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**Women on a Roll: How Members of the C-  
Max Roller Derby League in  
Johannesburg, South Africa, Construct  
their Gender Identities**

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# **WOMEN ON A ROLL: HOW MEMBERS OF THE C-MAX ROLLER DERBY LEAGUE IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA, CONSTRUCT THEIR GENDER IDENTITIES**

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how the members of the C-Max Roller Derby League, based in Johannesburg, South Africa, construct their gender identities. Previous research has shown that roller derby impacts on how skaters construct their gendered selves, empowering them as women and athletes. This study adds to the understanding of the impact of roller derby, a context in which there is a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, on the gender identities of participants. A qualitative approach was employed, using in-depth interviews and observations, in order to understand participants' views on their participation in roller derby and how it consequently shapes their notions and experiences of gender. The study found that roller derby is a contested space in which the need to create an alternative environment for women is being penetrated by normative gendered notions of sporting behaviour. Despite the fact that roller derby is thought to be a context in which alternate gender arrangements exist, the findings show that patriarchal ideals continue to influence the women who participate in roller derby and that normative gender arrangements persist and dictate how gender is constructed and performed. The study also shows that, within the context of roller derby, femininity is expressed in a multiplicity of ways and that there is a constant interplay between expressions of masculinity and femininity. Finally, the research found that female skaters continue to struggle to establish their legitimacy as athletes within the male-dominated sporting domain of South Africa.

## **Introduction**

In 2001, the sport known as roller derby saw a revival that was characterised by a do-it-yourself ethos and the fact that it was for women only. Although the revival initially started in the United States of America it quickly spread to other countries and has recently gained popularity in South Africa. Roller derby is a unique sport that was created in the 1930s by American sports promoter, Leo Seltzer. Over the years, roller derby has had many revivals, the most recent being from early 2000. Today, roller derby is a full-contact sport that is usually skated on indoor flat track rings. Many roller derby leagues have been established all over the world mostly through the do-it-yourself efforts of volunteers and would-be skaters (Roller Derby Resource, 2014).

In South Africa, roller derby became popular in 2010 with the first league, the C-Max Roller Derby League (C-Max RDL), being established in Johannesburg. C-Max RDL was the first league to be founded on the African continent. Other leagues and teams have come to life since then. Durban Derby was founded in March 2012 and the Cape Town Rollergirls recently merged from all the groups in the Western Cape that has been growing Roller Derby. The Venus Vixens, based in Bloemfontein and Vaal Roller Derby (Dirty South Skaters) are both associated with C-Max RDL (cmaxrollerderby.com). The aim of C-Max RDL is to develop and play the sport on their home ground

but also in South Africa as a whole. Three home teams currently make up the league – Raging Warmones, Thundering Hellcats and Slam Damsels. C-Max RDL also has an All Star Travel Team, The Joburg All Stars, who compete both nationally and internationally. An all-star B-team, the Killer Bees, has also come to life and it competes on both national and international levels.

Roller derby, like soccer, rugby and ice hockey, is frequently thought of as a masculine sport, and the women who participate are often described as flouting or disrupting gender norms. They diverge from hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity (Gill, 2007: 421). Despite this divergence, the pervasiveness of gender norms still exposes itself. Evidence can be seen in the sexualisation of female athletes and in the expectation that female athletes need to have feminine bodies (Hargreaves, 2001: 160). In the recent 2016 Rio Olympics the pervading impact of gender norms could be seen in the discussions around the female beach volley ball players' uniforms (McMartin, 2016). Despite the gendered norms that plague sports, arguments are still made that women are reinterpreting traditional gender roles and are finding new ways to define their femininities.

One of the ways in which women are discovering new ways to interpret their femininities is through roller derby. Roller derby presents a unique sporting context as it is not the female version of a male sport and is owned and operated by the (female) skaters. Although roller derby is a sport, it also has a strong community element. Furthermore, roller derby eschews normative ideas of athletic bodies and athletic dress adding to the way in which it is arguably disrupting gender norms (Eklund and Masberg, 2012; Paul and Blank, 2014).

Roller derby teams are a space in which women are considered hard-core athletes who can take hits as well as dealing them (Finley, 2010: 371). These women define themselves as strong, independent females who are as tough as they are pretty. The gender identities of roller derby skaters are actively constructed within this sporting context. It is for this reason that this study aimed to explore and attempted to understand how South African roller derby girls construct their gender identities. It also considered how the participants of this sport give meaning to the concepts of gender identity and femininity, and if roller derby is a way of constructing, or even deconstructing, their gender identities.

## Literature

Sports are usually characterised as either masculine, feminine or gender-neutral by prevailing conceptions of gender and gender difference that exist within specific societies at particular times. Sports are generally labelled as feminine when they allow the participant to remain decidedly feminine whilst participating, as well as providing for beauty and aesthetic enjoyment. The emphasis on beauty and aesthetics shows correlation with the general idea of femininity as women's bodies are still regarded as decorative and needing to live up to the male-defined ideal (Koivula, 2001: 378). Sports are defined as masculine if certain behaviour is required from the participant such as using bodily force against another person or object, projecting the body over a distance and bodily contact during competition. Displays of aggression and power are also thought to go with playing masculine sports (Koivula, 2001: 387). "The idea of 'feminine-appropriate' and 'masculine-appropriate' sports locks people into a fixed concept of the 'natural' which is blind to history and ignores changing and multiple feminine and masculine identities and different gender relations" (Hargreaves, 2002: 31). The idea of gender appropriate sports relates to the dichotomous definitions of gender defined by patriarchal standards. It works to rearticulate gendered norms within the sporting context,

resulting in limitations on both men and women's participation in sports and, consequently in the shaping of their identities.

