Understanding the Motivational Factors that Influence People to Become Roller Derby Fans

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Roller derby, a far different experience than it was in the 1970’s, re-emerged in the US in 2001 as a legitimate sport that has rapidly spread around the world for women and girls of all ages. As of November, 2011 there were 993 leagues in 37 different countries around the world. In the US and Canada alone there were 655 women’s leagues for a total of approximately 2,620 teams (Roller Derby Worldwide, 2011), a number that has grown from only 50 leagues in 2005 (Women’s Flat Track Derby Association, 2011). In December of 2011, the first World Cup will be held with teams representing 13 different countries.

Roller derby is an important sport for women from a feminist perspective. At first glance it may appear to emphasize femininity, but its full contact nature subverts femininity and gender norms (Carlson, 2010) while also challenging the gender binary by demonstrating unconventional ways to be female and feminine (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Peluso, 2010). Roller derby indeed presents a challenge to the typically feminine-typed sports such as swimming, tennis, and figure skating which are less rigorous and less aggressive (Kouvla, 2004; Riemer and Visio, 2003). Roller derby also presents a more substantial challenge to gender norms than contact sports that are seen as a gentler version of the male game, such as ice hockey and lacrosse (Theberge, 1997).

While the participation aspect of this sport is fascinating in itself, it is particularly interesting that this full contact sport is accepted and well supported by fans while other full contact sports for women in the US rarely receive enough support to even exist. Even when considering less aggressive sports, such as basketball which is the most popular women’s sport in the US, fan support is minimal. The average attendance for Division I women’s college basketball is only 1,642 fans (Johnson, 2011) while some US roller derby leagues consistently attract more than 7,000 fans (Rat City Roller Girls, 2011).

Roller derby is an under-studied sport with the published research being largely ethnographic and from the viewpoint of the participant (see for example: Carlson, 2011; Finley, 2010; Kearney, 2011; Krausch, 2010; Storms, 2010). While this type of feminist research is undoubtedly important, we suggest that there is also much to be learned by studying roller derby from a sport management and marketing viewpoint. More specifically, roller derby leagues have been successful in drawing large numbers of regular fans, an area where many traditional women’s sports struggle. Additionally, roller derby seems to be an acceptable full contact sport in a society that historically discourages such activity for women. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the motivational factors that influence people to become roller derby fans by answering the following questions:

1. Who are 'typical' roller derby fans?
2. What brings roller derby fans to their first match?
3. What factors contribute to roller derby fans becoming repeat customers?
4. What factors contribute to roller derby fans encouraging others to attend events?
5. Are roller derby fans also fans of other sports and if so, which ones?
6. Do roller derby fans have different motives than fans of more traditional sports?

Of the widely-used scales that measure fan motivation, several are not applicable to roller derby due to the nature of the sport (see for example Mahony, Madrigal, and Howard, 2000; Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard, 1999; Wann, 1995).
Such scales refer more to mainstream sports that provide consumers with many choices of teams to support, which is not the current situation with roller derby as it is not nationally televised. However, the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (Trail & James, 2001; see also Trail, Anderson & Fink, 2000) is a fan motivation scale that can be applied to a variety of sports including roller derby. The MSSC will be used with the addition of several open ended questions to account for the possibility that the provided answer choices are not sufficient to elicit the fans’ primary motivations. Open ended questions will be constructed based on results from an initial focus group made up of 6-8 fans who will be indentified via snowball sampling.

Following the focus group, the MSSC will be administered several different ways to several different groups. During the 2011 World Cup in Toronto, the survey will be administered in person as well as emailed to ticket holders after the event. Additionally, from January-March of 2012 the survey will be administered in person during 4 different matches of a US league that regularly attracts 1,500 fans. The survey will also be emailed to the entire database of the league’s ticket buyers over the last 5 years.

Data will be analyzed by three statistical procedures in order to answer the research questions. Frequency and descriptive analyses will be carried out to develop a profile of roller derby fans. Explanatory factor analysis (EFA) will be employed to identify the underlying factors that would influence people to become the roller derby fans. ANOVA tests will also be performed to examine the roller derby fans’ preferences with respect to other sports. In all analyses, fan demographics such as age, gender, and national origin will be entered as variables.

While previous researchers have extensively focused on fan motivation (Mahony, Madrigal, and Howard, 2000; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995; see also Trail, Anderson & Fink, 2000), studies consistently find that the motives for sport fans tend to be different based on the sport (James and Ross, 2004; James and Ross, 2003; Fink, Trail, and Anderson, 2002; Wann, 1999). Likewise, we predict that these results will show that roller derby fans are indeed different from other sport fans as roller derby is a unique sport that combines an aesthetically pleasing display of skating with highly aggressive collisions (Wann, 1999; see also Bernthal & Graham, 2003). Additionally, Wann (1999) found that players and fans tend to have similar motivations, which leads us to predict that roller derby fans will be motivated by some of the same factors that are often expressed by roller derby players: adherence to feminist beliefs, supporting a lifestyle, feeling connection to a lifestyle, and supporting individual players.

Identifying the motivational factors for fans of roller derby will contribute to the field of sport management in several ways. First, these results will assist promoters of roller derby, and other similar sports, in deciding which aspects of the sport to highlight in order to attract a larger fan base (Wann, et al, 2008). Perhaps more importantly however, it will help to uncover reasons why this particular women’s sport is well attended by fans while most others are not. The lack of fans for women’s sport is a crucial topic to understand as the future of any sport is largely determined by its popularity. Understanding fan motivations could prove to be the missing piece that ultimately leads to true equality for women’s sport.