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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL REVIEW: ROLE MODELS & WOMEN'S FLAT TRACK  
ROLLER DERBY

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I examine the phenomenon of role modeling in women's flat track roller derby (a woman-focused contact sport played on roller skates) specifically exploring their presence and importance. As a non-professional sport with close proximity between participants and fans, roller derby creates female athlete role models that are accessible for young women. However, outside of the derby community, roller derby also has been represented as unrealistic performative entertainment, similar to wrestling, as opposed to a sport. The representation of derby as entertainment is heightened by the prominent presence of tattoos and fishnets in the sport, as well as the use of stage names. This thesis examines the results of interviews asking roller derby skaters their perceptions of role models within roller derby, and of themselves as role models. I compare results to feminist embodiment theory to question how roller derby contributes to the identity of the skaters, and how that identity is perceived by the women to whom roller derby skaters are potential role models.

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## **Introduction**

### **Role Models for Women**

A role model can be difficult to define. In colloquial terms, she is someone looked up to for various reasons; to imitate, to emulate, or to admire; she is a good thing for young people.

Yancey et. al. (2011) define a role model as:

an individual who is perceived as exemplary or worthy of identification or imitation...[resulting in] a conscious or unconscious emotional attachment which may or may not involve direct personal contact (e.g., identification with sports or entertainment figures encountered only through print or electronic media). (p.36)

Within the heading of role models is a range from admiration of an individual who is not personally known to a personal mentor. Personal mentors are shown to have the highest impact, but all in this range are thought to influence the behavior and future choices of young people. The exact extent of the influence has been argued, yet researchers agree that it exists (Biskup and Pfister, 1999; Quimby and DeSantis, 2006; Staurowsky et. al., 2009; Yancey et. al., 2011).

Drawing on previous work that linked role model presence to “more positive ethnic identity, higher self-esteem, higher academic performance, decreased substance use, fewer behavioral problems in school, higher levels of physical activity, and lower levels of engagement in early or high-risk sexual activity”, Yancey et. al. (2011) determined that certain types of role models also have positive effects on young people’s health choices, and so future success, underscoring again the positive potential for young people in having a role model (p. 37). These positive types of role models included family members and athletes.

Athletes in particular as role models have been theoreticized and questioned, especially their applicability to young women. Studies have found that young women are less likely than men to choose an athlete as a role model (Biskup and Pfister, 1999; Yancey et. al., 2011). There are various reasons suggested as to why: Biskup and Pfister (1999) argue that young men identify with the strength and courage of athlete role models, while young women instead look for appearance and social behavior in their models, leading to them choose role models either from their environment (family members and friends) or from the music and entertainment industry. They also suggest that the lack of female athletes in popular media is a contributing factor. Yancey et. al. (2011) supplement this in noting that young people tend to choose role models who are similar to themselves, including gender and race (though women are much more likely than men to have a role model of the opposite gender).

Though the methods by which young people choose role models is poorly understood, it is obvious that there must be exposure to a potential role model for any emotional attachment / model relationship to form. Expanding upon Biskup and Pfister's observation of the lack of female athletes in popular media, other studies explore how young people feel about the females that are presented in popular media. Daniels (2012) compared reactions of young women (ages 13-22) to a variety of images of women in popular media: performance athletes (women athletes actively engaged in their sport), sexualized athletes (women identified as athletes who are posed, rather than actively sporting), and sexualized models (women not identified as athletes who are posed). Images of performance athletes received more positive responses, and were the only type to motivate the young women to activity themselves (the athletes serving as a model for the young women). The images of sexualized athletes and sexualized models, on the other hand, were more likely to stir negative criticism (both toward the woman in the image and the viewer). These results agree with Heywood and Dworkin's (2003) study of school children which found that the

children were not only not motivated by sexualized images of female athletes, but that they felt disgusted by them.

Role models who are athletes have positive potential on young women's health, self-image, and academic success; however, many young women do not look to athletes for role models. Though it is likely not the only reason, a contributing factor is that young people look to individuals who are similar to themselves to be models, and active female athletes are not widely represented in popular media. When female athletes are represented, they are frequently sexualized rather than advertised for their abilities (Biskup and Pfister, 1999), so young women don't see someone that is valuable to look up to. This project explores a type of female athlete with potential to be a role model to young women: women's flat track roller derby skaters. Roller derby skaters can fulfill the role model function in that they share similarities with young women in both their gender and extremely varied backgrounds. They also can fall higher on the range of role models toward the personal mentor side, because they are potentially accessible to young women. On the other hand, representation of roller derby skaters is mixed: presentation is both active (of sporting abilities and of other abilities of the women), and frequently sexualized and made a spectacle, sometimes by the skaters themselves. I examine how the skaters wish to present themselves as models for young women; their intent (or lack thereof) of role modeling being an important factor in how they present themselves and their sport.

### **Background: Women's Flat Track Roller Derby**

In order to understand the phenomenon of role modeling within roller derby, it is first important to understand the sport's history and function. Women's flat track roller derby is a full contact sport played with quad roller skates on a flat oval-shaped track. The first version of roller derby was developed in the 1920s as a co-ed marathon race on roller skates (Patrick, Bond, and

Wruck, 2012; Women's Flat Track Derby Association, 2014). Leo Seltzer popularized it in the 1930s with competition between the racers that emphasized physicality and falls, and by placing it on a banked track. Later versions, especially in the 1980s, took that competitive strain to the extreme to make gladiator-style performances that were staged, with costumes and pseudonyms similar to wrestling entertainment. This 1980s version is the most widely known outside of the modern roller derby community. The modern revival of roller derby occurred in Austin, Texas in the early 2000s. The Texas Rollergirls became the first flat track roller derby team when they moved their competition onto a flat surface, so that roller derby could be played anywhere. From there, the flat track version has spread and grown, and today there are over 1,300 women's flat track leagues in 41 countries across the world (Roller Derby Worldwide, 2014).

