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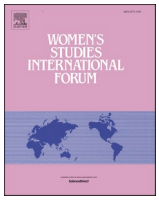

What's it like to be a girl skateboarder? Identity, participation and exclusion for young women in skateboarding spaces and communities

Carrie Paechter [a,*], Lyndsey Stoodley [a], Michael Keenan [a], Chris Lawton [b]

[a] Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
[b] Skateboard GB, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a qualitative study of girl and young women skateboarders in and around two cities in England. We consider what it means to have a skateboarder identity, and how this is related to commitment, skill level, and participation in local skateboarder communities. We found that girls and young women frequently need more support to take up skateboarding than do boys and young men. Crucial enablers are both structural and personal, and include: initial and ongoing support, often from young men skateboarders; women role models in skate spaces; and official women and girl only sessions. Factors inhibiting young women skateboarders include: the public perception of skateboarding; harassment from members of the public; feeling uncomfortable in skate spaces; and hassle from men and boy skateboarders. We conclude that, while skateboarding, both officially and locally, is working to become more inclusive, it remains embedded in wider gendered power/knowledge relations, which privilege and support its domination by men.

Introduction

Skateboarding, as a 'lifestyle sport', is an informal activity that takes place both in 'official' arenas (skateparks, sometimes managed and staffed) and informal ones (general urban spaces). It has the potential to be economically, ethnically and socially inclusive: many communities in the UK and elsewhere have open access skateparks (Beal, Atencio, Wright, & McClain, 2017; Borden, 2019), and the only essential initial purchase is a board. There are no formal gatekeepers or proficiency hurdles, and skateboarding does not require the social capital necessary for some team sports. Although it increasingly involves competition, and is now an Olympic sport, most practitioners consider it to be non-competitive, anti-organisational, and open to all (MacKay & Dallaire, 2012).

However, despite this rhetoric of openness, skateboarding is in practice dominated by white, middle-class, male participants, with a historic prevalence of hypermasculine and homophobic culture (Abulhawa, 2020; Bäckström & Nairn, 2018; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Previous research suggests that, in order to be accepted into skate spaces, young women have to both 'prove themselves' to a masculine standard through demonstration of 'tricks' or overt resistance to pain when injured, and to present themselves as not stereotypically feminine (Bäckström & Nairn, 2018; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2011). This reflects findings from other lifestyle sports, which suggest that female and non-white participants are marginalised even when competing at a high level of expertise (Nemani & Thorpe, 2016; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018).

Nevertheless, there have been recent changes in skateboarding culture towards forms of collective support between women and non-binary people[1] (Abulhawa, 2020), which may be partly due to inclusive interventions, such as funded development programmes and girl and women only sessions in managed skateparks (Projekts MCR, 2022). Furthermore, the improved visibility of women's skateboarding, as a result of its inclusion as an Olympic sport, appears to have gone alongside an increased takeup by young women in recent years, as evidenced by greater involvement in some officially provided beginner sessions noted both in our own observations and international reports (Skateistan, 2019). Given the relative lack of mature, experienced, women skateboarders, however, it remains unclear to what extent this

* Corresponding author at: School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Chaucer Building, Goldsmith Street, Nottingham NG1 5LT, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

E-mail addresses: carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk (C. Paechter), lyndsey.stoodley@ntu.ac.uk (L. Stoodley), Michael.keenan@ntu.ac.uk (M. Keenan), chris@skateboardgb.org (C. Lawton).

[1] Throughout this paper we use gendered terms, and recognise that these may not always be accurate or appropriate. Within the constraints of the activity, we use the term 'woman' or 'girl' to describe skateboarders whom we know to either identify as women or girls, or who appear to us to be female.

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will develop into longer term equality. By examining the lived experience of young women skateboarders at all skill levels from beginner to expert, we unpick the enablers and barriers to more equal participation in skateboarding spaces, communities and cultures. Our research addresses a paucity of studies in the area, especially outside North America and about girls' experiences of ordinary skate space life (as opposed to regular women-only sessions and skate camps (Bäckström, 2013; Currie et al., 2011; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005; Pomerantz, Currie, & Kelly, 2004). It further responds to Donnelly's (2006) call for researchers studying alternative and 'extreme' sports communities to focus not on the 'authentic', represented and defined by core members, but instead to focus on those the latter consider to be more peripheral. Our study is also unusual in its focus on communities within and across multiple skateparks and on other, informal, skate spaces.

Our research is underpinned by a theoretical framework that brings together ideas about legitimate participation in gendered communities of practice with a spatialised, Foucaultian understanding of power/knowledge relations (Allen, 2003; Foucault, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Paechter, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Wenger, 1998). We understand learning and identity development to take place within communities of practice in which newcomers to the community have the status of 'legitimate peripheral participants' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) who gradually develop their skills and knowledge alongside increasing acceptance into the community as full members. This works well for understanding how skateboarding is learned by novices in local skateboarding sites. Newcomers are given legitimation by attending regularly and being seen to practice skateboarding (rather than just watching) (Kelly et al., 2005). Their absorption into full membership is supported by the group through explicit teaching and modelling of skateboarding practices, such as particular tricks, skills, terminology, and attitudes, and implicitly by exclusion or direct action, such as yelling at or crashing into those using the space irresponsibly or in irregular ways (Petrone, 2010). Such informal 'teaching', however, also provides opportunities for dominant groups to mobilise power, and is inflected by gendered power/knowledge relations which, in this context, assume female incompetence. Nemani and Thorpe (2016) note similar tactics used to exclude non-white and woman surfers from superior waves, arguing that white men determine and regulate the rules within surfing sites through symbolic, verbal, and physical violence.