South Africa, like most countries, differentiates between male sports and female sports and in so doing collective identities are built and privilege is established (Pelak, 2005: 58). The South African context – a traditionally classed, raced and gendered context in which access is limited to the privileged – clearly shows how dominant groups ensure their privilege through specific boundaries enabling collective identities to emerge (Engh, 2007: 139). Male privilege is also visible in how female sports and female athletes are less likely to be televised and as celebrated as their male counterparts. An example of the disparity between male and female sports is evident in the difference between the South African male and female soccer teams – Bafana Bafana and Banyana Banyana respectively. Bafana Bafana plays as part of a professional league (PSL) which is something that Banyana Banyana has yet to accomplish despite the substantial growth the sport has seen (Grundlingh, 2010: 46). The female team's matches are rarely televised on premium channels and few people would be able to name even one member of the squad (Kayisi, 2012).

Furthermore, in an analysis of media coverage of sports conducted by Goslin (2008: 304) there is clear evidence that men's sports in South Africa are covered far more extensively than women's. Even netball, which is generally considered the primary sport in the country, received a mere 0.46% of coverage in comparison to rugby, despite the fact that participation in netball recorded an overall higher rate than rugby (Goslin, 2008: 307). When analysing photographs shown of sports in the media, netball also does not feature as only photographs of women in tennis and athletics are published (Goslin, 2008: 305). The fact that women athletes hardly get media coverage in comparison to male sports stars means that few female role models are publicised with whom both female and male rising sports stars can identify with (Goslin, 2008: 304). The South African media also has a tendency to largely publicise only rugby, soccer and cricket, as these are considered the main sports to which people subscribe. The fact that these three receive an overwhelming amount of attention marginalises other sports contexts of which roller derby is attempting to become a part (Goslin, 2008: 307).

As mentioned above, soccer is the epitome of masculine sports in South Africa representing male dominance through annexing the sport as men's territory (Pelak, 2005: 57). Grundlingh (2010) studied the Maties women's soccer team in South Africa, who has been part of the Stellenbosch University sports club for 10 years. She was interested in how participation in a predominantly male sport informs the gendered identity of the players in the Maties women's soccer team. Her study shows how the identities of the Maties women soccer players intersect with gender in the context of the sport that they play. Soccer informs these women's gendered identities and affects their performance thereof (Grundlingh, 2010: 47). Women's participation in sport and the experiences of being a female athlete in a patriarchal sporting environment have a particular influence on these women's gender identities. The fact that women's participation in soccer and in other sports is often relegated to an inferior status impacts on athletes' interpretation of gendered norms and, by extension, on their own gender identities.

Tying in with how sports women's gendered identities are shaped is the notion of body image. Cox and Thompson (2000: 8) argue that sport consists of multiple practices and meanings that directly influence the way in which female athletes view and experience their bodies. Bodies of female soccer players, for instance, tend to be toned and lean which portrays a feminine identity in the sports context. This contradicts the perception that soccer is a masculine sport. In a study conducted by Cox and Thompson (2000) on female soccer

players, evidence was found that players emphasise the need to look good – not having excess fat, being lean and toned. Having excess weight was seen as indicating a lack of commitment and general laziness. The ideal body of a female soccer player, as described by the players, resembles that of the socially accepted heterosexual norm of female bodies. Slim bodies are therefore, in this case, equal to female attractiveness (Cox and Thompson, 2000: 13).

Related to this is the way in which female athletes are sexualised through their bodies. Sports focus on the physical body, and sexuality is displayed through the body, therefore sexualising the female athletes' body becomes a natural occurrence (Hargreaves, 2002: 160). Labels such as 'fat' and 'slender' have become mechanisms of social control that affect women more than men. Furthermore, tight and toned female bodies have become highly desirable. Women are encouraged to keep their bodies tight and toned through exercise but excessive bulkiness or muscularity is discouraged as this is undesirable and considered to be masculine. The desirable female body must, therefore, walk a fine line between feminine softness and toned 'sexiness' (Hargreaves, 2002: 161).

Another aspect of the sporting body is its usefulness in terms of bodily capacity. Grundlingh (2010: 50) found that players specifically enjoyed the physicality that the sport demands, something which is often considered uncharacteristic for women. Similarly, Cox and Thompson (2000: 11) found that the female soccer players in their study had a sense of self-awareness that comes from the confidence they have in their bodies' abilities. A knock-on effect of this bodily confidence was a psychological well-being and emotional self-awareness that spilled over into other aspects of their daily lives (Cox and Thompson, 2000: 11). This aspect is also found in studies on roller derby, in which skaters emphasise strong bodies but also report feelings of increased confidence and emotional and psychological health.

Despite the overall wellness that female athletes experience in their sporting communities, this becomes threatened by professionalisation. Conducting a study of a women's ice hockey club in the USA, Pelak (2002: 108) found that once the women's ice hockey club gained legitimacy the club's values changed from an inclusive and participatory model to an elite model focused on competition. This, Pelak (2002: 108) states, is not unique as other studies have exhibited similar findings. The democratic, DIY spirit of the club faded and was replaced by a hierarchical system that valued a competitive edge. The collective identity of the women's ice hockey club also disappeared as players became separated in terms of skill levels (Pelak, 2002: 109). This separation within the women's ice hockey club (Pelak, 2002) relates to Carlson's (2010: 437) findings which state that roller derby skaters also start emphasising bodily capacity and skill levels to the exclusion of other skaters. Skaters need to be 'athletes' and need to take the game seriously: if they do not they are labelled as 'only there for the party' (Carlson, 2010: 437). This dynamic, Carlson (2010: 437) suggests, limits the possibility of roller derby to critique normative definitions of athleticism and sport. Roller derby is often referred to as a space that does not adhere to existing sporting structures but rather as an inclusive environment in which anybody of any skill level is welcome. The above observation by Carlson (2010) therefore negates this and shows that roller derby still functions within the confines of a normative and gendered sporting context.