My research focuses on the gameplay, interactions, and views of skaters who skate under the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) rule-set. WFTDA is the widest-recognized regulatory and rule-set making body for women's flat track roller derby; they aim to emphasize roller derby as a sport. Their motto, "Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary." applies to both the game play rules and their governance structure (Women's Flat Track Derby Association, 2014), as they seek to make roller derby a sport by and for women skaters.

Other regulatory bodies and rule-sets of flat track roller derby include the United States of America Roller Sports (USARS), which is the national governing body of roller sports in the United States (United States Olympic Committee, 2014); the Old School Derby Association (OSDA), which has rules for both flat and banked track and is co-ed; Renegade Roller Derby, which has very limited rules and is also co-ed; the Men's Roller Derby Association (MRDA), for men; and the Junior Roller Derby Association (JRDA), for women under 18. Of these regulatory bodies, WFTDA is represented as the do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.), "by the skaters, for the skaters", even though it has changed to become much more typical of a sport regulatory body since its first inception as the United Leagues Coalition in 2004 (Women's Flat Track Derby Association,

2014). However, WFTDA is still much more D.I.Y. than USARS, being in part organized by voting leagues. USARS is represented as the traditional masculine sport structure, due to its long history in governing men's sports and the Olympics. These two regulatory bodies are viewed within the roller derby community as competing businesses (Megatron, 2014). The MRDA and JRDA are both modeled after WFTDA, while OSDA and Renegade are loosely governed.

Banked track roller derby is similar to flat track in the game parameters, but is played on a raised and arced track. It is more similar to the gladiator-type performance roller derby that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s in that it takes place on the same type of surface, but like flat track derby it is now unscripted and governed by rules.

The basic parameters of WFTDA roller derby are that for each bout (competition / game), two teams each field five players onto the track, then compete to get their single scorer (the jammer, denoted by a star in Figure 1) around the other team while all roller skating in a counterclockwise direction. The non-scoring team members (blockers, denoted by circles, and the special blocker-pivot, denoted by a striped circle) must simultaneously play offense and defense to allow their scorer (jammer) through while keeping the opposing jammer back. The rules are intricate to keep game play both interesting and safe. Safety is fore fronted in the required use of protective equipment (helmets, mouth guards, knee pads, elbow pads, and wrist guards) as well as specific rules regulating which body parts are legal for contact.

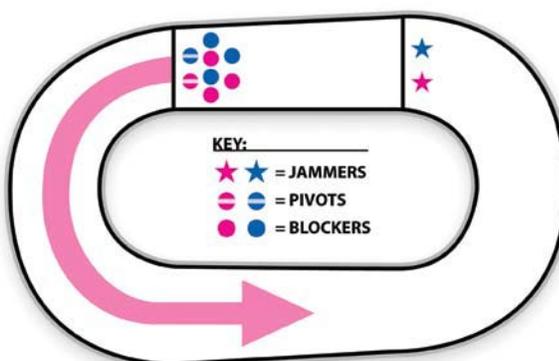


Figure 1: Roller Derby Flat Track Diagram with Players

## Research Methodology and Methods

To complete my research, I utilized a few methodological frameworks. My primary approach was phenomenological study method, as detailed by Creswell (1998) in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, seeking “to answer two related questions: what is the phenomenon that is experienced and lived, and how does it show itself?” (p.276). Phenomenological studies seek to understand the essential nature of an occurrence or relationship, so I sought to understand the relationship of women’s flat track roller derby skaters to role modeling. Phenomenology also requires researchers to ground their work in a philosophical theory, as well as “bracket”, demarcate and set aside, their biases. This qualitative approach was appropriate to my study as I wished to examine one thing in depth, and to do so required that I focus in on a small group and carefully consider the significance of responses, rather than sociological survey methods. Phenomenology was more appropriate for my study than ethnography or grounded theory because I did not intend to describe or interpret roller derby, nor to create a new theory. While biography could also explore this phenomenon, it would not give as complete a picture of the relationship. Additionally, multiple roller derby skater biographies are already available (for example, *Rollergirl: Totally True Tales from the Track* by Melissa Joulwan, *The Roller Derby Athlete* by Ellen Parnavelas, and *Talking Derby: Stories from a Life on Eight Wheels* by Kate Hargreaves).

Despite phenomenology being the primary methodological framework, I do not necessarily agree that there is an ‘essential’ relationship, but looked for general trends across most relationships, acknowledging that there may be other factors, and the themes I identified may not be universal of roller derby skater role modeling. My disagreement with essentialism comes from the feminist theories in which my phenomenological study is grounded. I based my work in the philosophical theories of feminist embodiment and feminist sport empowerment, but

feminist (and anthropological) reflexivity go throughout my approach. Reflexive approaches, as defined by Mascia-Lees and Black (2000), engage critically with ethical and political questions surrounding research, design research by what the population being studied needs, and acknowledge researcher positionality and power. This reflexive approach aligns with phenomenological bracketing of the researcher bias, required for a study to be phenomenological but is not the same. Rather, I work from my positionality and understand that it informs my conclusions, but because I acknowledge it, I do not consider it an uncontrollable bias. To this end, my positionality worked to my benefit in this study: I am not an outsider to the roller derby community, and have been a skater for the past two and a half years. This gives me multiple advantages: I understand the interworking of roller derby from long exposure to it, and from this, can address questions that I know skaters feel strongly about; I am not a stranger to other roller derby skaters – this means both that I have greater access to participants, and that my participants are more willing to talk candidly with me, and feel comfortable going into specificities that would not be comprehensible to a derby outsider. A unique aspect of the roller derby community is that despite its size (over 1,300 women's flat track leagues across the world (Roller Derby Worldwide, 2014)), it is close-knit. As a derby skater, I can contact leagues in another country and be not only accepted, but welcomed, immediately because of my roller derby status; outside researchers would not have this level of access or warmth.

