'It Feels Like a Big Performance': Space, Performativity and Young Woman Skateboarders[1]

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Abstract

In this article, we apply philosophical and sociological theory to consider how young women skateboarders interact with and are affected by performative aspects of skateboarding cultures. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study of three skateparks plus other skate spaces in and around two English cities, we argue that these spaces are performative in nature and that this is frequently problematic for young woman skateboarders. We suggest that, due to their comparative rarity in these spaces, young women are put under an immediate spotlight on entry, with an expectation that they perform a competent skateboarder identity while under scrutiny from other users of the space; we examine their experiences of this. We conclude by suggesting ways that skateparks and skatespaces can be designed and used to make them more accessible to woman and girl skaters, and to other groups marginalised in skateboarding cultures.

Keywords

gender, design, performance, performativity, skateboarding, skatepark

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Introduction

Especially since its inclusion as an Olympic sport and attendant publicity, skateboarding, historically dominated by young men, is increasingly popular with women (Bäckström and Blackman, 2022). In this article, we consider how young women[2] skateboarders interact with and are affected by performative aspects of skateboarding cultures. Our discussion is based on data collected from a 20-month study of girl and young woman skateboarders, centred around three English skateparks and associated skate spaces.[3] Our focus is on the most popular version of urban and skatepark skating, where participants ride a 'popsicle'-shaped board with hard rubber wheels to practice street and transition skateboarding (the term used for skating on ramps, usually found in skateparks). We argue that skateboarding in this form is an explicitly performance-oriented sport, and that skateparks and many street spaces, through a combination of design and usage, are implicitly onstage spaces (Goffman, 1959), in which those participating are expected to perform for a group of others (skateboarders and the general public) who may be watching, in person or on social media. Our research suggests that this performative aspect of skateboarding is particularly salient for women skateboarders at all competence levels, due to their comparative absence from skateboarding spaces, so that when present they fall under a hypervisible solo spotlight. Most of the young women skateboarders we interviewed found this problematic and intimidating, and some felt that it was also sexualising. There were also occasions, however, when they experienced being watched as enjoyable and empowering.

We begin by outlining our study. We then discuss how many skateboarding spaces are designed and/or constructed as performance spaces. We apply theory from philosophy, mainstream sociology and sociology of education to an empirical phenomenon arising from our research: that young women experience skateboarding culture as an oppressively performative environment. Our contribution is therefore twofold: the application of an interdisciplinary theoretical approach coupled with new and illuminating multi-site empirical data. We have found the concept of performativity useful for analysing how young women (and others) use skateboarding spaces. We explain how we understand this concept and how this is nuanced and exemplified by what we see as the performative aspects of skateboarder identity, before considering the explicitly onstage nature of the skate space (Goffman, 1959; Morissette, 2014) and how young women respond to and resist this.

The girl skateboarder study

Our findings come from a 20 month study of young women skateboarders focused on three main locations in or near to two cities. Flyovers are a partially indoor, managed skatepark in Bedrock in North-west England. High Hill Park is a public outdoor skatepark near the centre of Hillwood, in the English Midlands, and Parish is a public outdoor skatepark in a nearby village. The research team comprised: two non-skateboarders; one relative beginner; and two expert skateboarders. The authors of this article fall into all three categories. 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 et al., 2022). They encompassed times when the park was open to all (in the public parks this is most of the time; in the managed park it 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 observations of, and interviews in, other skateboarding sites and events in and around the same two cities, including informal street spaces frequented by skateboarders. This multiplicity of sites is unusual; most previous studies have focused on one specific, usually park-based, location. We acknowledge that this research is UK-based and skateboarding cultures may be different elsewhere (Fok and O'Connor, 2021; Li, 2022)

We used our presence in the spaces, supplemented by postcards explaining the study and snowball sampling, to recruit participants. We used semi-structured interviews as a main method, due to their efficacy in elucidating a detailed understanding of respondents' beliefs and practices (Forsey, 2010; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Strauss, 1987). 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. Ethical clearance for all activities was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Business, Law and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Skateboarding spaces as performative

We argue below that most skateboarding spaces are, architecturally and as used, fundamentally performance spaces (Morissette, 2014). One aspect of this is the performative requirements for those, such as young women, who are not immediately understood as belonging in the space. Ball (2003: 216), writing about education policy, describes performativity as:

A technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change . . . The issue of who controls the field of judgement in crucial . . . Who is it that determines what is to count as a valuable, effective or satisfactory performance, and what measures or indicators are considered valid?

