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## Selling the Third Wave: The Commodification and Consumption of the Flat Track Roller Girl

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Selling the Third Wave:  
The Commodification and Consumption of the Flat Track Roller Girl

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## DEDICATION

Thank you to Dr. Crawley, Dr. Benford, and Dr. Graham for pushing me to reach my academic goals. Also, I would like to give a big thank you to Stone, Alli, and the rest of the local roller derby team for embracing my research endeavor. And of course, thank you to Veronica and all of my friends who tirelessly attended roller derby bouts with me.

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## ABSTRACT

In an ethnographic examination of the “modern” roller derby movement that began in the early 2000s, I explore Women’s Flat Track Derby in Florida. What does it mean to be a roller derby player? How is she conceptualized and commodified? Or more centrally, how is third wave feminism used as a catalyst of this commodification? In order to fully appreciate, understand, and even embrace roller derby, I look at roller derby leagues as social movement organizations (SMOs) in order to note how they frame themselves and maintain collective identity the commodification of third wave feminism. First, I will explore various facets of the “modern” roller derby movement by way of gender, sexuality, and youth as central themes of roller derby culture and identity. Second, I note how roller derby utilizes rhetoric associated with third wave feminism. Third, I examine how roller derby is conceptualized as a social movement and while doing so note the charity organizations that various leagues support. I go on to explore how cultural capital is used in roller derby as a way to create insider knowledge while appropriating third wave feminism. Finally, I will look at how all aspects of roller derby I discussed illuminate a critique of third wave feminism. It is through these facets that I illustrate how the modern flat track roller derby employs third wave feminist rhetoric to produce and commodify the roller derby player identity.



## CHAPTER ONE

### ROLLING OUT: INTRODUCING THE ROLLER DERBY GIRL

In this investigation, I am interested in studying the sport of roller derby and specifically how it co-opts feminist ideologies to employ consumption, be it theoretical or tangible. I will interrogate how roller derby positions itself as a business while theoretically and tangibly selling identity and culture as its product. Furthermore, the modern roller derby movement employs third wave feminist rhetoric to commercialize, commodify, produce and reproduce the identity of roller player. It is this juncture that is critical to explore. What does it mean to be a roller derby player? How are her gender, youth, and sexuality used as tools to be conceptualized and commodified? Or more centrally, how is third wave feminism used as a catalyst for this commodification? In investigating these questions, my focus will be on the “modern” roller derby movement in Florida that began in the early 2000s and is currently thriving in 2012. I begin my exploration inspecting various facets of the “modern” roller derby movement such as gender, sexuality, and youth, revealing central themes of roller derby culture and identity. Second, I note how roller derby utilizes rhetoric associated with third wave feminism. Next, I examine how roller derby is framed as a social movement. I go on to explore the ways that cultural capital describes insider knowledge within roller derby, which appropriates the movement as a social movement tied to third wave feminism. In closing, I look at how aspects of roller derby illuminate critiques of third wave feminism.

The commercialization of the sport by players and leagues often focuses on the extreme “girl power” exhibited by playing roller derby, through the use of third wave feminist rhetoric, which influences the construction, commercialization, commodification, and consumption of the roller derby player. The roller derby player is feminized, sexualized, and made desirable in the sport of flat track roller derby. Hereafter, I will use the terms roller derby player and roller derby girl interchangeably and in purposeful ways. Third wave feminism is said to have begun around the late 1980s and early 1990s and has embraced differences of sexuality, race, nationality, and religion (Tong 2009). Also, when relating how roller derby is commercialized, I will be focusing on the ways in which players are commodified and consumed because of commercialization. The derby player becomes a product to be “consumed.” I employ the term consumption, however, to refer to the way that people intake the roller derby player as well. Specifically, I argue that modern flat track roller derby employs third wave feminist rhetoric to produce, commodify, and reproduce the roller derby player identity. Ultimately, I argue that roller derby leagues use third wave feminism as a resource to commodify and make popular the narrowly defined identity of the roller derby player, the sport, and the social movement of roller derby.

As a feminist social scientist, I find it imperative to query new social movements that may disrupt, challenge, or transform the current hegemonic paradigms surrounding women, sport, sexuality, and third wave feminism. In the realm of roller derby, there has yet to be a study conducted on the identity formulation and subsequent commodification of the roller girl identity by way of third wave feminist rhetoric. In order to fully appreciate, understand, and even embrace roller derby, researchers should look at roller

derby leagues as social movement organizations (SMOs). I do this in order to note how roller derby frames themselves and maintains collective identity by the incorporation and commodification of third wave feminism.

## Literature Review

### *Roller Derby Literature*

Since the early 2000s, roller derby has been growing in popularity with a new look signified by fishnets, tattoos, and punk rock while it has fashioned itself as a do-it-yourself (DIY) sport. Emerging from a past of commercial sports in the 1930s, the roller derby revival has paved a different kind of route (Storms 2008). Instead of the televised co-ed dramatized story line of the 1970s (Deford 1971), roller derby is now all female, player-run, and player-organized. Additionally, roller derby is now a DIY business venture. Roller derby leagues raise funds for their own leagues as well as local charities that are hand-selected by these individual leagues. Similar to their own fundraising strategies, they are also soliciting audience members during bouts.

The majority of the research conducted on roller derby has focused on aspects of history (Storms 2008), gender (Storms 2008, Finley 2010, Carlson 2010, Peluso 2011), and sexuality (Storms 2008, Finley 2010, Carlson 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Kearney 2011, Peluso 2011). The plurality of identity within the roller derby movement is situated between girl power, sport, and punk rock (Joulwan 2007, Storms 2008, Pavlidis 2011). Collectively, theorists argue that this use of alternative femininity has liberating potential for women (Storms 2008, Pavlidis 2011, Finley 2010). While there has been a good bit of research about roller derby as a gendered or sexual possibility (Finley 2010, Kearney 2011, Storms 2008, Pavlidis 2011), a sport (Storms 2008, Finley 2010) or even a feminist

creation (Pavlidis 2011), there has not been any research on roller derby as a social movement. Before constructing an argument about roller derby as social movement, I survey the literature on roller derby as regards gender, sport, and third wave feminism.

### *Gender and Performance*

Gender performativity (Butler 1990) in roller derby is not easily simplified. Instead, it works to complicate, but not negate traditional gender performance. Drawing from de Beauvoir's groundbreaking work, gender is not a stagnant thing, but rather "one becomes a woman" (1949:13). Similarly, ethnomethodologist Garfinkel (1967) asserts that people utilize gender "display" or performance, which inspired West and Zimmerman's (1987) argument about "doing gender." In this, they argued that gender is not a fixed thing, but something that people do in accordance to societal norms (West and Zimmerman 1987). Along the same theoretical line, Butler's concept of gender performativity (1990) is based largely on the notion that gender is understood as something that is always being done, as opposed to being stable. Butler explains gender performativity by stating that, "gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity that it is purported to be" (1990: 25). Performativity is based on the notion that gender itself is tied up in social notions of normative gender ideologies in which gender is done as a process, not as a stagnant goal (West and Zimmerman 1987, Butler 1990, Crawley et al. 2008, Bell 2008). Positioning performativity alongside desire, and occasionally drag, roller derby is easily positioned as queer (Sedgwick 1993). Butler finds the argument of queer performativity particularly compelling, explains it as "if the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play ...[where] 'queers' [or] those who resist or oppose

that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction” (Butler 1993:18). For Butler (1993) and Sedgwick (1993) alike, queer performativity inhabits the space that is not sanctioned, not agreed upon. This argument, then allows for the unapologetic performative movements in roller derby.

### *Sport, Sexuality and Subculture*

A crucial aspect of identity for a roller derby player is the practice of gender or “the sense of being appropriately masculine or feminine” (Crawley et al. 2008: 41) via playing sport. Crawley, Foley and Shehan (2008) elaborate on the construction of sport as gendered, which creates a theoretical space to explore how the gendering of roller derby becomes a selling point for the sport. Their work also assists in exploring how femininity is granted and exercised through this masculinized, violence-oriented sport. “Sport, then, is a site in which the performance and surveillance of masculinity and femininity are rampant” (Crawley et al. 2008: 57). From the screaming audience- to league designated derby outfits-- there are many ways that gender is surveilled within roller derby.

Historically, non-normative sexualities and genders (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin 2005, Lenskyji 2003, Cahn 1993) allowed for possible transgressions in sport. Sport is gendered and sexualized. When it comes to roller derby there are serious implications. Roller derby is known for its excessive violence and could be interpreted as following traditionally masculine paradigm in sport (Messner 1990). This masculinity of violence is pitted against femininity and overt sexuality to yield an interesting effect on traditional notions of gender. As a way to counteract the masculinity of sport, women engage in an over- feminization termed the “feminine apologetic” (Messner 1988). The overt masculinity of a sport, such as roller derby, thus allows for women to enhance their

femininity (Crawley et al. 2008, Clasen 2001, Messner 1988). This is extended into the way that women become overtly gendered and therefore sexualized through television and advertising in sport (Messner 2003). Moreover, this sexualization aids in assisting the “feminine apologetic” (Messner 1988, Messner 2003).

Another very important part of roller derby identity is interlaced with subculture theory, and in particular within punk rock and gender theory. Leblanc (1999) explores the complexities of being female within punk rock subculture. Punk rock, she explains, is a male-dominated subculture where femininity is nearly invisible (1999). When it is visible, women in punk rock utilize alternative methods to reconfigure femininity by “inscribing feminine attributes into the style and ideology of punk” (Leblanc 1999: 163). They do so “in combining attributes of punk masculinity with those of femininity, these girls are creating strong self-images” (Leblanc 1999: 163). Similarly, Holland (2004) cites punk rock, goth, and other alterative subcultures as spaces where women feel transgressive about hegemonic gender ideologies. Yet, Holland (2004) argues that these transgressions are simply mild fashion choices opposed to liberation. These constructions of gender are central to roller derby in that choosing non-normative fashion or identities does not necessitate transgression beyond hegemonic gender.

Developing from punk rock, the riot grrrl movement incorporated ideologies of third wave feminism while holding true to do-it-yourself (DIY) ethics (Garrison 2000). When discussing DIY ethics in this context, Garrison explains that the purpose of it is “to encourage women and girls to take the initiative to create art and knowledge, to change their cultural and political landscape, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for them” (2000: 154). The ethics of DIY and riot grrrl simultaneously become central to

roller derby. Just as described by Storms (2008), Finely (2010) and Pavlidis (2010, 2012), roller derby thrives off of the ability to be DIY, as many times the same people who are playing are also managing the teams, setting up the bouts, drawing flyers, and marketing the events. . Another issue central to this conversation is third wave feminism's prominence in roller derby culture.

### *Third Wave Feminism*

Like much of feminism (Mendes 2011, Reger 2002), there has not been a singular definition for third wave feminism (Snyder 2008, Gillis and Munford 2004). In fact, the definitions have been contested time and time again (Snyder 2008, Gillis and Munford 2004). Rebecca Walker was the first to define herself as a third wave feminist, and in so doing cited a plethora of issues for second wave feminism (Walker 1995, Mann and Huffman 2005). In particular, she pointed to second wave feminism as judgmental and not understanding of multiple identities (Walker 1995). Self-described third wave feminists Baumgardner and Richards assert this new wave as an opportunity to explore the empowering possibilities of popular culture for women (2000, 2004).

