

Breaking the Silence: How Roller Derby Combats Muted Group Theory in Sports

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This work is dedicated to all the women who have come before me and those who will follow who seek change in the sports industry.

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“Put some skates on... Be your own hero.”

~Maggie Mayhem, *Whip It*

Abstract

Gender discrimination has been an issue within the sports industry since the 1870's (Bell, 2008, p.1). The assumption that there would be a sport which actively opposes gender discrimination and marginalization of women and non-cis gendered people would not be unreasonable. This research aims to evaluate how the community and culture of Roller Derby combats and opposes the basic tenets of Muted Group Theory (MGT) within the sports industry. MGT suggests that women and non-cis gendered people are the subordinate group, which creates gender discrimination and marginalization within the sports realm. Roller Derby directly challenges this notion.

This study received 341 surveys from active and former participants in the Roller Derby community. The survey aimed to examine the experiences of participants in regard to their perceived empowerment, acceptance, and inclusion in terms of gender within the sport. Additionally, the survey addressed Roller Derby participants' perceptions of gender inclusivity in traditional sports (i.e., baseball, football, softball, volleyball, et cetera). By evaluating the responses to the survey, this study determined that the Roller Derby community and its values directly oppose and challenge the tenets of MGT. Notable findings also included that a vast majority of participants believe Roller Derby to be more inclusive than traditional sports and that the sport creates a safe space for transgender and non-binary athletes and that participants believed that Roller Derby's culture and community can aid in creating a change for women and non-cis gendered people in the sports industry.

Keywords: Roller Derby, Muted Group Theory, gender, sports, inclusivity, empowerment, acceptance

Table of Contents

Breaking the Silence: How Roller Derby Combats Muted Group Theory in Sports.....	1
Rationale	3
Literature Review	3
Foundations: Culture, Gender and Safe Spaces	3
Muted Group Theory (MGT)	6
Countering Muted Group Theory (MGT).....	7
Gender Discrimination in Sports.....	8
The History of Roller Derby: Overview	10
The History of Roller Derby: The Impact on Gender in Sports.....	11
The History of Roller Derby: Empowerment.....	12
Research Questions	13
Methods.....	14
Participants	16
Results	16
Perceptions of Inclusivity and Acceptance	16
Perceptions of Empowerment	18
Perceptions of Traditional Sports.....	20
Discussion	21
Limitations	24
Future Research Recommendations	26
Conclusion.....	27
References.....	28
Appendix A.....	34
Survey Questions.....	34
Appendix B	43
Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approved Research Form.....	43

Breaking the Silence: How Roller Derby Combats Muted Group Theory in Sports

It's 7:00pm on a Saturday night. You arrive at a location which can only be described as "a hole in the wall." People of all shapes, sizes, genders, races, etc., flood into the industrious, warehouse-esque location. The environment is loud and smells like a mix of concession stand foods and a sweaty locker room. You step into the stands and see a huge track. The track, which is constructed of rope taped to the floor in an oval, is approximately eighty-eight feet from one end to the other. An emcee over the sound system boisterously shouts, "Who's ready for some Roller Derby?!" The crowd of people erupts into applause and cheers. Two teams enter the arena, both with approximately fifteen skaters. Each team takes their place on their respective benches. The emcee begins to introduce the teams. You hear skater names such as Helenore Bruzavelt #33, Develyn Side #6, and Audrey Trackburn #93. As soon as both teams have been introduced, five skaters from each team take the track. With the chirp of a whistle from the referees, the skaters take off and the excitement begins. The crowd is rowdy and lively. The action on the track is aggressive and explosive. Skaters are slamming into one another with brutal force. The action continues for two thirty-minute halves before the bout ends. As the bout ends, you hear the emcee invite the crowd to the league after-party at the local dive bar to conclude the night.

In the fall of 2009, an eleven-year-old girl, alongside her mother, stepped into a sports facility nicknamed, "The Castle." Two short hours later, this girl would be fully enamored with the sport of Roller Derby, and by 6 months later, she would be joining the skaters she so adored. The small, skinny girl, who had always been picked on for being smaller than everyone else, finally had a place where she was empowered to be a strong, tougher version of herself. Nearly fifteen years later, she would find herself still fully enthralled in the sport and its evolution to

include not only women of every shape and size, but also those who may not be openly accepted in traditional sports.

Roller Derby and the Women's Flat Track Derby Association have always promoted a community of inclusivity and empowerment of those who otherwise would be discriminated against (WFTDA, 2015). Even in the earliest stages of Roller Derby in the 1930s, the sport has always accepted any individual, regardless of gender, race, and sexual orientation (Harlan, 2019). Roller Derby was one of the first sports to enact a sport-wide policy allowing those of different genders to join previously all-female teams (WFTDA, 2015). The Women's Flat Track Derby Association has been committed to "broad discrimination protections within the organization for individuals who identify as transgender, intersex, or gender expansive" (WFTDA, 2015).

Due to the nature of the culture of inclusivity within Roller Derby, curiosity is piqued regarding the policies and inclusiveness of traditional sports. Many argue that gender segregation is vital to uphold the fairness of traditional sports citing physical differences between the male and female anatomy and physiology (Magness, 2022). However, Roller Derby seems to be a crucial outlier to this argument. While co-ed sports already exist, one would find difficulty in identifying a full-contact sport in which mixed genders are allowed (McManus, 2022). Roller Derby's culture also brings empowerment for social change. In the midst of horrifying social injustices in Egypt, women joined physical sports as a subtle protest to the patriarchal government policies (Arafat, 2017). Without Roller Derby, these women may have turned to more direct and more dangerous forms of protesting the sexist and harmful laws of their government (Arafat, 2017).

The goal of this research is to explore Roller Derby participants' perception of gender discrimination in sports. Additionally, this research expands the tenets of Muted Group Theory (MGT) by first explaining why gender discrimination in sports exists. Then, this essay will seek to identify how Roller Derby differs from traditional sports by surveying the experiences and perceptions of Roller Derby skaters, referees, and non-skating officials (NSO's).

Rationale

Researching gender discrimination in sport is incredibly important for a number of reasons. As the landscape of this research stands now, very little has been conducted in regard to MGT. Not only is there very little research in respect to the MGT as it applies to gender discrimination in sport, but the research that has been conducted is dated and should be revisited. Further, by utilizing Muted Group Theory (MGT), this paper aims to shed light on the gender discrimination in sport and how women have been marginalized as a muted group. The culture of Roller Derby could become a starting point and may begin to establish a change in how gender is viewed in the sports industry. Roller Derby creates a culture that is unmatched in its history, inclusivity, and empowerment of all people. Each of these things create a model for how all sports could be. By addressing these issues in the sports industry, this research could help usher in a more inclusive and welcoming environment for women and girls in all areas of sport.