In local, male-dominated, skateboarding communities, what is judged is an individual's right to participation as a skateboarder in a particular skateboarding space, and the judgements made come from the young men who usually constitute the lead actors in that space (Atencio and Beal, 2016; Carr, 2017). A new person in a space may be expected to put on a performance of skateboarding (by skating proficiently over difficult ramps, by doing or competently practicing tricks) in order to be recognised and named as a legitimate and authentic skateboarder (Beal and Weidman, 2003; Dupont, 2014).

Skateboarding cultures are linked to performance in several ways, and most skateboarding spaces are usually at least partially performance spaces. This involves both performing skateboarding activities (especially tricks) themselves, and performing various aspects of skateboarder identity, including authenticity, commitment, and the ability to tolerate falls and injury (Abulhawa, 2020; Atencio et al., 2009; Beal and Weidman, 2003; McCarthy, 2022). Morissette (2014: 391) argues that

lifestyle sports like skateboarding can also serve as a scene or theatrical setting (enhanced by media coverage) where the quest for self-expression and social belonging are played out.

Furthermore, most skateboarding spaces, both those explicitly built for the activity, such as skateparks, and more informal (though sometimes regular) street spaces, are set up, or produced, by the local skateboarding community to have more or less clearly defined performer and audience areas (Ma and Munter, 2014). Indoor managed skateparks frequently have viewing areas from which non-skateboarding friends or parents can watch the action of participants, and/or parts of the space where skateboarders can take a break and watch or chat. Public skateparks and informal skate spaces often have bleachers or benches from which skateboarding activity can be observed; while in some cases these may be used for grinds or other tricks, in others they are simply places to sit. Given that, as evidenced by both our observations and respondent accounts, a skateboarding session (particularly in a public park or space) might only involve actual skateboarding for a minority of the time spent in the space, there are many opportunities to both observe and be observed. While more secluded skateboarding locations exist, such as wasteground DIY spaces and empty car parks, used for private practice by men skateboarders, they are not usually available to women, for personal safety reasons (Atencio and Beal, 2016; Carr, 2017)

Skateboarding etiquette, largely aimed at minimising avoidable danger, also makes it likely that an individual's skateboarding will be watched by others. When dropping into a bowl or down a ramp, for example, skateboarders usually take turns, so there is often only one person skating while the others watch, comment, cheer and commiserate while waiting. We also observed setups in which ramps or other obstacles were placed along a path or across a public space, with skaters lining up to skate over them, in some cases including additional tricks in their performance (Ma and Munter, 2014). This was

particularly striking on one occasion when local skateboarders had been invited to take over a newly tarmacked park space in the evening. While younger children and beginners were encouraged to use other areas, a more expert group had set up a run along a path bounded by two large grassy slopes, so they could be seen both by spectators watching on each side, and by those waiting in line to try their skill. This was dominated by young men in their late teens and early twenties. We saw only one young woman (a skilled local skateboarder who was part of this elite group) attempting the run, until some children (who had been practicing in a similarly arranged beginners' run) had a go towards the end of the session. The performative nature of this was emphasised not only by the spatial setup but also by successful attempts at the run being greeted with cheers, and unsuccessful ones mainly with silence.

The centrality of tricks to skateboarding culture also enhances the performative nature of skateboard spaces. Tricks are specific, defined and named moves which are performed statically or as part of a more complex run; skilled skateboarders produce lines which incorporate several tricks in succession. Tricks are important in themselves, but some, such as the ability to jump down a kerb or ollie up onto street furniture, are also necessary for successful street skating. Tricks are learned from others in skateparks and through individual practice at home, often using videos, which may contain explicit instruction. Within skate spaces, those learning tricks can get support and help from skateboarders around them (Ma and Munter, 2014).

Skateboarding is also a media-dense culture. Skateboarders film themselves constantly, both to examine and learn from technical problems performing tricks, and for sharing on social media. Professional skateboarders' social media accounts frequently include sequences in which they perform spectacular, risky, or acrobatic moves; making and consuming such videos is a central part of skateboarder culture, with expert photographers and film-makers having important roles in some local skateboarding scenes (Dupont, 2014). Abulhawa (2020) argues that while social media sites have made visible a broader range of skateboarding practices, they reflect a core association of skateboarding with masculinity. She notes that, through social media, skateboarders display the performance of tricks within a visual narrative of physical struggle and hard work; this includes documenting failed attempts as part of marking authenticity through overt physical challenge. Social media also acts as a space in which woman skateboarders can enhance their visibility and gain recognition, both for themselves and for women's skateboarding generally (MacKay and Dallaire, 2012, 2014). However, this increased exposure is not uncontested and can elicit misogynistic responses aimed at delegitimising the participation and expertise of woman skateboarders (McCarthy, 2022).