Birthered out of third wave feminism and punk rock, the riot grrrl movement has utilized social movement techniques, DIY, and feminist ethics (Garrison 2000). Punk rock is a masculine-dominated music genre and one of the main goals of riot grrrl is to make space for women (Kearney 1997, Garrison 2000, Holland 2004). Riot grrrl also was outspoken about heterosexism (Kearney 1997) and worked towards the possibility of “resignification” and empowerment (Munford 2004: 271). Bands like Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear used their music as a performance and even a spectacle to call feminism to the forefront of the riot grrrl and punk rock conversation (Leonard 1997). Riot grrrl

encompasses more than just music; it has ties to magazines, which are DIY zines (Leonard 1997, Garrison 2000, Crawley, et al. 2008) and activist organizations like radical cheerleaders (Crawley, et al. 2008).

Soon after the riot grrrl movement, the mainstream pop culture sensation of ‘girl power’ rose in popularity. Having grown up in a time period in which the Spice Girls were primary role models, I am all too familiar with the phenomena of ‘girl power’ (Lemish 2003, Gillis and Munford 2004, Attwood 2007). The pinnacle of this ‘girl power’ phenomenon was the rise of the British all-girl group the Spice Girls to the international market in 1997 (Lemish 2003). The group was made up of five different girls who are all traditionally attractive (Lemish 2003), but had distinctive personalities. These varied yet distinctive personalities allow for fan identification, and allow for all fans who fit into the category of attractive, and subsequent sexualization (Attwood 2007), could then take on the image of ‘girl power.’ It is clear through the Spice Girl application of ‘girl power’ that it “refers to both physical and mental strength” (Lemish 2003: 21). As it is rooted in ideals of third wave feminism (Lemish 2003, Attwood 2007), such as personal empowerment, “girl power” is a distinct pop culture slogan, which finds its way into a variety of places, one of which is the world and sport of roller derby.

Due to its wide array of definitions, third wave feminism is not only open to a variety people; it is also open for a great deal of critique (Tong 2009). Gills and Munford (2004) note third wave feminism largely rejects the academy, while they posit that they have thrown out their own theoretical underpinnings. Third wave feminism allows for multiple definitions and because of the wide range of definitions, third wave is without a singular definition (Snyder 2008). Third wave feminists also put distance between



themselves and second wave. This purposeful distance is critiqued as third wave feminists “not only to fail to wrap their hands around valuable tools, it is to join their shovels to the backlash forces that would bury the history and significance of feminism” (Bailey 1997:27). Furthermore, they have also been critiqued because of their claim of empowerment because they don’t recognize that not all people feel that way (Tong 2009). In line with the same critique, Riordan notes the use of third wave feminism and the rhetoric of girl power as tools of commodification (2001). The pro-girl rhetoric used by third wave feminism has been argued to be a catalyst of consumption of empowerment (Riordan 2001).

*Social Movement Theory, Framing, and Collective Identity.*

Social movement (SM) scholars have consistently explored the complexities of social movements in regards to things such as participation, motivation, and mobilization. Over the years a number of paradigms such as rational choice (Olson 1965), strain theory (Snow, Cress, Downey, and Jones 1998), political opportunity (McAdam 1982), new social movement theories (Melucci 1985), and social constructionism (Gamson 1997), have emerged out of SM theorizing. Most relevant to this analysis are social constructionist and new social movement theories, both of which heavily incorporate collective identities and focus on non-traditional movements, such as roller derby. However, there have been no SM studies specifically on the roller derby movement and until recently culture and identity have remained absent from SM studies (Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994, Melucci 1985, Gamson 1997, Benford and Hunt 1992).

Many SM scholars have also explored the ways that organizations utilize framing techniques (Hunt and Benford 2004, Snow and Benford 1992, Snow, Rochford, Worden,

and Benford 1986, Snow and Benford 1988, Benford and Snow 2000) to incite participation (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986, Snow and Benford 1988) and to promote collective identity (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, Hunt and Benford 2004). In their goal to exemplify framing techniques, Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) borrow the term “frame” from Goffman (1974). In so doing, they illustrate Goffman’s (1974: 21) term to “denote ‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (Snow et al 1986). The issue of framing is that it is intentional and “an active process-derived phenomenon that implies agency and contention in the construction of reality” (Snow and Benford 1992: 136).

Hand in hand with framing, the concept of collective identity is seen as “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 170). Collective identity has been studied in a number of fashions including the globalization (McDoland 2002), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (Bernstien 1997), feminist (Reger 2002, Taylor and Whittier 1992), and environmentalist movements (Lichterman 1995). The concepts prove to be helpful in my exploration of roller derby as a social movement organization.

Roller derby operates as a social movement by utilizing framing techniques and relying on collective identity while constructing the roller derby movement. As I will illustrate, roller derby leagues utilize framing techniques when addressing feminism, gender, sexuality, and youth by creating a narrative of the roller derby player. In so doing, leagues create and sustain cultural capital and insider knowledge to maintain the collective identity of the players, participants, and fans.

### *Consumer Culture Theory*

From ticket sales to fundraising for non-profits, roller derby is deeply infused with consumerism and consumption. Consumer culture theory is concerned with how consumption of products happens, the consumers themselves, and how certain products become desirable. Bourdieu's "cultural capital" (1984) is conceptualized as desirable patterns of consumption, ideologies, or skills. The various ways that cultural capital is conceptualized have been studied in a variety of communities, for example: surfing (Wheaton and Beal 2003), skateboarding (Wheaton and Beal 2003), punk rock (Moore 2007) skiing (Edensor and Richards 2007), club cultures (Thornton 1995), metal music (Kahn-Harris 2007), and youth cultures (Hodkinson and Deicke 2007).

While there has been a plethora of research pertaining to cultural capital, Campbell's concept of "imaginative hedonism" (1987) is also integral to the project at hand, as well as consumer culture theory. The concept of the imaginative hedonism for the modern consumer is, as Campbell argues, particular to modern generations (Campbell 1987). He argues that while people desire and fantasize about consuming, they are in a constant state of daydreaming, which extends to their perpetual longing for goods, with an end goal of gratification that is never fully recognized (Campbell 1987). Previously, this concept has been applied to consumer culture when examining fair trade coffee (Varul 2009), marketing (Elliott 1997), and reality television (Rose and Wood 2005). I find these theories particularly compelling as they help to shed light on the ways feminism is utilized by roller derby leagues.

### *Feminism, Gender, and Consumption in Roller Derby*

I am interested in specifically how the modern roller derby movement employs third wave feminist rhetoric to commercialize, commodify, produce and reproduce the roller derby player and movement. So, specifically, how is third wave feminism used as a catalyst for the commodification of the roller derby player and movement by way of feminism, gender, youth, and sexuality? In terms of commercialization, I focus on how various mediums have portrayed roller derby players and culture in Florida. In regards to the term commodify, I look specifically at the ways that feminism, gender, sexuality, and youth are utilized in order to transform the roller derby player and the roller derby movement into a product to be consumed. The term consumption, however, explains the way that audience members and fans realize and recognize the roller derby player and roller derby movement. The culmination of these concepts begins to illuminate the focus of my research project as critically engaged and feminist minded.

#### Methods

As a feminist researching the modern roller derby movement and community, I found it key to utilize an ethnographic approach to research. I employed an observational ethnographic analysis to incorporate an inclusive vision (Reinharz 1992). The use of observational ethnography is widespread within the feminist community because of the lessened power differentials, opportunities for reflexivity, and the possibility for participatory action (Fonow and Cook 1991). Specifically, while in the field, I assumed the role of a complete observer, in that I functioned as “an eavesdropping janitor” (Neuman 2011: 433). While I was this method did not allow for interviews, using observational ethnography did allow for a multidimensional analysis of the spaces and

people observed. Due to this rich observational data source, while analyzing my data, I was able to create a more accurate portrait of who roller derby players are, who participates, and who the audience is.

After receiving IRB approval for my field observation, I attended and conducted field research at Women's Flat Track Roller Derby games (i.e., bouts) and tournaments in the North, Central, and South Florida areas. I attended a total of eight official bouts and two derby sponsored events, all of which took place in Florida. Within these, I attended a total of six different league games and watched a total of fourteen teams. The games I attended were hosted and played by the most well known leagues in the state. Attendance at the bouts ranged from approximately 100-300 audience members. During these games I took field notes pertaining to the players and the bout. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw explain field notes as "accounts describing experiences and observations the researchers has made while participating in an intense and involved manner" (1995: 5). In my study, I primarily focused on the players' appearances, names, and interactions as well as the environment of the roller derby bout. In the latter, I took particular note of the interactions between the roller derby players and the audience; in these interactions I aimed to observe how identity is negotiated among the roller derby players, the participants, and the audience.

While analyzing the data from my ethnographic field notes, I allowed the themes that emerge to inform the codes that I used in my data analysis (Lofland and Lofland 1995). While taking my field notes during the derby bouts, I interacted with the material, and, in turn, concurrently analyzed the data (Silverman 2001). Moving from initial coding to focused coding, I saw a variety of themes emerge from the data (Lofland and

Lofland 1995). Throughout this process, I noted that the themes and data themselves would overlap, creating an interlocking web of material to draw from in my analysis.

### *Ethically Speaking*

While conducting my research, I continued to be conscious about the assumptions related to my field and population. Being reflexive about my own understandings of the community, sport, and players allowed for a more thorough analysis. I also was extremely cautious about how my research might be influencing the interactions of the players or experiences of the audience members. As I did my ethnographic fieldwork it was important for me to not distract the players during my note taking, so I consciously worked to blend in as an audience member.

### *Limitations*

The most important limitation to this project is the small scope. This whole project was conducted solely in Florida. My findings are central to leagues and bouts in Florida. Therefore, it is imperative to be mindful that roller derby is much larger than one region of the United States.

### *Context*

Coming to the project of roller derby was no error. In fact, a few friends and I sought out roller derby with the collective hope of becoming active players and participants. After a month of tragic skating attempts, I threw in my skates. Nonetheless, after spending five days a week with the same girls for a month, I did not want to disconnect from them. I spent an increasing amount of time attending bouts, practices, and helping plan events. As with most researchers, the project flourished under my nose.

Something significant about roller derby is the feeling of being part of a community. The time I spent in the roller derby community and culture is far from over. Many of those who are active in roller derby allow for it to serve as a community and a network of friends. I have strong ties and deeply care about many of the people who are active the roller derby community. I am well aware of this and hope this investment in roller derby allows me to complete a strong and respectful analysis.

Although I may have been ‘playing’ researcher, the friendships I made served as a site of reciprocity throughout the writing process (Tillmann-Healy 2006, Kirsch 2005, Reinharz, and Davidman 1992). Meaning, I allowed for an open line of communication during the analysis process with roller derby participants in order to correctly and fully illustrate the situations I map in my paper. As noted by Kirsch, “interactions with participants are most often based on friendliness” (2005: 2170). However, as a researcher, it is my responsibility to subjects and to friends made during that process, to make a clear distinction that my research has ended. As the case with much research, my relationships with these people will dwindle, but not be cast off (Tillmann-Healy 2006, Kirsch 2005, Reinharz, and Davidman 1992). This kind of connection reflects roller derby. No matter what city I move to or career change I make, there is always a nearby community and friendship group with open arms.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SKATING LIKE A GIRL: COLLECTIVELY PERFORMING THE SEXUALIZED FEMININE

*“When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional areas” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 126).*

*“Every human existence is defined by its **situation**; the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation.” (Young 1980: 138; emphasis in original)*

When exploring a sport that is organized by gender and played by women, it is imperative to note the ways gender and sexuality are negotiated and subsequently made meaningful due to the complex relationships and implications of roller derby. It has been previously argued that roller derby provides a space to re-appropriate ideals of gender and sexuality (Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011). While this may be true, it is only true to a very small extent. In fact, it is such small liberatory possibility that I argue the converse: roller derby imagines the same ideal woman as hegemonic society just with superficial additives such as tattoos, piercings, and brightly colored hair dye. Similar to the ideal femininity of mainstream society, this image of the roller derby girl is one that is consistently positioned as hyper-feminine, sexualized and youthful.