My primary method for collecting data was short (under twenty minutes) open-ended interviews, supplemented by ethnographic participant observation. Interview questions were designed in keeping with Mascia-Lees and Black's (2000) reflexive anthropological approach, to allow skaters to direct conversation towards topics they felt passionately about. This design acknowledged my position of power as the researcher who presents the voices of those being studied by attempting to give some power of direction to participants, to allow them to present themselves and their activity as they wished. Interviews were structured around specific broad,

probing questions, but always left time for participants to include anything they felt had not been covered and should be noted. I took brief notes during interviews, and audio recorded for further notation so that more attention could be paid to the participant. The interviews were then analyzed and coded by reoccurring themes. The supplementary ethnographic participant observation occurred at practices, bouts, and informal bonding events that took place in the spring of 2014 as a skater in my local league.

In order to recruit these participants for my phenomenological study, I sent personal outreach via announcement at each my league practice and social media. It was able to expand beyond my personal known circle through the afore-mentioned derby community by asking all who heard or saw my announcement to spread it to any skaters they knew who may have interest. Using this method, I was able to reach many potential participants. Actual participants were also more likely to have experienced the phenomenon and have opinions on it, as they were those who responded. I required that participants for the study interviews all meet certain requirements: women-identified people who were currently involved with a roller derby league, in a skater capacity for at least part of their involvement. Through this criterion sampling, I interviewed twenty two skaters in the spring of 2014. Interviews were conducted either in person at public locations (such as skating rinks or public libraries) or on the phone. Participants were able to choose the location for the interviews, placing them in a comfortable environment for greater exchange of information. Though I was concerned that interviews conducted over the phone would produce less material based on a disconnect of the participant from myself in terms of visual signals (such as nodding), there was no discernible difference between in person and phone interviews. Responses from the interviews produced these distinct themes: the attitudinal characteristics necessary of role models; the skills necessary of role models; the required work and commitment for roller derby; the community and culture of roller derby; women's lives when they transition to derby; and how derby affects the rest of skaters' lives.

## Literature Review

### Feminist Embodiment & Sport Empowerment

In keeping with phenomenological methods, my research is grounded in philosophical theory, specifically the feminist theories of embodiment and empowerment from sports. Feminist embodiment is a useful concept for exploring role modeling within roller derby because it examines how the physical body of an individual contributes to identity, and is unable to be separated from identity. Because the first contact of a young woman with a potential role model skater will be sensory (particularly visual, olfactory, and somesthetic), the physical body of the skater takes on particular importance in their identity self-presentation, and the perception of that identity by others as a role model.

Embodiment theory as described by Lock (1993), and drawing from Michael Foucault's biopower, argues that a body cannot be viewed as merely the site upon which culture inscribes an identity out of social interaction, but is itself invested with power. Davis defines embodied identity as: "the outcome of an individual's interaction with her body and through her body with the world around her" (as quoted in Budgeon, 2003, p.48). This view flies in opposition to the commonly held Cartesian dualism of mind and body as separate (the mind being the self, the consciousness, and the body being the vessel for it), which both feminists and post-modernists have a history of struggling with (Budgeon, 2003). In our modern times, Cartesian dualism is sold in the many services able to be purchased to change your body to match your 'self' – from clothing to cosmetic surgery, you can modify your body to appear as your 'inner person' feels. On the other hand, these practices attest to the complicated relationship between identity and the body, as body becomes more central to a person's identity rather than only a carrier for it. However the body is still not the only factor in identity, as evidenced by the responses of teenage

girls in Budgeon's (2003) study stating that cosmetic surgery does not change a person completely, though it contributes to how a woman lives in her body.

Embodiment theory recognizes that to think in a mind-body dualism limits the understanding "how people's experiences of, and responses to, social structures are shaped by their *sensory* and *sensual* selves" (Shilling and Mellor, as quoted in Budgeon, 2003, p.37). In doing so, it seeks to re-theorize the body as something other than a vessel: a process, an event, a borderline. Embodiment theory is comfortable with turning away from "a sure, objective foundation for knowledge" to admit that bodies are variable and constantly in flux (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987, p. 30). It takes the body as the frontier between an individual and society, constantly being reshaped by both as each in turn changes.

In beginning to understand the importance of embodiment to social perception, Bordo (2003) argues that women's bodies are made 'docile' (as discussed by Michael Foucault, social institutions define how bodies should look and function, and individuals self-police to make their bodies as they are culturally ascribed to be), taking away from individual identity. She claims women's bodies are docile in that they accept the culturally sanctioned definitions of femininity, and try to make their bodies fit the definition through make-up, dieting, clothing, etc. to become thinner, whiter, and more 'attractive'. In opposition to these media models of femininity as thin, fragile, innocent, other models can take back their embodied identity through 'body projects' which reject the dominant conception of femininity by presenting alternatives. Hern and Hirsch (2010) argue that roller derby skaters participate in just such a project through their rejections of stereotypical femininity and gender roles. I will discuss how in the next session by examining roller derby's cultural values.

At this point it is useful to draw in the feminist concept of women's potential empowerment as individuals from sports to understand why any female athlete, and roller derby skaters in particular, can be positive role models for young women. Participation in team sports

has been shown to promote self-care, self-confidence, leadership abilities, and female community (Beaver, 2012; Blinde et al., 1994; Bloom, 2010; Brady, 2010; Malin, 2010; Packard, 2005; Young, 2010). Each of these teaches women to be proud in their selves, and gives them a community that further supports them in setting and achieving goals. On the negative side, sports can also replicate harmful masculine values, including promoting aggression, violence, individualism, and views of people as *only* their bodies (without emotion or opinion, just strength and physical domination) (Beaver, 2012; Kennedy & Markula, 2011; Theberge, 2003). In part due to this perception, women's participation in sports often leads to negative views by others of the loss of traditional femininity, or potential lesbianism (Cahn, 1993; Dworkin, 2001). While the positives are obvious as to why they should be presented for young women, even the negatives can show young women that there is not a single correct definition of femininity, and offers options as to how they can live their identities. Additionally, not all sports necessarily reproduce these harmful traditional values, and alternative to mainstream sports (including roller derby) have been argued to replace the values with alternatives, such as fun-seeking, individual freedom, self-expression, and team bonding (Beaver, 2012). I return now to roller derby specifically as to how its skaters present themselves as positive role models through their adoption and portrayal of alternative definitions of gender.

### **Roller Derby Cultural Values**

The sport of roller derby is surrounded by a specific sub-culture, populated by skaters, referees, non-skating officials, volunteers, and fans. Though the first incarnation of roller derby was developed in the 1930s by Leo Seltzer, and revivals such as the RollerGames (similar in extreme performance to wrestling or gladiators) occurred in the 1980s, the modern roller derby revival has its roots in Texas in the early 2000s (Patrick, Bond, and Wruck, 2012; Women's Flat

Track Derby Association, 2014). Many of the women who formed the first roller derby leagues came from a performance and punk rock scene, and that culture has been embraced by roller derby. The idea of rebellion from norms is prominent in punk rock culture, and so in derby, leading to the acceptance of many individuals who rebel from heteronormativity (the dominant cultural belief in prescribed sex and gender roles). This takes physical form in the abundance of tattoos, dyed hair, piercings, and non-standard clothing. Also from punk rock culture comes the Do-It-Yourself (D.I.Y.) ethic of roller derby (Beaver, 2012; Patrick, Bond, and Wruck, 2012). This means that flat track roller derby leagues are run by and for the skaters who play for them, giving the women the opportunity to empower themselves not only physically and through the sport engagement, but also through leadership and business experience.

Roller derby culture also embraces a body project of rejecting traditional gender roles: “in roller derby, gender is practiced rather than accepted” (Hern and Hirsch, 2010, p.1). By doing this, roller derby skaters accept that gender can be performed in multiple ways, none of which are wrong, so they do not feel a strong need to conform their bodies to culturally-sanctioned femininity – they do not need to be ‘docile’. Roller derby gender practice occurs in part via dress, which is frequently overdone to accentuate the foolishness of stereotypes and contrast them to the athletic bodies the athletes are developing. Tutus and fishnets are donned more as an attempt to point out the silliness than to appear truly feminine or apologize for not being feminine. Despite this, the dress, often being perceived as sexualized, is brought up as a way roller derby skaters may be negative examples, in that they make sexuality a necessary part of femininity, and potentially objectify their female bodies. However, that the dress is a parody is known and accepted by the audience, who may dress ironically in turn (Hern and Hirsch, 2010; Patrick, Bond, and Wruck, 2012). Additionally, not all roller derby skaters wear sexualized attire, especially as the game takes on a more mainstream audience.

Gender is also practiced via the actions of the skaters. Through taking lead both by giving directions on the track and running the leagues, they make being in charge feminine. Skaters frequently choose a derby name (stage name) for their skater identities. These names, while originally intended to shield women from consequences of being a 'derby girl' in their professional lives, are now considered a fun part of skater identity, and a rite of passage in being a competent skater when allowed to choose one (Patrick, Bond, and Wruck, 2012). The names mean something different to each individual skater, but are often puns and/or related to an important part of the skater's life. In some cases the names too perform gender – sometimes nodding to sexuality (Lola Blow, Tits N Assphalt), sometimes to physical ability (A'blazin'Grace, Susi Blockwell), sometimes directly to body parts ("A" Cup Annihilator, Shark Legs) (example names taken from TwoEvils.org, an unofficial master roster of derby names). Derby skaters also make strength feminine as they build their bodies to be able to best play the sport.

Another part of this roller derby body project, apart from performing gender, is accepting many types of bodies and people. In the game play of roller derby, there is need for a large variety of body types, from large to small, short to tall. This exists even at higher levels of play, as can be seen looking at the Rollergirl Project, a series of photos examining the body types of roller derby skaters (Layman, 2014). The need for many body types leads to individuals feeling value in their bodies, even if it is not the ideal body by the outside society's standards. As expected of a body project that defies gender norms, the value extends beyond those following the sexuality and gender binaries of heteronormative culture and accepts individuals who identify in other ways (including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities. This can be seen in that WFTDA requires skaters to be female-identified and have hormones within normal woman's levels, but does not require surgery, for example (Women's Flat Track Derby Association, 2014)). The value placed on each individual body contribution

builds skater self-confidence, a required step for skaters to feel comfortable mocking feminine stereotypes by performing gender.

Skater embodiment becomes important in roller derby because it allows the confidence built on the track, during game play, and in the league governance, to translate to the skaters' outside lives (Hern and Hirsch, 2010). Because the skaters feel comfortable presenting themselves as strong and in control while in the context of derby, they find themselves more comfortable presenting that image everywhere. This contributes to the potential of young women looking to skaters as role models, because skaters with confidence make themselves more visible on the track as competitors during derby bouts, as league organizers, and as members of their larger communities.

The body projects of roller derby skaters and confidence in their embodiment is not only made possible by roller derby culture, but constantly reinforced by the members of the culture. Dress and gender performance are reinforced by other derby people doing the same things, and the love of the sport shared by the members keeps the process ongoing. This love of the sport has been documented in many instances, and linked to the physicality – the physical contact with other people, sometimes in brutal ways as happens in a contact sport – of roller derby and such sports (Packard, 2005). Because roller derby skaters love their sport, dress and perform their gender based on their sport's values, and feel confident from participation in their sport, they present to the world individuals who are potential positive role models.

## Results & Discussion

I interviewed a total of 22 roller derby skaters, who ranged in age from 20 to 49 (average 32.6), and from just beginning their derby training to seven years of experience (average 2.4 years). The majority (90.9%) identified as Caucasian (following the racial demographic lines of the sport (Beaver, 2012)), and most were located in Pennsylvania and surrounding states. Occupations of the skaters followed no patterns and showed as much variety as the number of skaters, reaffirming the inclusivity of diversity in the roller derby community. Sixteen participants felt they were role models as skaters to other skaters (six did not), and seventeen participants felt they were role models as women generally to all young women (five did not). Figure 2 compares how participants identified as role models to their age and years of experience in roller derby. A very slight correlation appears to exist between the participant's age and years experience, as well as between age and role model identification, and years experience and role model identification. Too few participants responded that they did not feel as role models for the trend to be certain.

The participants' opinions of role modeling within roller derby were coded into each of six large themes: the attitudinal characteristics necessary of role models, the skills necessary of role models, the required work and commitment for roller derby, the community and culture of roller derby, women's lives when they transition to derby, and how derby affects the rest of skaters' lives. Every participant described an experience or opinion fitting into each category. Across these themes, participants discussed each how they had begun their roller derby career, and their advice for aspiring young women to begin roller derby.

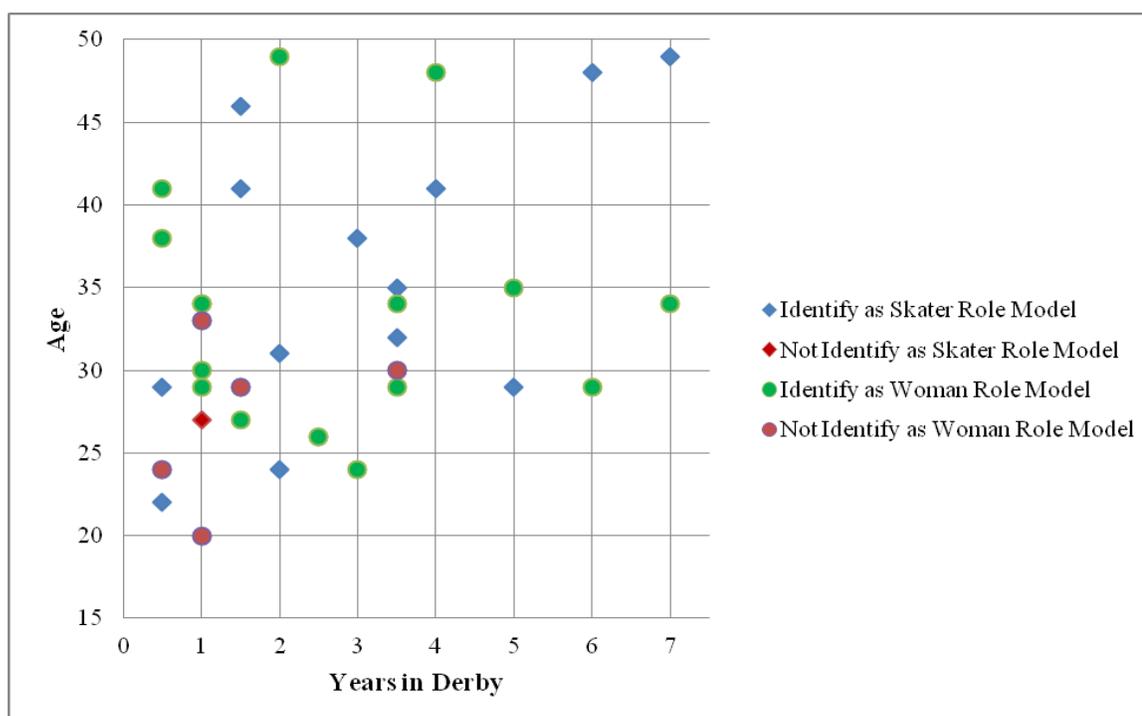


Figure 2: Role Model Identification by Age and Years Experience in Derby

Participants indicated that a skater's attitudinal characteristics were extremely important to their potential as a role model for other skaters and potential skaters, as well as to other people in the skater's life; Table 1 indicates how many participants named each characteristic as important. The most repeated ideas in this theme were a positive and supporting attitude, the willingness to help others, and a perceived similarity (of attitude and body type) between the person and potential role model, as necessary for a woman to be considered as a role model. The characteristics participants mentioned in discussing this theme align with Biskup and Pfister's (1999) proposal that young women will look to social behavior to judge if a person could be a role model. However participants never mentioned looking to appearance, Biskup and Pfister's other suggestion of what young women look for in role models, to judge a role model's potentiality, beyond appearing similar to the participant. The lack of appearance judging is likely because of the participants' roller derby body project, as larger society indicates that appearance

judging of women is used in every aspect of life. The number of participants (36%) who indicated that similarities between the participant and a potential role model were important in making a skater a role model reinforces the conclusion that young women look for someone they feel is like themselves to be their model. The comments of a middle age skater with 5 years of derby experience make this clear:

I look up to Atomatrix...because she is a mom, and she's successful, and she's like, one of the top derby people I know, and I'm a mom, and I'm pretty good, I'm getting there, and I wanna be successful in roller derby, so definitely Atomatrix, for sure.

Atomatrix is one of the top names in roller derby, given a lot of press within the roller derby community. That she is given role model status by other skaters not only because of her skill but because of shared attributes reinforces the idea that young women do not identify athletes as role models because of the lack of female athletes being represented in media (Biskup and Pfister , 1999; Yancey et. al., 2011).

Within this theme, participants also discussed if a skater needs to be personally known in order to be a role model. Of participants who mentioned specific persons as their role models, only 2 (out of 19) did not include a skater that they knew personally, indicating that personal mentors have greater effect than distant models. However, 5 participants agreed that something can be learned from those not personally known models (the big names in roller derby), most often mentioning skills or a work ethic.

**Table 1: Importance of attitudinal characteristics to role modeling**

<b>Model Characteristic</b>	<b># (%) of Participants Discussing It</b>
Helping others / building others' confidence	17 (77%)
Positive and supporting attitude	14 (64%)
Similarity to potential role model	8 (36%)
Fearlessness and not giving up	7 (32%)
Mentors are personally known / friends	6 (27%)
Mentors can be not-personally known	5 (23%)
Are there to have / having fun	5 (23%)
Skills must be supplemented by attitude	4 (18%)
Is humble	1 (5%)
Is ethical	1 (5%)

A skater's skills were also discussed as being important to making the skater a role model. Table 2 lists the frequency of a variety of ideas related to skill being mentioned. That skating abilities were looked up to is unsurprising, given that that is what most directly is replicated during game play. However, the views of this relatively new skater are representative of my sample in comparing skill to attitude:

Well I think skill gives you something to, like, strive for, and you always wanna be like, 'Oh, I want to learn how to do that', or I, you know, 'she's awesome I want to be like that', but then, but then there's also attitude and, you know, a good skater who's a real jerk is, you know, not really a good, ha, you know, you know, someone who wants to help teach people how to do that too is really, really awesome.

Participants agreed that potential role models also needed coaching and leading skills, as well as a positive attitude to be looked up to.

**Table 2: Skill characteristics observed in role modeling**

<b>Model Skill / Characteristic</b>	<b># (%) of Participants Discussing It</b>
Skating ability	17 (77%)
Organizer of league	9 (41%)
Coach / practice leader	5 (23%)
Not wanting to be a role model	3 (14%)
Become better by teaching	2 (9%)
Teach things other than derby	2 (9%)
Lead by example	2 (9%)

The theme of the work and commitment required of roller derby skaters also indicated what actions participants felt needed to be visible in potential role models. Table 3 lists how many participants brought up these actions and ideas. The most frequently mentioned ideas were a needed willingness to commit (by 32%) and an acceptance that roller derby is not easy (by 27%). A skater with 7 years of experience offered this advice concerning derby:

...take it day by day and not get frustrated, or, disappointed because it is a difficult sport to not only learn, but also to, um, physically, be a part of. So, I think everybody has their own different levels of skill and levels of athleticism, and to know that you may not be a natural at it, but you can easily build to that with lots of support, and, and just working hard at it.

Participants saw the commitment to putting in hard work to the sport as an important factor for all skaters, but especially of role models, given that they saw their sport as not something done

easily, and wanted others to understand this as well. This may also be indicative of many skaters' desire to be looked upon as legitimate athletes, rather than performers, and wanting the models of their sport to be serious and dedicated models.

**Table 3: Required actions for role modeling**

<b>Actions / Ideas necessary for role model success</b>	<b># (%) of Participants Discussing It</b>
Willingness to commit	7 (32%)
Accept that roller derby is difficult	6 (27%)
Put in hard work to have results	5 (23%)
Accept the challenge	4 (18%)
Compete at high level	4 (18%)
Continually push to improve	3 (14%)
Do exercise	3 (14%)
Accept are many viewpoints to learn from	2 (9%)
Take one step at a time	2 (9%)

The next theme that came up in every interview was of the community that surrounds roller derby. The cultural ideals of roller derby by participant response are listed in Table 4. Responses were similar to those other studies found in the literature review of a unique community that is accepting and close-knit. 82% of the participants commented that the derby community was like a family, and made entirely of friends. Another common comment was that skaters “loved” roller derby (41%), and that it “felt right” (27%), similar to Packard’s findings of women in football which connected the love of their sport to the physicality (full-contact nature) of it (2005). In describing why derby was something young women should try, participants

mentioned a teamwork mentality that was more than what is found in other sports. A skater with 4 years of experience in derby compared the culture of roller derby to her other sport experiences:

I have done sports my entire life. I am so grateful to my parents for, you know they joke around that they got me involved in sports to keep me out of trouble, ah, and I'm so grateful. I, I played a sport every single season, sometimes two, all through high school and into college and then when I left college ... .. So I saw it, and I was like 'oh my gosh, this is the sport I've been looking for. I can hit people, and I can go fast, I can go slow, and I can, oh this is crazy, I gotta do this'. This is, this is the trifecta of everything. This is, you know, my soccer and my volleyball, this is everything, together. *(laughs)* And I just, I fell in love. But then, I more than that I fell in love with the people, and the family that it creates. There's a difference, like when you love soccer, you loved soccer, and it wasn't the same family, wasn't the same cohesiveness. Derby's just different, than any other sport or family I've ever been part of.

This participant, like the others, named derby as unique among sports because of its community and contact nature.

**Table 4: The community and culture of roller derby**

<b>Community / Cultural Values</b>	<b># (%) of Participants Discussing It</b>
Made up of friends / family	18 (82%)
“Fall in love” with derby	9 (41%)
Is accepting of all	8 (36%)
Accepts many body types	7 (32%)
“Feels right”	6 (27%)
Love / like of skating	6 (27%)
Teamwork / sportsmanship mentality	5 (23%)
Alternative social & political atmosphere	5 (23%)
Made up of beautiful / strong / independent women	4 (18%)
Shows interest in people as individuals	4 (18%)
Shows interest in physicality	4 (18%)
Is acceptable to make mistakes	3 (14%)
Has positive vibe / energy	2 (9%)

Other ideals of the roller derby community mentioned included the acceptance of everyone, and the alternative to heteronormative cultural values. Ideas were similar to the body project described by Hern and Hirsch (2010), though without that vocabulary. A skater in her second year said that derby “breaks the rules”, and another with a year’s experience said she took joy in countering the stereotypes and assumptions about herself through derby. These personal stories contributed to participants reporting that they believed the roller derby community to be populated by “beautiful, strong, independent women”, which made them want to be a part of it. These positive mentions of the community of roller derby most often came up when asking participants to share advice for a young woman who is interested in roller derby. This may

indicate that it is the culture of roller derby that the participants believe makes women into potential role models: because they are in a space that allows them to be confident and proud of themselves, they will represent women as strong, confident, and proud.

The next theme I discerned in participants' responses expanded upon the culture of roller derby being conducive to creating role models. Participants explored how roller derby's values influenced their lives outside of roller derby. In discussing this category, participants intuitively understood that their body, shaped by their sport, was then influencing their identity even outside of the context of roller derby. Table 5 lists the ideas participants take from roller derby to apply to their lives. A few of the participants mentioned that derby taught them general life lessons, while others specified what lessons they felt roller derby was teaching them and the young women who watch roller derby skaters. The number one lesson mentioned was the importance for the women to do something for themselves, while countering stereotypes, pushing your limits, becoming an adult, and that women are valuable even when they are older each was brought up as an important idea that derby promoted, which the participants felt that the popular media had either not taught them, or had told them the opposite. The importance of these lessons was reinforced by 2 participants who felt that these should be taught directly to girls via junior roller derby, a version of roller derby specifically for girls under age 18.

**Table 5: Ideals from roller derby that influence skaters' lives**

<b>Derby Ideas that Influence Life</b>	<b># (%) of Participants Discussing It</b>
Importance of doing something for yourself	9 (41%)
Countering stereotypes	8 (36%)
Learning life lessons	8 (36%)
Pushing own limits	5 (23%)
Working on becoming a role model	3 (14%)
Becoming a professional / adult	3 (14%)
That older women are still valuable	3 (14%)
To spread via coaching junior derby	2 (9%)

The last theme that became apparent in participant responses described where participants were in their own lives when they began their involvement with roller derby. Common starting points reported by the participants are listed in Table 6. Of my participants, 26% stated that they came to derby as part of a turning point in their lives, as exemplified by this skater in her second season:

...my daughter had gone to, um, a skating party at the local roller rink and she came home with a little slip of paper with the information on it and said 'why don't you go and try it?'. So I did. It was just a, you know, a situation where, you know, right place right time I guess. Um, it was just the right, it was just the right time for me to do it. Um, so I did. Um, I was just experimenting in my life, I was at a bad place in my life and I needed something, an outlet. And it just seemed like a good thing to do, and immediately I fell in love with, with the people, the sport, and I can't get away from it

Participants indicated that they came to derby because their lives were changing, but also that derby changed their lives, and advised young women interested that it would likely change theirs:

It's gonna change your life, and I don't think I've ever heard of it changing life for the negative, so no matter what it's like a positive gain. It opens your world.

The backgrounds of the participants when joining roller derby was diverse, but their previous athletic and skating experiences fell into only a few categories. Nearly half of the participants mentioned having an athletic background, while a quarter mentioned not having an athletic background (the other quarter did not mention their background in regards to athletics). However both of these groups agreed that a young woman joining did not need to worry about have prior skating or athletic experience, as derby was accepting of everyone, reinforcing again that the community of derby is what makes it a growing ground for potential role models. Participants from both athletic and non-athletic backgrounds (23% of total) mentioned that roller derby seemed intimidating at first because the women do appear strong and independent, which the potential participant felt they didn't live up to when they first joined. This indicates that the very qualities that make roller derby skaters good potential role models may make young women nervous to try to join, as they feel they are not role model worthy themselves.

**Table 6: What skaters report experiencing when they first started derby**

<b>Things happening while starting derby</b>	<b># (%) of Participants Discussing It</b>
Had previous athletic experience	10 (45%)
At a turning point in life	8 (26%)
No previous skating experience is okay	7 (32%)
Had no previous athletic experience	6 (27%)
Derby seemed intimidating	5 (23%)
Felt a model because of private life situation	5 (23%)
Was seeking something from derby to "fill gap"	2 (9%)

## Conclusion & Relevance

The responses of roller derby skaters to questions of the practice and perception of role modeling within their sport revealed that skaters largely see roller derby as a production ground for positive role models (themselves included) for women. They believe that the traits that are important for role models to have – positive attitudes, sport-specific and leading skills, commitment, acceptance, and confidence – are produced and supported in the roller derby community through its body projects that reject of compulsory heteronormativity and embrace diversity (of shape, size, appearance, and thought). They feel the traits would be aptly applied to the lives of all young women. They acknowledged that some of these traits may not be visibly valued for young women in the larger community, and that young women are not often presented with women who have these traits by the media. As Biskup and Pfister (1999), Daniels (2012), Heywood and Dworkin (2003), and Yancey et. al. (2010) all argue, female athletes are not adequately represented in popular media. Skaters believe that roller derby can present the attributes that young women need to live successful and fulfilled lives, and is in fact well-suited to do so because young women share similarities with the skaters, who come from many walks of life and appear diverse in body type (if not in race).

However, participants seemed to focus on how roller derby skaters are role models to others who are already involved in roller derby in some capacity, particularly to the new skaters or those who have already professed interest in becoming a skater (who may be young women or not). Though life lessons taught by derby were discussed, it was done so in the context of how the participants learned them, rather than how they could be taught to a non-member of the roller derby community. Being role models to young women who were not skaters themselves was

mentioned when in the context of skaters' daughters, or daughters of fans. Drawing girls in to see potential role models on their own was not mentioned.

My skater participants also indicated that it is essential for role models to appear to have a positive attitude, which they describe as visible at practices and recruitment events in their help and support of others, and on roller derby specific websites and video blogs. However, those not involved in the derby community do not see practices or recruitment events, nor know to look up the websites. They only see the competitions; so there is a decent likelihood that the positive attitudes are not as well represented to non-derby community members. Participants also mentioned feelings of fear when first starting roller derby because the skaters appeared so confident and strong that my participants worried they wouldn't be good enough to join the ranks. In their descriptions, taking the first step past fear into playing roller derby and becoming a model themselves was on their own, no matter how inspired they were by what they saw, including their own potential. Though this intimidating aspect may hold back potential skaters, it does not necessarily prevent the young women from seeing role models in the roller derby skaters. It must also be noted that every popular-media source that mentions roller derby does not fail to mention the unique and accepting community surrounding it, and so in some respect mention the positivity of roller derby in general.

Though the attire of roller derby skaters was glanced upon via the appreciation skater participants felt for the alternative "fishnets and glitter" in roller derby culture, my participants never mentioned that young women may be turned off by the sometimes sexualized portrayal of derby skaters. In fact, skaters' appearances were only mentioned in the variety of body types, and not in how attractive or sexy a skater was. Participants instead stressed the visible level of commitment and hard work of skaters they deemed role models. From this, it is difficult to judge if skaters tailor their appearance to represent athleticism (so typical athletic attire) or to represent derby alternative culture, including sexuality (fishnets, tutus, ect.), and so how fans and young

women perceive the appearances. A further study of this would be useful to determining how roller derby role modeling is perceived outside of roller derby.

The phenomenon of role modeling within women's flat track roller derby from the perception of the skaters themselves indicates that skaters do believe themselves to be good role models for young women. The perception of the young women of these potential role models would be a necessary second step, but if they perceive of the skaters as the skaters themselves do, then roller derby provides a ground for the creation of the much-needed female athlete role models in our society, which will contribute to the well-being, health, and success of young women. Studies of self-perception of role modeling in other women's sports could reveal a similar hopeful future, or may show roller derby to be unique because of its welcoming community and culture. Though it is not yet certain, this research indicates that roller derby skaters can produce a positive future for other women by continuing to skate their way to positive attitudes, skills, continued commitment, acceptance of diversity, and self-confidence.

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# ACADEMIC VITA

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## EDUCATION

**The Pennsylvania State University** University Park, Pennsylvania Graduation: May 2014

*Majors:* BA Anthropology, BA Women's Studies; *Minors:* Spanish, Sexuality and Gender Studies

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Iota Iota Iota, Women's Studies National Honor Society; National Society of Collegiate Scholars

Dean's List all semesters

**The University of Sussex** Brighton, England, UK Summer 2012

Explored anthropology by conducting ethnographic observations of local Britonians and their city

## WORK EXPERIENCE

**All-Sports Museum, Penn State Department of Athletics** University Park, Pennsylvania

*Intern* 2013 – present

- Accession, photograph, and catalog an average of 45 objects and archives daily
- Conduct interviews, within-collection research, and original research to plan and design an exhibit for Spring 2014

**Susquehanna Valley Derby Vixens, LLC** Williamsport, Pennsylvania

*League Secretary, Merchandise Committee Head, Team Captain* 2012 – 2013

- Women's flat track roller derby team, dedicated to promoting sportsmanship, unity, hard work, and a sense of family through the sport, and supporting the larger community through charity and local business engagement.
- Organize and implement insurance coverage, league schedule, and league documentation
- Direct a team to design, purchase, organize, and sell league merchandise
- Plan and coach 2 hour practices for 15 skaters twice a week

**Puts Lab, Penn State Department of Anthropology** University Park, Pennsylvania

*Research Assistant* 2011 – 2012

- Coordinate with 2 faculty members, 5 graduate students, and 20 undergraduate students to collect physical data

**Minitab Incorporated** State College, Pennsylvania

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- Minitab is a privately owned 40 year old global statistical software and services company.
- In associated natatorium, provide lifeguard services for an average of 30 patrons per hour
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## SPECIAL SKILLS

- Software Proficiencies: Adobe Photoshop; FileMaker Pro; Microsoft Office Suite; PastPerfect
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## ACTIVITIES & ASSOCIATIONS

- Paper Presenter for the Women's Studies Graduate Association Conference, April 2014
- Featured Art Exhibition Contributor for the Penn State Judy Chicago Symposium, April 2014
- Athlete in Flat-track Roller Derby: State College Area Roller Derby, Student Group Club Secretary
- American Alliance of Museums member
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