"I don't want to get in anyone's way": mapping girl skateboarders' navigation of place and power in skate spaces

Lyndsey Stoodley, Carrie Paechter, Michael Keenan & Chris Lawton

Published online: 08 Feb 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

"I don't want to get in anyone's way": mapping girl skateboarders' navigation of place and power in skate spaces

Lyndsey Stoodley [a], Carrie Paechter [b], Michael Keenan [c] and Chris Lawton[d]

aSchool of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK of Great Britain and UK; bFreelance Academic, Nottingham, UK of Great Britain and UK; cSocial and Political Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK of Great Britain and UK; dN/A, Skateboard GB, Sheffield, UK of Great Britain and UK

ABSTRACT

Skateboarding is an informal activity with a relatively low cost of entry, and a range of potential practice grounds. Without formal gatekeepers, it is potentially inclusive on social, economic, and cultural levels. Participation has increased overall in recent years, including by girls and young women, who are increasingly visible in skateboarding organisations, international competition, and media. However, skateboarding spaces remain dominated by white, middle-class, male participants. Why, then, is the increased diversity of participation not diversifying the wider culture of the sport? Furthermore, skateboarding research has not been methodologically innovative, limiting its potential to see what is happening. This paper charts the development of a mapping tool as part of a wider study of young woman skateboarders, designed to better understand how different skateboarders (and others) use, move, and interact within skateboarding spaces. Drawing on behavioural mapping frameworks, we show how our mapping tool developed into a comprehensive, transferable system through which complex, fast moving, leisure settings can be studied. We conclude that being in a space does not always confer full access to participate in it. Examples from our research and consultancy demonstrate how the system can be used to illuminate power relations and interactions within active leisure settings.

Introduction

As an informal and playful activity, with a relatively low cost of entry, skateboarding holds the potential to be inclusive on social, economic and cultural levels. Taking place in various arenas, skateboarding occupies spaces which have been officially designated, and/or informally adopted as practice grounds (Abulhawa, 2020; Beal et al., 2017; Borden, 2019; Dickinson et al., 2022; Goličnik Marušić & Marušić, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2022). Unlike many other sports and urban leisure pursuits, there are no formal gatekeepers and no social capital required to take part. In theory, it is possible to pick up a board and skate, and, indeed, lots of people do. Skateboard GB state, for example, that there are around 75,000 skateboarders in the UK alone, with a boom in participation fuelled in part by the pandemic and Olympic exposure (Skateboard, 2023).[1]

CONTACT Carrie Paechter carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Chaucer Building, Goldsmith Street, Nottingham NG1 5LT

Such growth, along with a shifting culture and initiatives for improved access for women and girls, has allowed the demographics of skateboarding to be more heterogeneous than in the past: a past which has been well documented as dominated by young, middle class, white, male skateboarders, and with a cultural history of both hypermasculinity and homophobia (Abulhawa, 2020; Bäckström & Nairn, 2018; Borden, 2019; Carr, 2017; Dupont, 2014; Rinehart, 2005; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). While there have been efforts by skateboarders and the surrounding industry to move away from this history, its legacy continues to permeate some areas of skateboarding, making it less available to those not fitting neatly into the dominant group (Abulhawa, 2020; Bäckström & Nairn, 2018; Fok & O'Connor, 2021; Li, 2022; MacKay & Dallaire, 2014; Paechter et al., 2023b; Sayers, 2023; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). This is despite much increased visibility of women in skateboarding. Women skateboarders are taking senior positions in skateboarding organisations worldwide, and are visible across skate media, though sometimes in the face of misogyny (McCarthy, 2021). Similarly, there is an increased visibility within skateboarding of people with trans and non-binary identities (Geckle & Shaw, 2022), supported by specific LGBTQI+ sessions in some managed parks. Despite these developments, however, women and girls remain a comparative rarity in skateboarding spaces, and even experienced woman skateboarders can find it hard to be full participants in local skateboarding communities (Paechter et al., 2024, 2023b). In this paper we use an innovative mapping method to demonstrate that being in a space does not equate to having access to it, and that the increased participation of girls and women in skateboarding has not solved the problem of their exclusion.

While skateboarding has no formal rules, there is a range of well-entrenched cultural codes and conventions, which contain assumptions about who is a legitimate user of a skate space. Women are still assumed to be 'posers' rather than skateboarders when appearing with a board: overt perfor-mance is required on arrival (Paechter et al., 2024, 2023b). Despite a rhetoric of openness and inclusivity, the practice and place of skateboarding retains exclusive elements, and the raced, classed and gendered experiences of participants can vary widely. Specifically, judgements about who is a valid and able user of a space come down disproportionately against women and girls, irrespective of skating ability and experience.

While there has been considerable research on skateboarding, there has been little methodolo-gical innovation. Specifically, there has been a reliance on interview and unstructured observation, both of which have limitations. An exception is Jenson et al.'s (2012) research on skatespaces in Newcastle-Gateshead, UK, in which details about skate spots and their use were elicited by asking skateboarders to draw mind maps of how they skated the city. These researchers, however, do not mention the demographic characteristics of their participants, so it is unclear how inclusive their results are. This is particularly important in this context, as some spaces discussed were experienced as potentially unsafe by some participants. Researchers such as Goličnik Marušić and Marušić (2012), who have used behavioural mapping techniques to study skateboarding in urban spaces, do not appear to have used these techniques to consider how gender affects use of and access to space, being more concerned with more general spatial affordances. In this paper we discuss an innovative approach to understanding the gendered power dynamics of skateparks and other skateboarding spaces. We explore the development and use of a specialist mapping tool designed specifically to better understand how gendered groups experience skateparks, and to show how different skate-boarders (and others) use, move and interact within designated skate spaces. Using a typology that combines the dynamic recording of movement with a set of simple codes, the tool effectively generates visual and textual data to inform research and practice.

Our mappings focused on skateparks: spaces in which skateboarding is 'in place' and socially permissible, and used by the greatest variety of skaters. Access to most non-managed skateparks is unrestricted, at least during hours that any surrounding park is open, and some are lit and available throughout the day and night. In most skateparks, attendance and use is variable, with different ages, genders and disciplines (BMX, skateboarding, scootering rollerblading etc.) at different times of the day and week, and in and out of school term times (Carr, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; Paechter et al.,

2023b). Skateboarding in skateparks is predominantly unstructured, with people doing different things, though in some skateparks assumed or dominant 'lines' are expected by the majority of skateboarders (with concomitant informal penalties for transgressing these unspoken arrangements (Ma & Munter, 2014; Petrone, 2010)). For most of the time there are no instructors or coaches present, and when there are, group coaching in public parks is usually responsive to users' needs and requests, at least once the basics of getting onto and moving on a board have been learned.