#### Performing a “Twisted” Hyper-feminine

Like many sports played by women (Adams et al. 2005, Lenskyj 2003, Cahn 1993, Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993, Messner 1988) roller derby utilizes gendered



performances as a way to gain popularity and retain fans. The roller derby revival is grounded in the concept of promoting women-dominated spaces. Many techniques utilized by roller derby leagues focus on femininity, and therefore work to re-imagine the sport with a very particular feminine objective (Storms 2008, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011).

Gender performativity (Butler 1990) in roller derby is not easily simplified. Instead, it works to complicate, but not negate traditional gender performance. Performativity is based on the notion that gender itself is tied up in social notions of normative gender ideologies (Butler 1990). Further gender is done as a process, not as a stagnant goal (West and Zimmerman 1987, Butler 1990, Crawley et al. 2008). In roller derby this kind of performativity is present by accentuating the hyperfeminine subject. This is seen readily in a number of ways-- from the black and pink uniforms to the skater's long hair that flows beneath her helmet as she speeds around the rink. The roller derby rink is fundamentally gendered. During the bouts, the players skate in skirts, spanx (which resemble underwear), fishnet stockings, and expose bounds of cleavage. Many of the player's names also play into their feminized personas by their individually created, customized roller derby names, such as Twisted Tink, Killary Clinton, Bash em' Up Barbie, and Barbie Bont. In many ways, roller derby is bound by gendered personas and performances of players.

Conversely, Finely (2010) works to ascertain the way roller derby challenges traditional hegemonic gender ideologies. She notes that, when studying intragender relations, the roller derby player is one who is rebellious in regards to her femininity (Finely 2010). Schippers' (2007) concept of "pariah femininity" describes women who

inhabit masculine traits. Finely (2010) notes that roller derby players utilize “pariah femininity” (Schippers 2007) as a way to transgress traditional notions of femininity and by accomplishing “gender maneuvering.” Still, even though in roller derby there is a modification of femininity still follows the same hegemonic gendered ideologies. Examples of these ideologies in action occur in a variety of places, including during warm ups.

During travel bouts, the players tend to show off their skating skills while they are warming up. At this particular bout, while the players were warming up, they began hitting one another and giggling. With the crowd watching and while simultaneously twirling their hair, they grab each other’s shoulders and skate in a line. To better prepare for the game, the players begin practicing their hits. As they slam into one another and leave a trail of girls in their wake, the players giggle and link arms. During this warm up, the players actively attempted to defuse what could be perceivably masculine occurrence by overtly feminizing themselves. (August 13, 2011)

Again, while they are “twisting” the typical characteristics of femininity by being violent, strong, or scary, they are working to defy the strains of perceivable masculinity by re-inscribing hegemonic ideals of femininity such as short skirts and make-up. It is through this that it is apparent that “sport, then, is a site in which the performance and surveillance of masculinity and femininity are rampant” (Crawley et al. 2008: 57). Similarly, the “feminine apologetic” (Crawley et al. 2008, Clasen 2001, Messner 1988) is useful in explaining how an emphasis on femininity can offset the overt masculinity and violence of the sport. This heightened importance to remain feminine while incorporating more traditional masculine attributes (Adams 2005, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011), such as violence in roller derby, is commonly termed the “feminine apologetic” (Crawley et al. 2008, Clasen 2001, Messner 1988). These moments of emphasized

femininity allow for the player to enact violence on the rink while holding close to their gendered expectations.

It is striking that while theorists have noted the possibilities for activism or transgression of gender and sexuality in roller derby (Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2011), it still plays into hegemonic patriarchal ideologies of gender. A striking way it does this is the utilization of sexist language during bouts. During a play in which one skater repetitively fell, a man from the audience screamed “You’re a pussy!” as the skater continued to fall down. Similarly, at a different bout a male coach for the travel team screams at his players to “Man up!!” In a sport that is touted for playing with gender (Finely, 2010, Pavlidis 2011), it seems that the gender play is not always experienced positively or in feminist ways. Aside from the blatant sexism illustrated by this language, it is also telling of how important language, surveillance, and accountability is in roller derby. It is apparent that the surveillance utilized by the audience members and the coach yields accountability when the players do not appropriately live up to their aggressive and feminized standards. When they aren’t appropriately aggressive and feminized, the audience members play out this accountability on the rink side. Alongside overemphasized femininity appropriated by the players, there is also a distinct stress on a certain type of femininity: a youthful one.

#### The “Girl” in Derby Girl: A Look at Youth

The youthfulness of the derby player is consistently reinforced so as to paint the full picture of who the players are as gendered athletes. Most interestingly though is the fact that throughout the bouts, programs, and rhetoric about the derby players, they are most often referred to as “girls.” In addition to this, these “girls,” or players, many times

wear their hair in pigtails or braids, which also assist in signifying their youthfulness. As Messner, et al. (1993) notes, this is not a novel technique when it comes to women in sport. Additionally, the “feminine apologetic” (Crawley et al. 2008, Clasen 2001, Messner 1988) aids in downplaying the masculine nature of roller derby, such as violence, and instead, re-subscribes femininity on the players.

This overt language of “girl” has been previously explored as infantilization of the female athlete (Messner et al 1993). In the case of roller derby, both the audience and the announcer reify the importance of youth in their behavior and language.

It was the slow beginning of a home bout. The players seemed uneasy on their skates and were not being aggressive with their hits or blocks. With a smile and chuckle the announcer asks, “What’s going on out there? Do they have cooties?” (September 17, 2011)

The use of the word “cooties” suggests that youthful language is appropriate when talking about the players, which further contributes youthfulness onto already sexualized female players. This not only recognizes the players as young people who need to be scolded, but also invites the audience to do so.

Even though the “girls” that are playing are over eighteen, with the average age being from twenty-five to thirty-four (Women’s Flat Track Derby Association 2011), there is still a familial presence at games in which many of the audience members at bouts are friends and family (Finely 2010). Many times families show up with their own derby signs and apparel to support their daughters.

While attending a travel bout, I notice a large contingent of roller derby families. Directly in front of me is a family of one of the players. On the back of one of the family member’s shirt reads “Mildred’s Mom.” She screams, “Let’s go Mildred, let’s go!” Behind her, an elderly woman who is Mildred’s grandmother, waves her hands in the air and screams, “Go!!” Around both of them, there are a variety of other apparent family members. (September 17, 2011)

Family members are particularly prevalent at roller derby bouts. By creating and maintaining a space where the players are viewed as young girls, this infantilization serves the families as a way to connect with their children and kin. However, this infantilization also serves the general audience by gendering and fetishizing the players.

### Players as Sexualized

The campy aura of the roller derby bout is filled with allure, excitement, and sexuality (Joulwan 2010). Previously, I explored the feminine and youthful technologies the players utilized, yet it is imperative to note that these are not easily separated from sexuality (Messner, et al. 1993). Players concurrently employ femininity and youth in combination with sexuality. This prescription of sexuality occurs in a number of ways: the announcers who make sexual innuendos concerning the players, the players' personas, and the bouts themselves.

The sexualization of roller derby players has been previously studied, citing the use of sexuality as empowerment (Finely 2008). Sexualization is bountiful in the fantasy world of roller derby. For instance the personas that the roller derby players take on many times have sexually suggestive names, such as: Leia Flat, Flirtin W Disaster, Sasha Haughtbich, Climaxxx, and Handi- J. In combination, these sexualized names, men taking low shots with their camera phones, and the practice of calling new audience members "virgins", the sexualization is clear. In fact, many aspects of the bouts are sexual. A scene that exemplified the overt sexual tones occurred at a travel bout double header. Due to the large crowd and monumental excitement, the leagues planned to leave a good and lasting impression. One way to do that is to give away free merchandise.

A girl in panties, a miniskirt that resembles a belt, and fishnets runs out in front of the crowd. She throws free Pabst Blue Ribbon stickers, league bandanas, and cozies out to audience members. She giggles at the excitement of the crowd and states, "I feel like a stripper all of a sudden! Haha! Like with all of you waiving money at me. I'm like, yes, YOU! Haha!!" She screams this while sexually bending over to imitate a stripper, preparing to throw more free merchandise out to the crowd. (September 17, 2011)

In addition to the players and leagues consciously reappropriating sex and sexuality as a marketing or recruitment tool, the announcers also play a vital role in the sexualization of the players. They signify to the audience members that the players are to be sexualized, and subsequently, that the audience can engage in the same process. While the announcers narrate the bout, they are constructing the reality of the bout, but more importantly, they are instructing the audience on how to interpret that reality.

A curvy, feminine skater knocks over multiple skaters with one blow. The announcer says, "Look at Shakira with those hips over there!" (September 10, 2011)

AND

The announcer narrates while the jammer skates through the pack saying, "Look at her getting through the pack. Damn that is sexy!" (August 20, 2011)

This type of sexualization is not new to women in sports (Messner et al. 1993, Messner 1988). However, these kinds of messages don't end on the track. Instead, they become part of the roller derby culture as a whole. Therein, these same ideals become commonplace for certain audience members, namely women to play into the heterosexualization of the bout. Although the 2011 WFTDA survey assesses that 24% of the players are non-heterosexual, the differences are generally undetectable and are read as heterosexual. Through these instances, it is apparent that the announcer participates in signifying how to read the players themselves, showing that they become sexualized and gendered by clothing, looks, and athletic ability.

*“It Looks Like We Have Another DANCE PARTY!”*

The rink is a space of sexualization and perhaps more importantly, of performance. The ways this is accomplished vary, but tend to stick to a similar script. While most of a bout is a performance of athleticism, sexuality, or gender, many times an actual performance occurs. During most bouts the players begin to dance before a jam. While it interrupts the game, children and other audience members dance at their seats while the players dance on the rink.

LMFAO’s “Party Anthem Song” plays loud over the speakers. While the players are waiting for the jam to start, they begin to dance. The referees call an official timeout. In response to the skaters still dancing during the timeout, the announcer says, “It’s an official dance party!” The players skate around and dance. The NSO start dancing with them. The music grows louder as people start to dance more. All the children in the audience start to dance in their seats. (October 15, 2011)

The dance party occurrence appears to be a sexual voyeuristic fantasy that ensues at roller derby bouts. The act of a dance party is the antithesis of performance. It occurs as a spontaneous, unplanned, non-choreographed dance session and allows for players and audience members alike to grind on one another and to watch while others do the same. These performances are not just for the strict heterosexual imagination as roller derby plays off of the fine lines of sexuality.