Roller derby skaters, according to Breeze (2010: 122), do or perform both 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasized femininity' in practising their sport. As in Grundlingh's (2010) study, this leads to the question of how feminine identities are shaped and negotiated within this space. According to Breeze (2010: 122), skaters are 'doing' hegemonic masculinity through their participation in a full contact, high impact, sport in which broken bones and

visible bruises are often the order of the day. Roller derby girls are also doing a version of emphasised femininity in that they are both contravening and rearticulating ideas of femininity; they are insisting on a rereading of sexed bodies where being a female no longer only means being docile, or being soft with images of the caring mother, but rather embodies the roughness and competitiveness of the sporting female (Breeze, 2010: 123). Furthermore, roller derby outfits are thought to add to the skaters' femininity, striking a balance between the masculine roughness of the sport played by women (Breeze, 2010: 128). Alternatively, outfits are a way in which patriarchal gender arrangements are articulated in the derby setting. Sexualised outfits are a tool that skaters use in order to attract a predominantly male audience which ensures the survival of their sport. It is evidence of how women use their bodies as a tool, not only in the physical contact of their sport, but as a way to assert themselves in a male-dominated space.

Another facet of roller derby is the types of bodies that are useful and celebrated in the sport. Unlike other female sporting bodies, where the norm is to be lean, thin and still decidedly feminine, bodies in roller derby deviate from the norm as skaters are accepted, even sought, in any shape or size. The body in roller derby is a tool, as opposed to an object to be draped in clothing and displayed for others' consumption (Eklund and Masberg, 2014: 55). All body types and sizes are useful in roller derby, where bodies tend to be defined in "instrumental terms" and "participants are encouraged to take up and own space" (Molloy, 2012: 53). There is also a different approach to exercise, one that does not emphasise weight loss but rather fitness and strength (Murray, 2012: 39). Not surprisingly, Eklund and Masberg (2014: 59) found in their study on the influence of roller derby on body image, that roller derby skaters reported a high level of bodily acceptance. Skaters accept parts of their bodies that they previously did not like, for example a big bum which, in roller derby, is now a tool to be used when engaging in the sport (Eklund and Masberg, 2014: 57).

Furthermore, skaters also report feeling a sense of empowerment that comes from the physical contact side of the sport. They find a sense of security and feel more connected to their bodies in a way that would not be afforded women in any other space. Derby girls get to experience their bodies in a different way, they feel empowered and more in touch with their bodies and their bodies' capacity. Being able to push themselves to their physical limits gives them a sense of pleasure and strength (Paul, 2015: 411). Roller derby, as a sport, ultimately provides women with a collective identity in that they experience their bodies in a different way and contradict normative ideas on how women's bodies should be used. It is a counter hegemonic way for women to experience their bodies as they are doing a physically aggressive sport not commonly associated with women's activities (Storms, 2008: 68).

However, as Krausch (2009: 22) points out, there are problems in roller derby's ability to be a truly empowering feminist space. She specifically speaks to the conflict that exists between the sisterhood and the DIY discourse versus the call for the legitimisation of the sport. Although both these discourses speak to challenging hegemonic ideas regarding gender, the methods they employ are opposing and therefore in tension with each other (Krausch, 2009: 23). It would seem that those skaters who emphasise the sisterhood of roller derby are more concerned with the community that the sport offers, which is not necessarily a disruptive space that challenges existing gender norms, unlike those skaters who are pushing for the sport to become mainstream, and who might inadvertently be buying into the heteronormative ideals that permeate the larger sporting context.

## Research Method

As the study aimed to explore and understand how women who participate in the C-Max Roller Derby League in Johannesburg construct their femininities, a qualitative study was undertaken. Identities are socially constructed, therefore an approach was followed that allowed for meaning and interpretation to be highlighted. This made it possible for me to understand the factors that contribute to the production of gender identities amongst the participants of the study.

The C-Max RDL, at the time of the study, had 49 female members and 7 affiliated referee members with 15 people in the rookie and recreation leagues, 3 home teams, as well as a new All Star Travel Team. The age range of the population was 21 to 43 with most skaters being between the ages of 27 and 35. Purposive sampling was employed in the research study to identify potential participants. I therefore selected specific cases based on their informative nature and the data that they could provide. The informants for the study were selected in a non-random way and criteria were based on their knowledge of the league.

Access to the members of the C-Max RDL was negotiated through my cousin who is also a member of the league. The selection criteria were based on two factors. Firstly, participants had to be roller derby players for 12 months or longer and secondly, they had to have at least some knowledge of the history, rules and development of the sport. A total of 10 participants were identified and approached to participate in the research study. Therefore, a total of 12 participants, including the two key informants, were interviewed. In-depth interviews and observations were used to collect data for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants in order to gather meaningful insights into the lives of the roller derby girls. Observations of the roller derby league and its teams also took place in order to assist me in gaining a deeper understanding of the sport.

The interview process started in November 2014 and stretched over a five month period, the last interview being conducted in March 2015. A delay in conducting some of the interviews was experienced as some of the participants were members of TeamZA and went to Dallas in the USA in December 2014 for the Roller Derby World Cup. I used semi-structured, open-ended questions to gather information specifically related to topics such as gender, identities and ideas on femininity. Skaters were excited about the opportunity to describe their own interpretations of the sport as they felt that it was often misrepresented in the media and in how the general public understood it. The following themes were explored during the interviews: how roller derby influences identity formation; gender dynamics within the roller derby league; roller derby names as alternate identities and the meaning that participants attached to their membership of a roller derby team. After conducting a few interviews, it became evident that the interview schedule needed to be adjusted to include questions around the body and the athleticism of the sport, as these were issues that all the participants raised.

As I was relatively unfamiliar with roller derby, observations allowed me to gain insights into and understanding of the sport and I became familiar with the rules of the game. I attended league bouts, practices and fundraisers as an observer. Unobtrusive observation was done by taking shorthand notes which were expanded on later in privacy. Some of the things that were observed were the interactions between skaters during bouts, how they managed their bench and how skaters transformed from an easy camaraderie to serious athletes once they were on the track. At a fundraiser that was held to raise money to send the TeamZA skaters to the USA for the Roller Derby World Cup it was observed how important



the community<sup>1</sup> was to the skaters. Everyone banded together in order to make the fundraiser a success. It was interesting to see, as even those skaters who failed to make it on to TeamZA were enthusiastic about getting enough money raised to get the skaters to the World Cup.