The relatively unstructured nature of skatepark spaces leaves them open to interpretation and construction by participants. Goličnik Marušić and Marušić (2012) argue that leisure spaces are articulated by users, defining the space and how it is used. They note that 'larger groups of active participants can articulate places and, in doing so, create room for themselves and for others' (124). Power relations operating between different users of a space determine whose articulations will predominate. Conversely, how spaces are used by individuals and, especially, groups affects potential power relations within them (Allen, 2003; Foucault, 1977; Leib, 2017; Markus, 1993). Abulhawa (2020) notes that power/knowledge relations influence the rhythms of skatepark space, with faster, more confident and more accomplished skaters dominating space within the skatepark, using more areas of the park and for longer periods of time than others. Carr (2017) also suggests that some kinds of skateboarding environments can lower barriers to women, but only if those in charge, including skatepark designers, take seriously the needs of people who are not cisgendered men (Walker & Clark, 2023). Differences in skatepark use by skateboarders are also partly based on ability, often because some lines through a skate space are only accessible to those with a higher skill level, and those who are less skilled may need to take different ones in order to develop their technique (Ma & Munter, 2014).

However, skateparks have been historically male coded: larger numbers of experienced skateboarders are male, and more men than women are found in skateboarding spaces (Abulhawa, 2020; D'Orazio, 2021; Fok & O'Connor, 2021). Consequently, these power dynamics are often heavily gendered. Furthermore, skateboarding literature, in line with our own data, suggests that even skilled women and girls experience skateparks in a different way from, for example, young men, and that this is not just a matter of ability and/or experience. Skateboarding, as an identity, culture, and physical practice, is learned within local skateboarding communities which legitimate some beginners and support them in developing mastery, while excluding others or refusing them full access to the practice. Because many skateboarding communities remain male dominated (Abulhawa, 2020; Bäckström, 2013; Beal et al., 2017), it is harder for girls, at all skill levels, to be legitimated even as peripheral participants (Atencio et al., 2009; Carr, 2017; McCarthy, 2021), and this affects how they approach public skateboarding. Our interviews suggest that even experienced young woman skateboarders often seek out quiet, or protected space, or avoid skateparks at busy times. For example, YeahMan (23*)[2] told us that when new people enter the park when she is skating, 'I can't skate at all, I just sit down. I don't want to get in anyone's way'.

While several participants emphasised their own internalised anxiety as being the cause of these feelings of being *out of place*, others in the space can actively harass and intimidate those participants who are seen as less entitled to use it. While this may be due to lack of skill or to what is considered to be poor skatepark etiquette (Ma & Munter, 2014; Petrone, 2010), it may also be straightforwardly gendered. We saw such harassment happen several times in unstructured observations, and it was also described by respondents in interviews. It was therefore important to find ways of systematically observing and recording such interactions. We needed to work out why the more diverse participation in skateboarding is not really diversifying the wider culture of the sport and making girls and young women feel fully included.

Methods

Our skatepark mapping work forms part of a study of girl and young woman skateboarders,[3] focusing on the rising number of women and girl skaters[4] who are challenging male dominance by

taking part, creating space, and forging individual and collective skateboarding identities (Paechter et al., 2024, 2023a, 2023b). Underpinned by a theoretical framework that combines the concept of legitimate participation in gendered communities of practice, with explicitly spatialised, Foucaultian understandings of power/knowledge relations (Allen, 2003; Paechter, 2006; Wenger, 1998) the research, conducted over 20 months, explored three key case study sites, plus associated street skate spaces. Though our focus skateparks are all designated, or 'official' skateparks, they were selected to contrast with each other. One, Flyovers, is an undercover, managed space for which payment is required. The other two skateparks are outdoors and not formally managed. Parish, situated in a large village, is maintained by the parish council and informally looked after by members of the community. Situated in a parkland area, it is a large, newly refurbished skatepark which provides a challenging, flowing space. Popular with BMXers and young children on scooters, Parish hosts a range of interactions between various user groups. The other, High Hill Park, is much smaller, in the inner city. It is used by a local non-profit skateboarding organisation for free skateboarding events for young people, and a grassy area in the centre has become a popular hang-out spot on sunny days. To supplement our understandings of these places, and to recruit exclusively street skating respondents, we also made limited observations of other formal and informal skate spots in the surrounding areas.

We carried out individual and paired interviews with 32 young woman skateboarders aged 8–27, ranging from novice to experienced and expert skateboarders (two of whom were on a break from skating but expecting to return), plus single, paired and group interviews with 15 others involved in skatepark sites: skatepark managers,; man and woman 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 nine young women using their space. Finally, we organised an exchange visit between young women attending Flyovers and those from a managed park in Hillwood with which we had good links. This involved seven young women in total. During the first visit and between then and the second, the young women shared notes and videos of their skateboarding activities, which we used as a prompt for a recorded focus group discussion on the second occasion. Interviews centred around 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 destroyed after the transcripts had been checked. Those taking part in interviews and the two group discussions were given advance written information about the study, and completed consent forms, countersigned by parents if they were under 16. When observing in skateparks (two of which were public spaces) we carried information cards to give out to anyone interested in or concerned about our work, and we introduced ourselves, or were introduced by staff, to skateboarders in the managed skatepark. Lyndsey also sometimes participated as a fairly novice skateboarder, sharing the experience of all three skateparks with respondents. Ethical clearance for all activities was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Business, Law and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Interview data were analysed using NVivo using predominantly inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), with codes and coding regularly discussed and checked between the three social scientists in the team, and externally validated through ongoing informal discussions with experienced skateboarders, skate coaches, and skatepark managers.

In order to triangulate interview data about young women's experiences in skate spaces, which suggested considerable experience of exclusion (Paechter et al., 2023b), we needed to develop a way to map systematically who is in a skatepark at a specific time, what they are doing there, and the power dynamics of interactions between users. We needed to see, for example, whether the skate lines of young woman users are a factor in their exclusion from everyday skateboarding and whether they are otherwise systematically excluded by other skateboarders. Because of the sites

that we were observing, which were all at least partially outdoors and, in two cases, public spaces, we needed a simple analogue coding tool that could capture both position and movement. The literature on behavioural mapping formed a useful starting point. Behavioural maps are seen as providing direct links between users of places and the physicality and functionality of the places themselves (Goličnik Marušić & Marušić, 2012). They are research tools that record specific behaviours at a particular time and place, or the behaviours of a person within that space (Ng, 2016), and are considered effective for use in small, dynamic spaces, and used across disciplines, including play, urban planning, and landscape architecture (Cox et al., 2018). Using a pre-determined typology and codes, behaviour maps can focus on the movements and activities of an individual, or represent the space itself: who is in it, who they are, where they are, what they are doing, and so on. Using codes is necessary for fast-moving environments. These can be developed either from preliminary observations (Ghavampour et al., 2017; Goličnik & Thompson, 2010; Goličnik Marušić & Marušić, 2012; Ng, 2016) or by using and developing existing typologies that focus on what is considered important in this space or research context (Loebach & Cox, 2020). However, many of the existing mapping tools and procedures, because of their focus on such things as urban space use or children's developmental play, do not contain the power-related dynamic elements that we required. We had to adapt these methodologies to provide a system that was both dynamic and sensitive to power relations, while remaining easy to use and as reliable as possible in challenging conditions.