Examining the experiences of young women skateboarders through a lens that considers power relations within raced, classed, gendered and embodied communities of practice allows a detailed examination of what it means to be a girl skateboarder generally and at specific sites, and how this affects the identities and participation of young women skateboarders. It allows us to treat gendered skateboarding identities as both local and performative (Butler, 2004), to examine how skateboarding masculinities and femininities interact within specific sites and more generally, to consider how identities are taken up in and through raced, classed, (dis)abled bodies in motion within and across space. It also allows us to pay attention to how gendered power/knowledge relations are invoked, engaged with and contested by young people wanting to take up, confirm, or deny girl skateboarder status. Central to this is an understanding that, because skateboarding communities are usually constructed around hegemonic gender relations (Paechter, 2018), in which men are physically active and women support this, taking up a skateboarder identity may be an important way for young women to experience feeling powerful, but that this may concomitantly require the overt rejection of more traditional femininities.

Methods and data source

The findings in this paper come from a 20-month qualitative study of young women skateboarders[2] focused on three main locations in or near to two cities, one, in the English Midlands, generally considered to be skateboarder-friendly, and the other in north-west England, where the local authority has taken steps to prevent skateboarding in the public realm (Woolley, Hazelwood, & Simkins, 2011). The core sites were: a public, outdoor city centre skatepark, High Hill Park; a partially indoor, managed skatepark, Flyovers, and a public outdoor skatepark in a large village, Parish. The research team had different roles and have different relationships to skateboarding. Three are non/beginner skateboarders with various level of skill from basic pushing to having learned some elementary tricks, while the other two are expert skateboarders with strong connections to local and national skateboarding communities and organisations. The authors of this paper come from across this range. This meant that in order to preserve confidentiality, most interviews and observations were carried out by Lyndsey, with Carrie and Mike also contributing occasionally. Chris and the other team member had no access to transcripts or field notes until they had been fully anonymised, but were involved in discussions around analysis of findings, as well as facilitating access to observational sites and to some participants.

We conducted observations at all three skateparks over several months, at different times of the day and in different seasons and weather conditions. Observations included both conventional field notes and a specially designed mapping system which allows us both to record who is where within the space, and to trace an individual's movement through it within a specific time slot, including noting power dynamics in encounters with others (Stoodley, Paechter, Keenan, Abulhawa, & Lawton, 2022). They encompassed times when the park was open to all (in the public parks this is the majority of the time; in the managed park this involves payment for entry and the opportunity to borrow equipment) and times when participation was officially restricted to beginners or girls and young women. Lyndsey also sometimes participated as a skateboarder, finding this to be a useful way of meeting potential participants. To supplement our research in these spaces we also carried out more limited observations of other skateboarding sites in the same two cities, including informal street spaces frequented by skateboarders.

When carrying out our observations we carried postcards explaining the study which could be handed out to those using the space (or, in the case of young children, their parents). We used our presence in the spaces, supplemented by these postcards which were also left in other local sites such as skate shops and managed skateparks, to recruit participants for interviews, as well as using a snowball sampling method to contact additional respondents. To date we have carried out individual and paired interviews with 28 young woman skateboarders aged between 8 and 27 (two of whom were on a break from skating but expecting to return), plus single, paired and group interviews with 14 others involved in skatepark sites, including skatepark managers, coaches, those organising local skateboarding initiatives, young men skateboarders, two women whose leisure time is skateboarding based but do not skate themselves, and the manager of a skate shop. We also attended and audio recorded a meeting set up by a managed skatepark, Gnarly Ramps (not one of our key sites), to elucidate the experiences and opinions of 9 young women using their space. While we hoped to include trans and non-binary people among our respondents, no respondent has to date identified themselves to us as such. The interviews all focused on the individual's history with and aspirations for skateboarding, their positive and negative experiences as a skateboarder, and their views on gender inclusivity in skateboarding sites. All interviews were transcribed using a secure transcription service and the audio recordings

[2] 'Girl Skateboarders: active girlhood, alternative sports, and urban space' is funded by the Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant Scheme, June 2021–January 2023, Grant Reference RPG-2021-054.

destroyed after the transcripts had been checked. Ethical clearance for all activities was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Business, Law and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. This paper is based mainly on data from the interviews and group meeting, although we also refer occasionally to field notes and findings from our mapping work. Our analysis in this paper focuses on: young women's identities as skateboarders; what enables young women's skateboarding; and what inhibits girls' participation in skateboarding spaces and communities.

Girl skateboarder identities

Previous research (Bäckström, 2013; Bäckström & Nairn, 2018; Beal & Weidman, 2003; Currie et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2005; MacKay & Dallaire, 2012; Pomerantz et al., 2004) has mainly been interested in the gender affiliations, and, especially, the femininities, of young women who skateboard. We focus instead on how the skateboarder identity is understood by young woman participants. We asked all our respondents whether they considered themselves to be skateboarders; we thought that this was an important measure of whether someone felt that they were, even peripherally, part of a wider skateboarding community of practice. All except two recent beginners, and the two non-skaters, considered that they were. Reasons for their identifications varied, however, and fell into three main groups: commitment; competence; and community participation. We examine these each in turn.

Commitment

By 'commitment' we refer both to the amount of time spent skating and the regularity of participation, and to the extent to which skateboarding was an all-consuming leisure activity (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Dupont, 2014). For a small group of young women, skateboarding appeared to be fundamental to their identities. This could be expressed in terms both of how they saw themselves and of how they thought they were seen by others. Heather (22),[3] said, for example, that people at university knew her as 'Heather the girl who skateboards', and Georgina (21*) that she was known as 'skating Georgina'. In this way, being a skateboarder was part of the performance of self and was recognised as such by others.

