DIY Sport or DIY Eroticism? Tensions in the Spectacle of Roller Derby

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Created by and for women, roller derby operates within a DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos epitomized by its motto “by the skaters, for the skaters” (Beaver, 2012, p. 25). Women operate roller derby teams and leagues themselves, they participate as performers, and they produce spectacles for a dedicated and loyal fan base. Distinctively, roller derby deliberately marries raw athleticism, aggression, and toughness with femininity and overt sexualization (Carlson, 2010). Placing women’s bodies at the center of the sport, sexual appeal and assertiveness form the central elements of the roller derby spectacle (Pavlidis, 2012). These elements combine to feature an erotized performance that showcases “sexualized bad girls” on skates (Finley, 2010, p. 383). Though derby has received increasing coverage in the sociology of sport literature, sport management has ignored it, despite the tension its female organizers and participants face in positioning their product as a genuine sport, while playing to its fan base and providing a playfully provocative erotic exhibition. This study examines flat track roller derby as a context for exploring this tension. The research explores the following questions: How do derby organizers and players negotiate the sexualization inherent in the performance? And how do they view it within the context of a genuine athletic contest? These questions are fundamental to the field of sport management, which lacks a nuanced understanding of fan attraction toward sport that is ‘by women, for women’ and would benefit from a deeper understanding of the role of sexuality in women’s performance sport (Fink, 2014).

Analytical Framework & Method

Because roller derby brands itself “the third-wave feminist sport” (Kearney, 2011, p. 286, original emphasis), we applied third wave feminism as a lens for examining it. Third wave feminism embraces a “pro-sex stance that includes an emphasis on women’s agency within the domains of sexual life and cultural representation” (Green, 2013, p. 140). Indeed, a hallmark of third wave feminism is its adoption of an unapologetic, overt sexuality. Third wavers use their sexuality as a pathway to liberation by “anchoring women’s agency in the erotic domain” (Green, 2013, p. 140). All told, third wave feminism reflects a deep commitment to addressing the complex relationship between patriarchal social relations, structures, and cultural representations (Kinser, 2004), which was the focus of this study.

To this end, the lead author conducted thirteen in-depth conversational interviews with members of a roller derby league from Southwestern Ontario, Canada. Over the course of a year, she attended numerous bouts and practices to observe the people, activities, and context of roller derby, thereby engaging in participant observation. Data were analyzed using open coding within and between interview texts to identify recurrent conceptual themes. Each text was analyzed using open categories to develop initial descriptive categories (e.g., “performativity”) and then selective coding was used to compare categories both within and between interviews and to look for emerging conceptual themes, (e.g., “empowerment”). Subsequently, patterns of relationships among themes were also examined (such as the tension between “eroticism” and “sport”). These patterns of relationships were developed into the major themes.

Findings

Not surprisingly, women’s sexuality contributed enormously to the popularity and success of the roller derby league under investigation. Surprisingly, only a small minority of participants expressed their discomfort with the overt sexualization of the game. These individuals perceived the sexualization of derby as being at odds with the athletics of the sport. Most participants, however, celebrated the sexual appeal and assertiveness of the sport. Indeed, all participants were cognizant of the gaze of the audience while they performed. Interestingly, the vast majority of the participants felt empowered by their sexual appeal and assertiveness in derby. Aware of their erotic capital, derby girls used their sexuality intentionally to attract fans, who were deemed crucial to the long-term success of the sport. Participants acknowledged, and in many ways embraced, the adage “sex sells”.

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Even so, while sexualization of the sport brought fans to the game, most participants felt sport kept fans interested in it. These participants believed the athletic merits of the sport came through in every contest, thereby underscoring for fans the athleticism involved. Interestingly, participants noted the sexual side of derby was “not just for a male audience . . . The sport is very celebratory of women’s sexuality in general.” Indeed, participants noted the sexuality on display was not confined to a narrow conception of femininity, but rather celebrated different women’s bodies, albeit in a highly sexualized way. Accordingly, players of all shapes and sizes appreciated the opportunity to feel and develop their sexuality, which made derby a unique context in their lives. For some players, the sexual self-confidence developed in derby carried over into other aspects of the lives giving them more self-confidence and improved sexual interactions with their partners. Some players felt the portrayal of women’s sexuality in derby—strong, athletic, assertive—served to challenge gendered stereotypes of women’s sexuality more broadly, and therefore they embraced its inclusion in the selling of the sport.

Discussion & Conclusions

This study reveals ways derby girls negotiated the overt sexuality and athleticism of their sport to deliver a spectacle to an audience. In so doing, unlike other studies that have focused on the objectification and exploitation of female athletes by sport leagues (Brooks, 2001; Krane, et al., 2004; van Ingen & Kovacs, 2012), this study explores how women, as both the organizers and performers of roller derby, deliberately used their sexuality to advance their collective and individual interests. In so doing, this analysis introduces erotic capital—“a complex, but crucial combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation, and social skills” (Haim, 2011, p.1)—used for instrumental gain—to the sport management literature and demonstrates the intentionality of women’s resistance to, and reproduction of, gendered stereotypes, particularly with respect to sexuality. The research provides additional support for the complexity of women’s sport as an arena in which power is gained, maintained, reinforced, diminished or lost. Moreover, the findings reveal the complex motivations that underlie DIY initiatives and introduces the intricate ways sexuality and sport mix to achieve desired aims for women. As a result, this line of sport management research represents a challenge to underlying power relations, which affords an understanding of “by women, for women” sport as political practice. When viewed through a lens of political practice, sport—even one as eroticized as roller derby—can work toward meaningful gender outcomes through stealth feminism (Heywood, 2008).

References


