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Investigating the Effects of Inclusive Environments on the Mental Health of Queer Individuals: A Study with the Rose City Rollers¹

Ashton Lee

Introduction

Since its inception on August 13, 1935, roller derby has emerged as a significant cultural phenomenon. Leo Seltzer, the founder and head behind the original derby league, drew inspiration from an article highlighting that over ninety percent of Americans experienced roller skating at least once in their lives. Recognizing the potential of roller derby to captivate the Depression-era crowds and establish a new Americana tradition, Seltzer embarked on a journey that would leave an indelible mark on a global scale.² Notably, roller derby's foundation was rooted in counter-culture. It defied prevailing norms by placing women at the forefront as symbols of strength and perseverance—a groundbreaking concept for its time. The sport's success shattered gender barriers as well as paved the way for equity, particularly concerning women's rights and the disparities they faced.³ Throughout its history, roller derby has evolved into a powerful platform that celebrates and embraces a diverse spectrum of marginalized communities and identities.

The Rose City Rollers (RCR) is just one of over 400 Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) player leagues. Together, the leagues cover six continents around the world, excluding all banked track teams.⁴ RCR is the biggest organization to date and has won

¹ This research, which was conducted for a class project rather than a research study, was not reviewed by the PSU IRB.

² Jennifer Harlan, "The Long and Surprising History of Roller Derby," *New York Times*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/26/sports/roller-derby-history-photos.html>.

³ Harlan, "The Long and Surprising History."

⁴ "About WFTDA," Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), accessed February 22, 2024, <https://wftda.com/about-wftda/>.

multiple world championship titles, allowing the league to pave the way into the future of roller derby.

Located in Portland, Oregon, just by Oaks Amusement Park, lies the community of RCR. The players' hangar is home to more than 400 women, girls, and gender-expansive individuals, all looking to "skate fast, hit hard, and defy stereotypes."⁵ Cambrie Juarez covers the community morale found within roller derby, and quotes RCR marketing manager Meg Patterson, saying,

What's really amazing about the sport is there is a level of finding belonging for a lot of people who probably would have never seen themselves as any type of athlete... or potentially for people who have encountered incredible social barriers to competing in sports. We have a number of trans and non-binary skaters who are members.⁶

Patterson emphasizes a fundamental principle at the core of the Rose City Rollers' identity: their unwavering commitment to fostering inclusivity and embracing the LGBT+ community. This value is a source of immense pride for the organization.

RCR's openly queer setting allows LGBT+ individuals a unique platform of representation and visibility within a physically demanding sport. Studying the impact of this visibility offers insights into the significance of representation in empowering marginalized communities within sport-focused environments. The question this study addresses is: how does the openly queer setting of Rose City Rollers (RCR) impact the well-being of queer players? This study holds significant importance as it delves into the crucial role of inclusive environments in nurturing mental well-being, fostering self-esteem, and facilitating representation for queer individuals. Additionally, it seeks to unravel the intricate interplay

⁵ "About," Rose City Rollers, accessed June 4, 2024, <https://rosecityrollers.com/>.

⁶ Cambrie Juarez, "Rose City Rollers: Portland's Elite Roller Derby Athletes" *PDX Today*, December 18, 2023, <https://pdxtoday.6amcity.com/rose-city-rollers-portlands-elite-roller-derby-athletes>.

between our multifaceted identities and how aspects of one's identity flourish within a supportive community.

Literature Review

Scholars have highlighted the adverse effects experienced by LGBT+ individuals in sports settings, leading to a decline in mental health and self-image. Knoester and Allison reported that out of a sample size of 3,993 adults, one-third perceived sports as unwelcoming for LGBT+ players. Their findings highlighted the need to address prejudice and create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for the LGBT+ community within sports.⁷ A different study by Hughes et al. delved into pediatric providers' perspectives on policies impacting sports participation for transgender youth. They focused on how medical providers for gender-affirming care view possible legislation that would restrict transgender youths' participation in gender-segregated sports. The findings were that providers believed those restrictions would worsen discrimination and stigmatization, impacting their practice and patients' mental and physical health detrimentally.⁸

In comparison to the negative effects of community morale on queer individuals, Mock, Misener, and Havitz examined the benefits of having queer-focused sports groups. The researchers discussed how the bonds between the players strengthened over time and their confidence in those particular spaces. They found that when more identity-affirming needs were met, more players showed up to practice, enhancing social and community bonding,

⁷ Chris Knoester and Rachel Allison, "Sexuality, Sports-Related Mistreatment, and U.S. Adults' Sports Involvement," *Leisure Sciences* 45, no. 8 (March 11, 2021): 764–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2021.1895009>.