This recognition was not always automatic, however, and some respondents complained that it was not accorded to them as readily as it was to young men (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2004). In particular, carrying a board, rather than skating, would probably attract the 'poser' label (Dupont, 2014). Indeed, Suzie (17*) told us that it was only when actually skating that she saw herself as a skater:

> I would say like when I come here [the skatepark] I'm like, yeah, I'm a skateboarder. But when I'm carrying the board, I'm like, no…[…]… I'm like I feel like a faker.

This perception that a young woman with a skateboard is likely to be a poser, and therefore, not even a legitimate participant, is reflected in the wider literature on girl skateboarders (Pomerantz et al., 2004). It is particularly problematic due to the derogatory terms used by skateboarders for young women who spend time in skate spaces but don't themselves skate: Eliza (21*) told us she was known as a 'ramp tramp', a term Dupont (2014: 575) says is used for a young woman 'engaged in the pursuit of obtaining status through sexual affiliation with a skater'. Young women such as Heather and Georgina, who were skilled skateboarders, were only recognised as such by others, and their participation legitimated, when known regularly to carry skateboards, or when their prowess had actually been witnessed.

[3] All names are pseudonyms, chosen by participants. This means that they are not always conventional names in English, and do not always reflect either gender or ethnicity. Names of girl/women skateboarders are followed by ages in brackets. In some cases we have had to guess ages using contextual information — these are marked with an asterisk.

Commitment was also associated with carrying one's board everywhere and the amount that one thought about skateboarding. This was clearly expressed by Rosie (18), an expert street skater:

> People say skateboarding's a sport; it's not. It's a lifestyle…[…]…It's like, you wake up and you're either thinking about it, you're dreaming about it. Everyone dreams about that trick, everyone dreams about the dream line they want to do or whatever, and it's like, you're either watching a skate video…Like it's always in your head.

This was also reflected in the amount of time people devoted to skateboarding. Mandi, for example, dated her identity as a skateboarder to buying a month pass for the local managed skatepark, making it a regular part of her week. For several respondents, skateboarding was a daily practice unless prevented by bad weather (rain makes surfaces too slippery for safety) or other commitments such as work or studies. Skateboarding sessions might go on for several hours or even all day, though in these cases actual skating was usually interspersed with socialising, something reflected in our observations of public skate spaces, in which bursts of skating might be surrounded by comparatively long periods sitting down, chatting, watching videos, filming others, or smoking, either alone or with others.

Community participation

Being an active participant in skateboarder communities of practice was also a way in which young women identified themselves as skateboarders. This was particularly true of people who were so embedded in their local community that they only or mainly had skateboarder friends, something that was relatively common, particularly for those who had moved into a local area and used skateboarding as a way of meeting people. YeahMan (22*) told us that

> I don't really have any non-skateboarding friends…Because I wasn't working either, all I did was come to the skatepark. So eventually everyone who was skateboarding became my circle of friends…So I don't really know anyone who's not a skateboarder.

These young women were fully embedded in skateboarding communities and participation was a large part of their identities. This embraced not just skateboarding itself but also a skateboarder lifestyle, as understood by the local community of skateboarding practice (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Dupont, 2014), which might involve spending long periods in skate spaces or associated locations such as the local skate shop, going to these spaces to find other skateboarders, and having a strong commitment to the local skateboarding community. This option was not, of course, open to everyone. Jessica (13), for example, a Muslim who went to a religious girls' boarding school, still identified as a skateboarder (she was allowed to use her skateboard at school and taught her friends to skate in the playground) despite knowing no other skateboarders except her younger sisters.

Competence

Some people felt that a skateboarder identity came with competence, something that is also reflected in the literature in the field (Atencio, Beal, & Wilson, 2009; Kelly et al., 2005). Several people said that they saw themselves as skateboarders once they had perfected a particular trick, or when a particular move became second nature. Baby (23*), for example, told us that

> There's a few moments of comfort, moments when I've been stood on my skateboard and realised, oh, I just dropped off that kerb without even thinking about it. But two months ago I was thinking about the kerb coming for ages beforehand…And then I just did it on autopilot, and it's like, oh shit, that's quite cool, oh I am a skateboarder.

Similarly, Luna (14) said that she first thought she was a skater when she started tackling bigger ramps, including an eight foot drop into a bowl, and Mildred (21), while arguing that 'anyone who's got a

skateboard and like wants to get into it is a skateboarder', also told us that 'I guess because I've popped my first ollie, yes, I'm in the group now'. The acquisition of embodied knowledge is therefore related not just to group acceptance but also to one's own feeling of being legitimately present. For YeahMan (22*), it was landing her first kickflip:

> I said I'd quit when I landed my first kickflip. I did not quit when I landed my first kickflip. I was so happy to land it, that I just kept going, and was, like, what other flips can I do?

Meanwhile, Eliza (21*), while she saw her skateboarding community as 'my solid group of friends', and 'like a family', and spent her leisure time with them, did not identify as a skateboarder. She could actually skate a little, but considered herself neither skilled nor committed enough to have earned the identity:

> I can push. I've tried an ollie like a year ago, but I've not got…I'd love to be good at it, but that takes time, and I'm lazy, I guess'.

