Seven percent are full-time students, and 1% report as unemployed.

Further, 35% are salaried professionals, 15% are employed at a managerial level, and 5% own their own business.

Twenty-four percent report 2010 income exceeding $75,000 USD, and 44% exceed $50,000. Thirty-nine percent of skaters report having spent over $500 USD on roller derby in the past year.

More Information Available

The 2011 survey also contains league-specific breakdowns for each league's demographics, as well as fan opinions about the presentation of the sport in their local area. The global results are generally reflected in local markets, but with pockets of deviation. Contact the WFTDA or your local WFTDA league for more detail about the fans and skaters in your corner of the world.

About the WFTDA

The Women's Flat Track Derby Association is the governing body for women's flat track roller derby, and a membership organization for the leagues to collaborate and network. The organization created and maintained the first standardized rule set for the flat track game, which is now in its fourth edition. The WFTDA also serves as the sanctioning body for flat track roller derby games, hosts regional and national tournaments, sets safety standards, provides insurance to athletes and leagues, and serves as a networking venue for flat track roller derby leagues to share resources and get advice. There are currently (as of March 2011) 109 WFTDA member leagues.

ADDENDUM - SUMMARY RESULTS
February 2011 WFTDA Demographic Survey

Total sample size: 10,403. Participant volunteers took a 42-question internet-based survey.

- 3,312 current female adult roller derby competitors surveyed
- 5,360 roller derby fans surveyed
- 1,006 league volunteers surveyed
- 725 former skaters, male skaters, young adult skaters, retired skaters, and other sport partners surveyed

88% surveyed are American fans/skaters (2010: 89%)
12% surveyed are international fans/skaters (2010: 11%)

Fan Gender: 66% female, 34% male (2010: 59% female, 41% male)

Fan Age:			**Skater Age:**		
< 25 yrs:	11%	(2010: 10%)	< 25 yrs:	13%	(2010: 15%)
25-34 yrs:	42%	(2010: 41%)	25-34 yrs:	60%	(2010: 63%)
35-44 yrs:	30%	(2010: 30%)	35-44 yrs:	23%	(2010: 22%)
45-54 yrs:	11%	(2010: 11%)	45-54 yrs:	2%	(2010: 2%)
55+ yrs:	6%	(2010: 7%)	55+ yrs:	< 0%	(2010: < 0%)

Fan Education Level Achieved:			**Skater Education Level Achieved:**		
Some high school	1%	(2010: 1%)	Some high school <	0%	(2010: 1%)
High school diploma	7%	(2010: 9%)	High school diploma	7%	(2010: 8%)
Vocational degree	6%	(2010: n/a)	Vocational degree	7%	(2010: n/a)
Some undergraduate	23%	(2010: 27%)	Some undergraduate	22%	(2010: 25%)
Undergraduate diploma	33%	(2010: 34%)	Undergraduate diploma	34%	(2010: 37%)
Some graduate level	9%	(2010: 9%)	Some graduate level	10%	(2010: 10%)
Graduate degree	20%	(2010: 21%)	Graduate degree	20%	(2010: 19%)

Fan Marital Status			**Skater Marital Status**		
Single	34%	(2010: 37%)	Single	32%	(2010: 33%)
Married	38%	(2010: 37%)	Married	37%	(2010: 36%)
Living With Partner	18%	(2010: 16%)	Living With Partner	25%	(2010: 24%)
Divorced/Separated	9%	(2010: 8%)	Divorced/Separated	7%	(2010: 7%)

Fans living with children 18 or younger:	27%	(2010: 24%)
Skaters living with children 18 or younger:	31%	(2010: 31%)

Fan Sexual Orientation: 80% straight, 19% gay / lesbian / bisexual / other (2010: 82/18%)
Skater Sexual Orientation: 76% straight, 23% gay / lesbian / bisexual / other (2010: 76/24%)

Fan household income before taxes:			**Skater household income before taxes:**		
Less than $15,000	8%	(2010: 8%)	Less than $15K	9%	(2010: 7%)
$15K up to $25K	9%	(2010: 9%)	$15K up to $25K	12%	(2010: 13%)
$25K up to $35K	12%	(2010: 12%)	$25K up to $35K	14%	(2010: 15%)
$35K up to $50K	19%	(2010: 18%)	$35K up to $50K	21%	(2010: 21%)
$50K up to $75K	21%	(2010: 21%)	$50K up to $75K	20%	(2010: 20%)
$75K up to $100K	15%	(2010: 15%)	$75K up to $100K	12%	(2010: 13%)
$100K up to $150K	11%	(2010: 11%)	$100K up to $150K	8%	(2010: 9%)
Over $150,000	5%	(2010: 5%)	Over $150,000	4%	(2010: 3%)

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