These aspects of skateboard spaces and cultures combine to require performance from anyone skateboarding while others are nearby, whether fellow skateboarders or members of the wider public. While this affects all skateboarders, it is exacerbated for girls and young women at all levels due to their comparative rarity in skateboarding spaces (Bäckström, 2013; Dupont, 2014; Ma and Munter, 2014; Paechter et al., 2023). While most young male skateboarders can make themselves and their performances relatively invisible within a busy skateboarding space, allowing them choice about whether they are the focus of others' attention, this is not usually possible for young women, who are often the only girl in a male-dominated arena. In these circumstances they become

hypervisible, unable to avoid the dominant and often judgemental male gaze. Furthermore, because it is assumed that they are unable to skate, they have overtly to perform skateboarder immediately on, or soon after, arrival, to claim a skateboarder identity and avoid the 'poser' label.

Performing skateboarder identities

We understand performance as a way of constructing identity both for the self and for others (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Paechter, 2007). People use performances of self, through embodiment, clothing styles, behaviour, modes of speech, and so on, to consolidate their ideas about who they are and to project these to others, so that they can be named and understood in ways that they prefer (Hacking, 2004). Shilling (1993: 83) argues that

> the social meanings which are attached to particular bodily forms and performances tend to become internalized and exert a powerful influence on an individual's self and feelings of inner worth.

Butler (1997) argues that subjects are partially constituted and made intelligible through being named. Through this, an individual gains 'discursive agency' (p. 127), which allows them also to mobilise the power involved in naming others (Paechter, 2019). Youdell (2004: 481) argues that this performative naming means that someone is

> simultaneously interpellated as a subject and as a particular . . . type of subject. Such a naming joins a citational chain that inevitably inscribes hierarchical binary relations . . . These citational chains not only act to constitute the identity named, they also constitute the identity that is the silent partner in the dichotomy.

Being explicitly named as a skateboarder, as a community member, therefore implicitly identifies someone as not being a derided outsider such as a poser or a 'ramp tramp' (Dupont, 2014). As we will discuss, to be named as a skateboarder, and thus to have that identity recognised, either by oneself or by others, is harder for young women than for young men, and leaves them more open to the alternative, pejorative, naming.

Because skateboarding is an identity centred around physical performance, the display, recognition and naming of competent skateboarding bodies is crucial to this identification process. This makes claiming a skateboarder identity, and the naming of oneself as a skateboarder, an embodied social process. Although identity is a personal matter, it is also important to people to have their identities recognised and confirmed by others (Francis and Paechter, 2015). Consequently, young women for whom skateboarding was important both found ways of justifying the claiming of a skateboarder identity to themselves, and wanted it to be recognised by the wider skateboarding community. However, this took place within the wider culture of performativity which has different requirements and expectations for men and women skateboarders, especially those newly entering a space.

In our interviews we asked people if they considered themselves to be skateboarders, and when they started to do this. In several cases the justifications young women gave

for their claims were closely related to the performative expectations that are laid on them by the dominant skateboarding community, especially in relation to competent or expert performance. Claiming a skateboarder identity was associated both with a particular lifestyle and with being able to perform specific tricks. For Rosie (18),[4] a committed and expert skateboarder, the skateboarder identity was a key aspect of her performance of self, but also involved imagining and planning advanced skateboarding activity:

> 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 is just always in your head.

For other young women skateboarders, understanding oneself as a skateboarder reflected the wider performative criteria associated with being able to do certain tricks, usually those that would be recognised by the wider skateboarding community as requiring a reasonable skill level. Mildred (21) told us that 'I guess because I've popped my first ollie, yes, I'm in the group now'. Her claiming of the skateboarder identity refers directly to a skill considered fundamental to wider skateboarding expertise: many other tricks depend on the ability to ollie onto an obstacle. Luna (14)'s skateboarder identity combines Rosie and Mildred's approaches. As well as telling us that skateboarding is an important part of her life, she also relates her skateboarding identity to the acquisition of an important skill:

> When I started doing bigger ramps. Like have you been to Rockenroll?
>
> Lyndsey: I've not, I've seen it quite a lot on Instagram though.
> Luna: The eight foot in the bowl.
> Lyndsey: Yeah.
> Luna: It's like, I think once I got that though, whenever I was there, or if anyone was walking past, I'd try and drop in quick, because I'd be like, look what I can do. Cos I felt really, really proud once I'd done it.