The association between skill level and identity also reflected the commitment and practice time required to get to a reasonable standard as a skateboarder (Dupont, 2014). Although skateboarding was seen as a fun activity, it was also treated as hard work and something that had to be practiced regularly in order to achieve and maintain high, or even basic, levels of proficiency. This relationship between constant striving for improvement and skateboarder identity was, however, resisted by Polly (26) as something imposed on women by masculinist skate culture:

> Why can't you be a skateboarder when you just push around, why is that a poser? Or is that just boys, is that just what boys have made up and we're just buying into it?

This commitment to achieving something that might look easy to outsiders but is actually quite difficult and at times risky (Atencio et al., 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2004), was part of what gave people their ability to claim a skateboarder identity, coupled with the minor and sometimes major injuries acquired along the way. Abulhawa (2020) describes this as 'the performance of 'struggle', arguing that it is central to skateboarder authenticity a core aspect of skateboarder power/knowledge relations (Beal & Weidman, 2003). As Heather (22) put it:

> Sometimes at the start I felt like a bit of a poser, calling myself [a skateboarder], but, you know, you get to a point where you think you've earned it…Crying…Bruises, snapped ankles…I nearly had to give up walking for skateboarding, so…you know I was on crutches for a while, but that's it. I give up my ankles for this!

Girl skateboarder identities, therefore, reflect a combination of commitment, expertise and, in some cases, embeddedness in a skateboarder community of practice. They were seen by our participants as hard won and central to who they are. So what is it that enables girls and young women to take part in and identify with skateboarding? It is to this that we now turn.

What enables young women and girls to skateboard?

Of course, in order to develop a skateboarder identity, girls and young women need to have access to skateboarding, and if possible, given the lifestyle aspects of the sport, as legitimate peripheral participants in a local community of practice. In this section we discuss the means by which they gained this access, and the specific ways that this was enabled. It is notable that generally young women did not feel able to just get hold of a board and try to use it, or to go independently to a public skatepark to find help. This seems to be different from young men's approaches; those we interviewed had often felt comfortable either to teach themselves or to join an established group at their local skatepark, learning to skate as legitimate peripheral participants in a local community of skateboarding practice. We will focus on two main aspects of how access was facilitated: people and structures.

People enabling young women's skateboarding

Several participants talked about being introduced either to skateboarding or to specific skate spaces and communities by established skaters, particularly boyfriends. In this respect, men skaters could be significant enablers for women friends (Atencio et al., 2009), legitimating their presence in the space, despite, as we shall see, also playing a part in inhibiting young women's access to skateboarding spaces and cultures. For example, Craig (girl, 15)) told us that

> And it was just like, because my friend had one, one of my closest friends, and he's two years older than me. And he got me into it, and I had a go…and I just loved it, it was so much fun.

Other young women talked about being lent skateboards. Heather (22) and Georgina (21*), both of whom had been introduced to skateboarding by men partners, also gave examples of how skating with men companions had improved their skateboarding, for example by recognising their participant status and responding to requests for advice or teaching them tricks.

Even competent or expert women skateboarders could need support to participate in a public skate space, particularly on the street. For women, competence does not guarantee recognition by the local, usually male-dominated, community of skateboarding practice. Rosie (18), for example, was introduced by a friend to a place-based community of which she is now a central member. Even then, she felt uncomfortable for a while:

> So I remember going down, I met him there, and then he, like, introduced me to a few people. And then, it was still really awkward. Not awkward, but, like, still no-one wanted to, like, not speak to me, but like they didn't know me and I didn't know them So it was a bit weird.

Rosie's experiences in this particular location also indicated the importance of men as allies to maintain skate spaces as safe for young women. She told us of a time when.

> This crackhead was giving me grief, and all the lads stood up and literally made like a…just stood in front of me and were like, leave her alone, mate.

This emphasises the salience of informal networks and visible male support for young women who want to skate outside managed skateparks. As we will discuss later, they are much less able than young men to simply inhabit public space as skateboarders.

Women role models, seen as full community members, were also~ important enablers for girls starting out. For example, we observed that Heather (22), who coached at a local managed skatepark, was always surrounded by a group of girls who specifically sought her out for advice and support. This kind of local role model seemed to be much more important than national or international figures such as Sky Brown, who was barely mentioned by our participants. Having women skateboarding friends could also be important, for company, lifts to skateparks and membership of an explicitly female community of practice: Poppy (24) said that telling others that she was 'going out with the skater girls' made her realise that 'if…[…]…they're the people I'm hanging out with and they're doing the same stuff I think that qualifies me as a skater girl too'.

Structures

Participants also told us about the importance of structural factors in enabling them to skate. Women only spaces were seen as particularly important, and some women only skated, or only used certain skateparks, during women-only sessions (Atencio et al., 2009). A key aspect of these sessions was that they provided full access to the space. This is clearly seen from our space use maps: in public parks and open sessions in managed spaces, men and boys (on both skateboards and other technologies, such as BMX bikes or scooters) dominated the park almost all the time. Teenage and adult male skateboarders in particular were

able to do this by mobilising power gained from their assumed core membership of the community of practice, which made them able confidently to take up space and feel entitled to it, something seen in other lifestyle sports, such as surfing (Nemani & Thorpe, 2016). As we discuss later, this domination was not just a matter of sheer numbers, although girls were almost always outnumbered except in explicit beginner or women-only sessions. Women and girls' sessions, by excluding men and boys from a managed space, allowed young women to access sections of parks that they would otherwise find it hard to use.

