

Branding Gender in Sport: A Visual-rhetorical Analysis of the Branding of Roller Derby

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Abstract

Branding a sport has a significant effect on its reception by the public, particularly for sports that are newer or for which consumer awareness is less. Hence, how a sport is positioned to potential spectators will likely play a key role in its success. Roller derby has been a part of American cultural landscape since the 1880's and took its modern form during the Great depression. Historically, it involved women competing for points circling a flat track, and was primarily target to working class spectators. Over the last few decades, however, roller derby has experienced a resurgence in popularity due to better structural organization through the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) and a repositioning toward a more upscale audience. Part of this repositioning is exhibited in individual portrayal of roller derby participants by using gender-related symbols, which is the subject of this paper.

Driving the repositioning of the sport has been a re-organization based on self-organization and empowerment among the female participants. Participant (typically female) ownership of teams and leagues in roller derby has been described as a do-it-yourself ethos (Beaver 2012) that has served to shift the balance of power away from the previously-structured male dominance of female sports (Messner 1988), for which Title IX was intended to correct. This has served to remove previous barriers for female participation in sports. Portrayals of female athletes have also changed over that time period, starting, perhaps, with female bodybuilding (Lakoff and Scherr 1984). Roller derby is a sport that requires strength and fitness with an emphasis on endurance. It attracts many identities and evokes many desires through its cultural references to rock and roll, pin up girls and comic book heroines (Pavlidis 2012). As a culture, roller derby is set apart due to its inclusiveness of women of different sizes (Sailors 2013), and this inclusiveness extends to attracting new participants with little or no background. Messner (1988) points to the conflict that female sports participation has with femininity and suggests that traditional portrayals of women privilege males. These gender "paradoxes" have been pointed out by previous researchers (Pavlidis 2013), drawing from both hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine cultural symbols, roller derby combines serious competition with playfulness. In roller derby attire, a

cross between traditionally feminine symbols and those usually associated with aggression can be found (Sailors 2013).

This paper examines the use of gender-related symbols among WFTDA participants in order to see how this sport has accomplished its repositioning. Specifically, we argue in this paper that this individual and collective performance of gender is intricately related with the brand positioning of both the sport and the individual teams. The gender performance of roller derby serves as a key attraction and marketing point of the sport.

The study uses qualitative data collected through ethnographic interviews of 5 roller derby participants in a small Southeastern U.S. town. The participants were recruited through informal referrals of the first author, who had briefly participated in roller derby during 2012. Then, referrals were requested from informants to gain access to additional informants. The interview guide was adjusted as some interpretive categories emerged and others failed to be supported by continued theoretical interpretation. As the interpretation progressed, it became clear that the visual branding of roller derby was significant, we collected visual data from the team website of Gotham Girls, a well-known roller derby team based in New York City. Interpretive hermeneutical analysis was used to generate a theoretical understanding of the data (Thompson 1997). The researchers met frequently to discuss the emerging interpretation and challenge existing conclusions. Hence, the process was an iterative one that was carried out through the data collection process.

We find that both traditionally feminine symbols are used and symbols of violence and aggression not typically associate with the feminine. Use of heavy makeup and sexually suggestive portrayals, this takes place in the personal branding of participants through selection of derby names, and visually in website portrayals of members. Use of names that signify violence are common among roller derby, but they tend to be adaptations of names of famous people that are adjusted to signify violence. One informant adopted the name of a character from Rocky Horror Picture Show, for example. Commitment in the form of permanent markers of membership (e.g., tattoos) and relationships among derby participants represents a sense of sisterhood, particularly important in a team sport known for its violence.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners: This paper contributes to the literature on positioning of sports and leisure brands by including the performance of gender in that positioning. Further, it provides an illustration of gendered performance in the individually- and collectively-positioned activity of roller derby.

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