Initial open observations were used to gain an understanding of what went on in skateparks. Unlike, for example, the situation described by Loebach and Cox (2020) when developing a way of mapping children's outdoor play, there are no pre-existing typologies of skatepark action. While there are established protocols for naming skateboard tricks and moves, these were not our main focus, and such a categorisation would not cover either less conventional skatepark activities, or the concerns about space and power that interested us. We also had to consider that skateparks host a range of activities beyond skateboarding. This was particularly so in the non-managed skateparks, where a variety of ramp-based activity was recorded. The ramps were used extensively for non-skateboard play, such as running, climbing, hiding, and sliding. Various other wheels were in use, including remote -controlled cars, toy prams, real prams and pushchairs, wheelchairs and tricycles. We therefore needed a mapping system that did not just focus on skateboarding but was able to record the multitude of activities present.

In addition to *what* people were doing, we hoped to understand *who* was doing it, to record observable characteristics including: gender; age; ethnicity; technology being used; and whom they were with. We were particularly interested in how users moved in this space: the scope; scale; speed; frequency of movement; and if/how people were interacting. We hoped that this combination of factors would allow us to explore how power was circulating and being mobilised in these spaces and times. To grapple with this wide range of variables, it was necessary to develop a typology of key actions, and a set of simple codes to document these quickly and accurately.

A practical starting point for the mapping tool was that a low-tech solution was required, primarily due to the parks being non-managed spaces which were themselves embedded in wider public access space. Most of the observations in these spaces were to be conducted by a lone researcher and so from a safety perspective it was important for us to not be seen using expensive equipment for prolonged periods of time. A paper-based '2-map' approach was adopted to effectively record a wide enough range of variables and interactions in a short space of time. This approach incorporated pairs of 'place centred' and 'individual centred' maps, printed on individual sheets of A4 paper. Both maps were compiled using a template which provided space for notes, as well as prompts for administrative details such as map reference number, date and time of observation, and the name or initials of the observer. Where the maps differ is in the table/key, and in the way that the map is marked or produced.

As shown in Figure 1, the first map focuses on the place itself, and is a form of 'snapshot' to show the overall numbers of users and activities being undertaken in the space at a specific point in time.

It details the total number of users, narrowed to the total number of skateboarders, and narrowed further to make it clear how many (apparently) girl skateboarders are using the space. The template also provides space to record other uses of the space: active use such as scootering; rollerskating; BMX; and other; and indirect uses of the space such as: teaching; filming or photographing; general socialising; and more focussed spectating. The map is marked with simple, hand drawn, dots or crosses to show where in the park users are, with the 'Notes' space providing capacity for further detail where appropriate.

While the first map provides an overview of the space, the second template (Figure 2) focuses on an individual. Designed to 'follow the user' and chart how a particular skateboarder (or other active user) is using the park at a given time, this map is marked with line drawings and simple codes.

As detailed in Table 1, the codes were developed in line with the previously discussed observations, and cover a broad range of actions and interactions.

Combined, the two maps allow for both context (what is going on in the park) and depth (what an individual is doing) to be recorded. Both are designed to be completed quickly, and the codes speed up and simplify the recording of information. We now explore how this works in practice.

Using the maps

While the format of the tool remains consistent, the above templates can be adapted for use in different skatespaces, through advance preparation of space-specific outline maps. These can be produced at varying levels of sophistication, depending on the scope of the research: for example, they could include notes on depth of bowls or steepness of ramps for those wanting to focus on the affordances for those at different skill levels. For our research, which was concerned specifically with the impact of gender on access for skateboarders at all levels, we sourced indoor park plans from skatepark management and, in the case of unmanaged outdoor areas, through satellite maps. The use of satellite maps also allowed us to trial the system in street spaces. We simplified the satellite maps to emphasise key elements such as ramps and park features, to make it easier to locate specific points in the space when mapping, using lines and geometric shapes to identify key parts of the space. This improved both accuracy in the production of maps, and the readability of final results. Where possible, these maps were produced to scale to allow for the transference of data into GIS programs for further analysis (Cox et al., 2018; Ghavampour et al., 2017; Goličnik & Thompson, 2010; Goličnik Marušić & Marušić, 2012; Loebach & Cox, 2020; Ng, 2016). However, we did not actually do this transfer, as it was not necessary for our purposes. Because of the highly dynamic nature of skatepark use, we also did not find it useful to tabulate the mapping data as a whole: it was more important to consider specific occasions involving particular gendered groups and map their movements and interactions. As a team of qualitative researchers with relatively limited resources, our focus in this project was on the visual representation of trends and analysis of accompanying notes, and so a map's functionality took precedence over its technicality.

Once produced, maps were tested for legibility and validity among team members and added to the templates. This was done in either landscape or portrait orientations, to allow for maximum usable space on the page, again, to improve accuracy and readability. As we were using a paper-based system, the complete maps were printed out and collated alternately, to provide smooth transition between the two templates, and avoid confusion over which version should come next in a mapping session.