Women and girls' sessions also provided mutual support and a chance to socialise with other women skateboarders. Given that otherwise some young women skate exclusively with men, this is an important aspect of provision. Within these sessions, as well as, in the case of Flyovers, formal coaching, there was also the opportunity for identifying role models and having access to informal tuition and mutual engagement with the learning process within an alternative women-only community of practice. Polly (26), who with Poppy (24), organised women and girl skating sessions in local public skateparks, also talked about the excitement of resistance through upending spatial gendered power relations in this way:

> It's cool to be able to flip the normal dynamic and have a skatepark full of women and girls with just a couple of boys. It's cool to do the intimidating.

Reliance on women and girls' only provision is not, however, an ideal solution to encouraging young women to skateboard. Participants pointed out that this restricted the opportunities for them to skate to these times and places, meaning that they might only be able to once or twice a week (Atencio et al., 2009). There was also some concern in the group discussion that the existence of such sessions might suggest to some people that open sessions were not safe for women, or that they were not skilled enough to attend, reinforcing male dominated power/knowledge relations. While enjoying the benefits of women-only times, and in some cases using them to build up their confidence before joining in with open sessions (Abulhawa, 2020), young women wanted full access to open sessions as well.

Provision of women and girls' sessions by managed skateparks was not always straightforward and accepted by the wider skateboarding community. Mark, the CEO of Flyovers, told us that when they set theirs up someone had thrown a glass bottle over the fence into the skatepark in protest. Some fathers also felt entitled to be present, or even skate, on the park when their daughters were participating. However, while the parameters for women and girls' sessions and events in managed skateparks were generally enforced, if not always accepted, this was not necessarily the case when events were put on in public parks. We witnessed men continuing to skate during advertised women-only times in these spaces, with the organisers seemingly unable to prevent this. On one occasion, on which only adult men were excluded, teenage boys continued to act aggressively towards women, demanding that the women cede space to them.

It is also worth noting that poverty is a factor in access to skateboarding for both genders. Jessica (13), for example, identified as a skateboarder and had been skateboarding intermittently for five years. However, she had not owned a board until recently, when she was given one by a local skateboarding organisation, so was only able to skate at holiday clubs where equipment was provided. Providing skateboards and, if possible, safety gear, is an important structural aspect of bringing new people, especially girls, into skateboarding.

What makes it harder for girls and young women to participate in skateboarding?

As we have seen, some men companions and skatepark managers went out of their way to make girls and young women feel welcome, legitimate and confident in skate spaces, and this was appreciated by the women we interviewed. However, this was not always the case, and overall the inhibitors to young women and girls participating in skateboarding seem to outnumber the enablers. It is important to be aware that, even when some of these problems were shared with men and boys in the same spaces (Ma & Munter, 2014), they were usually magnified for girls and young women. There were also things that were specifically inhibitory for women skateboarders, and which did not apply to men. We will discus four main aspects of this: public perceptions of skateboarders, particularly street skaters; hassle from members of the public; feeling uncomfortable in skate spaces; and problems arising from male members of skateboarding communities.

Public perception of skateboarders and skateboarding

Several respondents complained about a public perception of street skateboarders and skateboarding as antisocial, and the problems arising from this. While this did not really affect the younger respondents, who were taken to 'official' skateparks by parents, it was an ongoing problem for street skaters and those wanting to skate in bad weather. As Baby (23*) put it,

> It's that skateboarding is frowned upon. There's so many signs in so many places, no skateboarding here, no skateboarders allowed, no rollerbladers.

Icantshuvit (16) complained that she and her friends had been automatically treated as troublemakers and prevented from entering a chain store when carrying boards.

Local by-laws banning skateboarding from particular areas were frequently cited as problematic. Rosie (18) complained of being accused of causing criminal damage to the kerb by ollieing off it, and Icantshuvit (16) argued that, rather than designing urban spaces to exclude skateboarders (by including physical barriers to make it harder or less safe to use street architecture and furniture for tricks (Woolley et al., 2011)), 'they should create other spaces that they can go to instead of, like, putting skate stoppers'. This was a particular problem in winter when skateboarders who cannot afford to pay to use indoor skateparks gravitate to multi-storey car parks, with the risk of being repeatedly asked to leave by security staff or police, or even made subject to an anti-social-behaviour order, which might ban them from whole areas of the city.

While these problems were encountered more or less equally by men and women skateboarders, women found that they were also singled out by passers-by, even when with men companions. Rosie (18) related one incident:

> I remember once, a group of twelve of us, right, street skating. This old man comes up to us, just comes over to me and goes, you be careful duck, you be careful…And I went, are you not going to tell these lot to be careful? And he went…No, because they'll be fine.

While such comments might be well meant, they reminded young women that they were seen as different from other skateboarders on the street. This feeling of difference was exacerbated by direct harassment.

Hassle from the public while skating or carrying a skateboard on the street

Both men and women skateboarders experienced general disapproval and stigma when out in public. This appears to be due to perceptions of skateboarding as something that should be confined to official skateparks (Borden, 2019). Women skateboarders were also, however, subject to direct hassle from members of the public when either skating on the street, or, in some cases, just walking around carrying a skateboard.

One thing that several girls talked about was being expected by random members of the public to perform on demand, even when just walking around carrying a board. Mildred (21) described this as 'just the standard lads walking past you doing, do an ollie, do a kick flip', suggesting that it was a frequent occurrence, and Poppy (24) said it happened daily on her way to work. Rosie (18) also complained of feeling that in some public spaces she had to 'prove myself all the time' when skating, because 'people just assume you're bad'. There also seems

to be an assumption among some members of the public that girl skateboarders are fair game for comment – though Georgina (21*) did say that some of this was appreciative of her skill. Although Rosie also argued that some of this commentary was also experienced by the young men she skated with, it was not something that the young men we interviewed actually talked about: they focused more on a general sense of being disapproved of by older citizens.