The data were analysed following the steps suggested by Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013: 342) who state that, when conducting qualitative data analysis, you start by immersing yourself in the data. This is followed by setting up preliminary code categories which were then reviewed in order to assign final code categories to all the data. The final code categories were organised hierarchically, with some high-level codes that consisted of various lower-level codes. The higher-level codes were as follows: Gender identity; community and individuality; alternative identity; athleticism; and body. Each of these codes had various lower-level codes, according to which the data were coded. Once the whole data set had been coded the final step of the process could be completed, namely the interpretation of the results. As the study was explorative in nature, I endeavoured to describe the data that were categorised under each code, pointing out differences and similarities between the responses of the participants (Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole, 2013: 347). In this way I hoped to give a complete interpretation of the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the study participants.

## Findings

The findings of the research study are divided into four themes which are explored in more detail below: the effect of roller derby on empowerment and confidence of women; transforming skaters into athletes; challenging and transforming gender norms in roller derby; and gendered bodies.

### **Roller derby: empowering and building confidence for women.**

Roller derby is often described as an empowering sport for women and researchers argue that this is true for various reasons (Breeze, 2010; Finley, 2010; Mullin, 2012). One common argument is that roller derby provides a sense of empowerment to women because it is an environment in which female skaters are not compared with male skaters. The sport is completely female-owned and run. It is only recently that males started playing roller derby.

The DIY ethic of roller derby, McRobbie (cited in Beaver, 2012: 44) argues, is a particularly empowering aspect of roller derby as women are doing it for themselves. As with other sports, women also tend to become more confident, owing to their participation in roller derby. Cotterill (2010:20) found that roller derby improves the self-assurance of skaters and also makes them feel strong and able to face challenges both at roller derby and in their everyday lives. One skater, Madison, equated her roller derby identity to her sense of confidence as *“you can’t play roller derby and not be confident”*. She said that your roller derby identity is *“who you are.”* She explained that there is a *“sense of strength from knowing that you are not afraid to hit another girl and get hit and fall and get up again.”* Madison further explained that roller derby also encourages women to challenge themselves and push themselves out of their comfort zones – *“to step up and do all these things”*.

Roller derby has had an impact on the self-esteem and self-confidence of the C-Max RDL skaters. Since starting roller derby, skater Anna said: *“I don’t really give a shit about what*

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<sup>1</sup> The roller derby community is understood to be a group of women who are joined together by a common activity who share similarities in beliefs, values and actions; what Walsh (2001: 3) calls sharing in “practices”.

*people think about me right now but before it wasn't really like that.*" Before she started doing roller derby Anna was self-conscious and valued the opinions of others in terms of what she looked like and how she dressed. She attributed her change in attitude to roller derby and *"skating and getting fitter and knowing that you are good at something just gives you that confidence."*

The confidence that skaters experience from participating in roller derby also spills over into other aspects of their lives such as their jobs. Lilly, a C-Max RDL skater for over three years now, says that *"it has definitely made me more assertive in my everyday life"* and *"I can have my own career or I cannot work for a boss."* She explains that if she can do all the things that is required of her at roller derby, such as throwing her body around a track and taking big hits, *"if I can do all these at the age of thirty then fuck ja I can go in to work and ask for a raise."* Therefore roller derby skaters do attribute an improved sense of confidence to their participation in the sport. They are finding a renewed sense of self and empowerment from roller derby which becomes a highly valued aspect of the sport.

Despite the impact on their confidence and self-esteem roller derby does not differ from other sports, in that participation in physical activity tends to boost confidence levels and improve athletes' general well-being (Krane, 2001: 124). The fact that skaters feel that roller derby provides a different sense of confidence could be owing to the personal attachment that they feel to the sport more than the actual sport itself.

### **Roller derby skaters becoming athletes**

Recently there has been a move in the roller derby community towards taking the sport more seriously. Skaters no longer want to be seen as sexy girls in booty shorts skating around a track hitting each other, but rather want to be seen as serious athletes who train and practice to become the best in their chosen sport. Some of the changes that can be seen are in the outfits they wear, many teams are opting for a more athletic look with sports vests and leggings or booty shorts. The uniforms that most national level teams are adopting is something more akin to conventional, masculine, sportswear similar to a basketball vest (Murray, 2012: 131). Skaters are also making use of their real names as they want to be recognised for their achievements rather than for their theatrical roller derby names. The changes are eliciting mixed reactions from skaters with some feeling that it is altering the foundations of roller derby.

Despite their mixed feelings, most skaters feel that changing from the sexy outfit to a more athletic uniform will help to make the sport more legitimate as it is currently often dismissed as merely entertainment. There is a struggle to be taken seriously as athletes because of their outfits, but there is a kind of irony in this as these sexy, cute outfits were specifically used to attract an audience when roller derby first started in 2001. The fact that skaters now feel that their outfits are being used against them, as they are limiting their ability to be seen as professional athletes, is also an interesting shift from the enthusiasm they initially felt about wearing alternative outfits that one would not normally associate with a sport. Skaters are starting to feel like their outfits are becoming problematic to them becoming professional athletes.

Skaters in the C-Max RDL also feel very strongly about the dedication and hard work they put in, and that they should not be dismissed as just sexy girls with fancy makeup and fishnet stockings. According to one skater they are treading a fine line with their uniforms and it is necessary for them to find a space where their sport is respected, such as tennis or volleyball. Athletes competing in these sports, wear sexier outfits but are still respected she

says. Contrary to this assertion, female volleyball players continue to be sexualised. Evidence to this fact is the recent attention volleyball players at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games received. Specific notice was paid to the Egyptian female volleyball team who opted to play in long pants and shirts, contrasting heavily with other teams' bikini tops and bottoms (McMartin, 2016). Although the specifications for the female volley ball players' uniforms have changed to include garments other than the usual bikini's, this has not stopped commentators and the media to discuss the female players' attire. According to Stephen Eisenhammer (2016), Reuters correspondent at the Olympics, "More than any other sport at the Olympics, beach volleyball attracts attention because of what players wear". Similarly, roller derby skaters do believe that the sexy outfits were necessary to attract an audience. And although there has been a shift to a more athletic uniform, there is still a sexy aspect to their attire. Uniforms are tight fitting, often still showing cleavage and many skaters still opt to wear booty shorts. Commenting on the new athletic uniforms Madison said:

*"I feel like an athlete, I feel like a strong woman. I feel like I am representing my country, you know, it's amazing. I think feeling more like an athletic powerful woman has actually done more for me than dressing all crazy and wearing crazy makeup."*

Therefore, the sense of empowerment that Madison finds in the athletic uniform means more than the sexualised outfits. This calls into question the power that roller derby players gain from wearing provocative outfits and exploiting their sexuality for their own gain. Competing on a level where they are seen as serious athletes and not having to use their femininity in order to attract an audience seems more important to Madison. The attempt to appear 'more athletic' ties in with the notion that female sports are not taken seriously. In order for them to be considered serious athletes, skaters need to adhere to (masculine) sporting norms.

It could be argued that the move currently evident in roller derby towards professionalization and athleticism is a move to masculinisation. In order for roller derby to exist within the legitimate sporting structures of society, the skaters are changing from outfits to uniforms and are hosting their bouts as professional sporting competitions and are trying to change perspectives in order for the sport to be taken seriously. Megan explained the shift as follows:

*"Look you are going there to play a sport, especially at the World Cup, you go there to beat the other team, you are not going there to look cute while you are beating them. You are not going there to attract attention and have people screaming for you because you are semi-naked in booty shorts..."*

Sport is historically considered to be part of the male domain and for a long time women were excluded. Today, although women are included in the sporting sphere they still inhabit a secondary position to men. Their participation is also discouraged by how female athletes are treated – often being objectified, sexualised or labelled as lesbians (Beaver, 2014: 3). Roller derby skaters run the risk of being subjected to the same treatment once they become part of this legitimate sporting arena. Even their uniforms that are changing to sports vests and leggings have a more masculine appearance. Participants, such as Megan, said that if they want to be taken seriously as athletes they cannot skate in sexy outfits where their bodies are on display.

In spite of the agreement amongst skaters about the change in uniform, the C-Max RDL is divided on the issue of athleticism in roller derby. Many skaters want the sport to grow and to be taken more seriously as they put in vast amounts of work in order to be good at

their sport. Two participants, however, did raise questions about the shift to athleticism and what this means for roller derby as an inclusive community for women. Ava feared that if the C-Max RDL shifted to too much of an athletic focus, it would stop attracting women from all walks of life and with all body types.

*“Women do derby for different reasons and we were concerned that the face that C-Max was representing was maybe intimidating for everyday women who just wanted to come... And that was what derby was built on, derby was built on everyday women coming and trying roller derby and discovering new things about themselves and finding new confidence through the derby space.” “...athleticism also implies a particular body and I think I was a bit worried that if we change to that we would stop attracting women who come to derby, like women who have just had a divorce and they just wanted something else to do...”*

Ava pointed out that roller derby had a lot of different faces and that putting too much focus on the athleticism of the sport would undermine and subtract from the other aspects of roller derby, such as the community and camaraderie. She supports the shift away from the “sex sells” angle with the very skimpy outfits as she feels that roller derby is not taken seriously as a sport because of the way that the skaters dress. Her assertion brings into perspective the sexualised nature of the sport and the need to move away from the ‘women as objects’ ideology. On the other hand, Lucy was also worried about the sport being presented as too professional and that it would lose what roller derby was essentially about. She said that she would never call herself an athlete nor did she want to be one and that is not why she does roller derby. It seems that there is an internal struggle in the C-Max RDL about the athleticism and professionalization of the sport.

### **Challenging and transforming gender norms: (De)constructing gender in roller derby.**

Roller derby developed and continues to function within the boundaries of a gendered society instilled with patriarchal norms. Skaters engage in an activity that is described as “*rugby on skates*” by Katie – the association with the masculine sport rugby being evidence of the unconventional gender arrangements found at roller derby. In opposition to the masculine nature of the sport, skaters adopt a more sexualised approach to the uniforms they wear, thus “*hot pants and fishnets were like the derby uniform*” according to Anna. Although skaters feel that there is a symbiotic relationship between the masculine and feminine elements in roller derby and that skaters have agency in the employment of these elements, power still operates and patriarchal values penetrate this space.

In this way, roller derby does represent a space where gender identities are constructed and is influenced by both masculinity and femininity. In the process of constructing gender identities, Connell (2002: 5) stresses the fact that people take on characteristics of both masculinity and femininity. Therefore, the supposed gendered dichotomy that exists within roller derby is perhaps a more obvious representation of the process of constructing gendered identities. Although females can take on aspects of masculinity and vice versa, as Connell (2002) argues, there are still hegemonic norms that work to influence what is considered acceptable behaviour for both men and women. Women acting in too masculine a manner are seen as problematic. Female roller derby skaters embrace high levels of hegemonic masculinity, owing to the aggressive and physical nature of their sport. Connell’s (2002) argument that people employ both femininity and masculinity

holds strong in roller derby. At roller derby there is a constant interplay between these two identities.

This interplay is performed as Butler (1999: 185) explains: gender is performative and is therefore not fixed; it requires work through the repetition of gender norms. Roller derby skaters perform their gender identities in the context of their sport which is constituted of both masculine and feminine aspects. Through their performance, they are embodying resistance as they are not prescribing to straightforward ideas of masculinity and femininity. Madison describes this embodiment in the following way:

*"...you do have a sense of strength from knowing that you are not afraid to hit another girl and get hit and fall and get up again and carry on and be strong about it..."*

This is further emphasised by Ava when she describes why she was attracted to roller derby: *"it was a different performance of femininity and it is something that women are not expected to do..."* Within these realities skaters construct - and deconstruct - their gender identities.