⁸ Landon D. Hughes et al., "Pediatric Provider Perspectives on Laws and Policies Impacting Sports Participation for Transgender Youth," *LGBT Health* 9, no. 4 (2022): 247–53, <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2021.0392>.

demonstrating how queer-focused athletic communities can meet individual psychological needs.⁹

Methods

The methods used for the research study consisted of interviews with three RCR players and a focus group using those same participants. Each player had to be a B/C level skater when I conducted the interviews. A B/C skater is defined as a player who is comfortable with contact yet is still learning the concepts and strategies of the game. The importance of the skill level is that the participants are still fairly new to the community, which allows them to have a fresh perspective. In addition to exploring new experiences, B/C skaters are comfortable enough to be in a setting where skill and trust are required in practice. The participants also needed varying backgrounds in terms of sports participation. This sample selection is useful as the data received comes from diverse backgrounds, making it possible for interpersonal answers from each player. The last requirement was that each person self-identify as LGBT+; the relevance is that the research question is specifically targeted to this set group within the roller derby community.

To gather participants, I relied on selective sampling. Research was conducted during a B/C level practice at the hangar where I approached the participants known as C.L, R.L, and L.N and asked them questions relating to the requirements for the study. Depending on the answers of each player, I decided if they would be a good fit for the sample group. It is important to note that all of the chosen participants had some form of relationship with each other prior to the study. C.L. and R.L. are married, and L.N. knows them due to derby practices. I found that this

⁹ Steven E. Mock, Katie Misener, and Mark E. Havitz, "A League of Their Own? A Longitudinal Study of Ego Involvement and Participation Behaviors in LGBT-Focused Community Sport," *Leisure Sciences* 44, no. 6 (September 17, 2019): 750–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2019.1665599>

would be beneficial when conducting the focus group as it would ease any tension or possible anxiety due to being around unfamiliar people. During the preparation for the focus group and the two interviews (C.L. and R.L. had a joint interview to ensure comfortability), the overall process proceeded without major issues. However, I emphasize that only three players were available to be studied, meaning that the data collected is not able to capture the full scope of experiences, as initially hoped.

A setback later arose due to scheduling conflicts for the focus group, resulting in the need to conduct the meeting virtually via Zoom. Anticipating that this change in environment might pose challenges in terms of creating meaningful conversations between participants, I approached the procedure with cautious optimism. Upon conducting the focus group, it became evident that the discussions surrounding the designated topics progressed smoothly. Despite the virtual setting, participants engaged in noteworthy conversations, effectively addressing the areas of inquiry.

In terms of the questions asked, I approached the topic with the focus group differently than I did in the interviews. When conducting the interviews, the focus was primarily on the growth and personal impact the queer players have experienced since starting roller derby. With the focus group, I took advantage of the personal and expressive side of the research. The aim was to focus on three things: community dynamics, supportive dynamics, and empowerment.

Having the questions delve into the participants' perceptions of their roller derby community and their interactions with teammates allowed for the reflective aspect needed for this project. I found that the players going into their own experiences of acceptance was crucial in terms of exploring the impact of personal growth. Next was the emphasis on supportive environments. RCR is known publicly as an inclusive space; however, that should not dismiss

the participants' reflections on the environment. The hope was that having the players explain their experiences within RCR would help draw out differences between communities that were not as well-known as LGBT+ safe spaces. Discussing the differences between two cultures in differing spaces leads to the impact they felt in terms of both positive and negative levels of acceptance. The last goal was to validate and empower. With the focus group questions, I wanted to provide the opportunity for the participants to validate and affirm each other's experiences, fostering a sense of empowerment. I believed this type of validation was essential for highlighting the impact of the roller derby community on personal well-being and mental health.

As the researcher, I tried to make as little of an impact within the research as possible; however, it is worth noting that I am a part of the RCR community. I validated every claim and fact stated during interviews from different sources and none of my perspectives were used for this paper. Acknowledging my presence within the given community, I find that the level of thought put into the questions could have been due to my relationships and care for this organization. I do not believe that this influenced any of the answers given. However, it did make the topics catered to any possibility of discomfort felt by the participants throughout the interviews or focus group.

Findings

Finding emotional validation and a sense of community

A theme found from the data suggests that beyond the openly queer setting, RCR has provided a space where individuals experience deep emotional validation upon entry. Participants expressed feelings of immediate acceptance and emphasized the absence of worry or doubt about their place within the community. In addition, they also mentioned repeatedly the

impact of going into such a queer community and how that is not something seen outside of RCR. In his interview, L.N touched this topic by saying,

I knew when I went in that I didn't need to convince anyone that I needed to be there. I knew as I went in that I was immediately accepted and I knew that without knowing anything about the Rose City Rollers. I just knew what roller derby is, and roller derby is historically super accepting of queer people... I walked in, I didn't have to worry about that I just knew immediately, and then yeah. I was like, 'All right, let's skate' [laughs]. ...you know, I think that their main strength is that it revolves around women, and it has for years. If I'm able to say that as a trans man and still be able to feel welcomed and accepted, then, um, I think that says a lot about the community that they create.