Literature Review

Foundations: Culture, Gender and Safe Spaces

The Roller Derby community is a cultural group whose members demonstrate affiliation in unique ways and share perspectives regarding gender and inclusivity. In order for the research

presented within this thesis to be best understood, key terms and theoretical foundations are defined in this section.

First, the term “culture” refers to a set of learned behaviors which are shared by interacting groups of people (Media Text Hack Group, 2014). In order to identify those who may participate within a culture, the American Psychological Association notes that individuals may share a sense of “affiliation” or “a cultural union with others, typically rooted in likeness or individual closeness instead of on assumed material advantages” (Sam, 2015). Theoretically, these terms define the cultural aspects of the Roller Derby community and environment.

As noted above, this research examines inclusivity and empowerment within the Roller Derby community. One main theoretical lens that may be comprehensive to explain the focus on empowerment and inclusivity would be that of “feminism.” “Feminism” may be defined as “an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality” (Day, 2016). Through a feminist perspective, cultural members may “identify” or develop a “sense of self, established by their unique characteristics, affiliations, and social roles (Yilmaz, 2019). As such, an individual’s sense of self includes gender identity and expressions. Gender identity refers to one’s “internal experience and naming of their gender and can correspond or differ from sex assigned at birth” (Prismic, 2019). Similarly, “gender expression” illustrates the way individuals communicate their gender to others through such things as clothing, hairstyle, and mannerisms (Prismic, 2019). Simply put, gender identity is a person’s internal experience of their gender, where gender expression is the outward communication of the person’s identifying gender.

Feminists approaches to research often have a sense of activism (Day, 2016). To that end, recognizing the ways that marginalization may occur becomes possible. Marginalization refers to

situations when “a person or groups of people are less able to do things or access basic services or opportunities” (European Liberties Platform, 2021). Marginalization should not be confused with the term “discrimination.” In this essay, “discrimination” which refers to a “negative action toward an individual as a result of one’s membership in a particular group” (Cherry, 2000, p. 490).

The Roller Derby culture and community stands actively for inclusivity, empowerment, and acceptance. “Inclusivity” refers to “the idea that all types of people...must be included as much as possible in work and other institutions and must be assimilated” (Ricee, 2017). Additionally, “acceptance,” which can be related to “inclusivity” holds a slightly different definition. “Acceptance” refers to “taking a stance of non-judgmental awareness and actively embracing the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of others” (Sperber & Davis, 2020). Roller Derby also focuses greatly on empowerment of the individual. “Empowerment” focuses on promoting the sense of self-worth, ability to determine personal choices, and the right for women to influence social change for themselves and others (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). Hence, the culture of Roller Derby is known for being a “safe place” for those who may not fit a specific mold for traditional sports. This research will refer to the definition of a “safe space” provided by North Carolina State University. The definition of a “safe space” is “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or any other emotional or physical harm” (OIED Staff, 2020).

Muted Group Theory (MGT)

Muted Group Theory (MGT) gained its origins when husband and wife anthropological duo Edwin and Shirley Ardener coined the term in 1975 (Barkman, 2018, p. 3). Edwin Ardener began looking for the reason that female voices were absent from anthropological studies and argued that women were at a disadvantage unless they expressed matters in a way acceptable to men (Barkman, 2018, p. 3). Muted Group Theory addresses the power differentiation between dominant and non-dominant groups in communication (Barkman, 2018, p. 4). The dominant group establishes the norms and rules for systems of communication while the non-dominant group must adapt without representation (Sanderson et al., 2016, p. 272).

Additionally, the Ardener's created three tenets of MGT and how dominant and subordinate groups communicate (Barkman, 2018, p. 3). The three tenets of MGT are dominance, acceptability, and subordination. According to Barkman, these tenets refer to the ways in which the dominant group sets the standards for the communication process (Barkman, 2018, p.3). The dominant group defines the terms of communication, at which point the sub-dominant group's communication modes are less accepted or recognized. This then forces the sub-dominant group into the subordination of the dominant group (Barkman, 2018, p. 3). To simplify, women are forced to cognitively think about their experiences, then recode their language to fit what languages men have created. This means that rather than communicating freely and without much consideration, women are forced to think more than a few steps ahead in each interaction to ensure their messages are heard and understood by the opposite party (Turner, 1992, p. 1). In a study by Lynn Turner, research found that if the translation process fails, women's communications simply go mute (Turner, 1992, p. 1). Because of the ways MGT

addresses women's inability to communicate in their own "language," this makes MGT a viable theory to explain the inequality faced by women in sports (Wood, 2005, p. 62).

Countering Muted Group Theory (MGT)

As previously mentioned, the three tenets of MGT are dominance, acceptability, and subordination (Barkman, 2018, p. 3). When exploring the effects of MGT, there is an importance in recognizing the opposing or conflicting tenets of inclusivity, acceptance, and empowerment. These tenets directly oppose the tenets of MGT. First, by including those groups who may have been considered the sub-dominant group as illustrated through MGT. Then, accepting those groups and their means of communication. Lastly, by uplifting and empowering the voices of those who otherwise would be muted by a more dominant group. In MGT, a sub-dominant group is dominated and forced into subordination by the dominant group. However, if a group or organization takes an approach of acceptance, empowerment, and inclusivity, this could lead to the countering of the marginalizing tenets identified by MGT. Additionally, when the empowerment of non-dominant groups includes promoting the sense of self-worth, the non-dominant group can then work toward being more accepted and included, rather than excluded, from the dominant group's practices (Orbe, 1998, p. 19).

These countering tenets are deeply engrained in the culture of Roller Derby and are outlined in the standards and bylaws set forth by the largest governing body for the sport. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) is the largest governing body for Roller Derby. WFTDA represents over 400 member leagues on six different continents (WFTDA, 2015). As a result of being the largest governing body for the sport, WFTDA sets forth the standards and provides the most guidance on the operations of the sport on an international level

(WFTDA, 2015). Due to the size and influence of WFTDA, the organization's bylaws and code of conduct are the main referencing point for this research.

Gender Discrimination in Sports

Gender discrimination in sports has always been constant. Prior to the 1870's, women's sports were purely recreational and non-competitive (Bell, 2008, p. 1). Until Title IX was signed into law, women's opportunity for competitive sports was extremely limited (Bell, 2008, p. 2). Most women in sports feel "less valued, believe they are paid less for doing the same role as men, and face more challenges to progress than men" (Barr, 2018). Gender discrimination also does not end in athletic participation. Gender discrimination can also be noticed in athletics leadership positions (Swaton, 2010, p. 3). In 2008, it was measured that women made up 48.8% of student-athletes but only 15.5% of campus athletics leadership positions were held by women (Swaton, 2010, p. 2). In Swaton's study, she stated:

Women must band together, just like Black coaches and administrators did in forming the BCA and the Fritz Pollard Alliance, to create equal opportunities. Until that happens, there is no telling how long women will remain on the outside looking in, hoping that someone, someday, will give them a chance to prove their worth in the athletic world (p. 47).