During mapping sessions, observations were conducted every five minutes, using the maps alternately. In effect, a snapshot was generated every ten minutes, building the context for the interim movement maps, in which the actions and interactions of skateboarders (or other users) were tracked and recorded for 45 seconds (also at 10 minute intervals). The timings, like other aspects of this tool, were tested and adjusted to be effective. The five-minute interval was found to be sufficient to ensure maps were completed comprehensively, with time to write up notes and reset in time for the next map. We found 45 seconds to be an effective time marker to
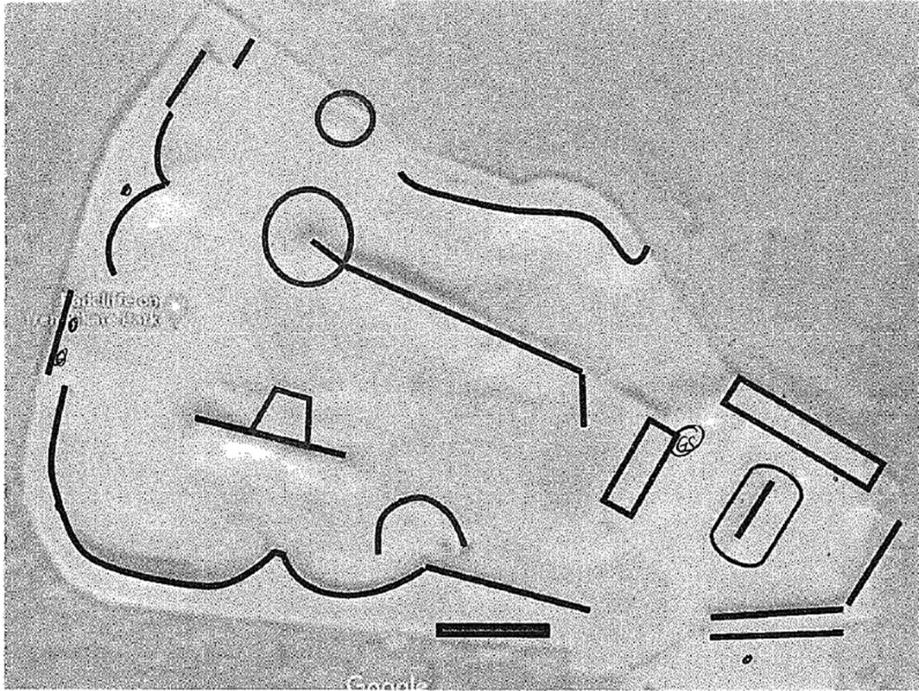
Map Number: 1.1
Date: 26/8/22
Time: 15.07
Observer: LS

Total Number of Users:

Total Skateboarders	2
Girl* Skateboarders	1

Other active participants:

	Scooter	Rollerskate	BMX	Other
F*				
M*				

Other activity

	Teaching	Film/ Photo	Socialising	Specta ting
F*				
M*				

Notes

Girl skateboarder, about 6 years old. Very good – dropping into spine/bowl

3 boys on scooters, 1 on bike
1 dropped into 8ft on scooter "I really died"
They're all about 10/11.

Girl

Figure 1. An example of a place-centred map. Notes read: Girl skateboarder, about 6 years old. Very good – dropping into spine/bowl. 3 boys on scooters, 1 on bike. 1 dropped into 8 ft on scooter 'I nearly died'. They're all about 10/11. Girl.
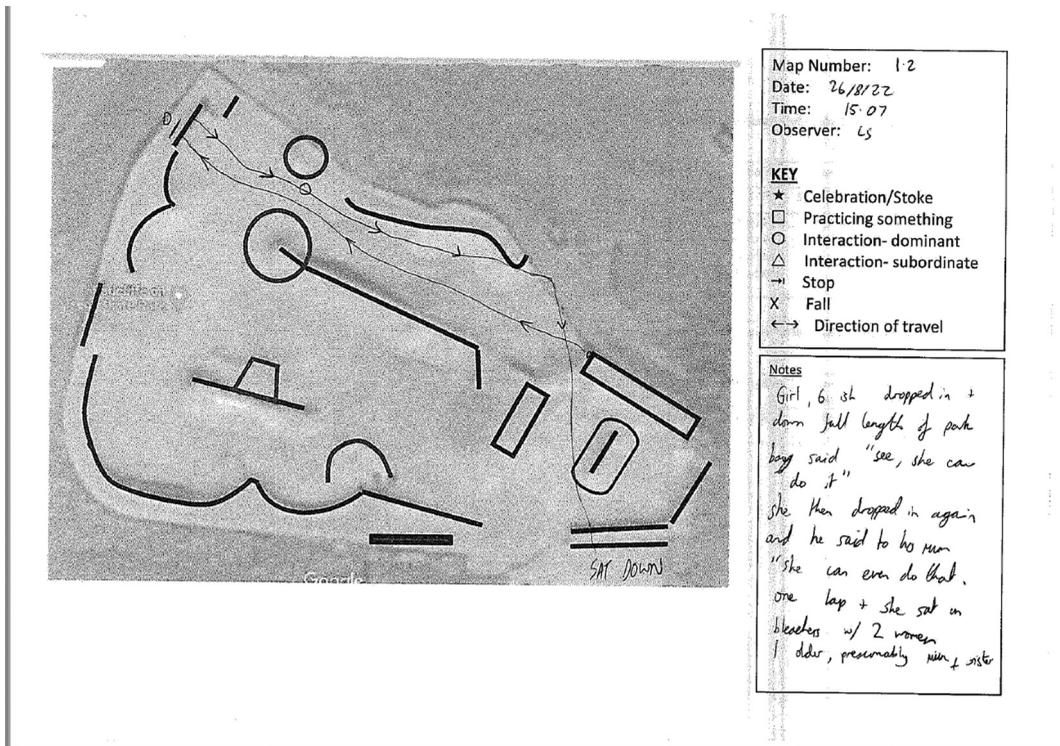
Figure 2. An example of an individual centred map. Notes read: Girl, 6 ish, dropped in down full length of park. Boy said 'see, she can do it'. She then dropped in again and he said to his mum 'She can even do that'. One lap and she sat on bleachers w/2 women, one older, presumably mum + sister.

provide adequate depth, while maintaining clarity through the maps. At two minutes for example, maps became crowded with lines, and this detracted from their function. A shorter duration resulted in maps with very little detail. For this element, the users 'followed' were generally chosen at random, though, when observing a mixed skate session, focus was placed on women and girl skateboarders, unless attempting a comparative exercise. It was also possible to 'follow' a user at different points in a session, to chart their movement across time. The aim of the exercise, and the duration of the mapping session, was established ahead of time, though we did have to cut some sessions short due to weather conditions, which sometimes made recording and/or skateboarding impossible. Completed maps were scanned into pdf documents and uploaded to a secure datastore for analysis.

Analysing the maps

To show how the maps have functioned in practice, we now move to explore three example maps. These illustrate three themes arising from our mapping data: protected space; marginal space; and claiming space. The maps were all produced in a single mixed gender session in an indoor, managed skatepark. This was not one of our designated case study sites. However, during the research period we were commissioned to carry out these observations by skatepark management as part of an initiative to better understand how women and girls of all abilities use the space, and ultimately to increase participation and provision for non-male skateboarders outside of the popular women and girls only sessions. We have chosen these maps as they clearly illustrate the themes, and the maps are labelled, well populated and easy to understand.

Table 1. Codes for recording actions and interactions in the skatepark.