Adding onto L.N.'s experience, C.L. mentioned in a separate interview,

You get to have discussions—like certain types of discussions—with people in the community that you don't...or at least I don't necessarily feel comfortable having with straight people [laughs]. Um, so yeah, the confidence in being a part of that dialogue and the confidence that comes in just, I don't know...it absolutely helps my confidence a ton.

R.L. followed with,

I also want to add that there's a context in roller derby that we don't have in the normal life, which is everybody in your team and in the league is already your friend, and they're going to help you. In normal society, people are strangers, and I wouldn't want to have, like, similar conversations with them, but in practices and links and stuff, you can just walk up to anybody, and they'll be nice to you [laughs]. My community feels like it's been expanded, and I feel safer in the city as just being in it [RCR] because I know that I'm getting so much time with people who are super like-minded to me. That doesn't happen as much at, like, work and in daily life. Like you're not just living your life and there's queer people everywhere, but in the league, there is [laughs]. There they are [said jokingly].

C.L. emphasized the unique opportunity for open discussions within the queer roller derby community. She expressed feeling more comfortable engaging in certain conversations with community members compared to straight individuals. The statement indicates that having RCR known as an openly queer community takes away the factor of caution felt by an LGBT+

individual. R.L. also added to this by highlighting the difference in context between roller derby and normal societal interactions. She mentioned how everyone within the league naturally becomes friends as it is just the morale created by the members of RCR. Having a sense of camaraderie and mutual support despite individual differences created a huge impact of acceptance and community felt by the players.

The vocality of a community is what builds trust for queer individuals

Throughout the study, participants continuously brought up the comparison of vocal and passive activism. They underscored the consequences of the term being ‘neutral’ and its effects on individuals. The players related this point to RCR's community, talking about the significance of constant activism and how that creates trust and safety for the organization’s queer members.

L.N. said,

I think RCR does a very good job at communicating that welcoming space and bringing that environment in players, so it’s an expectation in whatever your thing is. Whether it’s accessibility or LGBTQ support or inclusive...like whatever that thing is, creating that environment where that’s the standard and it’s like ‘of course, why wouldn’t people be accepted?’ or ‘why wouldn’t we be successful?’ I think that creates a culture to where every player wants to work towards it rather than, like, ‘alright, we really need to be doing this thing.’ [said sarcastically].

L.N. mentioned that this attitude is an expectation for everyone and that having RCR automatically embed this standard allows for no room to be passive regarding its members’ rights and treatment.

The interview with C.L. and R.L. brought up similar examples of these enforced values:

It’s not enough to just be neutral; you need to have to be intentional and immediate and abrupt to strike it down, correct, kick people out if you need to...it’s just not enough to say you’re accepting and then expect to put it onto an individual to protect their own identity...which I think is a common pitfall in a lot of organizations because, you know, people don’t

like conflict, and they don't like confrontation and they don't want to...It's just not enough to just be a bystander, and that's one thing RCR is really good at.

Yeah, they have an entire policy and committee dedicated to exactly this thing, and you just don't see that anywhere else [laughs]. Yeah, so being very bold and loud and keeping a united front of inclusion even for those uncomfortable human interactions...which you know a lot of people would just prefer to sweep under the rug and move past.

All participants agreed that RCR's vocality about its members' treatment created a strong sense of safety within the community.

Representation of identities is one of the most influential factors contributing to positive mental health in queer individuals

Another finding from the interviews and focus group demonstrates how RCR's commitment to having diverse representation has positively impacted the mental health and well-being of LGBT+ players. The participants emphasized how seeing genuine diversity among other players allowed individuals with various backgrounds to coexist without the societal pressure of being categorized. In the focus group, L.N. talked about how RCR's authentic portrayal of people goes beyond superficial ad campaigns, empowering individuals and positively impacting their mental health. He stated,

I think roller derby impacts, you know, how girls are able to see themselves as part of a community, and I think that's very impactful for girls to see straight women and queer women in spaces together without, you know, not necessarily knowing. You see a group of women together, and you don't necessarily know if they're queer or straight...yeah, but you don't always know, so you're able to see queer people, and you're also able to see queer people who are able to exist beyond that, and I think that's really powerful in a space. It is an accurate representation of people beyond just, like, you know, like an ad campaign.

C.L. had a similar response when answering a question relating to queer role models. The question was, “Do you think having a role model to look up to that's part of the queer community has impacted the way you view the sport as being someone who identifies as gay, compared to maybe a mentor that isn't a part of the queer community?”