To further this point, a study by Michigan State University showed that the number and type of sports sponsored by NCAA Division I institutions show that men have more opportunities than women to coach revenue producing sports and creating more positions of power for men (Knoppers, 1990, p. 369).

Prior research has found that nearly 40% of women in the sport industry battle with discrimination on the basis of their gender (Snook, 2022). Additionally, while women make up around 40% of athletics participation, they only receive about 4% of media coverage (Snook, 2022). Because of this massive disparity in media coverage, women's sports are perceived to be less interesting, increasing gender discrimination in sports (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018, p. 8).

Women have long been discriminated against in sports (Bell, 2008, p. 1). In a recent study, 40% of women felt their gender negatively impacted the way they are valued by others at work (Barr, 2018). Further, when asked if men and women are treated fairly in the workplace, 72% of men believed they were, and only 46% of women agreed (Barr, 2018).

Gender discrimination in the sports industry does not end in leadership positions or the office setting. Elite female athletes are subjected to gender verification testing to "prove" they are female before being allowed to compete at elite levels (The Associated Press, 2019). One highly publicized case of this gender verification testing is that of South African Track and Field athlete, Caster Semenya (The Associated Press, 2019). Semenya won the gold medal for the 800-meter race in the 2009 World Championships (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013, p. 104). On the same day of her victory, Semenya was ordered to undergo gender verification testing, which tests testosterone hormone levels in female athletes to determine their "femaleness" (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013, p. 103). The most controversial factor of this gender verification testing process is that men have never been ordered to undergo the same testing (Cook & Dworkin, 2013, p. 104). In the end, Semenya was barred from elite competition because the international governing body for Track and Field determined that Semenya was "biologically male" (The Associated Press, 2019). The simple fact that men are not required to undergo such testing shows the gender discrimination in the sports industry (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013, p. 107)

These types of discrimination are not easy targets for change. However, by understanding the theoretical causes of gender discrimination a better understanding of the issue may be had.

The History of Roller Derby: Overview

Roller Derby's history is quite the roller coaster of good times and bad times. In the 1930s, event promotor, Leo Seltzer, was tasked with increasing the popularity of "walk-a-thons" in Chicago. In an attempt to boost attendance, Seltzer put walkers on roller skates. Thus, Roller Derby made its first debut on August 13th, 1935 (Harlan, 2019). However, this early Roller Derby was purely just skaters completing laps on a track. Once again, Seltzer feared that the redundancy of skating laps was going to lead to decreases in attendance and popularity. In 1937, Seltzer teamed up with sportswriter, Damon Runyon. Together, the pair created what we now know as Roller Derby. Modern Roller Derby rules and regulations are modeled after the early rules and regulations put together by Seltzer and Runyon (Harlan, 2019). Due to World War II rationing and factory repurposing, Roller Derby decreased drastically in popularity (Harlan, 2019). By the early 1960s, Roller Derby hit a major resurgence. Teams were created in several cities in the northeastern United States. By 1965, over 13,000 fans flocked to Madison Square Gardens for the championship bout (Harlan, 2019). Roller Derby's popularity grew, and by 1971 the sport attracted over 19,000 fans to the same championship (Harlan, 2019). The bouts that drew such crowds appeared on television and radio broadcasts for several years throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, by 1975, Roller Derby had completely disappeared (Harlan, 2019).

In 2001, in Austin, Texas, a group of women came together and created the Texas Roller Girls. This team would kickstart a revival of Roller Derby across the country and around the

world (Harlan, 2019). By 2005, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association was founded to serve as a governing body for the hundreds of flat-track Roller Derby teams around the world (WFTDA, 2018). These new-age Roller Derby teams are all created and managed by the skaters, for the skaters. One could argue that the unique culture around Roller Derby is due to this fact. Additionally, Roller Derby's own story of revival and renewal only furthers the notion that Roller Derby provides a "new life" to people. Further, Roller Derby's history tells the inspiring tale of being great no matter the opposition and obstacles life gives.

The History of Roller Derby: The Impact on Gender in Sports

Throughout its century-long history, Roller Derby has challenged stereotypes about what women "should" be (Harlan, 2019). Further, Roller Derby has always strived to be a safe place for people of all genders and all sexual orientations to feel safe (Puglisi, 2020). Even after Roller Derby became a full contact sport, teams were comprised of men and women in a co-ed fashion (Harlan, 2019). In 1971, founder Leo Seltzer was interviewed by the New York Times and stated, "This is the only American sport ever created where men and women are equal" (Harlan, 2019). Roller Derby promotes the support and inclusivity of all people regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, and other demographical and ethnographical factors (Brenner, 2021). For women all around the world, like the women of Cairo, Egypt, Roller Derby provides a safe haven for them to be who they want to be, be confident in themselves, and learn principles for women to speak up and speak out against the issues plaguing their states and countries (Arafat, 2017). In Cairo, women who played Roller Derby were more likely to become activists against the horrific policies formed against women (Arafat, 2017). The safeness of Roller Derby teams and groups allows for people to learn to be confident enough in themselves to become the

voice that is needed to make a change (Brenner, 2021). Roller Derby is still an ever-evolving sport and culture. However, if more traditional sports can learn and follow the lead of Roller Derby's inclusivity and support, gender discrimination in sports could be a faint memory (Hanna, 2015).

The History of Roller Derby: Empowerment

All over the world, Roller Derby draws women and other individuals to feel a sense of empowerment. Roller Derby, in its way of creating a safety net, allows for the skaters to feel powerful in other areas of their lives. In Cairo, Egypt, women are vulnerable to heinous sexual crimes. Following the 2011 protests in Cairo, hundreds of women were sexually assaulted and sexually harassed (Arafat, 2017). In 2012, the CaiRollers formed. Amidst protests to bring an end to oppression of gender, Roller Derby provided a place for Egyptian women to feel safe (Arafat, 2017). In Egyptian society, women and girls were not allowed to play contact sports until 2012. For many Egyptian women, this Roller Derby team became a way to protest the patriarchal systems in Egypt without direct consequences from their families or the government (Arafat, 2017).