Code		Example
Celebration/stoke	*	Used when a park user visibly demonstrates elation. This can be a fist pump, a cheer or simply a smile. It has been observed that these indicators vary widely between skateboarders, and as well as a personal accomplishment, this often occurs in relation to another skateboarder's achievement or progression.
Practicing something	□	This is where a skateboarder attempts to do 'something'. The term trick is deliberately avoided here, despite being prevalent in skateboarding language. The use of 'something' instead allows for the map to highlight that a challenge has been undertaken, regardless of the level of the park user. For example, if a beginner is attempting a kickturn (turning the board by balancing on the back wheels and swinging the front of the board in a particular direction), they are working towards the development of a new skill, whereas a more advanced skateboarder might do a kickturn in order to be in the correct position to attempt a more complex task. It also allows for mapping across activities, when focussing on scooterers or BMXers for example
Interaction-dominant	O	As outlined above, power in skateparks is not evenly distributed. These symbols are used when the user being 'followed' has an encounter with another park user.
Interaction-subordinate	Δ	The subordinate marker would, for example, be used if they are forced to change direction or choose to stop to avoid being in the way. This can be used in instances of physical movement, body language, and verbal exchanges.
Stop	—‖	This symbol is used when the user comes to a stop, but does not fall. This can be, for example, coming to the end of a line, pausing at a particular point, or stopping abruptly to avoid a collision.
Fall	X	Used when user falls from their board. This does not necessarily depict that the user falls to the ground, but denotes a loss of control of their board/body.
Direction of travel	—> <—	Arrows are added to the lines drawn on the map to show the direction in which a user is moving. Where repetition occurs over the same space, the lines can be numbered.

Example one: protected space

Figure 3 shows how women and girl skateboarders, highlighted on the left-hand map in red, have clustered in between two ramps, in what we describe as 'protected space'. It is possible to ride at high speeds over these ramps, though it is difficult to do this safely when, as on this occasion, the park is busy. The ramps instead became a form of barrier, blocking the skateboarders from the main body of the park. Of the seven woman skateboarders in the park, five are located in these protected spaces. The subsequent movement map (on the right) shows one of the skateboarders practicing alone for a short time in a protected space, before moving on foot to join the other women in the area. These are relatively small spaces with no drop in points or other obstacles. This influenced the type of practice that was being undertaken, both for beginners and for experienced skateboarders. To remain in the space and in control, movements were restrained, cautious and slow. That the woman joined the larger group is reflective of wider themes in our research (Paechter et al., 2023b), in which participants have remarked that their confidence increases and anxiety reduces when skateboarding with other women. It is worth noting here that open skateboarding sessions in managed skateparks are usually fast-paced and rarely attract beginners, so it was likely that most, if not all, of these women were competent skaters (and some we knew to be so).

Example two: claiming space

The next example highlights how a group can work collectively to flip the dynamic of a space. The clustering of the skateboarders in Figure 3 is indicative of the sense of support women gain from being in a group. On this map, the skaters can be seen as subordinate actors and the power dynamic skewed in favour of male skateboarders who appear in greater numbers, and who are moving more freely across a wider range of the park. In this second example, shown through the movement of one woman (Figure 4) the women and girls appear to work together to take space in the park. As part of a group of girl skateboarders the subject of the movement map can be seen to cross the skatepark on three runs within the 45 second window. This is a marked difference from both the previous example, and the
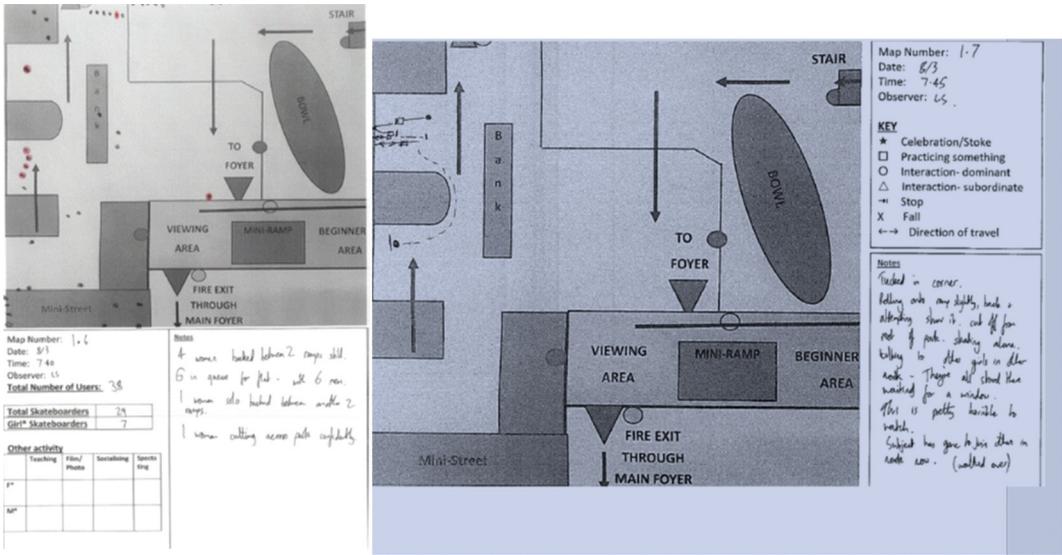
Figure 3. Protected space. Notes read: left hand map: 7 women backed between 2 ramps shield. 6 in queue for flat – with 6 men. 1 woman solo backed between another 2 ramps. 1 woman cutting across park confidently. Right hand map: Tucked in corner. Rolling onto ramp slightly, cut off from rest of park, skating alone.Talking to other girls in other nook – They're all stood there waiting for a window. This is pretty horrible to watch. Subject has gone to join others in nook now (walked over).
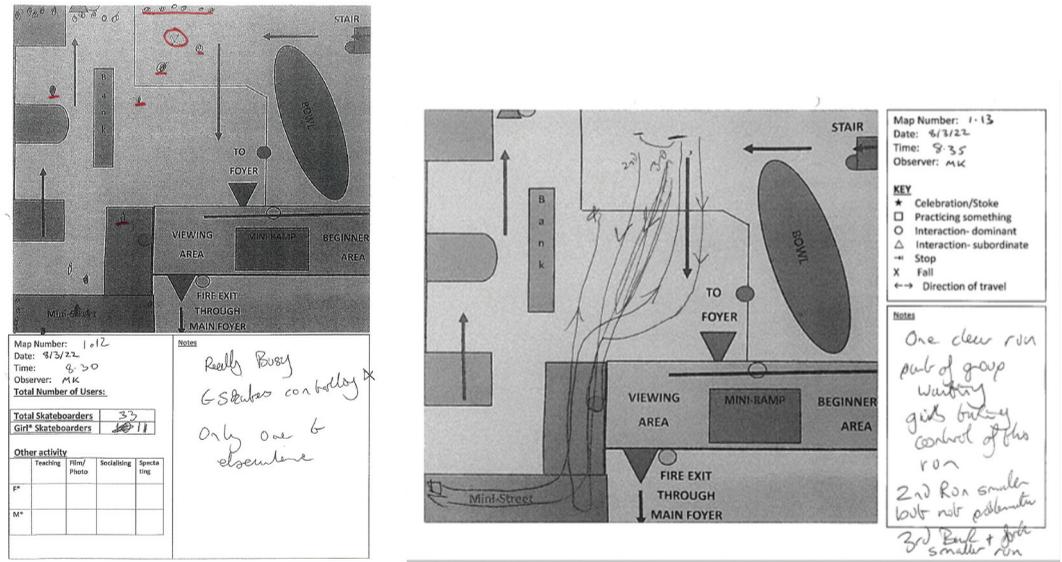
Figure 4. Claiming space. Text reads: Left hand map: Really Busy. G skaters controlling x Only one G elsewhere. Right hand map: One clear run part of group waiting. Girls taking control of this run. 2nd run smaller but not problematic. Third Back and forth smaller run.

relative paucity of girl skateboarders in the associated snapshot for this time. The girls come into the space and use a large swathe of it. The notes in this example are particularly important as the group dynamic is not represented visually. What is clear, however, is that this skateboarder was not confined to a small space and instead skated confidently and quickly through a busy, exposed section of the park.

Example three: skating at the margins

This example focuses on a girl skateboarder who was not skating as part of the group depicted in the previous maps. It may take a moment to locate her in the map, a challenge which in itself highlights how she is using a very small space in the corner of an informally designated beginner area. This map was produced towards the end of the session. Earlier maps had shown and commented that this particular skateboarder became displaced when others entered the space she was in. She was recorded as being in multiple different areas of the park, but moving to make way for more confident men and boy skateboarders. The map in Figure 5 shows her in the literal margins of the park. The space that she occupied became smaller and smaller throughout the session, until she was in a small a space as possible, practicing basic flat ground tricks on a piece of carpet. Once in this space, her board remained stationary as she practiced, and she had no interaction with the other skateboarders in the area. This map provides a visual representation that supports our interview and unstructured observation data, that women and girls are often relegated to the margins of a skateboard space. Indeed, all these examples show visually how young women skateboarders respond to the anxiety, expressed by most of our young woman participants, about being 'in the way' and easily observed, by removing themselves from the main spaces of skateparks. This anxiety reflects an awareness of the gaze of the skatepark. In taking up protected and marginalised space, the skateboarders are confined to the more 'offstage' sites of the skatepark (Paechter et al., 2024). The small, limited space influences the type of practice possible, and slows the progress of learning. The second example stands out as it shows the power of the group, and the boldness that this facilitates (Paechter et al., 2023b).
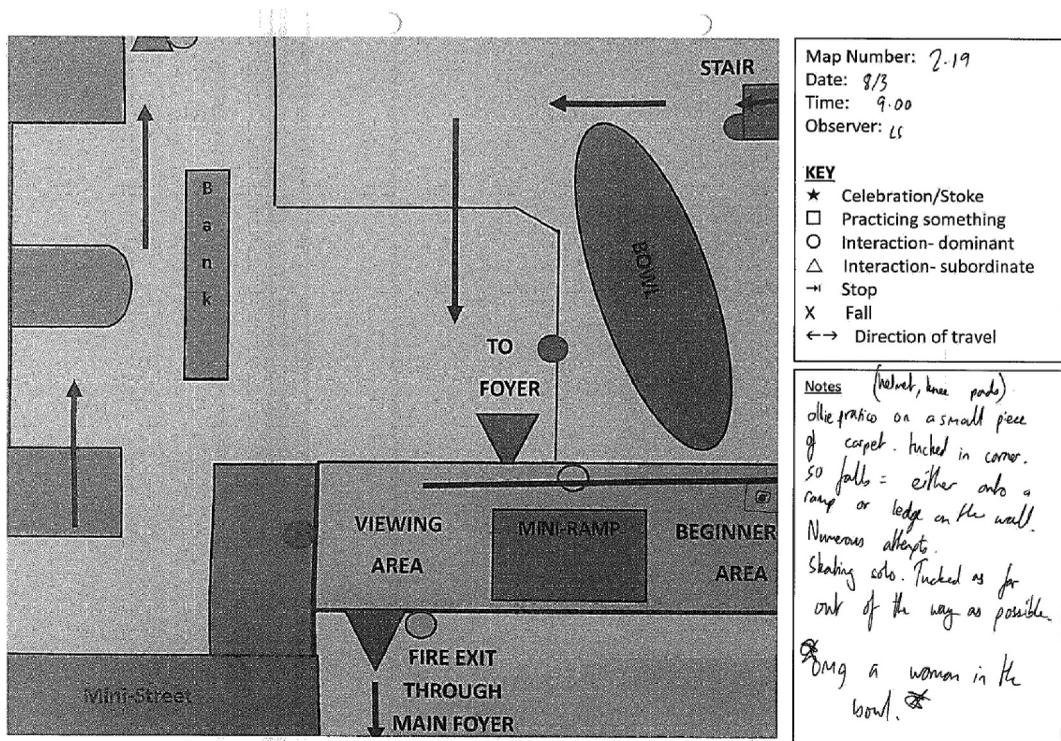

Figure 5. Skating at the margins. Text reads: (helmet, knee pads). Ollie practice on a small piece of carpet – tucked in corner. So falls = either onto ramp or ledge onto wall. Numerous attempts. Skating solo – Tucked as far out of the way as possible. * OMG there's a woman in the bowl.

Outputs, impact, and future opportunities

As shown in the three examples above, the use of these maps has generated valuable project data and presents a model for future research in dynamic, active informal spaces. As qualitative researchers, we have found the notes produced through this process to have been insightful, especially in the individual movement maps. By encouraging the observer to focus on particular aspects of a wider social environment, and zoom in briefly on the actions of a specific person, attention is drawn to otherwise overlooked phenomena. The visual element is effective in showing park use, movement, actions and interactions, and has highlighted patterns of use and associated power relations in space. The maps illustrate several of the key challenges that contribute to women's skateboarding experience, and provide visual evidence to support existing and emerging literature (Abulhawa, 2020; Bäckström & Blackman, 2022; Carr, 2017; D'Orazio, 2021; Dupont, 2014; Fok & O'Connor, 2021; Geckle & Shaw, 2022; Ma & Munter, 2014; McCarthy, 2021; Paechter et al., 2023b; Pomerantz et al., 2004).

The report produced using the maps detailed here was effective in bolstering arguments for increased provision for women and girl only sessions. It provides a model that can be followed by both researchers and practitioners, including skatepark managers. While our focus has been on gender in skateboarding, the maps could be adapted to focus on skateboarders of different ability levels, or other activities such as BMXing or scootering. Indeed, the tool can also be adapted for use in other dynamic sports spaces such as multi use game areas, and for use in street spaces where both skateboarding and other informal lifestyle sports are practiced.

As noted earlier, our maps of outdoor spaces were produced using satellite maps and to scale, so data can be inputted into GIS programs. This would facilitate a more technical analysis, including, for example, the production of heat maps to show use, or animations of routes taken and blocked. We have not engaged with these possibilities, but the incorporation of this into the initial design provides scope for ourselves or others to do so in future.

Problems and possible solutions

Our mapping tool has been effective in meeting its objectives, which were to provide visual data on skatepark use and power dynamics. We did, however, encounter some practical problems. One of the most significant difficulties arose around visibility. Skateparks can be sprawling, often being split into distinct sections. In these cases, it is difficult to see and therefore map the entire space. This was countered on occasion by having two researchers work on the maps, and where this was not possible, as suggested by Cox et al. (2018), outlines were designed so that the sections of the park could be mapped discretely.

The other key issue was one that cut across all our research in skateparks: the weather. To produce enough maps to identify patterns and trends, long periods of time in skateparks were required, especially given the amount of time that some skateparks stand empty. In some planned sessions, maps blew around making it difficult to map accurately. It was also sometimes too cold to stand in one place to observe, with notes becoming almost illegible due to shivering hands. There is no obvious way to overcome this if we want to carry out in-person research in the exposed sites typical of many skateparks.

Conclusion

Skateboarding holds the potential to be inclusive on social, economic and cultural levels, but access is currently unequal and experiences in skate spaces vary. Though skateparks are used in different ways by users of different abilities and technologies, our research has found that young woman skateboarders often skate in protected spaces, in the margins of skate parks, with a persistent concern around being 'in the way' (Paechter et al., 2023b). The mapping tool detailed in this paper

visually highlights elements of this positioning, and the associated power dynamics which can be seen across skateboarding spaces and cultures.

Movement in skate space can be very fast, and often encompasses a variety of activity. Bringing our developing understanding of skateboarding and skate spaces to existing behavioural mapping techniques, we have condensed a huge range of variables into simple codes which can be assigned quickly to provide novel data on skatepark use. As has been shown in the examples here, it is possible to use the maps to identify trends and offer recommendations to skatepark operators and designers, as well as to those planning other leisure spaces, such as parks. Our maps showed how women and girls occupy protected space; use collective power to claim space; and that they are still, at times, confined to the margins of skate space. This echoes the findings of other research in open access public space (Walker & Clark, 2023). Our mapping tool offers researchers an easily operationalised, straightforward system to investigate the use of such spaces, and to monitor the effects of interventions.

Both our methods and our findings have important implications for skateboarding research. We have developed a methodological innovation which is adaptable to other sites and activities: while we used it in 'official' skateparks, in trials we found it also worked in informal skate spaces, potentially allowing observations of how skateboarders interact with the wider public as well as each other. We hope that our mapping methodology will be developed further by other researchers focusing on rapid power/inflected interactions in informal spaces.

A key finding that was only possible because of this mapping system is that being in a space is not the same as having access to it. It is clear from our research that the increase in uptake of skateboarding by girls and young women does not mean that they have equal access with boys and men, even allowing for varying skill levels. Many of our respondents, and those we observed, were competent skateboarders, and some had significant expertise. Nevertheless, as we have shown, in mixed sessions they were mostly limited to restricted areas of the space, being present but not fully included. We therefore need both to educate men skateboarders in ways of making space for girls and young women, and for beginners of all genders, and to support young women in claiming space in all areas of a skatepark.

Finally, we note the playful aspects of skateparks (Geckle & Shaw, 2022; Glenney & O'Connor, 2019) and ask, given our findings, who gets to play (Walker & Clark, 2023)? Howell (2008) describes skateparks as 'neoliberal playgrounds', suggesting that they focus on individuals and their responsibility for both the space and for their own safety. He also notes the differences between the current provision of unsupervised skateparks and the former approach of interventionist play leadership in urban playgrounds. We suggest that there is scope for those running managed sites to influence their use by mapping their spaces and developing and testing intervention strategies that increase access for women and girls to the whole of the park. Our maps are not just for research: they can be used to plan, execute, and evaluate interventions and measure the success or otherwise of inclusive innovations.

Notes

1. The data underpinning this paper can be accessed at: **DOI**: 10.17631/rd-2022–0007-dmix **DOI URI** : https://doi.org/10.17631/rd-2022–0007-dmix
2. All names are pseudonyms, mostly chosen by participants. They do not always reflect gender or ethnicity. Ages of young woman skateboarders are in brackets – where we have estimated someone's age from contextual information this is indicated by an asterisk.
3. '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.
4. 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. We hoped to include non-binary people among our respondents. However, no respondent identified themselves to us as non-binary.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributors

Dr Lyndsey Stoodley is a freelance academic whose research interests lie in sport, gender and socio/environmental activism. Since completing their surf-centered PhD at Cardiff University, they worked as a research fellow on the Girl Skateboarder project at Nottingham Trent University. Lyndsey enjoys working with and developing new research methods, especially ones which involve surfboards and skateboards.

Professor Carrie Paechter is Professor of Childhood, Youth and Family life in the School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, UK. Her research interests include gender, power and knowledge, how we conceptualise hegemonic gender forms, how children construct and understand their identities, and active girlhood. Her most recent book, LGBTQI-parented Families and Schools: visibility, representation, and pride, is co-written with Matthew Carlile and published by Routledge.

Dr Michael Keenan is a senior lecturer in Sociology at Nottingham Trent University. His research interests are focused around issues of identity and belonging. His previous research primarily focused on the negotiation of religious and sexual identity. Michael is also interested in the use of research methods to explore everyday experience.

Chris Lawton is the Community Development Officer at Skateboard GB, the UK National Governing Body for skateboarding. There he combines his skills and experience as a researcher, economic development professional, community organiser and active skateboarder to work with grassroots communities across England to build capacity and transform spaces. Prior to this, he was a senior lecturer within the economics division at Nottingham Trent University. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a qualified skateboard instructor. He is co-founder of the award-winning social enterprise Skate Nottingham.

ORCID

Lyndsey Stoodley 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0901-6661
Carrie Paechter 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3050-5571
Michael Keenan 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2052-8462

References

Abulhawa, D. (2020). *Skateboarding and femininity: Gender, space-making and expressive movement*. Routledge.

Allen, J. (2003). *Lost geographies of power*. Basil Blackwell.