I think broadly, it's the same argument that representation is necessary. It can be one of those things. Um, even in other sports that are female-specific but more inclusive than other sports, like female soccer, for instance...Obviously, it's not just straight women in that sport...but, um, you don't see a lot of Megan Rapinoe's [professional soccer player] running around. It's a lot of, uh, Solo's [Hope Solo, professional soccer player] running around... anyway, the point being is that the top performers of roller derby look just as insanely different as the 101 class does. Um, even if you narrow it down a bit further and just look at the jammers [a roller derby position], they are all so wildly different...I mean, there are super tiny jammers, super tiny blockers [a different derby position], there are larger and tall—Body Thunders is, what, like, 6'7 on skates... Yeah, so seeing that you don't have to be, like, genetically built for the sport you're in, you don't have to be Michael Phelps [professional swimmer] to be a top swimmer, you don't have to be Megan Rapinoe to be in whatever position...the sport doesn't exclude people based on body type as a factor of what is required of it. So I think by seeing that and the top-performing players and top-performing teams, um, it makes the path up, it makes the path forward to developing those skills not just look a lot more attainable, but I also don't have to worry about a weird upward battle.

C.L. had a related point in the focus group:

It's interesting. I don't think I've been in an environment like derby with those people and demographics. Before I went to a non-profit, I worked in finance, which is mostly men, white straight men. Then I went to a non-profit, and I'm still trying to adjust to the cultural differences. Most of the spaces I've occupied in my life have been male-dominated and just very masculine, I guess. I had to do a lot to conform to that to just be taken seriously and conform to that to just be accepted...so just to be in a non-profit space and roller derby...it's weird because I don't have to do any of that. I don't know how to be anymore [laughs]. Because that had worked for me historically, and now none of it's required in the best possible way...but it's definitely, um, a code switch that I don't normally have to make, but it's great. It's really good.

The participants connected their positive experiences in RCR to diverse representation among players. The emotional impact of having someone who looks like and represents you was seen as a powerful concept to the players, highlighting the urgency of bringing that form of inclusion to more mainstream platforms.

Discussion

The study done on the roller derby community, specifically the Rose City Rollers, provides compelling insights into how the organization impacts the well-being of its queer players.

Firstly, the data collected showcased the deep emotional validation and growth in the community that RCR has provided the participants. Players expressed immediate acceptance upon entering the community despite gender differences and overall identity. They emphasized the absence of worry about their place within the sport and how their background would affect their presence. The community built around RCR creates a space where individuals feel comfortable engaging in discussions that they may not feel comfortable partaking in in the larger society. Being given the space for open dialogue and expression of self has fostered growth in confidence and self-esteem, as seen by the participants. Additionally, having a place where they felt unconditionally welcomed provided a strong sense of community and belonging. The participants said this as it is not often seen elsewhere.

Secondly, the findings underscored RCR's commitment to vocal activism and ongoing acts of self-improvement. Participants stated the importance of constant activism in creating safety for queer individuals. The intentional and immediate approach to addressing discrimination and protecting individual identities has set RCR apart from other organizations.

Players continuously talked about the strength and patience that comes with creating a high-morale space such as RCR's. However, when a space fosters patience and strength, the community it creates builds a foundation held by the trust. With trust comes safety and belonging, which were elements felt by the participants when they mentioned this topic. Having RCR foster that relationship between them and its members impacts players' well-being significantly by providing a place of safety and ease away from hate and discrimination.

Lastly, the research highlighted the positive impact representation has on the mental health of queer individuals in RCR. Having a genuine representation of diverse identities is not seen in larger society; instead, it is commonly viewed as unnecessary throughout the media. The lack of representation for oneself in certain roles, limited to those who fit into societal norms, has a detrimental impact on one's self-concept. Participants emphasized this, stating the emotional impact of seeing queer players who come from a vast range of backgrounds and identities. Roller derby prioritizes creating a space for everyone, resulting in an ensemble of players of different genders, sexual orientations, and bodies. For the participants, seeing themselves authentically in a community provided a sense of empowerment, inspiration, and confidence, which, overall, impacted their welfare.

The approach taken by RCR offers valuable insights that can be applied by other sports organizations seeking to foster supportive environments. While RCR's methods and this paper's scope are specific to the sports context, the lessons learned can have broader implications beyond athletics. The findings should not be confined solely to the realm of sports-based communities. Instead, they can inform research on LGBT+ inclusivity more broadly. However, it is important to acknowledge the project's limitations. With the research relying on only three participants, the topics mentioned cannot capture the full range of experiences and perspectives felt within the

roller derby community. Instead, the findings provide a starting point for researchers to delve deeper into studying LGBT+ acceptance within specific communities. These results serve as a foundation for highlighting the significance of establishing inclusive environments that value and demonstrate respect for individuals from diverse backgrounds.

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