Furthermore, roller derby is argued to be a space in which gender dynamics are played out in an unconventional fashion. It is female-driven with little male influence. Skaters thus have the opportunity to develop alternative gender identities. However I found that these notions of gender were still tied to a normative gender framework. For instance, when asked to explain roller derby, Jennifer, a skater for over four years, demonstrated a somewhat normative view of participation in the sport:

*"I think the way that maybe women do things makes the sort of sport the way that it is....it's a very like nurturing kind of dynamic. Um...and I think it's quite a strong sort of basis to build on a sport...there's so many more facets to it which make it like...sort of like a family structure. And that is a very feminine way of doing things you know, constructing it like a family...like definitely the way that we deal with everything is...it feels like a very feminine way...open to emotions. You know because we understand...we're women and we go through all the same things and I think that's what keeps us close as well...that understanding of each other."*

Jennifer, like many of the other participants in this study, did not necessarily express an alternative view to gender; instead she highlighted elements that are usually associated with traditional feminine qualities. Normative gender arrangements prevail at roller derby, despite the fact that skaters value their participation in an activity that they feel disrupts the norm. Ultimately, it would seem that roller derby still adheres to patriarchal ideals. The patriarchal influence can also be seen in the development of male roller derby.

The establishment of male roller derby teams has given this reincarnation of roller derby a new dynamic as in 2000, when roller derby started being practiced; it was a female-only sport. Skaters in the C-Max RDL responded favourably to males taking up the sport, believing that any growth in the sport is positive. According to the skaters it was inevitable that men would become interested in playing the sport with the appeal being in the physicality of the game.

Men's participation in roller derby presents an interesting dynamic. Although skaters are generally positive about men taking up the sport or in their wanting to be involved by being either referees or coaches, their participation is problematic. Skaters feel that men are playing a supportive role when they are refereeing or coaching but both these arrangements are positions of power in which skaters are subordinated to the power of the referees whistle and the coach's instructions. The development of male roller derby teams could also illustrate

how men are unable to allow women a space of their own, that they can not merely sit in support on the sidelines but have to be involved. The fact that skaters feel that men's participation was inevitable points to the acceptance of males dominating spaces within a patriarchal society.

In this way normative gender dynamics prevail. Skaters often praise men for getting involved and helping out, saying how they would not be able to do it if it were not for the support of their partners. Madison "*thanks God for men*" as they now have referees for their games. Furthermore, the development of men's roller derby teams has also changed the gender dynamics that exist at roller derby.

Some roller derby skaters are concerned that, as men are naturally viewed as more athletic, men's roller derby will overshadow women's roller derby, lending it more legitimacy (Murray, 2012: 190). Ava explained how she was concerned that "*when women do the sport it is not a legitimate sport but as soon as men put on a pair of skates it is a legitimate sport*". According to Ava there is more to female roller derby than just sex and 'kicking ass'. The girls work really hard and it would be wrong if they were dismissed as merely sexy girls in fishnets.

The central role that men play in roller derby can be likened to Connell's (2005) argument regarding how male dominance is achieved in patriarchal society. Men's positions are legitimated over women by the deployment of certain mechanisms of control. In roller derby this is evident in the prominent positions men play, such as coaches, referees and bench managers. Furthermore, the concern that some skaters show regarding men taking up the sport is not without foundation. Men's sports are naturally legitimised over women's sports owing to the construction of institutions, such as sports, that operate according to patriarchal norms. Hegemony is also evident in how female skaters respond to males at roller derby. They are grateful and complimentary of the sacrifices that males make in order for female skaters to practice their sport. In this way female skaters are consenting to and accepting the dynamic as natural, whilst all the while it is highly gendered, owing to the power afforded to men in that situation (Hall and Jefferson, 1991: 39; Connell, 2005: 77).

Evidence of the masculinisation of roller derby was seen at the first male versus female bout held in November 2015. The bout was originally set to be between the C-Max RDL and the P-Town RDL, a league based in Pretoria. At the last minute the P-Town RDL had to cancel and it was then when the arrangements were made for the men's TeamZA to bout against the Joburg All Star team. The men versus women game was a big draw card in terms of crowds but as Lilly explained: "*...it was supposed to be our game and it became about the guys.*" The male team made sure that their game was the highlight of the evening by securing the headliner event.

The dynamics between the C-Max RDL and the men's league is evidence of the gendered nature of sport. It also casts a shadow on skaters' initial assessment of males fulfilling mere supporting roles at roller derby. The men's TeamZA will also be going to the next roller derby world cup and, according to Lilly, they "*expect and or demand that we wholly support them.*" Although the league would support them as they are part of the roller derby community, at issue is their expectation. The C-Max RDL has already provided them with much support, getting them through their growing pains as seamlessly as possible. The current arrangement reiterates patriarchal norms, in which women are expected to play supporting roles to men. The listing of the men's team as the headline act at the 28 November 2015 bout was also symbolic of how men dominate in the sporting arena and women are relegated to supporting roles.

A further gendered aspect of roller derby is the lesbian label that often affect women in sport. Women who engage in physical sports are not only labelled as masculine (gender), but also as lesbian (sexuality). Female sports, in general, are often thought of as a space that attracts lesbians, especially when femininity is not explicitly performed, and roller derby is no different (Murray, 2012: 32). Roller derby is often regarded as a lesbian sport and skaters frequently have to correct this assumption when talking to the general public and to the media. Although skaters try to negate the lesbian label, roller derby does tend to attract lesbians to its ranks.

The stigma of lesbianism, according to skaters interviewed by Murray (2012: 240), was used to “break a cohesive community of women.” Katie made a similar statement when she says:

*“...it’s maybe because it’s a community where your sexuality is called into question a lot, either by yourself or by the outside people who don’t do derby, who don’t understand derby because you spend a lot of time with women and you really like it so what is that all about?”*

This experience is an age-old problem for women who are thought to be spending time with too many women for an extended period of time. Women get labelled as lesbians, but the reverse is rarely true for men. By placing women into these preconceived categories, society takes away women’s freedom as they have to constantly police their own behaviour. Skaters do attempt to distance themselves from the lesbian label but only in order for it not to undermine their efforts as athletes. A radio interview in which two of the league’s skaters participated illustrates how skaters are often subjected to labelling.