Luna not only uses her ability to drop into a deep bowl to claim skateboarder identity for herself, but also then repeatedly demonstrates this skill in order to perform her identity to others.

Carrying a board is also a visible aspect of performing skateboarder, particularly for those never without theirs and for whom it was a major identity claim. Carrying a board was, however, interpreted differently by others according to the perceived gender of the person carrying it. Several young women told us that it was assumed that they were a 'poser' (Dupont, 2014; Kelly et al., 2005), carrying a board around but unable to use it, but that this was not the case for young men. Heather (22), for example, said that

> I get really anxious to carry mine around sometimes because I know that because of my gender, I automatically get looked at in a slightly different way . . . Like when you see a boy walking down the street with a board, you're like, oh, cool, like a skater boy or whatever, and a lot of the time you've seen a girl walking down the street with a board, it's thought of in a different way.

This differing perception of man and woman skateboarders, from both the wider skateboarding community and the general public (McCarthy, 2022; Paechter et al., 2023), means that girl skateboarders must always be prepared to perform, so that their skateboarder status is recognised. Given that the boundary between skateboarder and poser seems to be mainly focused around being able to perform tricks, this is what was usually expected. As Georgina (21) put it:

> Yeah, the first thought, there's a saying, you're a poser. You're a poser, you don't really know skateboarding . . . Until you can do a kickflip.

It was not always clear whether this trick-focused performance criterion came from the young women themselves or from skateboarding more widely. It was sometimes challenged. Georgina, for example, said that 'Like you have to show people like I actually skate, but skateboarding is just about being happy, cruising around', and Polly (26) suggested that the focus on tricks was an internalised masculine imposition (Morissette, 2014):

> why can't you be a skateboarder when you just push around the city, 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?

The risk of being seen as a poser extended to other aspects of performance, especially those relating to appearance (Dupont, 2014). Morissette (2014: 392) notes that

> the coolness, detachment, and laid-back attitude embodied and enacted by the professional skateboarder are the results of a conscious effort to stage the self in the distinctive style of the skateboarding community.

Skateboarder as an identity is therefore performed in many ways, some of which are harder for women to embody or achieve than others (Dupont, 2014; McCarthy, 2022).

Onstage and offstage skateboarding space

Goffman (1959) argues that when the self is performed for others in everyday life, there is a distinction between frontstage and backstage spaces. Frontstage spaces are those where people are observed, often in specific roles, and have therefore to perform those roles consistently to appear authentic. Backstage spaces are more private, and are where performers can relax and temporarily drop their frontstage roles. We argue that, because of their stage-like character, and because of the ways they are produced by users, public skateboard spaces are not just frontstage, but explicitly onstage areas most of the time, and that, because of their hypervisibility, this is especially the case for girls and young women (Morissette, 2014).

Leib (2017: 195) argues, following Foucault, that 'the arrangement of the space is necessary, though not sufficient, to determine the character of what goes on there'. Although architectural features are important (Markus, 1993), how spaces are used by individuals and, especially, groups, affects power relations within them (Allen, 2003; Foucault, 1977). Furthermore, Morissette (2014: 392) suggests that sport itself

serves, among other things, as a stage or a set design where individual quests for self-expression and self-accomplishment are played out.

Skateboarding spaces generally have a combination of architecture (ramps, bowls, viewing areas, being situated in public parks or squares), and use (having some parts informally given over to spectators) which promote and facilitate simultaneous use by performers and observers. Skateboarding spaces are therefore, for skateboarders at least, frontstage. In spaces available to young women there are usually few or no areas in which one cannot be watched, though some managed skateparks do have semi-backstage practice spaces where one is somewhat less visible. For example, Gnarly Ramps, a skatepark used and discussed by several respondents, has an upstairs area mainly frequented by beginners or by more advanced skateboarders who withdraw there to practice specific tricks. While adjacent to the main viewing area, it is not somewhere people are much looked at, mainly because nothing exciting is expected to happen there.