Not only does Roller Derby create a place for social and political protest, but it also creates a space for women to be in control of their sport. Women are marginalized within sports more often than not (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 53). However, in the "by the skater, for the skater" structure that Roller Derby follows, the women are able to create, modify, and influence the structures and regulations of the sport (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 53). In the research by Paul and Blank, they interviewed different Roller Derby athletes to really dissect the empowerment within the sport. One of the major themes exposed was that of "Physical Empowerment" (Paul & Blank,

2015, p. 57). However, deeply rooted in this theme is a subtheme. This subtheme was identified by Paul and Blank as “The Emergence of the Badass” (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 58). Paul and Blank found that when the Roller Derby athletes felt physically empowered by their bodies in Roller Derby, they were more likely to identify themselves and their teammates as “badasses” (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 58). The researchers elaborate on this theme and define the term as “a woman who is confident in her conception of self, who rarely ‘backs down’ and who gets what she wants” (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 58). Additionally, this study around Roller Derby athletes suggests that the empowerment given by the sport influences the skaters’ lives and the way they address other situations in their personal lives. The study found that women skaters were more likely to speak up against injustices than women outside the sport (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 66).

These are just two examples of the changes that can occur on a personal and interpersonal level through the influences of Roller Derby. While we address these two examples, it is important to note that there are many other ways Roller Derby empowers its athletes and changes their perception of self and community.

Research Questions

The theoretical discussion above has impacted the creation of the research questions for this study. The goal of this research is to determine answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What perspectives regarding acceptance, inclusivity, and empowerment do Roller Derby participants hold?

RQ2: How do those perspectives impact the ways Roller Derby participants view traditional sports?

By answering these two questions, conclusions can be drawn to determine if Roller Derby may truly make a change in the landscape of athletics and conclusions can be drawn regarding the impact of Roller Derby on traditional sports.

Methods

This research adopted quantitative research methods allowing for the results of this research to be generalized across the Roller Derby community through statistical analysis (Wrench et al., 2016, p. 216).

Due to the dispersed nature of the Roller Derby population a questionnaire was developed to survey and collect data. The survey method enabled the respondents to share their experiences as it pertains to the specifics of this research study. Benefits of distributing a questionnaire include maintaining the anonymity of the respondents. This anonymity provides safety to the participants and helps to facilitate true and honest accounts of experience as some of the survey questions may be sensitive in nature (Wrench, et al., 2016, p. 219). This questionnaire also utilizes a 5-point Likert scale to record the responses of participants. A Likert scale is similar to a rating system. A Likert scale allows for flexibility when answering sensitive topic questions. For example, questions 25 and 26, which aim to determine a participant's stance on gender segregation in sports, offering a Likert scale will avoid a polarizing answer – like “yes” or “no” -- when a participant may fall somewhere in the middle – as in “it depends on the sport” type answers (Wrench et al., 2016, p. 221).

The questions asked within this survey were formulated to assess the differences between the experiences of participants within the Roller Derby community and their experiences within traditional sports. The goal was to determine whether the values and standards of Roller Derby's

culture and community create a different experience for participants than that of traditional sports. For example, question 15, “Roller Derby is a safe place for transgender or non-binary athletes,” aims to gauge the participant’s perception of gender inclusivity within the sport. Additionally, question 22, which states, “Sports would be better if they removed barriers of gender,” will help determine a participant’s stance on gender segregation in sports after participating in Roller Derby, which does not bar athletes from participation on the basis of gender (WFTDA, 2015). Furthermore, questions similar to question 10, which states, “I believe Roller Derby is more accepting of others than traditional sports (ex. Baseball, Football, Softball, Basketball, Volleyball, etc.),” intends to determine the difference between the experiences of those in traditional sports versus the Roller Derby community. The full survey of questions can be found in Appendix A.

Upon receiving approval from Valdosta State University’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B), the questionnaire was distributed via Facebook to skaters, referees, and non-skating officials around the United States. The call for participants in the survey also requested that those who have participated share the survey with their specific teams and leagues to ensure the largest audience possible is reached. That is, a snowball recruiting strategy was adopted to reach a larger pool of potential respondents (Wrench et al., 2016, p. 322) Additionally, this survey followed purposive sampling (Wrench et al., 2016, p. 318). The first question of this survey asks respondents if they currently or have previously participated in Roller Derby. If the participant answered “no,” they were immediately forwarded to the end of the survey. The purposive sampling method was used in this survey to ensure that those participating in the study have the knowledge and experience of the Roller Derby culture and community to offer informed answers to their surveys.

Participants

The research survey was distributed via Facebook. The survey was available for participation for ten days in total. At the time of the survey's closing, there were 296 completed surveys submitted. Additionally, there were 45 surveys which were started, but not completed. In order for a survey to be qualified for this study, the participant must have answered "Yes" to the first question of, "Do you, or have you ever, played or participated in Roller Derby?" If a participant answered, "no," their survey would end. Of the 341 total surveys, 317 surveys were considered qualified. Participants included 277 women (87.66%), 17 men (5.38%), 11 non-binary people (3.48%), and a combined 11 transgender or gender fluid (3.48%) participants.

Results

Perceptions of Inclusivity and Acceptance

Of the 27 total survey questions, 10 questions were written to target the perceptions of inclusivity and acceptance among the participants. These questions included statements such as, "Roller Derby is a safe place for transgender or non-binary athletes," "I believe Roller Derby is more accepting than traditional sports," and, "I believe Roller Derby is more accepting of others than traditional sports." When asked "Roller Derby is a safe place for transgender or non-binary athletes," 273 participants (88.63%) selected either "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree." Additionally, when asked "I believe Roller Derby is more accepting than traditional sports," 268 participants (87.01%) selected either "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree."

The questions which were formulated to gauge a participant's perception of gender inclusivity in sports also included questions such as "Different genders need to be separated in sports," and "Gender does not matter when it comes to sports." Interestingly, the responses to

these questions were evenly distributed. This is interesting when comparing these responses to those of the previously mentioned “Roller Derby is a safe place for transgender or non-binary athletes,” and “I believe Roller Derby is more accepting than traditional sports” questions. The aforementioned questions skew significantly toward “somewhat agree” and “strongly agree.”