Atencio, M., Beal, B., & Wilson, C. (2009). The distinction of risk: Urban skateboarding, street habitus and the construction of hierarchical gender relations. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 1(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/19398440802567907

Bäckström, Å. (2013). Gender manoevering in Swedish skateboarding: Negotiations of femininities and the hierarchical gender structure. *YOUNG*, 21(1), 29–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308812467670

Bäckström, Å., & Blackman, S. (2022). Skateboarding: from urban spaces to subcultural Olympians. *YOUNG*, 30(2), 121–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088221081944

Bäckström, Å., & Nairn, K. (2018). Skateboarding beyond the limits of gender? Strategic interventions in Sweden. *Leisure Studies*, 37(4), 424–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2018.1462397

Beal, B., Atencio, M., Wright, E., & McClain, Z. (2017). Skateboarding, community and urban politics: Shifting practices and challenges. *International Journal of Sport Policy & Politics*, 9(1), 11–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2016.1220406

Borden, I. (2019). *Skateboarding and the city: A complete history*. Bloomsbury.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.

Carr, J. (2017). Skateboarding in dude space: The roles of space and sport in constructing gender among adult skateboarders. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 34(1), 25–34. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2016-0044

Cox, A., Loebach, J., & Little, S. (2018). Understanding the nature play milieu: Using behavior mapping to investigate children's activities in outdoor play spaces. *Children, Youth, and Environment*, 28(2), 232–261. https://doi.org/10.1353/cye.2018.0018

Dickinson, S., Millie, A., & Peters, E. (2022). Street skateboarding and the aesthetic order of public spaces. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(6), 1454–1469. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab109

D'Orazio, D. (2021). Skateboarding's Olympic moment: The gendered contours of sportification. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 45(5), 395–425. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723520928595

Dupont, T. (2014). From core to consumer: The informal hierarchy of the skateboard scene. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 43(5), 556–581. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241613513033

Fok, C. Y. L., & O'Connor, P. (2021). Chinese women skateboarders in Hong Kong: A skatefeminism approach. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(3), 399–415. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220928735

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish.* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Penguin.

Geckle, B., & Shaw, S. (2022). Failure and futurity: The transformative potential of queer skateboarding. *YOUNG*, 30 (2), 132–148. https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308820945100

Ghavampour, E., Del Aguila, M., & Vale, B. (2017). GIS mapping and analysis of behaviour in small urban public spaces. *Area*, 49(3), 349–358. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12323

Glenney, B., & O'Connor, P. (2019). Skateparks as hybrid elements of the city. *Journal of Urban Design*, 24(6), 840–855. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2019.1568189

Goličnik Marušić, B., & Marušić, D. (2012). Behavioural maps and GIS in place evaluation. In B. M. Alam (Ed.), *Applications of geographic information systems* (pp. 113–138). IntecOpen.

Goličnik, B., & Thompson, C. W. (2010). Emerging relationships between design and use in urban park spaces. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 94(1), 38–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2009.07.016

Howell, O. (2008). Skateboard as neoliberal playground: Urban governance, recreation space, and the cultivation of personal responsibility. *Space and Culture*, 11(4), 475–496. https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331208320488

Jenson, A., Swords, J., & Jeffries, M. (2012). The accidental youth club: Skateboarding in Newcastle-Gateshead. *Journal of Urban Design*, 17(3), 371–388. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2012.683400

Leib, R. (2017). Spaces of the self: Foucault and Goffman on the micro-physics of discipline. *Philosophy Today*, 61(1), 189–210. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday2017321153

Li, C. (2022). Cultural continuities and skateboarding in transition: In the case of China's skateboarding culture and industry. *YOUNG*, 30(2), 183–206. https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088221081941

Loebach, J., & Cox, A. (2020). Tool for observing play outdoors (TOPO): A new typology for capturing children's play behaviors in outdoor environments. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(15), 5611. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17155611

MacKay, S., & Dallaire, C. (2014). Skateboarding women: Building collective identity in cyberspace. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 38(6), 548–566. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723512467357

Ma, J. Y., & Munter, C. (2014). The spatial production of learning opportunities in skateboard parks. *Mind Culture and Activity*, 21(3), 238–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2014.908219

Markus, T. (1993). *Buildings and Power: Freedom and control in the origin of modern building types*. Routledge.

McCarthy, B. (2021). 'Who unlocked the kitchen?': Online misogyny, YouTube comments and women's professional street skateboarding. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, Online*, 57(3), 362–380. https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902211021509

Ng, C. F. (2016). Behavioral mapping and tracing. In R. Gifford (Ed.), *Research methods for environmental psychology* (pp. 29–52). Wiley.

O'Connor, P. (2018). Beyond the youth culture: Understanding middle-aged skateboarders through temporal capital. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 53(8), 924–943. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690217691780

O'Connor, P., Evers, C., Glenney, B., & Willing, I. (2022). Skateboarding in the anthropocene: Grey spaces of polluted leisure. *Leisure Studies, Online First*, 42(6), 897–907. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2153906

Paechter, C. (2006). Power, knowledge and embodiment in communities of sex/gender practice. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29(1), 13–26. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2005.10.003

Paechter, C., Stoodley, L., Keenan, M., & Lawton, C. (2023a). 'We sacrifice our bodies for this plank of wood': Girl skateboarders, risk, pain, and injury 1. *Sport in Society*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2281584

Paechter, C., Stoodley, L., Keenan, M., & Lawton, C. (2023b). What's it like to be a girl skateboarder? Identity, participation and exclusion for young women in skateboarding spaces and communities. *Women's Studies International Forum 96*, 102675. online advance publication. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102675.

Paechter, C., Stoodley, L., Keenan, M., & Lawton, C. (2024). 'It feels like a big performance': Space, performativity and young woman skateboarders. *Sociological Research Online*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804231214100

Petrone, R. (2010). "You have to get hit a couple of times": The role of conflict in learning how to "be" a skateboarder. *Teaching and TEacher Education*, 26(1), 119–127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.05.005

Pomerantz, S., Currie, D. H., & Kelly, D. M. (2004). Sk8er girls: Skateboarders, girlhood and feminism in motion. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27(5–6), 547–557. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2004.09.009

Rinehart, R. (2005). "Babes" and boards: Opportunities in new millenium sport. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *29* (3), 232–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723505277909

Sayers, E. (2023). Skateboarding, time and ethics: An auto ethnographic adventure of motherhood and risk. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, Online*, *17*(3), 306–326. https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2023.2180533

Skateboard, G. B. (2023). Skateboard FAQs. Retrieved from https://skateboardgb.org/faqs

Walker, S., & Clark, I. (2023). *Make Space for Girls: The Research Background 2023*. Retrieved from

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Wheaton, B., & Thorpe, H. (2018). Action sports, the Olympic Games, and the opportunities and challenges for gender equity: The cases of surfing and skateboarding. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *42*(5), 315–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723518781230