Skateboarding spaces are, therefore, not just constructed as frontstage areas, places where there is little privacy to be other than one's performative, public self, but as actively onstage. This is the case both for skateparks and for informal skateboarding spaces, particularly those established in public squares, which are, in effect, theatres in the round, with observers on all sides (and in the middle of the stage area). Whenever a skateboarder takes a board to a popular skatepark or public skateboarder space, they automatically step onstage on arrival, and are expected to perform at some point. To arrive at such a public space with a skateboard and not skate is to invite the poser label and lose face. For young women, who, despite using skateboarding to resist conventional femininities (Kelly et al., 2005), are expected to fit the poser stereotype more easily than the skateboarder one (Dupont, 2014; Paechter et al., 2023), this means an unspoken performative obligation either to demonstrate skateboarder identity at an early stage, by participating in the action, or to leave. Skateboarding thus stops just being something that one does for oneself, and instead, or additionally, becomes performance for judgemental others, which some young women experienced as antithetic to what skateboarding is supposed to be about. As YeahMan (22) put it:

> I feel like I'm doing tricks for people rather than for myself. But I don't skate for anyone else but myself. So when I do that, it feels a bit, like, out of place, like, why am I actually trying right now, I may as well go home.

This performative aspect is exacerbated for girls and young women due to their lack of fit with male-dominated skateboarder spaces. It is not uncommon for a young woman to be the only non-male in the space, with a concomitant increase of individual scrutiny as, in effect, a solo and spotlit performer. Our respondents were clear that, alongside direct intimidation, this was something they were constantly aware of:

> I think it's just the general atmosphere . . . it can be really intimidating because you're the only, like you'll be the only girl. And you can tell that they don't really want you there. (Icantshuvit, 16)

Marcie took this further, arguing that the presence of girls skateboarding in what young men consider to be 'their' space, attracts both attention and antagonism, even in a managed skatepark:

> I've noticed when there is a girl that is skating, say on an open session like today, they'll like be in there and the lads just stand around them, and like watch to see what they're doing. Or if not that, there's a lot of testosterone you get flying around, and they're all stood there like, ooh, ooh, like just stood there like proper angry little gremlins. And it's like, leave the girl alone for five minutes. (Marcie, 28)

Heather (22) and Georgina (21), both good skaters, avoided a popular public skateboarding space dominated by young male skateboarders, and where it was understood that a high level of demonstrable skill was expected. As Heather explained:

> We tend to avoid Hipster Square . . . I used to go there a lot, but honestly, it's just a little circle of people who think they're better than you . . . [. . .] . . . you still feel like an outsider every time you get down there, and it's mainly male dominated, you get talked down.

Heather also talked about 'a lot of weird boys at skate parks who will like, watch you the whole session', suggesting that some of the spotlight on young women skateboarders was not entirely innocently trained. She also mentioned an occasion in which the manager of a local skatepark had found men in the park's waiting area taking it in turns to peek through a crevice at the young women skating during a women and girls' only session.

This invasively experienced spotlight on young women seems to be exacerbated and, possibly, encouraged, by the sexualisation of some professional women skateboarders. Rosie (18) was particularly scathing about this:

> I don't like the fact that a lot in social media now, like female skaters are sexualised. Like some of them will sexualise themselves. I know it sounds really bad, but they will. Like, they'll be wearing, like, a bikini or something like that. And it's like, no-one does that.

Our respondents felt that this sexualised approach to professional skateboarding not only made them more visible but could also lead to harassment of young women in skateboard spaces. This role of 'sexy skater' also underlines a perception of skateboarding space as inherently masculine, with even high-performing women being positioned as present at least partly for men's consumption, and makes it harder for young women to use skateboarding as a way of resisting conventional femininities (Fok and O'Connor, 2021; Kelly et al., 2005).

The focused, performative, spotlight on young women skateboarders does not, however, seem to result in a full appreciation of their skills, or even of their right to be in the space. Rosie (18) complained that there was a general assumption that young women would be less expert than their young men counterparts:

> If I'm dressed like a boy, people think I'm better. I don't know why. People assume you're better. Like, if I've got a low ponytail . . . people just assume you're better than if I'm dressed a bit more girly, I've got a bit of makeup on.

This meant that when entering any skate space (and, as a mainly street skater who took her board everywhere, for Rosie this meant most of the time) she had to perform in order to be named as a skateboarder:

> Just the general assumptions you get, like I always feel underestimated. So, like . . . say I'm at Central Place, anyway, I can see eyes on me and I feel like I have to prove myself all the time.

