

**Answering the “Call to Brawl”: Developing Recruitment and Retention Strategies for Roller Derby**

*Joey Zhou, University of Windsor*

*Katrina Krawec, University of Windsor*

*Jules Woolf (Advisor), University of Windsor*

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It is widely recognized that participation in sport enables individuals to acquire a myriad health benefits. Yet as people age, sport participation declines, and adult participation in sport tends to be low (Ifedi, 2008). Women in particular face many obstacles (e.g. lack of time) to access sport programs (Dixon, 2009), and women have lower levels of sport participation than men (Thibault, 2011). Roller derby is one sport that has emerged as an attractive option for women’s sport participation. The sport has grown in popularity over the last decade and there are currently more than 500 leagues in 15 nations (Cohen & Barbee, 2010). Roller derby is distinctive from other sports because it is primarily played by, managed, and developed by women. There are very few men’s teams, and these have only begun to appear in recent years. Part of the appeal of roller derby is that the different positional play and physical requirements of the sport provides opportunities for women of different shapes and sizes to play (Cohen & Barbee, 2010). Still, despite the growth in popularity of this women-dominated sport, there has been little research investigating this modern phenomenon. The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop a psychographic profile of participants by examining roller derby athletes’ previous sporting experience and their motivations for participation.

Historically roller derby has been more spectacle than sporting contest. The sport has had multiple incarnations since its invention in the 1930s as a co-ed endurance race, and experienced its most recent renaissance in Austin, Texas in 2001 (Cohen & Barbee, 2010). Modern day roller derby is a legitimate sport played using standardized rules developed by the World Flat Track Roller Derby Association. In the past year the inaugural World Cup, featuring teams from 13 countries, was played in Toronto, Canada.

Previous research on roller derby has focused on developing a demographic profile of roller derby athletes. Studies showed that the majority of roller derby participants are Caucasian, have obtained a post-secondary education, are heterosexual, and unmarried (Carlson, 2010; Peluso, 2011). However, this was only within an American context. While these previous studies have helped to develop a profile of the women who play roller derby it is unknown whether this profile can be generalized to other countries. Moreover, it is unknown why they participate. The current study extends the existing literature by focusing on athletes from Canada and by investigating women’s motivations for participation and their prior experience in sport. This study also has practical significance because roller derby team managers can use the results to develop recruitment and retention strategies for participants. Roller derby athletes (N = 116) from Ontario-based roller derby teams completed an online questionnaire. Participants completed a series of open and closed ended questions on their roller derby experiences, other sport experience, time devoted to roller derby practice and games, and their financial investment in roller derby. Demographic variables were collected and this included ethnicity, marital status, household income, sexual orientation, education and family structure. A K-means cluster analysis was performed using quantitative data to identify distinct profiles of roller derby athletes. However, the results did not produce separate groups. Quantitative data was therefore averaged to generate an overall profile of roller derby athletes. Qualitative responses were analyzed using open coding followed by axial coding to identify themes and relationships among themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The demographic information obtained from quantitative questions revealed that the majority of participants classified themselves as Caucasian (87.3%), with an average age of 31.09 (SD = 7.11). Participants were well educated with 89% having had some college or university education and over 70% having completed a college or university education. Annual household income was generally high with 32.2% reporting income between \$40,000 and \$79,000 and 32.1% indicating income above \$80,000. The majority of the participants stated they are heterosexual (74.6%), with a sizeable proportion indicating their sexual preference to be bisexual (12.7%) or homosexual (5.9%). As seen in Peluso (2011), there were a greater number of participants who self-identified as

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bisexual rather than homosexual. The reverse is seen in the general Canadian population with more individuals identifying themselves as homosexual compared to bisexual (Canadian Community Health Survey, 2009). The remaining classification variable produced similar results to studies of American roller derby athletes (Carlson, 2010; Peluso, 2011) and female participants in other collision sports, such as football (Carter, 2012; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007; Packard, 2009) and rugby (Baird, 2010; Ezzell, 2009; O'Hanley, 1998; Saville, 2007).

The participants in this study were committed athletes. On average participants spend 5.87 (SD = 1.6) hours per week practicing, and have played roller derby for 2.73 (SD = 1.61) years. Participants also estimated that they spend, on average, just over \$1,000 on roller derby related costs (e.g., travel, membership fees, equipment) each year. Respondents frequently used terms such as dedicated, strong, and determined to describe roller derby athletes. Respondents were attracted to the sport because of the social aspect of being on a team and the sense of community that develops from these teams. Future research should investigate the ways in which the sense of community develops within roller derby. By understanding these mechanisms, sport managers can develop effective retention strategies for new athletes.

An additional feature that was attractive to participants was learning a new sport, a new skill (i.e., roller skating – many started as novices), and the sense of achievement that results from developing as athletes and as individuals. Sport managers should communicate these benefits to prospective athletes because it may not be readily apparent that these benefits exist to the uninformed. Finally, participants reported that they liked the inclusive nature of the sport, and that it is accessible to women of varying sizes and athletic backgrounds. Participants indicated that they currently play, or have played a variety of sports (e.g., soccer, basketball, volleyball, baseball, and hockey). Managers should consider the ways in which they can recruit athletes from other sports, particularly those that tend to terminate organized competitive teams after university and those with different competitive seasons. To conclude, roller derby is an appealing, competitive sport for women that provide opportunities to learn new skills and be part of an inclusive community. Future research is needed to understand the 'people who answer the call to brawl' and why they do so.