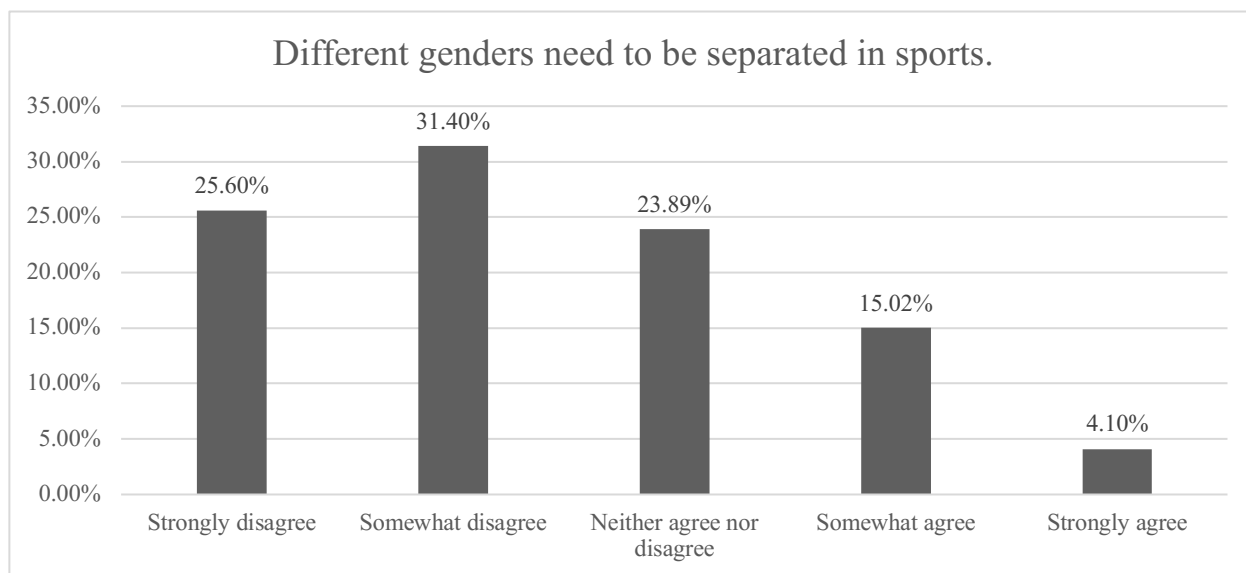


Figure 1. Participant responses to “Different genders need to be separated in sports.”

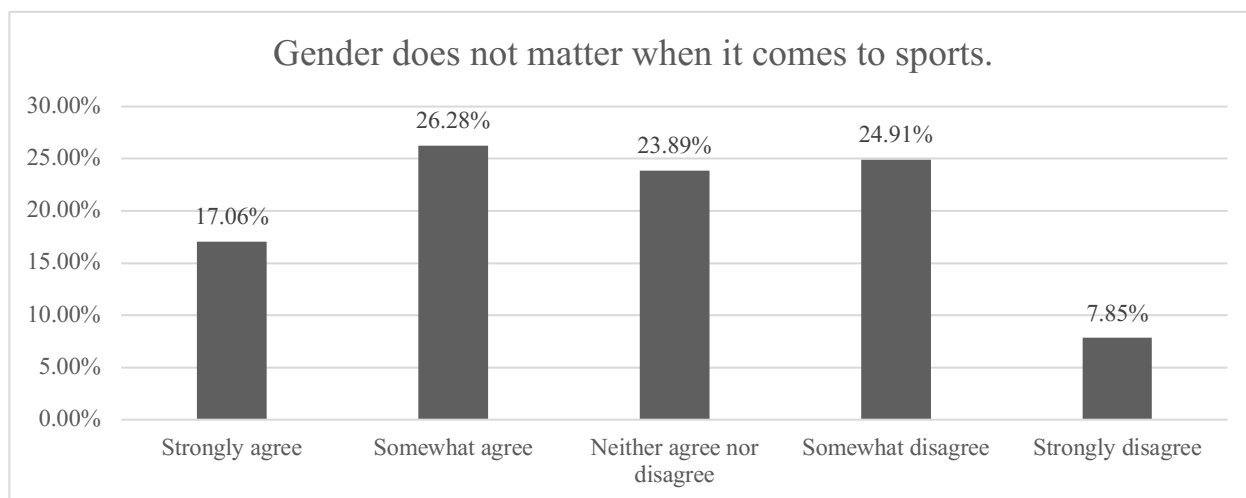


Figure 2. Participant responses to “Gender does not matter when it comes to sports.”

The responses for these two questions are also interesting when compared to the question “I think more sports should allow all gender teams.” Where there seems to be an equal

distribution of opinions regarding gender segregation in sports, 229 participants (78.15%) either “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that more sports should allow all genders on the same team.

Perceptions of Empowerment

Within this survey, there were three specific questions to gauge a participant’s perception of empowerment experienced within the Roller Derby community. These questions included, “Roller Derby lets me be my ‘true’ self,” “Roller Derby has changed my life for the better,” and, “Roller Derby has made me feel more confident.”

For the first question, “Roller Derby lets me be my ‘true’ self,” only fifteen of 308 responses (4.87%) either “strongly disagreed” or “somewhat disagreed.” The remaining 293 respondents (95.13%) selected options that they were either indifferent or agreed – somewhat or strongly – to the statement.

The second question, which asked participants if Roller Derby changed their lives for the better received a similar skew toward agreement. For this question, only eight participants (2.60%) selected answers which indicated they disagreed with the statement. The remaining 300 participants (97.40%) either were indifferent or agreed in some fashion with the statement.

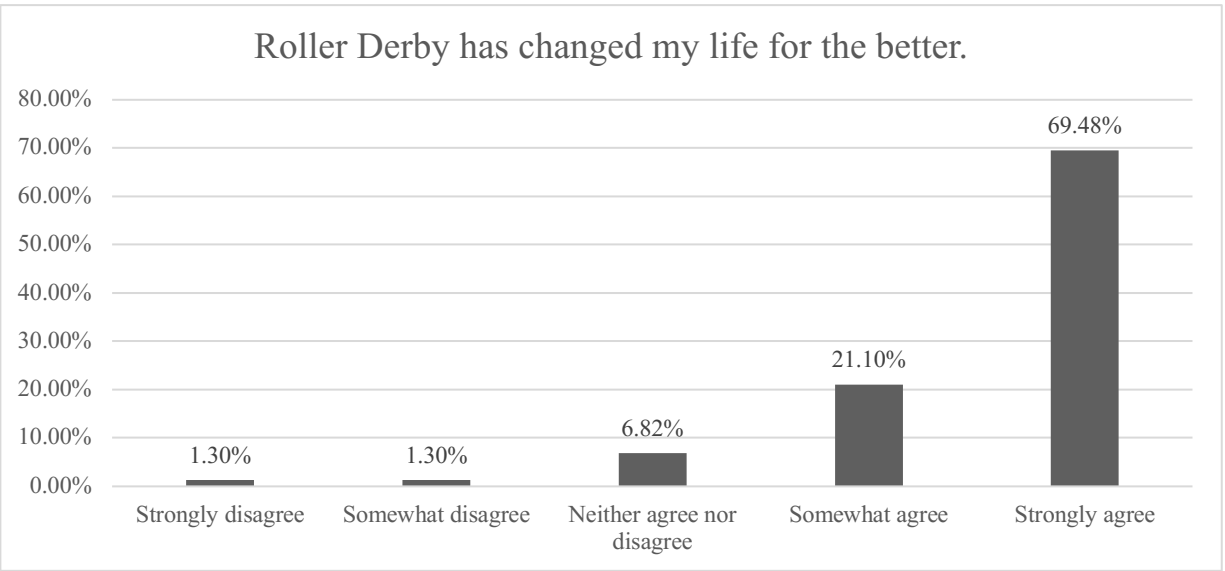


Figure 3. Participant responses to “Roller Derby has changed my life for the better.”

Finally, the statement “Roller Derby has made me feel more confident” yielded extremely similar results. In this case, only eleven participants (3.57%) disagreed – either strongly or somewhat – with this statement. The remaining 297 participants (96.43%) selected responses which indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed or agreed in some way.

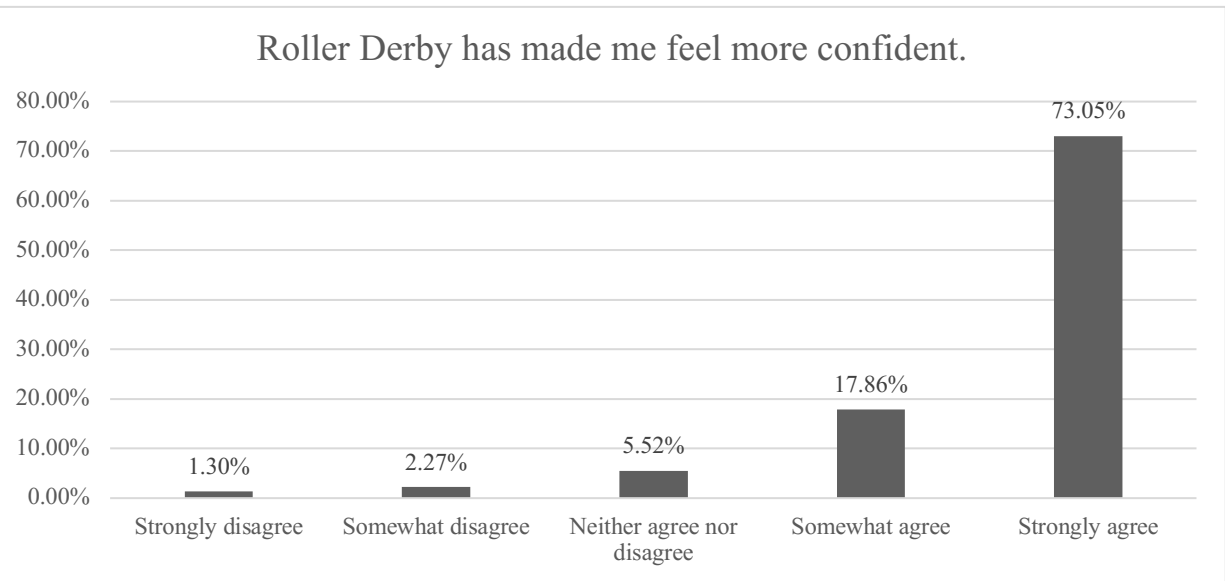


Figure 4. Participant responses to “Roller Derby has made me feel more confident.”

Perceptions of Traditional Sports

Similar to other sections of this survey, there were a few questions specifically formatted to determine how Roller Derby participants viewed traditional sports. In this case, “traditional sports” refers to mainstream sports, such as baseball, basketball, football, volleyball, softball, etc. First, participants were asked if they had ever participated in traditional sports before participating in Roller Derby. 208 of 317 participants (65.62%) responded “yes,” while 109 (34.38%) responded “no.” This question was important to understanding if a majority of Roller Derby athletes had an experience with traditional sports prior to their experiences in Roller Derby. This question determined that most Roller Derby participants had experienced traditional sports.

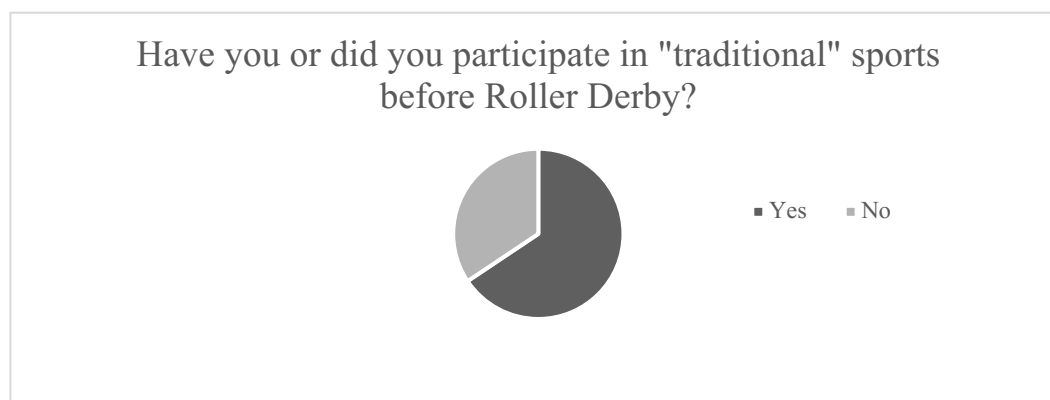


Figure 5. Participant responses to “Have you or did you participate in ‘traditional’ sports before Roller Derby?”

Two other questions were asked regarding perceptions of traditional sports. First, “Roller Derby is more fun than traditional sports” was asked to determine which environments were more enjoyable to the participants. An incredible 302 of 308 participants (98.05%) agreed with this statement, while only six (1.95%) disagreed.

The second question regarding the perception of traditional sports in comparison to Roller Derby stated, “Traditional sports could learn a lot from Roller Derby about gender policies and inclusion.” This statement was met with strong opinions toward either indifference or agreement. 293 respondents (95.13%) selected that they neither agreed nor disagreed, or that they agreed in some sense. Only fifteen (4.87%) chose answers which suggested they disagreed with the statement.

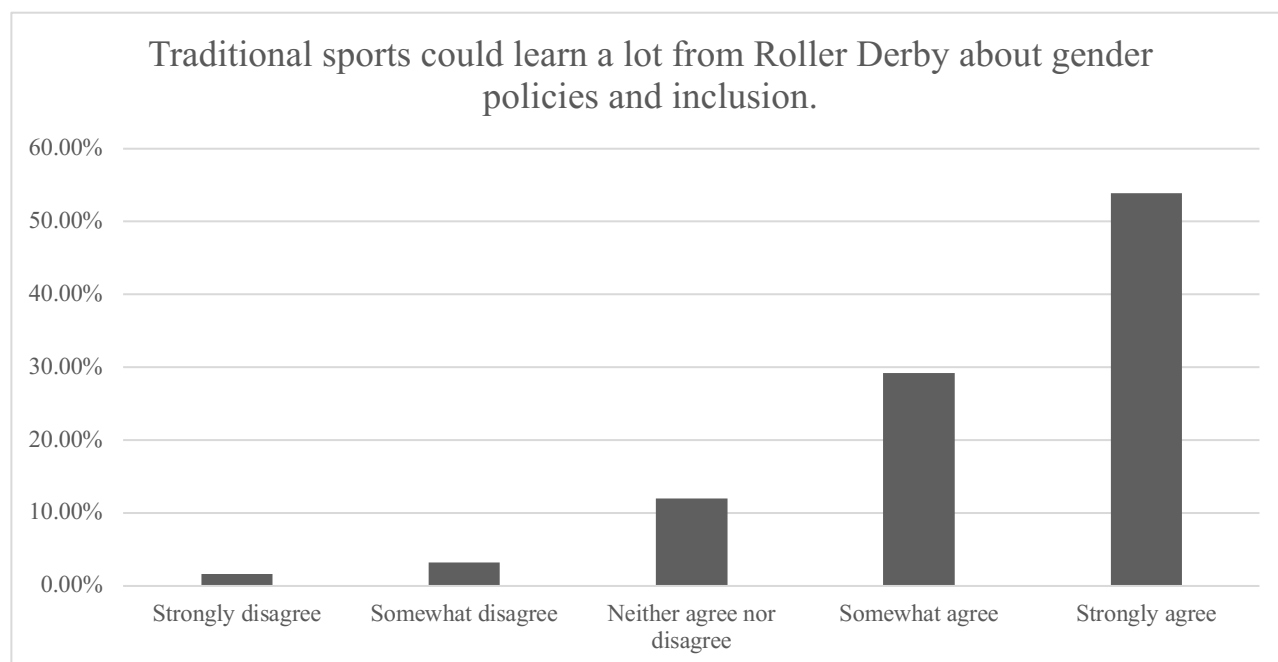


Figure 6. Participant responses to “Traditional sports could learn a lot from Roller Derby about gender policies and inclusion.”

Discussion

This research sought to better understand how the culture of Roller Derby may differ from that of traditional sports. To accomplish this goal, Roller Derby participants were surveyed with questions formulated to gauge their perception of acceptance, inclusivity, and

empowerment. Further, several of the survey questions were written to determine the participants' views of traditional sports.

The first research question of this study asked, "What perspectives regarding acceptance, inclusivity, and empowerment do Roller Derby participants hold?" The survey presented participants with ten questions which were used to understand their perceptions of these tenets. Based on the results, a majority of Roller Derby participants believe that the community and culture of Roller Derby is an accepting and inclusive space for those who may otherwise be marginalized in sports (i.e., transgender, non-binary, and other non-cisgender people). However, the findings for a few of the questions which determined a participant's perception of mixed-gender sports were surprising. A vast majority (80-97%) of participants believe Roller Derby culture to be more inclusive than traditional sports and believe the community is a safe place for transgender and non-binary athletes. However, when asked if differing genders should be separated in sports or whether or not gender mattered in sports the results were surprisingly evenly distributed among those who agree and those who disagree. It is curious where this drastic difference may originate in the perceptions of participants. With so little research completed about Roller Derby, it would be beneficial for future research to adopt varying methods and disciplines to create a full profile of the culture and communities of Roller Derby. It was not surprising that the results showed that 95-97% of participants believed that Roller Derby allowed them to be their "true" selves, made them more confident, and provided a positive change in their lives.

The second research question was focused on determining how Roller Derby participants view traditional sports in comparison to the culture and community of Roller Derby. First, the determination was made that a majority of Roller Derby participants have experience in both

traditional sports and the Roller Derby atmospheres. These results show that over 65% of participants have participated in traditional sports, outside of their participation in Roller Derby. The findings also show that 87% of participants believe Roller Derby to be a more accepting environment than traditional sports. Additionally, 95.13% of participants believe that traditional sports could learn from Roller Derby in regard to their gender policies and gender inclusivity. Transgender athletes have not always been accepted in traditional sports. Additionally, when transgender athletes have attempted to join a traditional sport, policies are made or changed in an ad hoc fashion (Teetzel & Weaving, 2017, p. 185). Conversely, Roller Derby's largest governing body, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) adopted an organization-wide gender policy which includes transgender and non-binary athletes (WFTDA, 2015). This organization-wide policy was revolutionary at the time, as no other sport had adopted a policy of a similar caliber (Puglisi, 2020).

This survey also offered a text-response question. This gave participants the opportunity to share any information regarding their Roller Derby experience that they felt comfortable sharing, and that the previous questions may not have covered. There were several responses given that referenced the empowerment and joy that the sport brought to participants. Notably, one participant stated, "[Roller] Derby literally saved my life." Another response said, Roller Derby is "an extremely accepting community who has made me feel welcome since the beginning." There is an importance in recognizing these optional free-text responses, as these are the participants' own words about their experiences in Roller Derby. These responses are candid and allow for further insight into the reality for the individuals within the community.

These results and open responses show a firm opposition to the core tenets of Muted Group Theory (MGT). While MGT suggests that women and non-cis people would be the non-

dominant – or “muted” – group, Roller Derby and the participant experience suggests that MGT could be challenged and changed in the sports industry. Women have been consistently discriminated against in sports since at least the 1870’s (Bell, 2008, p. 1). A 2019 study found that nearly 40% of women in the sports industry faced discrimination based on their gender (Snook, 2022). MGT’s tenets of “dominance, acceptability, and subordination” (Barkman, 2018, p. 3) have supported the discrimination of women in the sports industry. However, the core beliefs of the Roller Derby community actively oppose the tenets by allowing women and non-cis gendered people to hold the power within the sport. Since the 1960’s, women have dominated Roller Derby and have always fought for the inclusivity of non-cis gendered people (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 57). Additionally, from the inception of the sport in the 1930s, Roller Derby has challenged MGT by directly opposing the stereotypes of what a woman “should” be (Harlan, 2019). The founder of the sport, Leo Seltzer, was interviewed by the New York Times in 1971 and was quoted as saying, “This is the only American sport ever created where men and women are equal” (Harlan, 2019). With a testament such as this, one would find difficulty in arguing that Roller Derby promotes the empowerment and equality of women in sports.

By utilizing the data received from over 341 participant surveys, the determination can be made that Roller Derby and the community’s strong advocacy for gender inclusion actively fights against the norms of the sports industry to alienate and marginalize women and non-cis gendered athletes and participants.

Limitations

One limitation which is always present in survey research is that of response bias. Response bias refers to the phenomenon that participants may provide inaccurate or false

answers to surveys (Wrench et al., 2016, p. 233). This bias could be a result of a variety of factors which include the perceived social position of the administrator or a desire to respond favorably to the interviewer or other participants, among others (Nikolopoulou, 2022). In addition to response bias, a limitation to this study is the lack of participant ability to clarify the context of survey questions (Wrench et al., 2016, p. 230). In fact, this limitation has been noted in this study due to a text-response which stated, “I assumed for the sake of the survey that gender and sex were used interchangeably. If not, then my answers would be different.” One way this limitation could be avoided in future research is by increasing the size of the participant population (Wrench et al., 2016, p. 234).

Another significant limitation to this research is the lack of international participation in the research survey. This survey received responses only from the United States. Because of this, the results are only allowed only be generalized to the experiences of Roller Derby participants in the United States. Furthermore, the lack of international voices within the research limits the ability to assume that all Roller Derby communities are accepting and inclusive in the same way the United States leagues and communities are.

Lastly, a major limitation to this study is time. This research survey was available to participants for only ten days due to time constraints for completing the study. However, a study completed over a longer period of time may have allowed for greater distribution of the survey. Greater distribution could have resulted in the accommodation for international voices to be accounted for within the study. Unfortunately, with the short window of collection time, the various channels for communicating this study abroad were unavailable.

Future Research Recommendations

As previously mentioned, this study's final question was an optional text response provided participants an opportunity to supply any other information they would like regarding their experiences within the Roller Derby community. These responses have given great insight into future research opportunities as it relates to the Roller Derby communities.

First, several participants noted exclusion and microaggressions against Black skaters and skaters of color. One participant stated, "Roller Derby is inclusive to the LGBTQIA+ community, but there's a long way to go on racial inclusivity." Another respondent said, "There is a façade of inclusivity. As a Black skater, I have experienced latent racism, and have had skaters react with disproportionately dramatic or combative behaviors." Comments such as these open a door to exploring the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) participants within the Roller Derby community. It appears there is quite a bit to uncover in regard to the differences in inclusive practices within the sport.

Another potential future research study would be that surrounding the emergence of all-gender teams within the major governing bodies of Roller Derby. At present, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) does not allow men, or those who identify as men, to participate in the sport as a rostered skater. While men are welcome as referees or non-skating officials (NSO), men are not allowed to skate on a team (WFTDA, 2015). However, leagues which subscribe to other rules sets, such as the United States of America Roller Sports (USARS), typically have co-ed or men's teams affiliated with their leagues. One text-response answer stated, "WFTDA is not very male-friendly. My husband was upset when he could only be a referee." A potential study could examine in greater detail the effects of the advocacy for women and non-cis gendered people on the male population in the Roller Derby community.

Furthermore, there is very limited research in regard to the Roller Derby culture and community and its place in the sports industry. Future research on this topic should adopt varying methods and disciplines in order to truly provide a thorough and in-depth understanding of the culture.

Conclusion

This research aimed to evaluate the marginalization of women and non-cis gender people in the sports industry. Further, this research hoped to provide a potential blueprint for change in the sports industry through examination of the culture and community of Roller Derby. Prior research in this topic is minimal. Additionally, the research that has been conducted is outdated.

This study provides a new perspective on gender discrimination in sports and how Roller Derby can help bridge the gap for women within the industry. At present, nineteen states abide by laws which ban transgender athletes from participating in sports consistent with their gender (Barnes, 2022) and at least twelve states have introduced bills to “prevent an athlete whose gender is female from participating in sports teams designated for males” (Migdon, 2022). It is time for the sports industry to take notes from the Roller Derby model and in turn demand change, inclusion, and empowerment for female and non-cis gendered athletes.

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Appendix A
Survey Questions

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Do you, or have you ever, played or participated in Roller Derby?

Yes

No

2. What is your age range?

18-21

22-29

30-35

36-40

41-45

46-50

51-55

56-60

61-65

65+

3. What is your ethnicity?

Black or African American

Native American or Indigenous Tribes

White

Hispanic

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Two or more ethnicities

Other (please specify)

4. What is your identifying gender?
- Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Transgender
 - Gender fluid
 - Other (please specify)
5. What is your sexual orientation?
- Heterosexual
 - Homosexual
 - Bisexual
 - Pansexual
 - Asexual
 - Other (please specify)
6. What is your highest level of education?
- High School
 - 2 year degree or technical school
 - 4 year degree (Bachelor's Degree)
 - Graduate degree (Master's Degree)
 - Doctorate degree
7. How long have you participated in Roller Derby?
- Less than 1 year
 - 1-3 years

- 3-5 years
 - 5-8 years
 - 8-10 years
 - 10+ years
8. What rules set have you played for a majority of your career?
- WFTDA
 - USARS
 - MADE
 - Other (Renegade, OSDA, etc)
9. Where have you participated in Roller Derby?
- United States
 - Canada
 - Other (please specify)
10. Have you or did you participate in traditional sports before Roller Derby? (ex. Baseball, Football, Softball, Basketball, Volleyball, etc.)
- Yes
 - No
11. I believe Roller Derby is more accepting of others than traditional sports (ex. Baseball, Football, Softball, Basketball, Volleyball, etc.)
- Strongly disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

12. I feel safe in my Roller Derby community.

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

13. Roller Derby is more fun than traditional sports (ex. Baseball, Football, Softball, Basketball, Volleyball, etc.).

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

14. Roller Derby lets me be my “true” self.

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

15. I felt accepted and welcomed in traditional sports (ex. Baseball, Football, Softball, Basketball, Volleyball, etc.).

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

16. Roller Derby is a safe place for transgender or non-binary athletes.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

17. Roller Derby has changed my life for the better.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

18. Roller Derby has made me feel more confident

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

19. I believe Roller Derby is more accepting than traditional sports (ex. Baseball, Football, Softball, Basketball, Volleyball, etc.).¹

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

20. Traditional sports (ex. Baseball, Football, Softball, Basketball, Volleyball, etc.) could learn a lot from Roller Derby about gender policies and inclusion

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

21. Before Roller Derby, I had never placed sports with people of a different gender than my own.

- Agree
- Disagree

22. I think more sports should allow all gender teams.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

23. Sports would be better if they removed barriers of gender.

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

24. Gender determines a person's ability to participate in sports.

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

25. Different genders need to be separated in sports.

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

26. Gender does not matter when it comes to sports.

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

27. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experiences in Roller Derby?

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approved Research Form

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approve Research Form



Institutional Review Board (IRB) For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04398-2023

Responsible Researcher(s): Skylar Cameron Meeler

Supervising Faculty: Dr. William Faux

Project Title: *Breaking the Silence: How Roller Derby Combats Muted Group Theory in Sports.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (tmwright@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of the research study, collected data must be securely maintained and accessible only by the researcher(s) for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie *03.08.2023*
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.*