Several young women also described direct and often frightening assaults, such as people trying to grab their boards and run off with them. More serious incidents tended to happen late at night, when young women might be travelling home alone through groups of drunk young people, some of whom would behave dangerously. Mildred (21) described one incident:

> This girl jumps in front of me, and I've seen my life flash before my eyes, and I'm like, oh, I might have to try and dodge. And then she stopped me and she said, can I ride your skateboard? And just off like, talking at me, and I didn't know what to do or say. So I was like, yeah, okay, but I don't want to be liable for any accidents that you do. And she's like, no, it's fine, fine, fine, takes my skateboard without me giving it to her. And I'm like, right then, do you need me to hold your hand, or like, anything I can do to like make sure that I don't get shit for, you know, any accidents.
>
> And she gets on it, she skates off a little bit, and then I see her toppling a little bit, and I'm like, oh god, oh god, this isn't a good idea. So I run over to her, make sure she's okay, she gets off and she's like, can you teach me? And I'm like, it's 2 am, I really want to go home.

While even incidents like these were seen as partly just what happens if you are in the city late at night, others were more deliberately aggressive and at times frightening, and could take place in broad daylight. Rosie (18) had been spat at twice, both times during the day:

> One was like, two weeks ago, three weeks ago, skating past Rasool Food, like, [a local convenience store], and I was skating past, a guy runs out of Rasool and gets really close to my face and shouts, fuck off, you're shit, and spat all over my face, like phlegmy. It was grim.

Although young male skaters did complain about anti-social behaviour from some non-skaters hanging around public skateparks, serious harassment on the street seemed only to be targeted at women. This was pointed out by YeahMan (22*), who had also been assaulted on several occasions:

> I've had people stick their feet out at me [to throw her off the board]. And I've had someone push me off my board once…[…]…I've had water thrown at me…[…]…They never did it to any of the lads, though.

Street skating, then, particularly at night, carries additional barriers and dangers for young women compared with young men.

Feeling uncomfortable in skate spaces

A major deterrent for girls and young women was feeling uncomfortable in skate spaces. This encompassed both skateparks and the wider public realm. While girls frequently blamed themselves for these feelings, both our observational mapping and our interviews suggest that there are other reasons why young women may feel unwelcome or awkward.

One very obvious factor is male dominance of skate spaces and the communities within them. All the spaces we observed were dominated by men and boys, both in terms of sheer numbers and regarding how the space was used. There were generally more men/boys than women/girls (both skateboarders and others) in any space at any time except for specific women and girls' events, and it was common to see only one or two girls in an otherwise busy space. Male users also tended to take up more of the space available. Individual men and boys clearly felt able to use the entire space, while girls and young women tended to stick to the margins, unless the park was otherwise empty. This reflects previous research into girls' experience of mixed groupings for informal male dominated sports, in which they are relegated to subordinate roles and spaces (Clark & Paechter, 2007). Mildred (21) complained about a group of young men taking up the entire park playing a game of skate,[4] so that 'Amandeep and I had to keep changing corners'. We also observed adult men skaters repeatedly practicing the same space-hungry trick over and over again in part of a small skatepark, seemingly oblivious to the limitations this put on everyone else's use of the space. Often we saw girls arrive at Parish and then, even if quite competent, only skate the path or football pitch nearby, rather than the skatepark itself, and Poppy (24) reported arriving at a park and immediately leaving because she 'saw the people in it'. We also found that young women tended to put a physical barrier between themselves and the rest of the space, for example, practicing behind a ramp in a skatepark, or behind a bench in a street space.

While in some cases this male dominance seemed simply to stem from a lack of awareness that not everyone had the same sense of being entitled to take up space (Nemani & Thorpe, 2016), we also saw examples of what appeared to be deliberate intimidation, using both greater expertise and sheer physicality to exclude or harass others (Ma & Munter, 2014). On one occasion at Parish, for example, Lyndsey observed a group of older men skateboarders repeatedly call out to children (mainly on scooters) to get out of their way, and one of them, without apology, skated so close to a small girl on rollerskates that, not knowing how to avoid him, she fell to the ground to protect herself and covered her head with her hands.

Even when male skatepark users were not being actively intimidating, young women could easily find themselves to be the only girl in the space. This mattered more to some than to others. Some were very self-conscious, clearly feeling that the legitimacy of their presence was in question. Heather (22) told us that

> if I was meeting a friend to go skate at a skate park, I used to be absolutely terrified to turn up alone and just start warming up on my own. Absolutely terrified because you just felt like everyone looking at you…[…]…But you still, when you're the only girl in the park, you do get, you get looks.

While Suzie (17*) argued that young women were often watched on the first day at a new park just because 'you're a new skater and everyone is trying to see where your level's at', Icantshuvit (16) also said that sometimes 'you can tell that they don't really want you there', and there was talk in the group discussion about young women, especially inexperienced skaters, feeling overwhelmed in the male-dominated open sessions. Craig (15) said that when she first got her board four years earlier:

> I was the only girl in the skatepark, it was like me and 50 year old like men, bowl skaters, and that was it. And that really discouraged me.