Several young women spoke about being referred to as 'good for a girl', even when demonstrating expert skill levels.

A young woman entering a skateboarding space is therefore immediately expected to perform in order to demonstrate her right to be there and her identity as a skateboarder rather than a poser. Furthermore, this performance takes place under the intense spotlight that arises from her status as a rarity, and, often, the only female-perceived body in the space. At the same time, any performance is judged in relation to her status as a girl, whether she outshines the local young men or falls over:

> What irritates me the most, when you do something, and a boy says, 'oh, even I can't do that' (group discussion participant)

Berry (22) argued that any 'fail' is first and foremost tied to her gender:

> Like I feel when I fall over when there's lads around, and they'll go, oh, you know, because you're a girl you've fallen over.

Young women skateboarders are hypervisible, constantly watched and constantly criticised, but unable to benefit from their rarity or the spotlight they are put under on the skateboarding stage. They are assumed to be worse performers than others in the space, even when there is no evidence for this, based on their physical appearance.

The hypervisibility of young women and their skating performances combined with the assumption that they lack expertise means that, for much of the time, skateparks and other skateboarder spaces are not good places for girls, particularly beginners, to practice. In effect, the exacerbated performative nature of these spaces for young women excludes them until they are sufficiently expert (or recognised as such by the local skateboarder community) to be working on relatively advanced tricks. Consequently, some young women use other spaces, such as back gardens, or streets near to home, for backstage practice. They also used less pressurised frontstage spaces, such as women only or beginner sessions at managed skateparks, in order to develop skills and confidence before they felt able to participate in open sessions or general public skateboarding (Pomerantz et al., 2004). BurgundyMan (19), a skatepark coach, pointed out the limitations of this:

> Because the amount of beginners that have said to us that, I don't feel comfortable going to a skatepark, because I need to work on my skills first before I can go. Which is a sort of bit of a double [bind], because you use the skatepark to progress and get better, but unless you're already at a certain level you feel intimidated to go there.

All of this raises the question of who skateparks and other skate spaces are for. The current dominant usage suggests that they are primarily spaces for skilled young men skaters, with others, including highly competent women, taking second place. This can be problematic, as was especially clear from our observations of Parish, a skatepark explicitly built to attract local young men for both skateboarding and BMX riding. Here, despite it being a local village park, there was no quiet space where a beginner could practice safely or a young woman skate unobserved. On several occasions we saw girls arrive with boards, only to leave immediately and instead skate on the all-weather football pitch or concrete paths nearby.

One solution to this favoured by several of our young women respondents was to visit skateparks, but only when they were not busy, usually early in the morning, and to leave if anyone else arrived. This strategy turned what later in the day would be an onstage performance space into one that was temporarily backstage, allowing them to practice unobserved. Of course such times could not be relied on, as Mildred (21) pointed out:

> One time I think it was empty, and then all of a sudden, a wave of skaters come by and I'm like, you had like five minutes of alone time. And as soon as they start coming in, I feel like I'm obliged to go away, because I'm not good . . .

Mildred here articulates not just her unease with being at the skatepark with other skaters but also an internalisation of an assumed hierarchy of skateboarders which makes her own right to skate harder to access (Dupont, 2014) Another strategy we observed was limiting oneself to a relatively secluded corner of a skatepark and just practicing quietly there alone or with other young woman companions. One woman in the group discussion talked of 'just needing to be in one corner to practice'. We also noted that it was common for groups of young women in mixed skateboard spaces to stick to areas in which there was some sort of barrier (such as a ramp) between them and the main space, especially if that space contained a lot of young men or spectators.

It was clear from our interviews and observations that most young women disliked the performance and performative aspects of skateboarding most of the time. Occasionally, however, they enjoyed or even embraced it. As discussed earlier, Luna (14) actively wanted to perform to anyone passing her ability to drop into a challenging bowl. Other young women mentioned occasions and spaces in which they felt comfortable being onstage, partly because they felt that their skill was being celebrated. Heather (22) and Georgina (21) liked a central public square specifically because, as Georgina put it, 'people just do their own thing there. They talk, they read books, they drink coffee, and I do my own thing as well'. The multiple uses of this space in some ways made it less stage-like than others, despite its layout, with a wide open space in the middle surrounded by seating. However, Heather and Georgina also enjoyed the friendly comments from members of the public that skating there elicited:

> Georgina: When you do some tricks, and then people will see and, then, it's like, oh, this girl is impressive. