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Skating for Strength: The Experiences of Skating in Women's Flat Track Roller Derby

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SKATING FOR STRENGTH: THE EXPERIENCES OF SKATING
IN WOMEN'S FLAT TRACK ROLLER DERBY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, & Society

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Feminists are continually seeking methods of improving the lives of women, whether that is through fighting for women's rights, promoting embracing aspects of being a female, or discovering new methods of female empowerment. This research looks at the last of these by exploring the experiences of women who are within their first year of competitively playing women's flat track roller derby through a qualitative phenomenological study. In order to do this, eight women were interviewed from two competitive teams located in the southeast region of the United States. From these interviews, five categories of experience emerged as significant aspects of participating in roller derby: (1) Intimidation During the Initial Skating Experience, (2) Challenges of Learning New Skills, (3) Developing and Maintaining Relationships, (4) Feelings of Strength, and (5) Relieving Built-up Stress. These themes were analyzed in-depth using statements from the skaters to build an understanding of the experience of skating competitively for a women's roller derby team.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my team, the Upstate Roller Girl Evolution, for their continued support throughout the process. Additionally, I would like to dedicate my research to the coaching staff and skaters of the Spartanburg Deadly Dolls due to their support through both giving of their time, as well as encouraging me through the whole process. The derby community is a special one, full of individuals who quickly become like family.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Nearly five years ago I stepped into a world that would consume me in a way that I never expected. I was very familiar with the roller rink, but this time was different than any other. After getting a skull and crossbones stamped on my hand at the front door, my friends and I found our way to an empty spot on the floor marked “suicide seating: over 18 only.” The number of people crammed in this building would have made even the most relaxed fire marshal nervous. My friends and I were beginning to wonder exactly what we had gotten ourselves into when suddenly in came the derby girls. These women skated out with a level of confidence that I felt like I had not seen in the everyday woman walking down the street. In a sea of fishnets, tutus, booty shorts, and pseudonyms, all I could focus on was the look in their eye—the look of a strong, empowered woman. In that moment, I officially became hooked on the sport of roller derby.

According to Martin, an author and a skater known as Punchy O’ Guts in the derby world, “verbally, the women of roller derby speak a rare mix of Neanderthal gruntings, politically incorrect phrases, nouns used as verbs, vulgarities, and Newtonian mechanics terminology” (2012, p. 4). Past research (e.g., Sailors, 2012) has validated the idea that this unique communication style is the language that the majority of roller derby athletes use. She mentions that typical female communication styles are often criticized by other skaters within the context of the sport as “being girly.” The purpose of this research is not to reiterate the experience of female roller derby participants in breaking traditional gender norms. Instead, this research hopes to look at the experiences of fresh

meat skaters and analyze how experiences that are common within derby culture shape the skaters.

Men and women both flock to competitive sports for a variety of reasons, but particularly for women, sport can provide “experiences that ‘empower’, ‘heal’, ‘transform’ them as individuals, and more broadly challenge cultural norms about women’s embodied capacities” (Padvlidis & Fullaragra, 2012, p. 675). Roller derby participants and the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association have claimed that it holds the possibility to empower females.

In order to explore this idea, this work looks at the experiences of “fresh meat” skaters—women who are within their first year of being on a team roster. Being on a team roster is significant because in order to be rostered, one must pass a series of skating assessments, as well as a written exam over the rules of the sport. Once skaters have overcome the written and physical assessments, they are then allowed to play competitively for a team and participate in scrimmages and invitational bouts. In listening to the stories of my participants, I paid special attention to the language skaters used and specific aspects of their experience that they discussed when describing their first months within the sport.

Though females now dominate the sport, it was nearly 50 years into the development of the sport before women were introduced. With roots back to the 1880s, the sport of roller derby has seen many transitional periods— even times when it became extinct. In its very first strides into the world, roller derby was a simple race on skates. From there it transformed into marathon races in the 1930s. These marathon races

included “partners trading off laps on a banked track until they either successfully skated the equivalent distance between New York, and Los Angeles or collapsed from bloody feet and/or exhaustion” (Barbee & Cohen, 2010, p. 11). It was also during this phase that the sport picked up the name “derby.” It wasn’t until 1935 that women were introduced to the sport of roller derby. This was a monumental moment for women as a whole, as this was the “first real chance to see women compete on an equalized playing field” (Mabe, 2007, p. 27). It was soon after this time that contact and collisions were introduced to the sport. Noticing that the fans were excited by this new element, the leader of the roller derby league at the time, Leo Seltzer, altered the play of the game. Modern roller derby rules are based off of his alterations

In its early years, roller derby teams traveled the country to compete; this characteristic is what brought the death to the first era of derby. The gas crisis of the 1970s made travel too expensive for the teams, so on December 7, 1973, the last game of the sport that Leo Seltzer had created was played (Mabe, 2007). It was not until 1997 that we saw the reemergence of roller derby in a form true to its former days. In the heart of Texas during the early 2000s is where the true revival of modern day roller derby emerged. Banked track roller derby is the style that first reemerged, but it was not long until flat track derby showed its face again in 2004. Currently there are 343 leagues that comply with the standards of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA, 2014).

The sport has transformed numerous times in various ways throughout its history and has affected countless lives. As with anything that has a history, it has its supporters

and its critics. In the instance of roller derby, many of these criticisms have come in the form of gender and feminist critiques, as scholars explore how the sport can affect the lives of women who participate within the sport.

Although my colleagues and I experience roller derby as empowering, critics of the sport believe it reinforces certain gender stereotypes. Finley (2010) highlighted the fact that skaters often adorn themselves with aggressive symbols, such as skulls and cross bones, to break gender norms. But instead of breaking the norms, Finley criticized the sport because skaters feminize these tough images by placing bows on their skulls. Another critique by Carlson (2010) looked at the pseudonyms under which skaters compete, as they tend to be feminine in nature. Additionally, Carlson suggested that the environment itself may be oppressive due to hierarchal systems that exist within leagues. However, through her research, Sailors (2013) concluded that although there are flaws as Finley and Carlson suggest, the sport ultimately can “function as a force for reshaping ideas about women, femininity, and sport” (p. 245). Sailors focused primarily on the do-it-yourself (DIY) aspect of roller derby, which means it was a sport formed by women for women. She even goes as far as to claim that if roller derby lost its DIY aspect, it would become less empowering. Though the DIY aspect plays a critical role in the culture of roller derby, I would argue that it is not the only factor that plays into the empowerment of females that play the sport.

Gender discrimination is still prevalent within modern American culture (Gill & Elias, 2014; Pedelty & Kuecker, 2014), and during this time of third-wave feminism, the voice of women is often the center of focus for researchers and feminists. Third-wave

feminists “explore the power afforded them from the women’s movement” (Chanksey, 2010, p. 681) and are working to reclaim feminine aspects that were devalued by a male-dominated culture and shunned by second-wave feminists. Feminist scholars suggest that third-wave feminism offers new methods of providing women with empowerment and voice by working to end gender violence, promote the embracing of femininity and sexuality, and many other gender-based issues. Meanwhile, critics of third-wave feminism worry that it is not focused enough to allow for any progression of female rights. Those that argue against the third-wave argue that this wave of feminism is working to change too many women’s issues at once, and argue that this wave should choose one cause to focus on in order to be successful. They believe that having one group working on one issue would be more successful than divisions within the group as various members focus on the issues they feel are most important to them.

Despite the criticism of third-wave feminism, this study utilizes third-wave feminism to look at skaters’ detailed accounts of the experiences that fresh meat skaters endure in order to explore the potential of roller derby as one of these new methods of female empowerment during third-wave feminism. Previous scholars (Battaglia, 2008; Beaver, 2014; Sailors, 2013; Toews, 2012) have claimed that women’s flat track roller derby can be utilized for this purpose through multiple aspects of the sport, but scholars have yet to look at the experiences of females that play the sport in the context of empowerment. Therefore, I will explore these claims of empowerment by looking at the experiences that females have within their first year of competitively playing roller derby.

In addition to the theoretical implications related to issues of agency and empowerment in women's sports, this study also has important practical implications. Participants expressed feeling strong due to experiences that were a result of playing the sport, as well as experiencing roller derby as a therapeutic process. Other subcultures and sports may begin to embody the aspects of women's flat track roller derby that produces these positive effects, such as challenges that push participants to their limits and an environment that allows for them to forget about their daily stresses at the door. Additionally, leagues can use the recent formation of junior leagues to promote the sport as empowering to the parents of young girls, allowing younger generations to experience these empowering moments during their most impressionable years. This in turn could lead to creating a generation of more successful women, bridging the gender gap as feminist movements have aspired to do. To begin the exploration into these questions, previous research on subcultures, women in sports, and feminist standpoint theory were reviewed. From there, I performed a qualitative phenomenological study through the use of in-depth interviews. I coded the data looking for categories of experience that emerged and placed those categories into the context of answering the original research questions.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research relies on three overarching areas of previous research: subcultures, women in sports, and feminist standpoint theory. The review of literature on subcultures contributes to a clearer definition of the idea of subcultures, but also provides elements of the subcultural context necessary to comprehend the lived experiences that occur within this culture. Secondly, a review of women in sports not only offers insight into the gender norms that are associated with competitive sports, but also discusses representations of female athletes in the media that socially construct ideas of female athletes. Lastly, I review the feminist standpoint theory and the constructs that define the theory. While this literature provides a glimpse into the culture and experiences of the female athletes that participate in roller derby, there is insufficient discussion of the experiences that skaters undergo when joining the sport.

Subcultures

In order to be able to understand the concept of subcultures, it is important to first examine what makes up the culture that surrounds it. According to Hebdige:

Culture is a notoriously ambiguous concept...refracted through centuries of usage, the word has acquitted a number of quite different, often contradictory, meanings. Even as a scientific term, it refers both to a process (artificial development of microscopic organisms) and a product (organisms so produced) (2006, p. 144).

Therefore, culture is not only composed of the artifacts that are produced within that particular scenario, but also the interactions between members of that culture that make it specific. Subcultures, on the other hand, contradict the larger culture of which they are a part. Often times this contradiction is performed through expressing “forbidden contents in forbidden forms” (Hebdige, 2006, p. 153). One of the most popular examples of a subculture is punk, a culture in which foul language and rowdy behavior is often promoted, which came into existence during the 1970s.

Women’s roller derby relates to the punk subculture in its opposition to the overarching culture. Roller derby and punk are both composed of aggressive behavior, which is typically frowned upon, especially when the female gender is involved. The sport of women’s flat track roller derby has generated its own subculture full of unique interactions and artifacts that create a distinctive environment in which women can participate.

Misrepresentation of subcultures. Occasionally a subculture can develop within a subculture, which was the case within the punk subculture. Though women related to the larger, music-oriented subculture of punk, they felt that “when attempting to become involved with the punk movement at the local level...the men leading the punk movement allowed them little voice” (Huber, 2010, p. 68). Thus, one group of girls who realized the power of language in achieving empowerment bonded together to form the riot grrrl movement in the 1990s. Though riot grrrls partook of activities that were considered “forbidden” by their overarching culture, they also worked as activists against rape, domestic abuse, and promoted sexuality and female empowerment (Huber, 2010).

Through this positive activism, one can see how not all subcultures are completely focused on enacting “forbidden” behaviors. Perhaps a better way to define the behaviors or members of subcultures would entail the notion of breaking the norms of the overarching culture, rather than spinning a negative connotation on subcultures with the term “forbidden.”

If a person were to take a look at the press surrounding the riot grrrl movement however, he/she would have to work to find the ideologies of female empowerment that the group worked for. Instead of representing the positive attributes of the subculture, the press—a product of the overarching culture—published representations of the riot grrrls as “both silly and immoral while dismissing the serious issues they were attempting to address” (Huber, 2010, p. 69). The press’s representation of this subculture ultimately became one of the major causes of the decline of the riot grrrl movement, a group that could have made major strides for feminism. By focusing on the sexuality and femininity of the athletes, mainstream media representation of female sports—including women’s roller derby—treats women as objects rather than subjects and thus fails to adequately capture women’s experiences of these sports.

Women in Sports

As recognized by Sloop (2012), the athletic world does not leave much room for gender interpretation; instead, “sports competitions—divided into men’s and women’s events—assume a strict gender binary” (p. 83). In cases where the lines begin to become blurred, accusations of cheating and lying begin to surface, such as in the case of Caster Semenya, a female runner who performed better than other women during the 2008 and

2009 Track and Field World Championships. Due to her outstanding performance, she was subjected to gender testing to prove her biological sexual makeup (Sloop, 2012). Men tend not to face accusations of lying about their biological make-up when they excel in the sports world; alternatively, men are often praised.

In the world of sports, “masculinity is normalized and positioned as superior while other gender performances are considered deviant” (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013, p. 1377). Notably, when men fail in sports, they are often ridiculed and insulted with terminology that is typically associated with the female gender. Additionally, the blame is often placed on the male for possessing what are understood to be female characteristics.

When women are unsuccessful in the athletic world, the blame is also placed on the characteristics they possess that are associated with being female. A second article by Sloop (2005) recounts the controversies surrounding the professional, female racecar driver, Deborah Renshaw. Criticism came through the gendered ideologies associated with the automobile as a masculine technology. Some see the car as “equally open to all drivers regardless of gender/sexuality...making each person equally fast” (p.194). Yet on the other hand, because of the binary gender lines that exist, “it is always a particular type of body—and the meanings articulated with that body—in the drivers seat” (Sloop, 2005, p. 196). Therefore, though the car is just as user-friendly to Renshaw as it is to her male colleagues, she was unable to place the right type of body in the drivers seat, making her incapable of driving according to sufficiently masculine standards.

Due to the aggressive nature of roller derby, the women that play this sport are often similarly criticized for their “masculine” characteristics. This could be challenging

for skaters in their first year as they are learning to deal with this criticism as while also embracing the aggressive aspect of the sport.

Representations of the female athlete in the popular media. Through the aforementioned discussions of Semenya and Renshaw, we have seen how women's successes and failures are portrayed in the world of sports. The cases of Caster Semenya and Deborah Renshaw were circulated through news outlets, but this is not the only media platform that produces and reinforces gender norms for female athletes. Popular media, such as movies and television shows, also portray the female athlete in a way that sets standards for this particular group of women.

The images of female athletes' sexuality have been updated to be more pleasing to the postfeminist audience through the use of "sexy-fit femininity." Some scholars critique sexy-fit femininity (e.g., Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Sailors, 2013), arguing that it reinforces gender stereotypes rather than empowers females. This form of femininity blends "girlishness with assertiveness, performativity with competitiveness, and sexy attractiveness with hard-body athleticism, sexy-fit femininity is a highly marketable cultural script that answers the call for 'girl power' without seriously challenging the gendered status quo" ("Bring It On," 2011, p. 25). This article in particular discusses the movie *Bring It On*, which portrays the world of competitive cheerleading. Throughout this movie, one can see the typical cheerleader stereotype begin to disintegrate and the new "sexy-fit" cheerleader emerge.

This concept of "sexy-fit femininity" can definitely be applied to the two instances in which roller derby made a noticeable appearance in popular media: the

movie *Whip It* and the reality television show *Rollergirls*. Kearney (2011) takes a look particularly at how derby girls are represented in the show *Rollergirls*, which is based on one of the original teams to initiate the most recent roller derby revival in Texas. She analyzed both the advertisements leading up to the premier of the show as well as the actual show itself. In accordance with the “sexy-fit femininity” described previously, the advertisements did not enact the roles set within this feminine form of female athletes. Almost all notions of their athleticism were ignored, as the ads did not depict any helmets, bruises, or scrapes—all icons that are associated with roller derby. Instead, all focus was placed on the sexuality of the skaters. The nature of the actual show plays more into this idealistic, sporty form of femininity emphasizing both their sexuality, as well as their athleticism. This most likely can be attributed to that fact that the nature of the show requires images of the skaters playing the sport, thus images of athleticism are going to begin arising as viewers watch skaters practice and competitively play roller derby, even though they coincide with the show sexualizing the females through their apparel.

In addition to the implications of these representations for women in general, it is also important to consider the influence of popular culture on the derby girl’s self-perception. Exposure to representations of how one is supposed to behave (such representations are created through social construction) often influences one’s actual behavior as a person attempts to mimic what is “correct” according to society (CITE – see social cognitive theory). Therefore, if a female entering the derby community for the first time is seeing images of “sexy-fit femininity” associated with roller derby athletes, she

will feel as though she must conform to these standards. When I viewed these images prior to entering the sport, I perceived all derby athletes to conform to the standard of wearing fishnets and booty shorts; therefore, I assumed this would be expected of me as well.

The derby girl. Female athletes have been scrutinized for their athletic competitiveness and breaking of gender norms for years. Due to this criticism, many have had to take the extra step to embrace their femininity because of the notion that “without sex appeal the athlete risks being labeled a dyke, and without athleticism the sexy girl risks being labeled a slut” (“Bring It On,” 2011, p. 28). In the instance of women’s flat track roller derby, the females often dress themselves in clothes that emphasize their femininity to bout in—tutus, short shorts, and fishnet tights; these outfits are also referred to as their “boutfit” (the outfit in which they bout). According to Sailors (2013), this over emphasis of femininity and sexuality is used to compensate for the aggression that dominates the sport. This notion coincides with the idea discussed in the “Bring It On” article; without their emphasis on sexuality, females who participate in roller derby would risk being labeled a dyke or butch due to the aggressive nature of the sport that is typically correlated with the male sex (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). Additionally, the derby girl must pair her sexualized image in the athletic context or risk being considered too provocative or slutty. Due to this desire to enhance femininity, some critics believe that the skaters are reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes rather than creating an arena for empowerment, like WFTDA suggests (Sailors, 2013).

On the other hand, Beaver (2014) found in his interviews with players of the sport that they did not find the use of feminine dress to be compensation for the aggressiveness of the sport; rather, they found the outfits to be playful and a fun way to express themselves. Not only did the skaters not find the uniforms degrading, they found them to be empowering due to the ability to choose their own attire. According to Beaver, “the decision to wear mini-skirts and fishnets becomes a symbol of empowerment, a means of claiming ‘ownership’ of their body and sexuality.” This aspect of the outfit will be important to explore in this study as the clothing that one chooses to wear during a game can shape their experience or be representative of their experience.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory is one of the children of the overarching theory, standpoint theory. Other subtheories that fall under this primary theory include, but are not limited to, theories that focus on the standpoints that come from race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Wood, 2005). Standpoint theory builds off of the ideas of Marxism, drawing on the claim that “the work we do—the activities in which we engage—shape our identities and consciousness and, by extension, our knowledge” (Wood, 2005, p. 61). Feminist standpoint theory puts emphasis on the importance of knowledge emerging through the experience of marginalized groups based off of the notion that privileged groups (often times men in the case of this theory) are not likely to create accurate knowledge about the oppressed group, which also includes insights into larger power structures. Additionally, feminist standpoint theory “can help to avoid the false choice of characterizing the situation of women as either ‘purely natural’ or ‘purely social’”

(Hartsock, 1983, p. 283). Thus, this theory helps break down stereotyped gender roles (such as women being less aggressive or having to be a mother, wife, etc.) and makes them seem like less of a product of nature,

In regard to the aggressive, gender-norm breaking nature of women's flat track roller derby, there arises another valid reason as to why it is important to hold a feminist standpoint when observing the group. This stems from the fact that one who holds a feminist standpoint realizes that the socially constructed idealistic behavior for females is to "be nice, defer to others, and not be pushy" and the more assertive females who do not adhere to this standard receive derogatory treatment, "including calling them bitches, whereas assertive men are admired for their confidence and leadership" (Wood, 2009 p. 397). We watched this style of double standard play out as well in the aforementioned research on women in sports, where women who excel in athletics are labeled as dykes or lesbians, or in extreme cases are forced into gender testing, as was the case with Semenya.

Traditionally, standpoint theory looks at how marginalized groups have different experiences than the groups in power due to the attributes that cause them to be oppressed, such as race, gender, class, or sexual orientation. This makes it easy to understand why the use of the theory is applicable in the cases of subcultures, as they are often disregarded due to the group they belong to, such as in the case of riot grrrls.

Hence,

While examining the subcultures of marginalized groups, standpoint and muted group theories are important to keep in mind, as they call attention to the fact that

traditionally these groups have been oppressed and silenced, and when individuals from these groups communicate, they do so from their own individual positions as members of such a silenced group. (Huber, 2010, p. 65)

Therefore, when adding in the factor of gender to the already present identification as a subculture, as is the case in women's flat track roller derby, feminist standpoint theory seems to be the clear-cut choice for looking at the experiences within this group of women. This coincides with one of the five key claims of feminist standpoint theory as according to Wood (2005): an individual can belong to more than one group that places them in a standpoint.

The above literature looks at subcultures and the influences they can have on their individual members, women in sports, and feminist standpoint theory to play into the discussion of the experience of being a first-year skater in the culture of roller derby. Previous research still leaves some questions unanswered, particularly in the area of experiences and what the influential and challenging fresh meat experience reveals about what it means to be a skater in this culture.

Research Questions

Previous research has claimed that roller derby has the potential for female empowerment, but no research has been done to determine if this is an effect of playing the sport or if this is just typical of the women who decide to play the sport. A phenomenological study was performed to assess the experiences of fresh meat skaters through in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with skaters who are within their first year of skating as a rostered team member. The interviewees were selected

from teams in the southeastern region of the United States by recruitment through the local teams. This data was used to answer two research questions regarding women who participate in the sport of flat track roller derby:

RQ1: (a) How do women skaters describe their experience of the fresh meat phase of flat track derby? (b) What is the essential experience of being a skater during the fresh meat phase of flat track derby?

RQ2: To what extent and in what ways do women discuss transformation as part of their fresh meat experience during flat track derby?

The first research question looks to explore the experiences that women go through during their first year of competitively skating for a women's flat track roller derby team. This question looks to uncover experience categories that will help the researcher understand what women endure during the initial months of playing the sport. Research question two explores the culture of roller derby in order to determine aspects of the sport's culture that may create an environment that supports transformation of the participants.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

I chose a qualitative phenomenology as my method for exploring the research questions at hand. The reasoning behind this decision comes from the fact that research from this perspective allows for the experience of participants to be understood more in-depth. I explored the research questions by analyzing in-depth interviews with fresh meat skaters. Post-interview, I transcribed and coded the data utilizing *in vivo* coding.

Phenomenology

The purpose of phenomenological studies is to look at the shared experience of a single group by connecting individual experiences. Researchers in this field work to create a universal understanding of an experience by looking at the commonalities between experiences of individuals who have all shared the experience (van Manen, 1990). There are three philosophical assumptions associated with phenomenological studies. They include that the research is: a study of lived experiences of a person, the experiences were conscious ones, and that the research is not an explanation, but rather a description of the experience (Creswell, 2013).

I replicated Moustakas' (1994) method of performing a phenomenology. Moustakas suggested to first identify a phenomenon to study. In this case I chose to look at the initial phase of entering into the sport of roller derby. Secondly, I worked to achieve *epoche* as according to Moustakas (1994), which is clearing the mind of preconceived knowledge and notions of the phenomenon. Moustakas admitted that it is difficult to completely remove one's personal knowledge. He says that though "*epoche* is

rarely perfectly achieved, the energy, attention, and work involved in reflection and self-dialogue, the intention that underlies the process, and the attitude and frame of reference, significantly reduce the influence” (p. 90). I took measures to ensure that her own personal experience does not hinder the analysis of the interview data. In conjunction with previous feminist research, however, personal experiences will complement the data, but will not be used as a lens through which to interpret the experiences of others.

In order to obtain data, I performed interviews with eight individuals who have all recently begun their journey as a member of roller derby. There were moments that the participants mentioned that stood out as influential aspects of the skaters’ experiences; I horizontalized these moments by assigning them equal value as according to Moustakas (1994). He stated that horizontalization is “the process of explicating the phenomenon, qualities are recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value, nonrepetitive constituents of experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived” (p.96). I highlighted those moments individually and later grouped them into similar categories based on the experience they described in order to reduce the experiences of several individuals into one universal description. From there, I created textual descriptions to understand what the skaters experienced and a structural description to understand the environment in which they experienced the phenomenon. A combination of these two descriptions creates the essence of being a fresh meat skater.

Data Collection

Interview participants. Interview participants included eight females who have earned a spot on a roster of a flat track derby team within the previous year, as this would place them within the fresh meat category. The researcher recruited participants in this criterion sample by contacting three teams in the southeastern region of the United States and requesting contact with team members who fit the set criteria; two of the teams responded. Ages of participants range from 24 to 43. Originally, the plan was to interview nine skaters, three from each team in the area. Due to lack of response from one team, there was limited diversity of team representation. One team had a large number of fresh meat skaters that were willing to participate in order to compensate.

Interviews. The interviews were performed in a phenomenological style according to Moustakas (1994). Prior to the interviews, the researcher set aside all personal beliefs in order to not guide the interviews, but let the interviewees select the information they felt important to share during the interview. The questions the researcher (or I, depending on which you switch it to) searched for tales of the skaters' experiences within their first year of competitively playing. True to the social constructivist framework, which works to create a subjective meaning of the world (Cresswell, 2013), questions are "broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation" (Cresswell, 2013, p. 25). Representative of the phenomenological style of interviewing, questions were open-ended, leaving plenty of room for the skaters to express what they feel is most important about their experience and share moments that they felt best reflected their experiences. The descriptive questions gathered examples and narratives from the skaters' experiences as a fresh meat member on their roller derby

team. While, on the other hand, structural questions looked to explore and discover information about the cores of the subculture of roller derby. The questions used in the interviews can be found in Appendix A. The interviews were semi-structured in format in order to delve deeper into the topics that seemed most important to the skaters. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Being a member of the roller derby community proved to be beneficial during interviews. First, the skaters seemed very comfortable self-disclosing to me as they accepted me as part of their community. Additionally, I was able to relate to their stories and experiences, which seemed to put them at ease during the interview. Secondly, the participants often used terminology, such as “leave it all on the jammer line,” to describe experiences. Having knowledge of the source of the meaning of this statement and similar ones proved to be beneficial because I did not have to question the interviewees about what they meant when using jargon. This could also create an obstacle, however, as I worked to avoid applying my own personal knowledge to my participants’ descriptions of what they were experiencing by asking the participants to delve deeper into their word choice. The most instructive information came from when I maintained a perspective of naïve curiosity in order to draw out more detailed and deeper descriptions.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed according to Moustakas’ (1994) method of analyzing phenomenological data. First and foremost, this method requires bracketing out the researcher’s personal experience with the phenomenon in order to focus on the experiences of the study participants. Secondly, the transcriptions were read through

critically, and key phrases and statements that were essential to the experience were highlighted. Next, these statements were clustered into overarching themes, of which four emerged. By using *in vivo* coding in a phenomenological study, I was able to determine potential categories of experience based upon the exact words of the participants.

In vivo coding was the chosen method because the language used by skaters helps to best reflect the skaters' experiences—through which knowledge is formed according to feminist standpoint theory. The participants may use terminology and language that is specific to roller derby culture during their interviews; and according to Saldaña (2013), *In vivo* coding is useful in research that “prioritizes and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 91), which is one of the goals of this research and an idea which is central to feminist standpoint theory. Through the use of feminist standpoint theory, the subculture of roller derby was explored to understand the meanings and experiences that may be shared by women who choose to participate in women’s flat track roller derby. *In vivo* coding was performed on the eight transcribed interviews. This style of coding uses an exact word or phrase stated by the participant to categorize a group of data. For instance, in this data, the participants used the word “challenges” on numerous occasions; thus “challenges” became one group of data. Therefore, all statements that described a challenge that a new skater faced during her fresh meat period, either physically or mentally, was coded into the “challenge” group. I identified five categories of experience: intimidation of first time experiences, challenge of overcoming new experiences, developing and maintaining relationships, feelings of strength, and relieving built up stress.

Validation Standards

Creswell (2013) outlines eight differing strategies for validation of qualitative research methods. Though he recommends engaging in as many as possible, he suggests that qualitative researchers use a minimum of two of the strategies. The validation strategies noted by Creswell include prolonged engagement and persistent observation; triangulation; peer review; negative case analysis; clarifying researcher bias; member checking; rich, thick description; and external audits. The most prominent strategy that I used was rich, thick descriptions. Details are included in order to ensure that the results can be easily transferred to other situations and scenarios that could replicate these same experiences in order to affect women's lives positively. Using the exact words that skaters used to describe their fear, anxiety, and joy, as well as their physical exhaustion, their sweat, and the pain they endure throughout the process did this. By taking these statements and pairing them with interpretations of the experience, the description moves from "thin" to "thick" as described by Geertz (1994). This includes taking into account how the participants talked about their experiences; this could come in the form of crinkling their brow, eyes lighting up with joy, or breaking eye contact to look down in discomfort in that moment.

Due to my active participation in a roller derby league during my final few months as a fresh meat skater during the research period, as well as my history of following the sport, it is unquestionably important to note that the sport has been a significant part of my life for many years. As noted in the very first paragraph of this paper, the confidence of skaters is something that stood out to me from the first moment of experiencing the culture of roller derby, and something I longed to achieve.

Additionally, being aware of my own emotions and perceptions during the personal process of moving from fresh meat skater to an accomplished veteran skater is highly important to note, as I must make sure that my experiences do not affect my perception of the experiences of my participants. But, in order to align with feminist research, instead of bracketing my experiences and completely removing them from the study, I chose to follow a hermeneutical approach as according to Lavery (2003). This method required me to consider how my experiences were similar to or different from the experiences my participants described. This method helps bind the idea of bracketing that phenomenologists pursue, while still satisfying the need to consider personal experience, as feminist scholars choose to do. I still vividly remember and can easily relate to the tales that were shared with me during by my interviews with participants, but had to make sure not to relate their experience to mine when analyzing their interviews and make sure not to later incorporate my own experiences into the analysis of the universal experience. Lastly, the fact that I have personal relationships with some of the skaters who were interviewed should be noted.

The relationships I had with some of the participants allowed for ease in the last method that was employed, member checking. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). This method required presenting the findings to the skaters and receiving their feedback on the results and interpretations studied throughout the research. This was done by sitting down with skaters either individually or sharing the data with them via email to

see if they felt that the data was an accurate representation of the fresh meat experience.

They all agreed that it was.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Structural Description of The Fresh Meat Experience

Participants entering the environment for the first time described being greeted by a group of friendly women who reached out and automatically accepted them, as claimed by the participants. Practices are closed off to the public, so it is a time where the skaters can push themselves to their limits without worrying about what others are thinking, which is an experience they do not encounter in other aspects of their lives. Instead, it is often frowned upon for women to be aggressive in typical day-to-day interactions; yet, in this dated roller rink, women are able to express those emotions. Though dull and dingy in physical appearance, participants describe the environment as very encouraging. In this environment, with its potent smells and poor lighting, these participants find their inner peace and happiness, as well as a strength they never knew they had.

These experiences all took place in a similar location, a skating rink that had seen better days, with faded carpets with geometric designs that had not been in style since the day the rink opened in the 1970s and minimum lighting that illuminated from multicolored globe lamps all reflecting off a disco ball in the center; the exterior reflected the interior with parking lots full of cracks and pot holes and faded lines that signified parking spaces. I entered the building and instinctually notice the smell, one of sweat, mildew, and nacho cheese. It's a room full of women, with the occasional exception of a male coach or referee. These women cover a wide range of body types, from lean girls my size maxing out at 115 pounds, to the more toned, athletic women, and women that

are comparable to small NFL players. And as previous research suggests, these women are not ones to conform to the patriarchal ideal of polite, mild-mannered feminine behavior. Though they are friendly and welcoming, participants or audience members are likely to hear a crude sexual joke accompanied by a sea of foul language within this environment. Female skaters are reminded that one does not need “balls” to play roller derby and that, as a female skater, “six inches is longer than what a man once told you is six inches.” These are some of the conversational habits that are used frequently by derby girls but frowned upon in day-to-day life.

My participants, when relaying their experiences, expressed the frustration and process of overcoming obstacles that arose within the initial phase of joining the sport. Every participant began describing their fresh meat experience with thoughts of fear and intimidation. As they discussed how scary it was to enter this culture and try something they knew little about, their brows would crinkle, they looked down to the table, breaking eye contact with me, and would clasp their hands in their laps. As we moved throughout the interview, their faces turned into smiles, talks of fear became moments of laughter, and I could tell that they were more at ease in the environment as they confidently looked me in the eye. Physical and mental challenges were discussed. They talked about struggling to overcome certain skills, but then the pitch of their voice would go up as they mentioned with joy the time they overcame this obstacle along the way. One could see that their confidence level had grown as they progressed through the sport that challenges them.

Textural Description

Intimidation during the initial skating experience. Feelings of fear and intimidation were expressed when describing initially joining the sport, as well as many of their “firsts” in roller derby. The first few practices were described as intimidating, especially the first one, as they witnessed the high ability level of more advanced skaters, and feared not being able to excel and achieve that level of competitive play. When describing the first time they played competitively, many skaters described extreme amounts of anxiety, as well as the idea of being overwhelmed. Many describe being afraid when entering their first bout because they were unsure of what to expect. The actual game play is very overwhelming, and many felt confused and struggled to know what they were supposed to be doing when.

Challenges of learning new skills. Challenge is something that most people face when entering a new scenario, and this is a very prominent theme that emerged when discussing what the first year of joining roller derby entails. This theme emerged not only in tales of what it was like to play competitively for the first time, but also in the day-to-day routine of practicing. Player after player discussed how they had to learn to use their bodies in ways they never knew possible and how this was very intimidating, frustrating, and even scary at some points. Participants mentioned specific skill sets that were necessary to play the game as horrifying and frustrating to master during the fresh meat period.

After mentioning these moments that challenged them during the beginning stages, however, they all had a shared smile when discussing what it was like to finally

overcome their challenge. Some skaters chose to share a story that they described as their turning point in the sport, and these often had to do with overcoming a challenge they faced from day one of putting on skates. Participants also described the challenge of the sport in a very positive light. They enjoyed pushing their bodies and their minds to new levels and seeing what they were capable of accomplishing. Additionally, they left practices feeling physically exhausted. Though the challenges could be physically draining, many participants described the challenges of playing roller derby as their favorite part of the sport.

Developing and maintaining relationships. Whether it was relationships with teammates, coaches, other derby-affiliated people, or family, almost all participants mentioned a significant relationship that was either created or strengthened because of their experience in roller derby. Their teammates are important to them both on and off the track. The other members of the team, as well as the coaches, are a great support system during the fresh meat experience. This support comes through in the form of not only encouragement, but also through willingness to work with the fresh meat skater and help her master the sport. Additionally, going through this experience together helped form and strengthen relationships, as the skaters were able to relate with this shared experience.

There is also this sense of community that encompasses the sport that one becomes a part of, according to the participants. This community includes all of the skaters for various teams in the area, as well as refs, announcers, and supporters of the

sport. Through shared interest in the sport of roller derby, it seems that members of this community have an automatic connection.

Relationships also flourish off the track. Many participants mentioned that their coaches call just to check on their skaters on a Saturday night. Furthermore, they find themselves building relationships with the other skaters that make them more than just teammates. Family was a common word used to describe the bond between teammates. But some skaters mentioned that roller derby has positively affected their relationship with particular biological family members—their children. Roller derby has become a bonding point with their children as the youth enjoy and take pride in watching their mothers play the sport.

Feelings of strength. Finding a personal strength that was previously unknown to the participant was a common theme. This came primarily in the form of physical strength. Participants were often surprised to discover they could hit harder than they originally thought. The strength that comes from taking a hit and coming right back for more showed even more prominently as part of the experience of being a fresh meat skater. Participating in competitive roller derby makes the skaters feel strong, which is a characteristic of the experience that they appeared very enthusiastic about.

Relieving built up stress. A natural high is how many participants described the experience of playing roller derby. Roller derby provides an outlet that allows participants to forget about the stresses of their everyday life and relieve built up aggression. Playing the sport forces them to not worry about what went wrong that day because roller derby requires the full concentration of athletes, whether in a bout or

during normal practice. This comes from the fact that if they take their mind off of the game for even a brief moment, someone will knock them down, according to the participants; therefore, they cannot risk taking mere seconds to reflect on life outside of that moment, whether that be home life or work life. Additionally, after getting to go into a practice or a bout playing aggressively, the participants feel relaxed and exceptionally happy.

Analysis

Intimidation during the initial skating experience. Many describe their “firsts” in roller derby as intimidating and scary. They have a lot of anxiety going into an experience for the first time, whether it is their first practice, their first scrimmage, or their first bout.

Intimidation. When the participants reminisced on when they first began attending practices, phrases that were used included “very intimidating,” “very intense,” “a lot of fear,” and “I was really scared.” This fear came partially from the unknown, but also from seeing the high skill levels of advanced skaters. One girl said, “the other girls were such good skaters, it was really intimidating.” One replied feeling “intimidated because I was worried I wouldn't learn to skate as well as everyone else” when thinking about her very first derby practice. Also, just the nature of the sport caused intimidation, “it’s intimidating because you know you’re going to get knocked around.” I remembered feeling similarly when I first started attending practice as I watched the experienced skaters move on their feet as if they did not have eight wheels attached to the bottoms of

their boots, standing in awe as they performed tasks I did not know were feasible on skates with such ease.

Fear of Lack of Experience. Fear was discussed when describing the first few practices attended as well. “I feel like I was really scared, like the entire practice was like, I was just really scared that I was going to fall, or that I wasn't going to be able to keep up” is how one participant described her first practice. Fear came most frequently though from physical obstacles. “I was afraid of falling. And not necessarily falling from being hit, because you know that's coming and is expected, you're going to get hit. But just falling from losing my balance or doing a spin or skating fast.” They also discussed fear of some of the skills they had to acquire, “jumping scared me, still does.” These stories came from skaters who did not have much previous experience skating, which is where they and I differed. I had been skating for five years before joining the sport; my fear came from the hits and being knocked down. I am relatively small in the derby world; therefore I had extreme fear of injury during the beginning stages.

Anxiety of Being an Inexperienced Skater. Examples that showed some fear also appeared when participants were describing their first bout; but in this context, it was expressed more as anxiety and nervousness. When describing her first bout or scrimmage, one participant remembered going into her bout very nervous; “I was nervous as crap. I was actually shaking cause I was nervous,” she remembered. This was a story I related to easily, as I remember trembling with anxiety when entering my first bout, paired with a high level of nausea that left me expecting to leave my lunch on the track. Three other skaters described the experience as either consisting of “anxiety” or being

“nervous.” Another skater described her first bout as a feeling of being bullied due to the intensity and aggression of the opposing team; “it felt like we were getting basically bullied, like we came to our own bullying.”

Challenges of learning new skills. As aforementioned, the participants described challenges in both the settings of practice and bouts. When describing challenges they faced as a fresh meat skater, there were two reoccurring types of challenges: mental and physical.

Mental challenges. But just as there are the physical challenges, the participants described mental challenges as well when discussing overcoming the tasks at hand. One participant feels that there is pain that is to be expected when playing roller derby, but that there is extra pain that comes along with playing the sport; “in terms of fresh meat, I feel like there is a certain amount of pain you go through with learning how to do things and them being more difficult without the skill level.” One participant remembered the challenge of building up endurance during her first practices, “that really kicked my butt.” The physical demands of the sport were often described as part of the challenges of being a newer skater. The physical challenges and mental challenges sometimes overlap due to the high physical demand of the sport, as one participant described struggling with the endurance requirement as “emotionally draining.”

Physical challenges. Another skater talked about her physical challenges of playing roller derby; “bending my knees is my biggest struggle. Every day. Every time I skate.” She ended with how she over comes this challenge every practice; “it’s like 20 minutes of feeling like I just started skating, you know, cause like, I’m nervous. And then

it goes away after that 20 minutes.” In addition to overcoming the challenge of acquiring skills, players discussed how challenging it is to play the sport. “It's hard. I got my butt kicked and I hurt really bad the next day.” Players reported being sore as well as “tired as crap” and “tired, sweaty, nasty” after practice and game play. They physically push themselves to their limits, feeling exhausted after putting their all into the sport.

With almost every challenge story, there was a follow-up story of conquering that challenge. One participant recalled attempting to meet the basic physical assessments one must pass to play the sport, and she amazed herself when she overcame the challenge of jumping. She stated, “so I was like, ‘okay, I’ll just try.’ And I did it! I was like, “wow, that’s crazy!” Another participant remembers overcoming one of her long term challenges, “it finally happened two weeks ago and I was like ‘yes!’”

The challenge was portrayed as a positive aspect of the sport though. “I like the challenge and like there’s a thrill in learning how to do something, and there’s like a thrill in doing something that makes you scared,” stated one participant. “There is always something to work on and always something to get better at and something to always improve. I like that. If it was the same thing every time you would get bored,” reported another skater. Thus, even though both physical and mental challenges are present, they are not viewed negatively; yet, they are seen as a driving force and positive aspect of the experience.

Developing and maintaining relationships. Every participant had a relationship that they mentioned their derby experience would not be the same without.

Family-like Bonds. Many of these relationships came in the form of teammates and bonding over shared experience, such as the case of one interviewee: “the other fresh meat are important because like they are going through the learning experience like you are, so you guys are on the same page and can bond over how much pain you’re in.” Multiple times the participants described their team as a “family.” Furthermore, when describing being brand new to derby, the team was often described as “friendly” and “encouraging.” Additionally, when joining roller derby you become part of an “instant community” that is based around this common interest.

Nurturing Relationships. Outside of the immediate teammates, relationships with coaches stood out to players as influential relationships on their derby experience. One participant recollected a night that the coach was calling each individual player to check on her. Additionally, the coaches are encouraging during the learning process. For instance, one participant shared a moment when she had been discouraged: “I felt like I hadn’t been progressing as much as I had been before, so I felt a little discouraged for awhile. But as we were doing the assessments, she (the coach) just kind of started laughing and told me that I didn’t need to practice at anything, that I was really good at it.” This interaction was a turning point for this participant, as she then began to believe in her own ability to excel at the sport.

Aside from coaches being encouraging during practice, there were mentions of the coaching staff supporting their players off the track as well. Many players mentioned that their coach would call or text to check on them periodically just to see how they were doing. For instance, one player informed me that “just last night I was sitting on the

couch with one of my teammates, and the coach, who didn't know we were together, called just to check up on me. He was like great, she was next on my list anyways. So, I was like 'okay, are you just bored on a Saturday night and have nothing better to do that call all your players?'" This dedication to their skaters created a positive player-coach relationship.

Off-track Relationships. Lastly, there are the relationships with those that do not actively participate in the sport but still become influenced by the skater's participation—relationships with biological family members. In particular, two players mentioned the strengthening of their relationship with their children. "It's something that me and my little boy can really get close together, cause like when he comes to my games or comes to my practices he's always cheering me on...he loves it, and because he loves it, it makes me love it even more." Another girl remembers getting one of her daughter's school assignments back, "they had a \$100 bill, and in the center they had to draw a picture of what they would buy with \$100 and then write about it. Z drew a pair of skates and said she would buy them so she could skate as good as her mommy." Playing derby has made them even more of a role model for their children and keeps their love of the game strong.

Feelings of strength. "It makes me feel strong. It makes me feel stronger than I ever have before, and it feels good." This was just one instance when a participant described feeling strong when going through this experience. Another skater stated, "I found out that I'm a lot stronger than I thought." A separate skater was reminiscing on her time in the sport when she paused to say, "I think the thing I love most about derby is

that it lets women embrace their sexuality with the booty shorts and fishnets and lets you feel sexy while also being tough and strong.” It seems clear that this environment helps women realize that they are physically stronger than they ever imagined, and that is a feeling that they enjoy.

Relieving built up stress. Skaters described the experience of playing the sport as cathartic. It relaxes them and gives them an outlet to relieve stress that overwhelms them in day-to-day life. Furthermore, it provides an area in which they can escape the stresses of life that come during transitional periods, such as going through a divorce, as expressed by one participant.

Relieving Stress Through Aggression. A word or concept that I was surprised to hear frequently when exploring a naturally aggressive sport was “relaxing.” Many of the participants described the experience in a therapeutic manner and as a “good way to get aggression out.” Derby allows females a physically aggressive release, which is frowned upon in today’s society. One participant stated, “I love that I get to hit people and there are no consequences.” This occurs in both game play and practice, as she stated “I feel relaxed after practice. I feel relaxed after a game. I feel like I let all of the stress out.” Playing roller derby releases all the built up stress, according to participants. “Derby is a is like getting away from the reality of every day work.” This may come from the fact that it is more dangerous to zone out of derby because “if you’re not in the moment and being aware of what’s around you, you’re going to get knocked down.”

Escaping Reality of Everyday Life. Many participants also reported coming to derby during a transitional period of their lives. One found the sport while going through

a major break-up and “threw hell to the wind and just came.” She reported that derby was very cathartic for her during this time because “it is a good little anger release, not just with the hitting people, but also with the skating. You almost skate your heart out at practices and at bouts and you just kind of leave everything on the jammer line, so to speak.” The jammer line is significant because this is where the beginning of play occurs. Another skater disclosed that she is going through a divorce but derby “has been positive, it keeps me busy, keeps my mind off of everything I’ve got going on at home.” In this sense, derby has been a therapeutic aspect of their life, for not only helping participants relieve their mental aggression through physical aggression, but also helping them escape the stresses of life outside of derby. “I never regret going to practice. It just puts you in a really good mood.”

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

When reminiscing on their first few months of participating in competitive roller derby, the participants spoke of times of fear and intimidation, challenges, building relationships, finding physical strength they did not know they had, and the cathartic aspect of playing the sport as essential aspects of the experience. Thus, answering RQ1: How do women skaters describe their experience of the fresh meat phase of flat track derby? What is the essential experience of being a skater during the fresh meat phase of flat track derby?, it became very clear that participating in this sport affects the participants both on and off the track, as they are able to overcome mental challenges that occur off the track as well. These five categories of experience seem to be key aspects of the first year of participating in women's flat track roller derby. In addition to these five categories, skaters mentioned that they spend time outside of practice researching the sport online, reading blogs, and watching tutorial videos; they are constantly trying to better themselves as a skater through the use of these online resources.

Of the five experience categories that emerged, four of them were explicitly positive, while Intimidation During the Initial Skating Experience was the only one that participants relayed in a negative manner. These stories of fear and intimidation came from the very beginning of joining the sport, but skaters described all the moments after overcoming this intimidation as positive. Even the challenges were described positively, as many participants reported enjoy the challenge and the feelings they felt once they overcame these challenges. If one does not overcome this fear, they are likely to quit the

sport, as playing roller derby is completely voluntary and there are no monetary gains from playing the sport that would entice people to keep playing despite negative experiences. Hence, those that would report experiences that are not positive most likely no longer participate in the sport.

Regarding RQ2: “to what extent and in what ways do women discuss transformation as part of their fresh meat experience during flat track derby?,” most skaters did not use the word transformative or transformation. Yet, they defined the experience of being a fresh meat skater as “finding out I’m stronger than I ever knew” or a process of finding their inner self, a part of themselves that had always been there, but had never surfaced. They are finding strengths they never knew they had, pushing their bodies to new limits, and overcoming the mental challenges that are associated with the sport. Feminist standpoint theorists have argued that a key aspect of the empowerment of women is changing the world in which they live to counter the standards that have been set that oppress them. The female roller derby participants’ descriptions of their experiences as a part of the fresh meat initiation period align with this ideas, as they are able to enter a world in which they can freely break gender norms (such as being aggressive) without having to worry about the repercussions they would typically face in society. Roller derby helps shape players’ identities, as they feel strong and confident on the track. This confidence pours over into life off the track as well. This sport creates an environment in which skaters are able to release aggression without fear of consequences or repercussions from society, which is rare for women as aggressive behavior from women is often frowned upon elsewhere in modern society.

As mentioned in the literature review, some critics of the sport argue that the sexuality embraced by female skaters simply reinforces gender stereotypes and hinders the sport from breaking gender norms and fostering an environment for empowerment. Some versions of this critique are offered within important and influential critiques of third-wave feminism. Additionally, the literature suggested that females cannot be aggressive without compensating for this aggression by overemphasizing their sexuality, or they are considered a “dyke.” However, one skater reported that she loves that derby allows her to both be strong and embrace her sexuality by wearing fishnet tights and booty shorts, which contradicts both of these notions. This idea of embracing one’s sexuality works alongside the ideas of third-wave feminism, which supports females embracing their sexuality and femininity rather than letting society oppress them by idealizing more conservative dress. Instead of the sexual component hindering the skaters, skaters report that it accompanies the feeling of being strong, as well as positively affects their outlook of their own body. Furthermore, she did not express that she felt the need to be sexy, nor did any of the other skaters, in order to overcome being labeled as masculine, as previous researchers have suggested. This shows that even when the outer appearances of derby girls may seem to align with gendered stereotypes, we must explore how feeling strong and being aggressive interacts with those stereotypes to produce experiences that help skaters overcome oppression they feel in their daily lives.

Overall, skaters describe the experience of joining the sport as a positive aspect of their life and suggest that other women should consider playing the sport as well so they can share in this encouraging subculture. Though skaters face challenges and struggle at

times, they report overcoming these obstacles makes them feel strong. Previous research suggested that it was solely the DIY nature of roller derby that created an empowering environment. Though this aspect may play a role, I believe the source of empowerment within this environment to be more of a product of the experiences of overcoming fears, challenges, forming new relationships, and relieving stress.

Personally, I have experienced experiences similar to what my participants described. Even though I knew how to skate prior to entering the sport, I had never had to perform many of the tasks that were placed in front of me. There were many moments of doubt and frustration that went through my mind as I repeatedly struggled with particular skill sets, such as endurance and knee taps. There were nights that I left in tears because I felt as though I would never obtain the skills, or because I was not progressing as rapidly as I had hoped. But now when I think of my time in the sport, my initial thought process does not go back to these times of struggle. During the research period, a fellow skater asked me what it is about derby that I love. After I took a moment to reflect upon this question, the answer was obvious; the way I feel when I accomplish something that challenges me, strong and invincible.

Furthermore, I too felt that the relationships that I made through the sport are an integral part of my experience—especially the one I share with my fellow fresh meat. It was encouraging to have someone going through the process with me and seeing that I was not the only one struggling. We were able to bond over these moments we shared on the track, and through this, a friendship grew off the track as well. Other significant relationships came through those nurturing roles—those who told me to keep my chin up

and that I was doing better than I thought. These members of my derby community pushed me through those times I felt weak and encouraged me to keep going when all I wanted to do was quit.

Lastly, I too found roller derby while in a transitional period of my life. I had just moved 350 miles away from my friends and family and submerged myself into a stressful environment in which I felt it hard to connect with others. When asked why I started playing roller derby, I always smile and say, “because I was in grad school and I needed to hit people.” People laugh, but there is more truth to this than they realize. Roller derby gives me an outlet to relieve the stress I feel from graduate school and the everyday stresses that are associated with this environment. Thus, I can relate to how my fellow skaters experience the initial phase of the sport. It can be intimidating and frustrating, but the feeling of confidence and the relationships that are produced by the experience, in addition to getting to relieve stress, make it worth every challenging moment.

Limitations

As with any study, there were limitations of the research. First off, there were only two teams represented in the study, and the both were located in the same region of the country. The derby community in different areas of the country may create different environments, which could cause the skaters in these areas to have different experiences than those in this study. Furthermore, different leagues could have different coaching methods that could affect the skaters’ perceptions differently than what was disclosed to this researcher. Additionally, though I wanted to focus on the first year of skating competitively for a team, bringing in the experiences of more experienced skaters could

have helped develop the knowledge of the experience of skating in the community, as they hold the potential to have overcome more obstacles and would have experienced derby in multiple phases, allowing them to reflect on both their experiences as a fresh meat skater as well as a veteran skater.

Implications

The experiences that skaters relayed appear to affect their lives in a positive manner overall. They reported feeling stronger due to overcoming challenges, building positive relationships both on and off the track, as well as being able to relieve built up stress due to the nature of the sport. These experiences could be used to market the sport to both adult females and young girls as a tool for empowerment in their lives.

Additionally, other sports or leisurely activities could adopt the aspects of women's roller derby that create these positive effects in order to also empower women through other methods and activities. This could create even more tools for female empowerment according to third-wave feminism.

Many scholars have looked at the benefits that sports can provide for youth (Brady, 1998; Ewing et al., 2002; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008). However, research is lacking on the positive effects that amateur sports can have on adults. After hearing my participants describe how playing roller derby has been a positive aspect of their lives both on and off the track, future research should look at the experiences of other amateur adult athletes who competitively play team sports to determine if there are similar reports across a spectrum of sports. Further research should also look at both male and female sports to determine if the genders experience these environments similarly.

Conclusion

I began this research by looking at not only the history of the sport of roller derby as a whole, but also my personal history. I identified that I wanted to explore the sport by looking at the women's experiences within their first year of joining the sport. From there, I looked at literature that created a deeper understanding of subcultures, women in sports, and feminist standpoint theory. Through a phenomenological study, I interviewed eight participants and then used *in vivo* coding to create categories of experience. The five categories of experience that emerged were (1) Intimidation During the Initial Skating Experience, (2) Challenges of Learning New Skills, (3) Developing and Maintaining Relationships, (4) Feelings of Strength, and (5) Relieving Built-up Stress. Lastly, I discussed the meaning of these categories, limitations of the study, and implications of the findings.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about when you first started attending derby practices.
2. Describe how you feel leaving practice at the end of the night.
3. Describe your first bout.
4. Do you utilize any online resources for information about derby? If yes, what kind of sites do you visit?
5. What's it like for you to read online articles about derby?

Appendix B

Consent Form

Information about Being in a Research Study Clemson University

The Fresh Meat Experience

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika and Jerrica Rowlett invite you to take part in a research study. Dr. Kumanyika is a professor of communication at Clemson University. Jerrica Rowlett is a student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Kumanyika. The purpose of this research is look at the experiences of fresh meat players to determine if this culture affects their lives, and if so, what aspects of the experience fosters change.

Your part in the study will be to participate in an in-depth interview about your experiences as a fresh meat skater for your team. The interviews will be recorded.

It will take you about 30 minutes to be in this study.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. If appropriate, add: However, this research may help us to understand the experiences of being a fresh meat skater and understand the roll this experience plays in the lives of women.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. We will not tell anybody outside of the research team that you were in this study or what information we collected about you in particular. Interviews will be stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. Any hard copies will be kept in a locked cabinet in a secure location, separate from any identifying information such as your name.

Choosing to Be in the Study

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Kumanyika at Clemson University at 864-656-1567.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-6460 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC's tollu free number, 866u 297u 3071.

Consent

I have read this form and have been allowed to ask any questions I might have. I agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

A copy of this form will be given to you.

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