Others found being the only woman less problematic, or had simply got used to it. Georgina (21*), who comes from a country where the skateboarding scene is small and consists almost entirely of men and boys, said that it was 'kind of lonely' but that also having the 'right group to skate with' was what really mattered. Rosie (18), who was a central member of a mainly male skateboarding community, had more or less become one of the lads, telling us that 'I know it sounds weird, I forget I'm a girl, sometimes, when I'm there'. However, she also noted that others' assumptions about her skill level depended on what she was wearing, with people expecting her to be better if she dressed like a typical man skater.

Some skate spaces were also perceived to be exclusive to a particular group of men, with others not being considered legitimate participants

[4] A game in which skateboarders successively try to perform each other's tricks, dropping out if they fail, until only one remains.

in the space. This meant that they were avoided completely by some women. One popular space was especially dominated by a community of young, expert, men. Three young women actively liked it there, seeing it as a good base for wider street skating and as somewhere to meet other skateboarders. Others, however, avoided it. It was seen (by both men and women) as not being friendly or supportive towards beginners, even though the space itself (much of which is open paving with a slight slope) would otherwise be a sensible place for a beginner to practice. Several people described the atmosphere as 'intimidating', and there was a strong sense that one had to prove oneself as a highly proficient skateboarder to have any chance of acceptance. Even Heather (22), a good skater who knew some of the main crowd there, said she avoided it:

> I used to go there a lot, but honestly, it's just a little circle of people who think they're better than you…[…]…I'm friendly with them…[…]…but you still feel like an outsider every time you get down there, and it's mainly male dominated, you get talked down. Like anything you do they're like, oh, that's pretty cool, or you know, a lot of mansplaining, or just plain straight up ignoring you.

Several young men also described avoiding this particular skate space. The widespread belief among local skateboarders that, as one young man put it, 'you can't go there unless you're really good' was a general disincentive to skate at what is in many ways a space at the heart of the local skateboarding community.

Generally we found that young women avoided any street space that was largely occupied by men, especially if that involved young men in groups skating together. This could result in considerable personal inconvenience. For example, Mandi (27) told us:

> It's just like, it can be really intimidating as a woman I think. Like, there's a spot right outside my flat that I could definitely skate. But it's just, there's so many guy skaters and they are usually in, like, packs.

Young women's reluctance to skate these male-dominated spaces was a thread throughout our research. There was only one exception to this: a local skatepark in which YeahMan (22*) was a dominant regular user.

One factor in young women's reluctance to skate in particular spaces was feeling that they were not competent enough to be accepted as legitimate participants. This was particularly a problem for woman beginners, who lacked the confidence to just join in. One of the young women in the group discussion told us that she had wanted to skate for years but had never felt able enough to just go to her local skatepark with a board and ask for help, as young men seem to:

> I've always lived local to the Fieldham one, but I've just never felt confident to walk over and, like, hi, I want to start, how do I get a board, how do I start, how do I even move it? And it took me a while, even after chilling at the skatepark, to actually get a board, because I was watching everyone all the time.

Several would practice elsewhere first, so that they were at their best when they arrived (Abulhawa, 2020). Others simply avoided open sessions in managed parks altogether, or tried to go to parks early in the morning when no-one else was about. However, this could mean a very short skating session, as Mildred (21) described:

> And as soon as they start coming in, I feel like I'm obliged to go away, because I'm not good, and I don't know…well, I mean, I do know, you know, the skate courtesy and when you need to go and stuff, but just in case I take too long or I get in the way or whatever, I leave just out of fear that I'm going to get in the way, you know.

This worry about 'getting in the way' ran through our interviews with almost all the women and girl skaters, but was not mentioned at all by young men. It extended even to highly skilled skateboarders, including girls who would usually be the best in the park. Mildred's reference to 'the skate courtesy' is particularly telling here. Skatepark etiquette is part of the taken for granted practice of skateboarding communities, and something that all skateboarders (and other park users) need to learn (Petrone, 2010); both managed and public skateparks have posters up about this. It appears, however, that an extended version, involving not actively taking space as well as the intended fairness and avoidance of dangerous behaviour, has been internalised by some young women (Clark & Paechter, 2007). This effectively excludes them from most spaces (and therefore also from the wider skateboarding community) most of the time, and also allows more expert skaters to dominate spaces. This has been borne out by some of our observations, in which implicit hierarchies and conventions (for example allowing a 'turn' to continue until someone falls) result in more advanced skateboarders in effect getting more practice time than those less skilled (Carr, 2017).

Hassle from men and boy skateboarders

The young men we interviewed all welcomed women into skateboarding spaces and tried to support them. However girls and young women still complained about patronising behaviour and even outright hassle from male skaters. Several people attributed this to an 'old skateboarder culture' of misogyny, anti-authority and homophobia, which they saw as persisting in some contexts, and even passed down to and perpetuated by younger men as part of their enculturation into local communities of practice. Young women also complained about sexist imagery that still pervades skateparks, on boards, as part of park graffiti, and so on, and the extent to which this still seems to be taken for granted within the community.

Some community members were also not seen as safe: as Heather (22) put it, 'a lot of skateboarders are creeps'. For example, men skateboarders could pay close attention to a young woman skating, causing her to feel uncomfortable. Heather described the things that had happened to her:

> Sometimes the boys would only try and help you and then they get angry at you 'cause you don't want to get them your number. That's happened to me a couple of times. Some guy helped me set up my board or something, and then he asked me, I think, out, afterwards, or something. Or you get a lot of weird boys at skateparks who will, like, watch you the whole session, or you have a session and they message you afterwards, being like, saw you at the skatepark today, you looked good. I'm like, aarghh.