*“We had two girls go on to Gareth Cliff and, you know, all he went on about the whole time was lesbianism and about the girls touching each other inappropriately and what they would wear. I mean, you wouldn’t ask a rugby player that – you don’t ask a roller derby girl that.”*

- Madison

Throughout the interview the girls had to make a conscious effort to steer the conversation back to the sport and promoting the fact that the girls were headed overseas to participate in the roller derby world cup, a prestigious event in which they would represent their country. Gareth Cliff also made repeated references to the girls’ bodies, specifically to their ‘asses’ and ‘boobs’ asking questions about how useful they are when they are trying to block skaters or if big ‘boobs’ are a hazard and if skaters need to wear special bra’s. Furthermore, he continually spoke about what the girls wear and how sexy the outfits are, saying that he understands why so many lesbians watch the sport as they get to watch beautiful girls in skimpy outfits. Here, again the DJ showed how female athletes are objectified in order to become recognisable. As literature shows (Mikosza, 1999; Hargreaves, 2002; Krane, 2001) female athletes’ talents and physical abilities are relegated and their bodies and desirability are emphasised.

The above is also true for roller derby and therefore patriarchal ideals still permeates the roller derby environment. However, although roller derby, and the C-Max RDL, does not necessarily disrupt conventional gender norms, it does provide different ways for women to connect with each other and allows women to negotiate their space in sports in their own way. This is significant as women are rarely afforded an opportunity to create and participate in a space that is of their own making and points to an empowering element within roller

derby. Providing a supportive and inclusive community to women is perhaps more significant than negating gender norms and giving patriarchy the finger, as women find that solidarity and support provides them with a platform from which to move with confidence.

### **'Gendered' bodies and outfits.**

Female athletes have always been marginalised as women are subjected to normative rules that dictate to their bodies' capacity for physical exertion (Storms, 2008: 77). Historically women were barred from any form of physical exertion as it was believed to be hazardous to their health (Storms, 2008: 69). Also, the qualities of an athlete – being competitive and trying to best ones opponent - were believed to be in contradiction to those of a housewife in which domesticity and care are valued (Storms, 2008: 69). Today, female athletes are still struggling to be taken seriously and to be seen as equal to their male counterparts. Female athletes are often objectified and displayed as sexual symbols rather than as professional athletes and there is a general standard to which the bodies of female athletes are expected to adhere (Paul, 2015: 406).

Female athletes should be lean and toned, but still sexy and feminine, bodies that are too muscular are othered (Hargreaves, 2002: 161). The way that athletes display their bodies are also subjected to scrutiny as athletes are expected to still look feminine in the way that they dress, wear their hair and makeup (Chandler, 2010: 5). In some ways then, roller derby as a sport breaks from these norms as there is no normative body type in roller derby and skaters are free to adorn themselves in any way they please.

It is argued that, in roller derby, skaters' bodies are being redefined in a positive way and that skaters are gaining confidence in their bodies and their bodies' abilities (Paul, 2015: 411). A part of the body that is viewed as particularly useful is the butt or 'booty' as skaters refer to it (Paul, 2015: 412). Skaters also accept their bodies and acquire a sense of confidence in their bodies, although many of them do not fit the normative ideal body (Eklund and Masberg, 2014: 59). The outfit is often cited as one of the things that give skaters confidence in their bodies, another is the confidence gained from the physicality of the game and the way bodies are employed.

The C-Max RDL skaters feel that their bodies are made useful in derby regardless of their size or shape. Lilly explained how playing roller derby has given her a different perspective on her body:

*"I look at my body in a different way as far as it is the instrument with which I can play this sport instead of my body being this thing that you like drape in clothes or whatever."*

Skaters feel that roller derby challenges conventional notions of what athletes bodies should look like as, according to participants, all bodies are welcome at roller derby. Athletes are generally thought of as lean and petite but there are many successful, bigger roller derby skaters and many roller derby girls cite body acceptance as one of the draw cards of roller derby. These skaters are not people who would normally be considered athletes but in roller derby, Murray (2012: 178) argues, this is a possibility.

*"There was one girl who was like oh I think I need to lose some weight and we were like no we need you like this!"* (Mia). Skaters feel that there is no pressure in roller derby to change your body because you can employ your body in different ways and play to your strengths. Lilly pointed out that, even though the general perception is that jammers are fit and fast and small and athletic, as they have to score points, there are many bigger girls who



are just as fast and agile. Something that the C-Max RDL players who are in TeamZA learnt at the Roller Derby World Cup that they attended at the end of 2014, was that you need all body types to be able to play competitively and need to play all types of skaters.

Although bodies are not emphasised, there is a stress on fitness and strength in derby. But, according to skaters, this is not for aesthetics, but rather to improve their game and be better players (Eklund and Masberg, 2014: 59). Skaters explain that they feel a sense of control over their bodies when they feel fit and strong and they are able to give and take a hard hit, which is empowering (Paul, 2015: 411). *“I think the main thing is strength. We need to be as strong as possible and that comes with fitness and what not, but that is not for aesthetic value. That is just to be strong.”* (Mia) The skaters of C-Max RDL also emphasised the need to be athletic, strong and fit but, as Katie put it, *“any body shape can be athletic and strong.”* Although this statement by Katie is true, there are still bodily norms that prevail in roller derby.

Participants explained that bodies in roller derby are assessed based on their ability and not on what they look like. Skaters are encouraged to experience their bodies in different ways to “passive embodiment encouraged by traditional cultural norms” (Paul, 2015: 413). Skaters push their bodies to their limits and employ them as weapons to physically disarm their opponents. With the shift to athleticism it remains to be seen whether roller derby will continue to defy normative ideas of athletic bodies (Murray, 2012: 190). Regardless, the meaning that they attach to their bodies and their bodies’ capacities, as a result of the sport, becomes important in how they view and present themselves.

Although the C-Max RDL also emphasises the range of bodies that are needed for their sport and encourage women of all sizes to join, their marketing material does not necessarily reflect this. Ava tells of how she did not join roller derby when she first heard about it because she had the idea that you had to have a certain body and look a certain way to do roller derby. *“It is still something that I feel is a bit of an issue in the league in terms of how we project our public image”* (Ava). This relates to Mikosza’s (1999: 6) argument about how female athletes are portrayed in media images, focusing on sexualising good-looking sportswomen. Another skater, Lucy, also shows concern for the new athletic focus and for what this means for women with different types of bodies. She says that *“larger girls won’t join roller derby if they don’t see other larger girls doing it.”* Ava agrees that the athletic focus might be a problem and she goes so far as to say that *“although we talk about roller derby as an alternative community they are not necessarily that alternative that they are thinking differently about athletic bodies.”* These concerns raised by Lucy and Ava bring into question how alternative a space derby really is and whether there is a perpetuation of bodily norms disguised as disruption. Furthermore, according to Carlson (2010: 437) “real skaters are athletes, bodies matter”. Heteronormative definitions of athletic bodies are becoming important in roller derby, which means that the sport is becoming exclusive in terms of who can participate.

Not only are bodies in derby becoming more athletic, they are also required to be tough and able to contend with injury. Bodies in derby also consist of a physical side, as roller derby is a full contact sport there is a very high level of physicality and, by extension, risk of injury. This physicality of the sport is something that skaters say draws them to the sport. Skaters view the physicality that they engage in as almost like a rebellion as it is something outside of normative behaviour for women. Roller derby affords women an opportunity to experience their bodies differently from how women are supposed to: *“we are not encouraged to experience our bodies in the way that roller derby allows us to, these are the way that men are encouraged to experience their bodies, like full contact, being pushed to*

*your limits.*" (Ava). According to convention women are not supposed to want to be physical or to participate in activities in which there is the potential of getting badly hurt.

*"...the female body is...not really supposed to get bruised and stuff it's supposed to be preserved and pretty and pampered and disciplined in terms of putting makeup on it and there are those aspects in derby as well of course but yeah it just allows you to experience the very physical body."*

- Ava

By emphasising the need for women's bodies to be docile, society is restricting women and their actions which ultimately render them incapable of breaking with gender norms. Roller derby, therefore, questions the norms that dictate acceptable levels of physicality and aggression that women can embody. It also highlights tension between women and how women view other women who show aggression and display a high level of physicality. Women are often policed by other women in dress and behaviour and roller derby represents something that flies in the face of acceptable female standards of behaviour, as revealing outfits and aggressive behaviour are usually frowned on (Mennesson 2000: 22).

Roller derby skaters therefore question normative ideals on gender and athleticism by engaging in a full contact sport that leaves visible markers on the bodies (Carlson, 2010: 436). Although by engaging in a physical, aggressive sport, skaters are not acting as women are expected to, they attempt to counter this by wearing feminine outfits. Observation also showed that their off-track behaviour is normatively feminine and the aggression and physicality they show in derby only appears when they are playing the sport. Therefore their alternative gender behaviour is constrained.

## **Conclusion**

Many (Breeze, 2010; Carlson, 2010; Cotterill, 2010; Finley, 2010; Mullin, 2012) argue that roller derby is a space in which patriarchal gender norms are questioned and disrupted. Skaters, through their participation in the sport, are said to embody alternative femininities. Roller derby started in South Africa in 2010 with the formation of the C-Max RDL. The league aimed to create a space for women in which alternative gender identities could flourish. Since their inception the league has changed in various ways and therefore the gendered impact of roller derby on the league's skaters have also changed and developed.

Roller derby in South Africa started as something alternative, a space in which women could create alternative identities and participate in something that was contrasting to the norm. They flouted conventions by refusing to adhere to any existing sporting structures. The DIY, female-owned and female-run ethos of roller derby also added to the alternative nature of the sport. The female skaters emphasised the need to redefine themselves. Recently, the roller derby environment has undergone many changes which have also come to affect the alternative nature of the sport. The community of roller derby, although initially celebrated for its diversity, is becoming more homogenous. The move to professionalization evident in the sport is undermining the initial character of the sport. Alternative ideas are being replaced by normative conventions that see specific types of women being successful in the sport. The need to become more professional in their approach speaks to the need for women to act and behave in certain ways in order to be taken seriously. Changing their orientation to a more professional, athletic standpoint demonstrates the difficulties that women face when entering sporting contexts. Roller derby is therefore a contested space in which the need to

create an alternative space for women is being penetrated by normative gendered notions of sporting behaviour.

Within the roller derby context, femininity is expressed in a multiplicity of ways. There is a constant interplay between masculinity and femininity, something that is illustrated by skaters' roller derby names. The play on both masculine and feminine qualities in names such as 'Sugar Fist' and 'Bloody Mary', illustrates how skaters are embodying aspects of both genders at different times. Roller derby skaters thus illustrate Connell's notion that there are many ways of being a woman and the sport has allowed them to express different gender identities. Moreover, there is a constant interplay between masculinity and femininity which is illustrated by the dichotomy in roller derby of playing a physical game while wearing feminine outfits.

Finally, the research found that there is a constant struggle to be taken seriously as women who are doing a physical type of sport. Initially, skaters played up to male fantasies in order to get audiences interested in their sport and outfits were employed as particular expressions of femininity. The league was playing with the notion of men's desire in order to grow the sport but this was not successful, which led it to seek a more professional approach. The decision to move to a more athletic stance has brought with it underlying tensions. Skaters continue to struggle to establish their legitimacy, something that would not be found in a male context. Although skaters feel that they are empowered by roller derby, patriarchal norms still permeate the roller derby space, causing the women to act in more normative ways than they realised.

Normative ideas about gender exist in all spaces and operate to control women and police their behaviour. Although initially created as an alternative space for women, roller derby has become normative in nature. Instead one sees that certain gendered expectations still guide their choices in the sport. However, this still happens within a constant interplay between feminine and masculine characteristics.

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