### Implications and Conclusions

Messner, when discussing television, states, “the choices, the filtering, the entire mediation of the sporting event, is based upon invisible, taken for granted assumptions and values of dominant social groups” (1993: 204-205). The same concern is being illustrated with roller derby. Individual leagues make decisions regarding clothing style, music playing, or the kind of sponsors they will host. All of these things play into the

performance of the youthful, sexualized woman. It is this where we note, "...gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler 1990: 25). We see here, through intensive work of the participants, players, and audience members, that these realities and modes of being are created through roller derby. Kane and Snyder (1989) note this as sport typing. As described by Crawley et al. (2008), certain sports help players emphasize genders- that is, "sports are gendered" (Crawley et al. 2008). In this instance, roller derby allows for sport typing (Kane and Snyder 1989) the practices of the game itself produce femininity. The culmination of the themes discussed work to reformulate a hegemonic ideal of what it means to be a roller derby player, participant, and fan by the use of surveillance and accountability (Crawley et al 2008). Many times the announcers work as agents of surveillance and accountability, in that they help the audience to define the ways that roller derby players should be. For instance, this occurs during the bouts themselves.

At a particular travel bout, there are two announcers. One is a woman with short spikey hair dressed in men's clothing. The other is a man; also with short spikey hair and gender appropriate t-shirt and jeans. As the skaters are still warming up before the bout begins, the woman licks her lips, smiles, and says, "Do you see what they're wearing?!" The man laughs, and responds with a smile on his face saying, "Yep, it is one of the main reasons I love derby." (September 17, 2011)

Here, it is evident that roller derby players are supposed to dress for the sexual gaze of the audience. With the verbal help from the announcers, the audience members recognize this surveillance. Later in the same bout, another player who does not fit the hegemonic understandings of feminine beauty is made fun of by the announcers. The female announcer laughingly comments, "Oh wow, look at her. I hope she doesn't plan on



wearing that makeup and outfit out to the after party.” She is held accountable for falling outside of these beauty ideologies and therefore outside of normative ideologies of roller derby players.

The rhetoric of individuality and personal expression via hegemonic ideals are ever-present in roller derby. Pointing to third wave feminism, this kind of empowering sexualized and gendered agency is used consistently at roller derby bouts. By incorporating “gender emphasis” as agency, roller derby players highlight their femininity as a way to raise the popularity of the sport (Crawley et al. 2008: 201). By using this kind of agency in roller derby, it is clear that “gender emphasis works to recreate gendered messages and seems to have limited potential to create serious conformity, regardless of whether it is actively intended” (Crawley et al. 2008: 227). Consistent with Crawley, Foley, and Shehan’s (2008) concept of gender emphasis agency, while the agency of the roller derby players is being enacted, it is discernible that no transgression is occurring. However, many theorists have argued this roller derby is possibly transgressive (Storms 2008, Pavlidis 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011) and due in part due to feminism. In order to fully understand roller derby, it is vital to investigate the role of feminist rhetoric.

## CHAPTER THREE

### GET IT GIRL: INVOKING THIRD WAVE FEMINIST RHETORIC

*“We find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities...” (Rebecca Walker 1995: xxxiii).*

Drawing the attention of a variety of women, third wave feminism has historically been provoking, challenging, and even sexy (Snyder 2008, Riordan 2001). Third wave feminist theory comfortably finds a home in a sport of aggression, excitement, and tantalizing sexuality. The linkage between third wave feminism and roller derby has been noted by a number of scholars as positive, transformative, and transgressive (Storms 2008, Pavlidis 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011). As a sport, roller derby invokes gendered behavior and representation (Storms 2008, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011), and does so in a way which has been argued to allow for the possibility of agency (Storms 2008, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011). It is in the space of these assertions, however, where I ignite my analysis. By exploring the utilization of third wave feminism in the sport of roller derby, I argue that the relationship between roller derby and third wave feminism is much more complex than previously theorized (Storms 2008, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011). In contrast to the previous research (Storms 2008, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011), I argue that roller derby is a site to critically engage with current uses and critique understandings of third wave feminism.

Rebecca Walker was the first to name third wave feminism by arguing that, “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” (1994: xxxiii). In particular, she argued second wave feminism was judgmental and not understanding of multiple identities (Walker 1995). Baumgardner and Richards recognize this new wave as an opportunity to explore the empowering possibilities of popular culture for women (2000, 2004). While second wave focused on structural issues, such as the gender wage gap (Tong 2009), third wave focused on personal and everyday issues, like sexual habits (Tong 2009). It is not that all third wave feminists completely discontinued the work of second wave feminists; even so, they have been critiqued for overlooking previous feminist work (Tong 2009, Snyder 2008, Henry 2007, Gillis and Munford 2004). With this seemingly haphazard rejection of analytical engagement with second wave (Snyder 2008) and overwhelming celebration of pop cultural notions like “stop worrying and love the thong” (Baumgardner and Richards 2004, Bailey 1997), the validity of third wave has been contested (Snyder 2008, Gillis and Munford 2004).

Born out of anger and anxiety over the lack of intersectionality within second wave, third wave feminists’ embraced a variety of genders and sexualities, some of which were previously deemed not politically savvy within the feminist community (Gillis and Munford 2004). Because of third wave’s embracement of a wide array of definitions, and therefore lack a clear definition (Snyder 2008), third wave feminism is not only open to a variety people, it is also open for a great deal of critique (Tong 2009). Furthermore, third

wave has been critiqued for their claim of empowerment because it doesn't recognize the multiple ways people can feel aside from empowered (Tong 2009).

Instead, much of third wave is inspiration for riot grrrl (Garrison 2000) and the 'girl power' mantra (Adams 2005, Riordan 2001, Baumgardener and Richards 2000), which is an intersection where roller derby flourishes. With derby names reminiscent of infamous first wave feminists such as, Rosie D. Ribsplitter and Suzie B. Catastrophe, the tie to feminism is unmistakable. While these names refer back to historical first wave feminists, it is important to note that there is no discussion of classical first (or second) wave feminist theory at bouts, or practices. Instead of addressing feminist issues, these names simply serve as a nod to feminism. It is the sometimes contradictory tie to feminism that I hope to examine in this chapter, specifically surveying the use of third wave rhetoric during bouts, in programs, marketing, and recruitment. While noting these mediums, I elucidate the three main themes found: "You Go Girl!" phenomenon, roller derby is for every woman, and the skater's ability to be simultaneously pretty and violent. After completing my thematic explanations, I move onto an analysis of these themes as they relate to the appropriation of third wave feminism. I close by discussing possible implications and questioning how this rhetoric may influence more concrete feminist applications.

#### "You Go Girl!" And Other Forms of Motivational Girl Power

The mantra or rhetoric of girl power (Lemish 2003, Attwood 2007) as rooted in ideals of third wave feminism (Lemish 2003, Attwood 2007) seeps into most bouts by way of audience members, skaters, and other participants. It is no coincidence that a sport

such as roller derby uses these verbal cues. They are imbedded in the very understandings of roller derby as particularly aged (young), gendered (feminine), and sexualized (attractive). In so doing, it highlights the very selective nature of what it means to be a derby player, while detailing the appropriateness of language during a bout.

The rhetoric of “you go girl” is not simply a congratulatory slogan. Instead, many times it actually works as an agent of motivation, where the audience members are invested in the player’s well-being and, of course, invested on their winning. During the bouts, cheers such as “Get it Girl!!!” or “Good job girl!” are commonly heard. As noted in the previous chapter, the use of “girl” language is tied to infantilization of the female athletes (Messner et al. 1993). However, it extends far beyond the rhetoric of youth into implications of empowerment and feminism.

A giggly female audience member who was seemingly to be a roller derby “virgin” exclaimed, “I’m excited girls are doing this!!” as though the player’s genders may inhibit them from being this active. (September 17, 2011)

Although she seemed to be a newcomer to the sport, her enthusiasm sums up the overarching theme of girl power. After all, roller derby is a sport dedicated to being women-focused by women skating, being aggressive, and participating in a sport that is atypical of hegemonic gender ideologies; this signifies that it is impressive and empowering that these women are participating in something athletic like roller derby. More than that, the rhetoric of girl power is showing that these women are actively engaged in their own transgressive acts and therefore working against normative gendered ideologies, and most impressive, doing it all in spandex, bootie shorts, and fishnets (Storms 2008, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2010, Pavlidis 2011, Peluso 2011). This not

only works to commodify the players and roller derby lifestyle, but also promises the audience members that any woman could be a derby girl.

### Roller Derby is for Every Woman

An interesting addition to the rhetoric of ‘girl power’ is the normalization of the roller derby player. It is common for leagues to recruit using this kind of rhetoric, while outwardly tying roller derby into third wave ideologies of empowerment. Most specifically, leagues recount the sport of roller derby as something universal in that all women can be participants. While it is not the case that all women can play derby, or even that derby players recruit women of all ages, the rhetoric is present. Similar to much of third wave, this kind of empowerment implies an agentic actor (Baumgardner and Richards 2004). In so doing, it reifies the notion that by their choice, they are participating in an act that has the possibility of transforming and transgressing gender and sexuality (Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2010, Pavlidis 2011). One place where this is theme is unmistakable is through the process of recruitment. During this, roller derby is in a way sold to possible participants, and therefore reveals that it is open to any woman.

Recruitment happens at bouts, online, and at sponsored events. Derby players emphasize the ease of roller derby and subsequently motivate women who would not typically be interested in derby. That motivation is not a coincidence; on the contrary, it is a goal. At one bout, an announcer described, “If you want to do this, let us know! We’re looking for more girls! And it’s a great workout!!” This statement normalizes the amount of work and violence that occurs in roller derby; in fact, it reduces a sport, lifestyle, and social movement to a feminizing fit body image. In so doing, leagues are

purposefully sending the message to the audience members that they too can be a part of the empowering sport, workout, or body image that is roller derby. Again, this consistently connects with hegemonic ideologies of femininity.

This theme not only came up as a recruitment tactic, but was also utilized by audience members themselves. Audience members saw female participants and fans as potential roller derby players, which in turn, perpetuated a form of surveillance among audience members.

During halftime at a smaller local bout, two audience members make small talk about the ability of all women to be part of roller derby. The middle-aged man seated in front of me takes a sip of his beer and asks a young woman beside him, “Why don’t you get out there and put on some skates?” She nervously laughs and uncomfortably says, “Oh, I can’t do that.” The woman the man is with, who at this point is seemingly intoxicated yells, “Hell yeah you can! Those are everyday women- just like you!” The young woman nervously giggles and whimsically replies, “Yeah...maybe.” (October 16, 2011)

This scene shows the way audience members enacted surveillance over other women in the audience as potential players. Again, this demonstrates that roller derby falls into “sport typing” (Kane and Snyder 1989) as it is appropriately feminine, and therefore women are encouraged to participate in the sport. Through these interactions, it is clear that audience members invoke the same third wave rhetoric utilized by the roller derby leagues, that all women can be players. For instance, in signing up for derby, the recruit is instructed, “Yes, derby is a huge commitment, but it is equally as rewarding. Roller derby is not for everyone, but for those of you that challenge yourselves; you’ll be surprised what you can achieve” (TBDD website 2012). So while roller derby is a rigorous sport, it is one that supposedly all women can achieve with practice and discipline. As described by many of the participants, this achievement is noted as an

accomplishment of self-esteem. This is similar to much of third wave feminism in that without question, the rhetoric of roller derby illustrates that all women would want to participate in something like roller derby-regardless of its implications- (Gillis and Munford 2004, Snyder 2008). Roller derby goes further in asserting that roller derby is about the “challenge” of achieving body image, confidence, and toughness while simultaneously downplaying definite athleticism of the sport (Storms 2008). Even though the rhetoric employed by roller derby insists that any woman can be an active participant, it is only a certain kind of woman that leagues are targeting for recruitment (read: one that is appropriately sexual and feminine). It is this sexualized feminine player that inhabits the sole narrative of the roller derby player.

#### Yeah, I’m a Girl; I Can Still Kick Your Ass! Violence in Roller Derby

Although roller derby is aimed at feminine women, they are still expected to be tough and to “kick ass” in the rink. Analogous to the previous themes, agency and youth are also central to how gender and violence are systematically conceptualized in roller derby. Roller derby is well known for being a full contact sport where injury is fairly common. Hits and blocks, as they occur in sports such as football, are also central to the sport of roller derby. It is standard for these interactions to appear violent and aggressive, many times ending in blood and broken bones. Similar to previous research on women in sports, the audience members hold close to this violent yet feminized ideology (Messner et al 1993). Sport utilizes masculinity as a way to construct hegemonic masculinity (Messner 1990). When women play sport, and in particular in the case of roller derby, the “feminine apologetic” transpires (Messner 1988, Clasen 2001, Crawley et al. 2008).



Similar to other forms of sport (Messner 1990), violence operates in roller derby as an extension of the sport itself, but more importantly as a spectacle. While it would be easy to assume that violence, as it is typically gendered masculine, would be shunned from roller derby, it is much more complex. Violence is used as a legitimizing factor to make the sport more real as opposed to historically being staged (Carlson 2010). This juncture of legitimation meets with empowerment, as many players and leagues reify the authenticity and “cool” factor associated with being injured (Carlson 2010). When third wave feminism mixes into this assortment of violence and legitimation, the empowering statement is transparent.

It is a double header and the crowd behind me seems to still be excited from the previous bout. One woman screams, “I’d sucker punch some people. I’d be punching everything. That’s some pussy shit right there!” The people with her screaming, “Get them girl!!!” “HELL YEAH!” “She’s badass!” The woman screams, “Go down! Go down! Go! Kick her out!!” (August 6, 2011)

In this, it is apparent that the expectation of the roller derby player is to be violent while still being thought of as a “girl.” This brings us back to the youth or “girl” factor that is utilized a way to feminize or make the players appear weak. It also aids in diffusing the masculine aspects of both sport and violence. This kind of connection between gender and violence does not always seem positive, or motivational.

Many times skaters also commented on the overt violent acts that occur during a roller derby bout. During a particularly heated travel bout, a few of the team members discussed the negativity that occurred during that night’s bout. They were extremely angry with the referees and the opposing coach. More than anything though, the players were angry about how the fans acted during the bout.

One of the players explains, “That’s not how fans are supposed to act. They’re supposed to be supportive.” A player further discusses that one fan attempted to trip her while she was skating. She said the fan had been cussing at her throughout the game. And then finally telling him to “shut the fuck up” and next time around the rink, he had his foot sticking out, which she promptly jumped over. In response, another player explains to the first that, “Not only were the fans mean, but so were the girls. It’s not like this is a championship or anything. We’re supposed to be friendly to each other- that is what derby is about...not this petty bullshit.” (August 13, 2011)

While the sport itself is competitive and appears to be rough, this conversation discloses that bouts are intended to be amicable. In roller derby it is imperative to win, sell tickets, and attract audience members, it is also important to keep the bouts friendly. Through this rant from a travel team player, it is evident that roller derby has a complex and even oxymoronic relationship with violence. Many of the players assert themselves as skilled athletes, but rely on the founding ideas of the roller derby movement- women working together in sports. Even though this team took issue with the way that their opponents played, nonetheless, their opponents played as was expected by their fans: as aggressive as necessary to win. The fans of their prospective teams assert themselves in accordance with the players’ aggression by egging on their team to be aggressive. While the audience members may wish for a rowdy game, there is a level of decorum associated with sportsmanship. Roller derby leagues know this level of aggressiveness is important to fans, so they play into the performance of violence.

While violence is plentiful, players are held to ideals of sportsmanship by other teams and leagues. The performance of violence is an important part of roller derby. Only amicable violence is appropriate in roller derby. This violence is both performed and real. Real violence is used as a way to legitimize the sport (Carlson 2010). While real violence does occur on occasion, the performance of violence is more prevalent and is expected by

both leagues and fans. Skaters play on the violent aspect of roller derby and in so doing provide a more entertaining bout for the audience members.

Due to the rapid growth of roller derby, the controversial inclusion of men also brings about issues of violence. Although not sanctioned by WFTDA, many leagues have opted to include a separate men's roller derby team. Due to the large number of leagues opting to do so, the men's teams are currently operating as travel only teams, opposed to home teams. In order to play a bout, the men's teams must travel to play other leagues men's teams across the country. While these teams bout separately from women, they practice together. As seen in my ethnography, the incorporation of a men's team into previously women's only practices has greatly changed the climate and dynamic. Multiple female players acknowledged their concern about the roughness of the male players during practice. They note that the men skate faster and tend to be more violent, making the safe space into a space of competition. This issue has divided the roller derby movement. One side sees it as opening up roller derby for all genders as full of possibilities, while the other notes that the safe" women's only space is now being crowded by masculinity. Those who see this as a positive change, they believe that this will allow roller derby to grow in numbers and popularity. However, those against it feel as if men are unnecessarily violent during a scrimmage, which disrupts the "safe" space of roller derby practice. Strikingly different from the way violence is utilized by women's roller derby, the addition of men's only roller derby allows for more blatant violence. Within the movement, many of these debates are focusing around the role of feminism in the sport of roller derby.

## Feminist Surveillance and Feminist Accountability

It is crucial to note that themes of feminist individuality are not effective by themselves. Fundamentally, they work together to create the dominant narrative of the roller derby player. In so doing, they construct the appropriate roller derby player who embraces a hint of third wave feminism. Concurrently, players, participants, and even at times audience members are under surveillance and held accountable to the narrative of the roller derby player and therefore to feminist ideals.

Surveillance and accountability are vital to address when discussing issues of gender, sexuality, consumption and third wave feminism. Surveillance and accountability occur within consumption (Veblen 1926, Campbell 1987), gender, and sexuality (Crawley, et al. 2008, West and Zimmerman 1987). Conversely, there has been a lack of research on accountability to feminism. In the roller derby movement, third wave feminism is vital and omnipresent in representations of gender and sexuality, consumption, and roller derby personas. This accountability, I term feminist accountability. Historically situated before third wave feminism, Haraway defined feminist accountability as a concept that “requires a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy” (1988: 588). Just as feminism, my term now has new meanings, opposed to just the one. “Feminist accountability” occurs in certain groups, or movements, such as roller derby, as a way to hold participants accountable for being a specific kind of feminist. In contrast to Haraway’s definition, third wave feminism is displayed in a number of ways like the “pro-girl” or “girl power” mantra.

Furthermore, audience members and participants fall into this feminist accountability. An important part of feminist accountability in roller derby is being supportive of one another. In particular, it is important for the audience members to understand the level of feminist surveillance and accountability when players get injured. One instance of such occurred during a bout between two highly ranked travel teams.

As soon as the jam starts, a player falls to the ground and appears to be hurt. Everyone stays silent waiting to see if she gets up. Suddenly someone from the crowd yells, “We love you!” The announcer clarifies the situation by saying, “It’s okay y’all. This is why we have EMTs here to assist if something like this does happen. This is a high speed impact sport so this kind of thing does happen.” A few minutes pass and another voice from the crowd yells, “Walk it off!” The female announcer, in a moment of awkward silence giggles and says, “They skate- not walk.” Moments later, the player gets up. The same announcer says, “Give her some applause!!” As the player stands up with the help of the EMTs and skates away, she gives a smile and thumbs up to the announcers. (September 17, 2011)

Through the help of the announcer, the audience came to understand that being unnecessarily rude to the players during the bouts is not a way to behave in roller derby. Instead, regardless of the team, audience members should respect the possibilities of injury. The rhetoric of untainted support for the players is preset, acceptable, and congratulated at bouts, recruitments, and practices.

### Implications and the Inklings of Third Wave

The culmination of overt sexuality, femininity and youthfulness in combination with third wave feminism is understood through the themes observed during roller derby bouts. As a theme born out of third wave feminist theory, girl power is used as a marketing strategy for participants and audience members. Joulwan described her trainer as someone who “preached girl power and the ‘third wave of feminism’ gospel, she led

us like a dictator” (2007: 27). In light of the themes I illustrated, this comes as no surprise.

Using roller derby as a looking glass for the larger cannon of third wave feminism (Gillis and Munford 2004), a few things become apparent. First, third wave feminism lacks a reflexive critical eye, in that the ‘empowering’ sport of roller derby is at times a fantasy world of fishnets, beer, and cleavage. By incorporating ideals of female empowerment and the possibility of owning their own sexuality, it is clear that roller derby draws from and defines itself as being third wave feminist. For many players participation in roller derby is their way of exercising their own feminist identities. However, roller derby brings us to troubling places of third wave feminism, where sexual objectification meets empowering push-up bras. It is this place where third wave feminism is embraced, yet clearly lacks transgression.

Second, as a feminist sociologist, the blind acceptance of agency is problematic as the concept of agency is a complex, reciprocal process (Berger and Luckmann 1966). However, when it comes to roller derby agency is complex. By employing the form of agency termed “gender emphasis” (Crawley, et al. 2008), roller derby players exert overt femininity. In this, they are not resisting or transforming hegemonic gender ideologies; on the other hand, they are acting as agents of their own femininity (Crawley, et al. 2008).

These observations are just minor ways that roller derby leagues purposefully position themselves as third wave feminists. As roller derby is a social movement, and the leagues are social movement organizations, it is imperative to note how this could be

developed by more classic modes of meaning making, such as organizational ties. For instance, how could the organizations the leagues worked with, such as charity organizations, assist in framing (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986) roller derby as feminist? Although leagues utilize these feminist trademarks, are they feminist in their actions? Likewise, roller derby is an organization where support is necessary. In the case of roller derby, marketing and money is the kind of support that is necessary. How do roller derby leagues market themselves? How does the identity and movement they market become a commodification? In conjunction with the findings I just discussed, it is these questions that I intend to explore in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4:

### CONSUMING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN ROLLER DERBY

Roller derby is more than a pastime or recreational sport- it is a social movement. With a goal of gaining popularity, the all-women's movement of roller derby is of interest because of its particularly complex incorporations of collective identity and framing techniques. While the roller derby movement may not have a traditional organizational structure, it utilizes techniques discussed by social movement scholars in order to reach its goal of popularity.

For many years, social movement (SM) theorists have been interested in how framing is negotiated within organizational structures. While there has been research on traditional social movement organizations (SMOs) such as labor movements (Clemens 1996, Steinberg 1999) and the nuclear disarmament movement (Benford 1993), until recently little research had been conducted on how identity and lifestyle-based SMOs (Haenfler 2004, Taylor and Whittier 1992, Futrell and Simi 2004, Futrell, Simi, and Gottschalk 2006) function and frame themselves. In this chapter, I offer just such an analysis by arguing the roller derby movement is organized as a lifestyle movement that banks on framing techniques and the reification of collective identity. Further, social movement theorists have paid insufficient attention to how these organizations market themselves and fundraise for other organizations. Here, I show how in roller derby there is a complex and conscious relationship between fundraising and the local leagues that



comprises the connection between consumption and the production of roller derby as a social movement.

Collective identity is created and maintained through motivational framing techniques (Snow and Benford 1988). Motivational framing is “the elaboration of a call to arms or rationale for action” (Snow and Benford 1988). Furthermore, motivational framing often has moral implications by proclaiming a call to arms (Snow and Benford 1988). As I will demonstrate, roller derby is a social movement that utilizes motivational framing (Snow and Benford 1988), specifically with fundraising, and in so doing, draws on feminist issues to incite action. This framing aids in the creation and maintenance of the roller derby movement’s collective identity. Collective identity is “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 170). With the constant call to raise money, it is important for the movement to have a unifying consciousness such as collective identity. An important part of collective identity is the negotiation of boundaries within the social movement (Gamson 1997, Hunt and Benford 2004). Within this context, boundaries are formed between people who contribute money and those who do not. Gamson describes, “clear membership boundaries are...useful... for group solidarity” (1997: 181), and therefore for maintenance of collective identity.

Boundary making aids in creating notions of desirability and cultural capital that work to advance collective identity. Defining the concept of imaginative hedonism, Campbell (1987) explains that people desire and fantasize about consuming, as if they are in a constant state of daydreaming. It is this daydreaming which extends to their perpetual longing for goods, with an end goal of gratification (Campbell 1987). In the case of the

roller derby movement the fantasy, longing, and goal aren't focused on a consumable item, but rather on the consuming movement itself. The fantasy of roller derby helps to create cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

Cultural capital is defined as certain desirable patterns of consumption or skills acquired through socialization and often used to mark membership in a group. In the instance of the roller derby movement, cultural capital is attained through the desire for feminist ideologies and the consumption of roller derby merchandise. The cultural capital in the roller derby movement aids in creating and maintaining collective identity.

By applying the concepts of imaginative hedonism (Campbell 1987), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), framing techniques (Snow et al., 1986), and boundary making (Gamson 1997), I argue the collective identity of the roller derby movement functions as a vehicle to sell the overall lifestyle of third wave feminism, by way of tangible products, rhetoric, and events. Therefore, the roller derby social movement is a commodity ripe for consumption. While collective identity within the roller derby movement is not consumed like a roll of toilet paper or item of clothing, it is consumed by integrating hegemonic ideologies about gender, sexuality, and feminism as a goal for the participants, audience and potential participants. The audience members and participants are given the opportunity to literally buy into the movement. Furthermore, roller derby also sells ideologies by literally receiving donations from the audience.

The screen of feminism worn by the roller derby movement is sustained for its own survival, and subsequently, in framing, selling, and sustaining the collective identity of the movement itself. It is the movement's tie to feminism that allows for an analysis of collective identity and framing techniques. The feminist persona of the roller derby

movement is an aspect of collective identity where the goal of the social movement is commodification in order to advance the movement's popularity. I argue the roller derby social movement as a whole uses feminist frames in order to define their collective identity and advance stealth consumerism. Ultimately, my argument lies with roller derby masquerading consumerism as feminist.

I begin by illustrating how the roller derby movement is marketed and framed through the media, national organizations, and regional leagues. I then draw on my ethnographic data to explore the ways the roller derby movement is marketed and framed locally in Florida. In doing so, I demonstrate the roller derby movement uses fundraising to commodify its collective identity.

#### Producing Roller Derby as a Social Movement

The roller derby movement has emerged through framing techniques utilized by popular media outlets, national organizations, local leagues and individual players. Traditionally, social movements are thought of as labor movements (Clemens 1996, Steinberg 1999) or blatant political movements (Benford 1993), and while roller derby does not fit these notions, it does fit those of lifestyle or identity driven social movements (Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994, Gamson 1997, Bernstein 1997, Haenfler 2004). As I will note, the roller derby movement operates on both macro and micro levels that utilize both formal organizational structures and DIY ideologies. The roller derby movement's participants promote a very particular lifestyle, one that is grounded in third wave feminist ideologies and simultaneously, its own survival.

An important area of focus is how macro aspects occur in the roller derby movement. As a way to aid in defining the context of the roller derby movement,

following the macro lens of the roller derby movement allows for a bolder analysis of the ethnographic data from the local roller derby movement. The combinations of these frames create a complex web, which is translated to a variety of viewers as representative of the roller derby movement.

### *Popular Media*

Popular media perpetuates the glamorous image of the roller derby movement focused on sexualization, without athleticism (Kearney 2011). There have been three popular media representations of the current roller derby movement: *Whip It* (2009), *Rollergirls* (2010), and *Hell on Wheels* (2008). Directed by Drew Barrymore, starring Ellen Page and grossing \$13,034,417, *Whip It* (2009) aided in getting the roller derby movement into major movie theatres all over the U.S. In this coming-of-age narrative, the main character Bliss, played by Ellen Page, finds herself awkwardly outside of the norm of suburban Texas. After lying about her age, losing her virginity, constantly lying to her parents, and dying her hair a multitude of colors, she becomes the star of the Austin, Texas roller derby league. The film's tag line "Be Your Own Hero" exemplifies the narrative of the film: girl power. Furthermore, *Whip It* (2009) sustains the plot with previously discussed hegemonic ideologies of youth, gender, and sexuality.

Lasting only one season, the A&E reality television show, *Rollergirls* (2006), features the Texas roller derby movement. Following the well-documented identity, lifestyle, and movement, the topic of roller derby became a hit show, and on the night of the premiere, entered 1.6 million homes (Kearney, 2011). However, as Kearney notes in her analysis of *Rollergirls* (2010), many of the non-normative aspects of the roller derby players were actually coerced out of them by executives of A&E (2011). Consequently,

the gender representations of the women were more mainstream than accurate of actual players, in that they actively adhered to hegemonic ideologies of femininity, sexuality, and consumption.

Finally, the documentary *Hell on Wheels* (2008) follows the beginnings of the roller derby movement in Texas, specifically including issues, struggles and choices that the league made in order to start and maintain the movement. In the documentary, the league members openly discuss ways to gain audience members and fellow skaters. During this conversation in the film, one of the managers mentions that, even though many of the skaters might identify as feminist, it is their duty as participants to do whatever it takes to keep the league thriving. Many times, as the league manager explains, this means doing things that demean them, such as oil wrestling, flirting with the audience or wearing lingerie to the bouts. This team mentality, as the team manager called it, calls for the players to perpetuate the roller derby player stereotype of being tough, but still sexy and available. While this documentary is the least popular of the media discussed, it provides the least glamorized and most accurate look at the roller derby movement. All of the popular media discussed have a stake in framing issues of the roller derby movement. However, this framing doesn't work alone; it works in conjunction with other organizations.

*The International Organizing Association: The Women's Flat Track Derby Association*

The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) is the governing association of roller derby leagues and regions around the world. It is the official global social movement organization (SMO) of the roller derby movement as it consistently updates details, rules, and regulations of roller derby. By determining steps leagues must

take in order to be WFTDA recognized, WFTDA officials monitor, regulate, and rank all leagues and teams in the association. As a tax-exempt 501(c)(6) organization, WFTDA is a volunteer run company. The organization has a board of directors, mission, and code of conduct.

It is clear that the roller derby movement depends on the organization and support of WFTDA. With a tag-line of “Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary.” surrounded by the pink and black background of the WFTDA website, it is clear that the SMO also assists in framing the roller derby movement. The SMO utilizes framing techniques in order to aid in the construction of reality and meanings (Benford and Snow 2000). By asserting the rhetoric of “Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary,” WFTDA advances the frames of the roller derby movement at large, especially as related to feminist ideals. These assertions aid in creating boundary making in that roller derby participants are framed as revolutionary women, as opposed to fake, weak and compliant automatons of emphasized femininity. Regional leagues with the roller derby movement then use motivational framing in order to promote a need for collective identity.

*Regions and Leagues: Meso Issues.*

The regions and leagues in the roller derby movement are governed by WFTDA. There are currently four regions: west, north central, south central, and east. National lines do not bind these regions; instead they are internationally recognized. Currently, WFTDA has one hundred and fifty-six member leagues and fifty-eight leagues in the official WFTDA Apprentice program. The full leagues can participate in regional and international play-offs. The apprentice leagues are newly founded leagues in training to

learn how to abide by the WFTDA mandated rules become full leagues. All leagues are ranked in accordance to their regions.

Leagues also have a full board of directors, which is the decision making entity of local leagues. They are in charge of creating and maintaining committees. These committees cover everything from marketing, to bout scheduling, to merchandising. The committee that is most important in my examination of roller derby is the marketing committee. They are in charge of community outreach by picking charity organizations to fundraise for and events for self-promotion.

*Connecting on the Rink: Where Macro Meets Micro*

Similar to framing utilized by popular media and national organizations, various teams, players, and audience members receive comparable messages explicating the collective identity and lifestyle of the roller derby movement at local bouts. For the youthful age cohort that is involved in roller derby, media is commonly used when constructing meanings. In terms of roller derby, mass media and locally created DIY flyers work together to construct the collective identity within the movement.

The leagues I observed also strategically employed framing techniques for marketing. As observed in my ethnography, local leagues have specific committees on marketing. Similar to the conversation noted earlier from the documentary *Hell on Wheels* (2008), marketing committees openly negotiate collective identity. One local league hosts a yearly prom party and also oil and mud wrestling fundraising party. These parties, selected by a specific committee, are debated within the leagues. Those in favor of the events, cite that they assist in gaining fans and meeting fundraising marks. Some participants, however, note that these degrading fundraisers are counterproductive to the

feminist ideals the roller derby movement was founded on. These examples, while they are years and miles apart, illustrate that this kind of framing doesn't occur in isolation. They also illustrate that leagues ride the line of degradation and feminist empowerment.

Local leagues also interact with popular media and national organizations by utilizing brand placement during bouts. This aids in legitimizing the roller derby movement by making a strong connection to brands, popular media, and national roller derby movement frames. Local leagues do this by purchasing more expensive and popular roller derby brands like Protech or Riedell. For instance, in 2011, WFTDA held their first World Cup title. For the title, they allowed countries to hold try-outs in order to pick their best players. For the United States of America team, the players had to travel to five try-outs in scrimmages across the U.S. The last try-out was in Tampa, Florida.

Unlike local bouts, the majority of the players were wearing athletic gear, tights, and spunks instead of the typical skirts and corsets. These players are in the last round try-outs for the U.S. Team to play for the Roller Derby World Cup. Instead of wearing makeup and "costuming" all the players are in professional looking athletic apparel and of course, their Riedell skates. (July 23, 2011)

Those who made the final round of try-outs are perceived as being more experienced skaters, and therefore own more expensive gear. This gear further legitimizes the players and movement. As Carlson (2010) noted, this kind of legitimation is vital to the roller derby movement, as it creates a consumable culture. It helps the audience members understand the roller derby movement by clearly delineating the boundaries of the legitimacy. This understanding allows audience members and participants to learn and internalize the fantasy of the movement while actively construction of the roller derby movement's collective identity. These constructions are



negotiated and, in local instances decided by committees specifically focused on deciding the framing of the local movement.

*Localizing Marketing: Do It Yourself (DIY) Bout Flyers, and Programs*

In a stark contrast with the incorporation of corporate name brands in order to legitimate themselves as athletes, the roller derby movement also becomes a product of marketing at the hand of their own leagues by the creation of DIY local bout flyers and programs. The main way fans and the local community find out about roller derby bouts are through the DIY homemade flyers that the local leagues distribute over the internet, at local restaurants, bars, and concerts. These flyers represent the DIY ethics associated with roller derby leagues (Storms 2008, Finely 2010, Pavlidis 2011) and are vital in creating their own roller derby movement framing. As explored by Moore (2007), many times subcultures see DIY as integral to defining themselves outside of hegemony. Similar to how other social movement organizations frame themselves (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986), the self-proclaimed DIY bout flyers mirror and aid in advancing the images set out by the media, national organizations, and even hegemonic narratives.



Figure 1: Flyer and Program Front Page

When walking into a roller derby bout, your license is checked to verify you are of drinking age, you pay for a ticket, and you are given a program for the bout. These programs give details about where the after party is, or how to gain cheaper admission by participating in fundraising goals. Plastered on the pages of the programs are advertisements for recruitment, roller derby products, and local businesses. Typically the first page of the programs corresponds to the bout flyer which many times shows pictures or caricatures of women skating in a voyeuristic utilization of bodies. As seen in *Figure 1*, the caricature allows for unrealistic corporal expectations of the roller derby player.

Local flyers are created by individuals within the local leagues. They are voted on and accepted by the league's marketing committee. The flyers are DIY in practice, therefore the local leagues and players they are directly negotiating the framing put forth. Instead of popular media recreating and reimagining what it means to be part of the roller derby movement, the skaters themselves create bout flyers. As an organization with ties to third wave feminism, one might hope the overt narratives of the sexy, tough and scantily clad roller derby player would vanish, but quite the opposite has occurred. The overwhelming majority of these posters show girls with tattoos wearing small amounts of clothing and engaging in some sort of 'tough' behavior such as being a champion, knocking someone over, destroying something, or incurring injuries. These direct frames aid in creating and maintaining the roller derby movement's collective identity, which is tied to feminism.

#### Fundraising, Feminist Consumerism, and the Cloak of Feminism

The way that these leagues frame (Goffman 1974, Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford, 1986) themselves is just as a complex as its mingling of beer, babies, cleavage,

and grandparents. And while one would assume that separate leagues from across the same state would vary in the ways that they market themselves, this was not the case. It was salient that the leagues in Florida marketed and fundraised in the same ways. They utilized the same tools, and subsequently relayed the same message. While it is not theoretically mandated or directly addressed, I have previously discussed feminism as central in the roller derby movement. Feminist ideals are present in the roller derby movement throughout recruitment, fundraising, and training.

One tool that was used at all of the bouts was the announcing and the selling of raffle tickets. During bouts, raffle tickets were used to reaffirm the need to constant need to raise money. Prizes awarded varied from league to league, but included things such as: Pabst Blue Ribbon cozies, gift certificates, free tattoos, and an iPad. Although the roller derby leagues define themselves as non-profits, they extend their fundraising ventures to worthy charities. Promoting their feminist outlook, roller derby leagues vote on and choose which organizations to support. The roller derby leagues I explored chose to fundraise for charity organizations to improve their standing in the local community. Strategically, fundraising also allows for league advertising while giving back to the community the league comes from. A league appointed fundraising committee selects the charities the league ends up fundraising for. During the roller derby bouts, the league sells raffle tickets. The proceeds of these tickets either go towards a charity or to the league directly. The symbolism in the sale of these raffle tickets, I argue, plays an important role in the framing of the league, bout, and individual participants.

During a roller derby bout, a multitude of things are going on all at once: a high impact game, children dancing, people drinking beer, referees calling fouls, and players

yelling at one another. Similar to St. John's (2008) likening of a social movement protest as similar to a Brazilian carnival, as a spectator, participant, or volunteer it is nearly impossible to take in the entire campy and carnivalesque affair of a roller derby bout at once. However, one thing that stays constant at all bouts is the way leagues fundraise by asking fans to purchase raffle tickets.

Motivational framing is prevalent in the inclusion or exclusion of charity fundraising, and is important for the league in order to maintain and advance collective identity. Using the fundraising as a call to arms to drum up donations, motivational framing is used strategically to sell raffle tickets, and in so doing, selling the audience a narrative of the roller derby movement's collective identity. Fundraising within the roller derby movement has implications concerning the collective identity of leagues and the movement as a whole. In using my field notes I illustrate how local leagues strategically employ and frame fundraising.

#### *Fundraising for the Roller Derby Movement*

Fundraising is a main tenant of the roller derby movement. Instead of fundraising for charitable organizations, many leagues take the opportunity to fundraise for themselves. In so doing, the leagues position themselves as the organization deserving of funds donated by the audience members. The fundraising mostly occurs in the sale of raffle tickets. The two themes found were vocality of fundraising and the assertion of legitimacy.

When fundraising for themselves, the leagues were extremely vocal and open to explaining why the money is important. Throughout the bouts, in order to drive the point home, the announcers explained that the "referees and volunteers don't actually get paid

for any of the work they do.” Instead, they explain that “...they’re here because they want to be here,” asserting their status as DIY, and therefore providing the reason why, as fans, it is important to donate money to continue to keep roller derby alive and well in Florida.

Also coming to the surface is the issue of legitimation. The roller derby movement, in many circles, is not thought of as a rigorous or mainstream sport (Storms 2008). Therefore, it is no surprise that leagues constantly seeking legitimation from their fans and participants. In an attempt to legitimate the roller derby movement, the announcers urge the audience to “support these girls because they skate their asses off for your enjoyment,” noting that while derby is by all means entertainment, it is also a social movement. Similarly, as noted previously in my ethnography and in the Hell on Wheels (2008) documentary, skaters use name brand skates and gear to appear more legitimate and professional. This legitimacy of the roller derby movement is vital for motivational framing and collective identity. Through fundraising, the leagues are framing how to conceptualize the roller derby movement.

#### *Fundraising for Charities in the Roller Derby Movement*

Selling raffle tickets serves a variety of purposes, symbolic and practical, for different bouts and leagues. One of the reasons that leagues fundraise is to raise money for a selected charity organizations. These organizations include blood banks, domestic violence shelters, and breast cancer awareness non-profits. Of the bouts that did fundraise for charities two main themes emerged from the data. The first theme is that the charity organizations were not discussed during the bouts themselves. Instead of explaining the logistics of the charity organizations, the announcers at the local bouts stay surprisingly

silent. Second, the charity organizations chosen as beneficiaries were feminist-centered. As feminism is a concept without a singular definition, I extend my definition of feminist-centered to: woman or humanist centered and in the best interest of human kind, and women alike. Similarly, these organizations for which roller derby leagues were fundraising for were notably framed as within the best interest of human and woman-kind, further constructing them as something all people present should be respectful of and donate money to. While they are not necessarily constructed as adhering to third wave feminism, because of their ties to the roller derby movement, the connection is clear.

Table 1: Types of Charities

Bout Date	Type of Charity
July 23, 2011	Flyers handed out for Slut Walk, third wave feminist marches/protests that began in April 2011. The goal was to bring to light that because of current culture, women often get blamed for their slutty appearance in matters of rape.
August 6, 2011	Raffle tickets are benefiting a walk to prevent sexual violence
August 20, 2011	Peaceful Paths, a domestic violence and rape crisis center and Blood donations
September 17, 2011	“Race for the Cure” for breast cancer awareness
October 1, 2011	The Spring, Domestic Violence Prevention and Emergency Shelter and Agency in Tampa Bay
October 16, 2011	Donations to Breast Cancer Awareness

Although leagues chose to fundraise for charities, it was not always the case that they addressed the fundraising during the bouts or that the charities appeared in the programs. Out of the five bouts that did fundraise, all of them mentioned the charities at

least once, but only two of them had the organization's name in the bout program. Out of those that did discuss it during the bout, there was never an explanation of what the charities do, what kind of service they provide, or even how to learn more about them. In this, the announcers of the bouts acted as advertisers, without even naming the organization, yet simply asking the audience to, "support the raffle for breast cancer research!" Instead of announcers taking the moment to advertise, educate, or even advocate the cause for which funds are being raised, they simply ask for funds. In so doing, they do not clearly delineate their connection to the feminist organizations.

Although the charities are not discussed at length, they still adhere to feminist ideals. Of the charity organizations, all but two dealt directly with women. The other two were blood donations and a childhood diabetes prevention and awareness organization. Of the charities that are focused on women, all were domestic or sexual violence or breast cancer awareness organizations. For example, at one Florida bout, the league fundraised for the local domestic abuse network, Peaceful Paths. Birthed out of the grassroots Rape Crisis Counseling center movement of the late 1970s (Rose 1977), Peaceful Paths has a rich history of working as a woman-centered victim advocacy program. Aside from the swift mention during the bout and the website address printed in the bout program, there is no way an audience member or participant would know anything about the organization.

Local roller derby leagues also participated in fundraising events for other organizations, one of which was Breast Fest, a local fundraiser. Contrary to the name of the fundraiser, the proceeds went to benefit The Spring, a Tampa Bay domestic violence shelter and advocacy organization. At the event, there were local artists and jewelry

makers creating masterpieces on the spot, where a certain percentage of their profits would be donated to The Spring. The roller derby players who helped organize the event were also present in their roller derby gear and skates gliding around while the burlesque dancers performed. Similar to the other leagues, the local league, utilized a feminist-minded, woman-centered organization for which to fundraise. By fundraising for feminist organizations and concurrently use third wave feminism as a means to hypersexualize through empowerment (Snyder 2008), roller derby frames itself as feminist.

The utilization of fundraising for charities works to assist in frame bridging (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986), as it emphasizes the importance of these feminist-centered organizations in relation to the roller derby movement. Frame bridging is “the linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (Snow et al., 1986). In the instance of the roller derby movement, frame bridging aids in constructing the movement as feminist by extension of the organizations they are fundraising for.

### Fundraising for Feminism

Fundraising works to advance their third wave framing. While roller derby chooses historically situated second wave organizations, like Peaceful Paths, it does not address the history. Instead, the leagues simply do not address the issues associated with the charitable organizations. So, much like third wave feminism simply nods at the history of feminism, the roller derby movement does the same. Roller derby social movement actors, then, opt out of responsibility for knowledge of feminist history (or theory) by using a cloak of feminist empowerment. This cloak of feminist empowerment



is laden with blatant sexualization and the prospect of gender emphasis agency (Crawley, et al. 2008).

### Imagining Motivation and Identity

Weaving in the complicated ways and reasons that roller derby leagues raise money, I point to how these groups utilize motivational framing as a call to arms to raise money for the movement. This framing provides a more coherent and clear collective identity. By exploring the utilization of motivational framing and collective identity, I uncover significant aspects of the roller derby movement. I argue the league's use of fundraising aids them in creating, maintaining, and defining their ideological motivational frame (Snow and Benford 1988) and collective identity.

The utilization of feminist-centered charity organizations actively informs the roller derby movement's collective identity. One way collective identity is defined and dispersed to the audience members is through boundary making, therefore showing the audience members what is appropriate and what is not. Due to the interactive nature of the bout, those who are contributing money by purchasing raffle tickets have chances to win prizes or play games in front of the crowd. This aids in publicly addressing and teaching the audience members about the boundaries of the roller derby movement's collective identity.

These instances detailed above become vehicles of collective identity that is understood once cultural capital is obtained. Audience members participate in roller derby by coming to know about the rules and regulations of the sport. This occurs by way of the announcers who use bouts as an opportunity to educate audience members about rules, regulations, and most importantly about the cultural capital that is necessary to gain

before understanding and embracing the roller derby movement's collective identity. For instance, at bouts, before the game starts, the players illustrate how the game works by slowly playing a full jam. While doing so, the announcers explain the rules and expectations of roller derby, for example, when to cheer and what to cheer about. In addition to the audience members gaining cultural capital, they must also desire to participate in the movement by way of fanship in order to embrace the roller derby movement's collective identity.

Producing desire for participation within the roller derby movement is a consistent project of the movement (Kearney, 2011; Pavlidis, 2010; Finely, 2010; Joulwan, 2007). The roller derby player represents a “fantasy, [that]... day-dreaming is intimately linked with a key component of modern hedonism, longing” (Campbell 1987: 85). The same sentiment is shared by Joulwan, a roller derby player turned author, as she explains the first time she watched roller derby. In her personal narrative, she explains having an “entrancing, and entertaining life-changing thought: I wanted to be a Rollergirl. With each lap the girls skated the track, I became more convinced that I must become a Rollergirl” (2007: 12). This kind of longing is not confined to simply being a member of the audience, but to being invested in roller derby either athletically as a player, monetarily as a fan, or even ideologically as a feminist. This fantasy, feminist and otherwise, to be part of the roller derby movement aids in the construction of the movement's collective identity. Similarly, this desire works in the benefit of the roller derby movement by making the movement more attractive to audience members.

An older heterosexual couple is seated in the front row. They look somewhat distraught and surprised. The woman says, “So much is going on, this is sooo

cool!” With arms crossed and mouths wide, they look somewhat astounded. Grins grow across their faces as they watch with wide eyes. (August 6, 2011)

The fantasy of the roller derby movement drives the desire of inclusion and fandom and helps to create the movement’s collective identity. It is this almost sensual longing that brings us to collective identity and thereby, to framing. In order to fully explore how the fundraising affects the roller derby movement’s framing, we must explore the motivation behind it.

It is this use of motivational framing that contributes a puzzle piece of how collective identity forms and is maintained within roller derby. Motivational framing is accomplished through aligning the league with the charity organization they are fundraising for by way of frame bridging (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). While not all bouts incorporate blatant descriptions of the charity organizations they fundraise for, frame bridging allows for the application of the charity’s frames without a transparent discussion. Most of the charity organizations that roller derby leagues fundraise for are feminist-minded. This allows for a frame bridging of feminist ideology without the league blatantly identifying as feminist. This is an obfuscation for the audience members, as they grapple with the feminist framing. As an integral part of motivational framing, morality comes into play (Snow and Benford 1988) and affects the collective identity of the roller derby movement. Not only does this operate through the utilization of charities, but also by the moral obligation of contributing to fund the league. The feminist framing utilized by the movement does not require feminist ideals. However, what it does necessitate is the illusion of feminism within the roller derby

movement. Through this puzzle piece, the feminist frame is employed by the roller derby movement is more readily understandable.

### Conclusion

The use of feminism as framing is prevalent within the roller derby movement. However, where it was most striking was fundraising for feminist charities. In using frame bridging, the roller derby movement purposefully framed themselves as feminist in order to promote collective identity and therefore stealth consumption by way of fundraising. In understanding the boundaries of the movement's collective identity, it was clear to the audience members that they were supposed to support and donate to feminist organizations. The announcers used their pull with the audience to educate them about the cultural capital associated with being part of the roller derby movement. For instance, there is an understanding that giving money for fundraising purposes is something that is appropriate to be part of the roller derby movement. Furthermore, to want to be a part of the movement, desire, or imaginative hedonism is necessary. In that, the audience members long to be part of the roller derby movement, which then aids in the construction of the movement's collective identity.

In looking at how the roller derby movement is presented through ethnographic field notes, national organizations, and popular media, it is apparent that the same message prevails. This message, while it might wear a cloak of feminism, it is only interested in the strength and survival of the roller derby movement. The movement as a whole, while it is consciously framed as feminist, is not feminist at all; instead it is interested in selling the image of sexy, tough women skating in lingerie while winking and smiling at the men in the crowd.

CHAPTER FIVE  
ROLLING TOWARDS NEW FIGURATIONS: IMPLICATIONS, DISCUSSION, AND  
REFLECTION

After walking into a local roller derby recruitment night almost three years ago, I had high hopes for my future as a nationally recognized lead jammer with a badass attitude and well-known blocking skills. In roller derby I thought I had found my women's only feminist haven full of queer possibilities but instead, I found something a little less ideal. Once I began attending practices and bouts, I realized something completely different was taking place, something that didn't hold accurate to the feminist ideals I had expected. With that, my research project was born.

Throughout my ethnography I was sadly but consistently disappointed in the feminist movement I thought roller derby would be producing. After finishing my data collection, I finally saw the actual issues and practices jump out at me: strict sexual and gendered ideals, third wave feminism gone awry, and the use of theoretical and tangible consumption in the making of the social movement. All of these factors led me to a clear distrust of third wave feminism.

The Sexualized Feminine

Previous research about roller derby argued that it provided a space to transgress hegemonic ideologies of femininity and sexuality, that is, as a movement that has been

touted as being transgressive. That is not the case. In fact, the only differences from traditional femininity are superficial fashion choices such as tattoos, piercings, and fishnets. Roller derby movement participants imagine the same feminine, youthful, and sexualized persona that mainstream society does.

In line with other sport theory concerning women participants, women in roller derby play into the feminine apologetic by emphasizing their femininity as a way to diffuse their athletic prowess. The players themselves also utilize feminine attributes when playing at a bout, such as wearing skirts and heavy makeup. In addition to this, women playing roller derby are also supposed to appear youthful. Again, this works to diffuse the athletic and aggressive sport the players are engaging in while keeping them appropriately feminized, and therefore sexualized.

Additionally, roller derby players are expected to play into their sexuality for the benefit of the audience. With push-up bras aplenty and roller derby names such as Climaxxx, this distinction is clear. Sexualized fantasies such as the 'dance party' arise during the bouts as a way to further sexualize the performance of roller derby. This sexualization, though, is many times touted as being empowering for the players, as a feminist way of owning their own sexuality. Instead, it reads simply like an overt way of buying into the feminizing and sexualizing expectations of the mainstream.

### Third Wave Feminism

In combination with overt sexualization and feminization, roller derby also upholds a façade of feminism. However feminism and roller derby clearly have a complex relationship. Most specifically, roller derby utilizes the language of girl power,

the possibility of player universality, and the promotion of violence—a notion that has been historically anti-feminist.

Historically situated in understandings of third wave feminism made popular from the mid to late 1990s, the rhetoric of girl power comfortably finds a place in roller derby to claim third wave transgression. Similar to critiques of third wave feminism, this language draws from feminist concepts without necessarily interrogating them--thereby, blindly situating roller derby as a third wave oasis of transformation.

Also drawing from third wave feminism, the possibility of player universality in roller derby advances the idea that any woman can be a roller derby player. While it is primarily used as a recruitment technique, the assertion that any woman, regardless of age, ability, class, and appearance, can be a roller derby sensation is just not the case. Roller derby is a challenging, dangerous sport that is not suited for every woman. Instead, it emphasizes youth and bodily power much like many other sports.

The aspect of violence in roller derby is fairly multifaceted. Violence is used in the sport as a real tactic during the play of bouts although the performance of violence is more prevalent. Feminism has historically been anti-violence, yet with third wave feminist movement such as roller derby, a certain kind of violence is veiled as empowering. This particular kind of violence smoothly glides in-between amicability while giving the audience the spectacle of violence (common in androcentric sports) they believe they paid for.

Girl power, universality of roller derby for all women, and the use of overt violence are all accepted and touted as being third wave feminist within roller derby. In fact, feminism is a necessity to the players, participants and the audience in the promotion

of roller derby as not just a sport but a social movement. The term feminist accountability aptly describes how the veneer of feminism operates within the roller derby movement as a way to hold the players, participants, and audience members accountable to third wave feminist ideals and standards. For instance, all parties involved expect the rhetoric of girl power to be exuded within roller derby.

Roller derby is, by definition, a third wave feminist movement. Therein, my critique is not with the roller derby movement, but with third wave feminism. Third wave feminism dangerously plays into superficial narratives of girl power, universality, and empowerment. Just as the third wave movement critiqued second wave feminism for not addressing intersectionality, third wave makes the same mistake in assuming all women find the same things empowering, such as sexuality. In the instance of roller derby, the movement assumes that all women would be apt to and even want to partake in roller derby, whereas some may find it offensive. Or for instance, many second wave feminists took issue with violence, and in particular previously unrecognized violence against women. In the third wave movement of roller derby, third wave makes the assumption that all 'good' third wave feminist women would enjoy watching, performing, and participating in violence against other women. This kind of participation is vital in the creation and reification of the collective identity and framing of the roller derby movement.

### Consuming Social Movements

Roller derby is a third wave feminist social movement and in order for a social movement to be successful, a strong and unified collective identity is necessary. In the roller derby movement, the collective identity is developed by the use of cultural capital,



imaginative hedonism, and boundary making. By defining the cultural capital makers within the roller derby movement, like knowing the rules of the game, facets of the collective identity are illustrated. Imaginative hedonism allows for the desire of being part of the roller derby movement. This is a necessary aspect of collective identity. Boundary making is another important aspect, as it helps define what is within the confines of the roller derby movement's collective identity.

In the roller derby movement, fundraising for leagues and charities is a very popular way to generate revenue. The fundraising has a few purposes. First, it aids in raising funds for the leagues themselves. When the fundraising is for a charity organization, it helps the leagues become more involved in and give back to the community. Community engagement also is helpful as it aids in the league's local marketing.

Second, fundraising also signals to the audience what kinds of organizations are important in the roller derby movement. Aside from their own fundraising, the organizations were mainly feminist organizations. This signals to the audience members that feminism is an important aspect of the movement. While many times the leagues selected charity organizations that were birthed out of second wave feminism, they did not discuss the social issues associated to these organizations. Similar to the third wave feminist movement the roller derby movement emulates, it recognizes issues historically addressed by second wave, but dismisses them by not appropriately addressing them. Instead, the leagues take the moment to advertise for themselves. In addition to the fundraising illustrating the importance of feminism in the movement, it also signifies that feminism is an integral part of the movement's collective identity. Furthermore, that

giving money to these organizations is a way of gaining entryway into this collective identity.

### Wheeling Away

As a feminist in who is active in the roller derby movement, this project was necessary, if not deflating. First, it is important to refute previous research about the transgressive possibilities of roller derby. Just as I initially did, even feminist sociologists can get swept up in the joy of being part of a feminist movement such as roller derby. However, the crux of my analysis is the movement's use of third wave feminism as a way to critique the inaction of third wave feminism itself. While third wave feminism sounds tempting and even sexy, my analysis demonstrates that it is neither. Instead, as it takes shape in roller derby by third wave feminism turns a superficial eye to previous feminist literature and, in so doing, it reinforces new social movements that perpetuate traditional, mainstream ideals under the guise of feminism

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