She felt that this emphasised male gaze was related to the sexualisation of some professional women skateboarders (Abulhawa, 2020), such as Leticia Bufoni, suggesting that for some men, 'it's not about what tricks she can do, it's like how she looks on the board.'

Given this level of unwanted attention, it was unsurprising that young women felt uncomfortable about the performative nature of some skateboarding spaces and events, and the ways in which these were used or set up. Situations in which single skateboarders take it in turns to attempt a particular run or skate a bowl were especially off-putting for some. This was related to the pressure to prove their ability that young women perceived in mixed skateboarding sessions. There was also a prevailing sense that anything they could do was seen as being 'good for a girl'. One member of our group discussion remarked that

> What irritates me the most, when you do something and a boy says, oh, even I can't do that. I'm like, what do you mean, even you can't? Like you should be able to 'cause you're a guy…and I can't.

This idea that young women were simultaneously expected to be worse skateboarders than the men around them while repeatedly having to demonstrate their skill on demand was a source of constant annoyance to our respondents, and could make it harder for them to enjoy just being in the space. There was also a general feeling that some men found it hard to accept that women could be better skaters than they were. Rosie (18) encapsulated this:

> I've played games of skate with some boys before that have asked me for a game of skate, and they've either been a sore loser, cheated, or one of them was like, ah, I can't lose to a girl. I was like, grow up, mate.

This seeming belief that men/boy skaters would automatically be better and more knowledgeable than women/girls also led to a considerable amount of what was seen as mansplaining. One woman in the group discussion reported being given instructions about how to ollie by a BMX rider in the same park, and others talked about having unsolicited advice at times when 'it'll be a trick you can already do, and you just don't land it one time'. This both annoyed them and took away their skate time as 'I've either got to stand here and listen to this, or just be rude'. Heather (22) told us about a time that a man had barged into her teaching session and taken it over:

> One time an older guy was, I was coaching the adult beginner sessions and we had a group of uni students…[…]… and I was helping them on the mini ramp….[…]…And he comes over and starts talking to the girl who I'm coaching about what she should do, bla bla, and I just had to kind of stand there and be like, hmm.

Again, this reflects a perceived attitude among some men skateboarders that young women cannot possibly have high levels of expertise.

Conclusion

An increasing number of girls and young women have been taking up skateboarding in recent years, due in part to national and international inclusivity programmes and the wider impact of the Olympics. Structural moves to include them, including provision of women only sessions, explicit, funded initiatives such as beginner tuition, and attempts to design skateparks to be more inclusive to new skateboarders, are all welcome. The increase in women/girl attendance at beginner sessions in some locations nationally and internationally (Projekts MCR, 2022; Skateistan, 2019) is testament to the success of these initiatives. It does appear that, at the organisational level, at least, attitudes towards women skateboarders are changing, and support is being provided.

Our research suggests that young women would like to fully participate in local communities of skateboarding practice, but it is difficult for them to achieve this, even if they have high levels of skill. Wider gendered power/knowledge relations, which associate masculinity with physical prowess in activities which carry some element of danger (Wheaton, 2016), mean that it is assumed, by both men skateboarders and members of the wider public, that girls and women entering skateboarding spaces lack the skill levels expected of full participants. The belief that young women will not be prepared to put up with the risks and pain involved in learning to skateboard (Atencio et al., 2009), and will therefore give up at an early stage, also makes it harder for them to be legitimated even as peripheral participants. This not only makes going into a skate space with a board and simply 'having a go' much harder for girls, but also prevents their access to informal tuition from others within a local skateboarding community of practice. We found that young women who were fully accepted into local, male dominated, communities of skateboarding practice were very much in the minority, and for some, such as Rosie, this more or less required taking up an 'honorary male' status within the space. Of all the young women we interviewed, only one, YeahMan, who was the sole woman skating with a group of mainly slightly younger and less expert men, could be said to have a dominant position in her local skateboarding community of practice.

Even expert young woman skateboarders were frequently prevented by masculinity-focused power/knowledge relations, and particularly by the image of the skateboarder as a young white male, from having that expertise recognised. While some young men mentioned specific spaces as requiring them to demonstrate considerable expertise before being accepted, this appears to be the case for young women in all skateboarding spaces, except during woman-and-girl-only sessions. Given that these spaces are generally not just male dominated but home to particular and highly exclusive forms of masculinity, many aspects of skateboarding reinforce, rather than resist, wider power/knowledge relations. As D'Orazio (2021: 418) puts it:

> It is a profound contradiction that a subculture that has consistently romanticized its own marginality is complicit in fomenting the exclusion and marginality of participants who are experiencing precisely the same conditions that would normally accrue legitimacy and authenticity (if they were not female).

This means that work to encourage greater participation of girls in skateboarding spaces has to go far beyond simply providing equipment, tuition, and women-only spaces, important though these are. Serious and thorough work has to be done with dominant members of local communities of skateboarding practice, to challenge existing power/knowledge relations. This must involve international, national and local groups, including the skateboarding industry, in examining and resisting the dominant masculinist imagery that is still strongly associated with skateboarding. This will need to include and go beyond challenging sexist images in skateparks and on boards, and involve a thorough consideration of the ways in which skateboarding and skateboarders, including those who are not men, are presented in industry and other media. Ideally, it should involve finding ways of working with dominant men skaters, both in the industry and locally, to recruit them as aware and enabling allies intent on changing attitudes and expectations.

Being a young woman skateboarder involves participating in an exciting and in many ways inclusive community which is trying to change at local, national and international levels. Our research, however, suggests that such change is not as straightforward as it sometimes appears, and that there is still a long way to go before we reach full equality in access and participation.

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