



## Fashioned Bodies in Roller Derby League Logos: An Intersectional Analysis of Race, Gender, Body Size, and Aesthetics

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Roller derby began as a sport in the 1920s, fell out of popularity in the 1970s, and garnered interest again in the 2000s, with 1500 leagues worldwide today (Donahoe, 2010; Mabe, 2007; USA Roller Sports, n.d.; WFTDA, 2019a). The sport was revived by the introduction of the flat track in the early 2000s and games, known as “bouts,” were billed as a form of athletic entertainment: players combined elaborate costuming with athleticism, aggression, and gender expression in interesting and complex ways. In the United States today, the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) serves as the organizing and governing body for 236 leagues (WFTDA, 2019b), each with a unique logo that serves as a visual representation of the team. We seek to understand who is represented in the WFTDA logos and what these representations convey about the sport and the athletes who participate.

WFTDA leagues are typically dominated by individuals who identify as women (WFTDA, 2010), with an estimated 100,000 active players (Lampert, 2015). Strübel and Petrie (2016) have argued that roller derby women are immersed in a subversive environment where they renegotiate acceptable body sizes, concepts of femininity and masculinity, and may reject heteronormative behaviors. Players display aggression, toughness, and power on the track—characteristics that do not align with dominant social expectations of women’s behavior and “femininity” (Storms, 2008). In roller derby, larger bodies are valued and embraced (Krane, 2004): three shouldered “blockers” and a “pivot,” who are frequently larger in size, must prevent a single, oftentimes smaller “jammer” from scoring by passing the pack (blockers and pivot), all the while skating around on a circular track (Mabe, 2007). Derby differs from other organized sports because of its theatricality: players choose a derby name and perform this alter ego by costuming their uniform (Brick, 2008; Carlson, 2010; Green & McCullough, 2009). Punk- or rockabilly-themed apparel items, fishnet tights, ruffles, body paint, visible tattoos, and other forms of costuming enable players to fashion their identities. While celebrating individuality, each team also embraces a collective identity through a logo. The logo communicates who they are as a team, as is displayed on social media, jerseys, or other team-related media.

In this study, we critically analyzed roller derby logos for WFTDA-member leagues (N=296, 100%) across the United States collected from the WFTDA website over a period of three weeks in January 2019. While there has been significant research on roller derby women’s experiences playing and their related bodily practices (e.g. Strübel & Petrie, 2016), researchers have not examined the imagery that represents the different leagues. Using content analysis, we critically examined the meanings of the imagery for the different leagues. If WFTDA promotes the message “REAL. STRONG. ATHLETIC. REVOLUTIONARY,” then how does the logo imagery that is used on the websites, team jerseys, and related social media reflect these principles or not? Additionally, WFTDA offers a diversity and inclusion statement specifically focusing on gender, offering definitions for transgender, intersex, and gender-expansive, where they define gender expansive as “an umbrella term used for individuals that broaden commonly held definitions of gender” (WFTDA, 2019c). Using an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1990), we examined the current leagues’ logos to understand how they represent race, gender, body size, strength, and other aspects of identity.

We used an inductive approach and first analyzed the logos following a grounded theory method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We used an open, axial, and selective coding process and looked for emergent

themes throughout, in addition to using some previously developed codes. A codebook with code definitions was created and referenced throughout. Intercoder reliability was checked by analyzing 20% of the data. We had high agreement on the first round (98%), negotiated the differences, then finalized the codebook and re-coded all data.

Within the logos, 136 (46%) featured an identifiable person whereas the other 160 (54%) did not feature a person and used either text and/or other motifs such as skates or wheels. Of all the women pictured (n=136), 127 (93%) appeared in stereotypical feminine aesthetics, comportment, or conformed to gender norms. Many were wearing make-up, including red lipstick and long lashes (n=81, 60%) and 79% were represented with long, full hair (n=107). Very few logos (n=6, 4%) pictured gender non-conforming women where they might have had shorter hair, part of the head shaved, or no breasts. In four (3%) logos it was difficult to determine if the women were gender conforming or non-conforming. Of all the women pictured, 81 had visible clothing on their bodies, where 76 (94%) were wearing stereotypically-feminine garments or accessories.

We also analyzed race and found more than half were white-appearing individuals (n=76, 56%), followed by those who had an indistinguishable race (n=54, 40%); however, most of the indistinguishable logos were a silhouette of a person filled in with black, making race impossible to determine. There were some individuals who appeared to be a person of color, but it was difficult to determine therefore, we classified them as “other” person of color (n=5, 4%). Lastly, there was one (<1%) Asian individual pictured and no Black people.

We found almost half of the women were in the 1 to 3 (underweight) range (n = 75, 55%), followed by some (n = 18, 13%) in the 4 to 7 (normal weight) size range. No individuals were pictured in the size range 8 or above range (overweight or obese). The remaining logos (n = 43, 32%) did not have enough of the body visible to judge the body size (e.g. they only pictured the face).

We identified numerous other themes when analyzing the images. For example, about 14% of the logos were characterized as classic pin-up style poses with hairstyles typical of the 1940s-50s (n=41). Some logos highlighted body parts, like the cleavage, stomach, or buttocks, in a sexualized manner (n=24, 18%). In a few instances, (n=7, 5%), the clothing was moved to reveal underwear in an erotic expression. Representations of violence—for example, women holding bombs, guns, and other weapons, or shown physically harming others—were found in more than half of the logos (n=90, 30%). By contrast, only two logos aligned women with signifiers of domesticity (n=2, <1%). After coding for hyper-femininity, domesticity, pin-up, references to feminine beauty, and violence or death separately, we noticed that both or a few of these concepts were represented in 49 logos (17%).

WFTDA-member league logos represent mostly cisgender, youthful bodies that were both feminized and violent, with more than half of the logos white- and thin-appearing. Strübel and Petrie (2016) found roller derby women renegotiated concepts of masculinity and femininity, rejected heteronormativity, and moved into spaces that were fat accepting; in some ways, WFTDA logos tell a similar story, yet the absence of women of color, fat bodies, and gender-queer appearances was highly evident. Given the power of imagery, WFTDA and roller derby leagues should think through the messages they are sending and whether or not they reflect the women who play the sport, and the inclusivity they are trying to create.

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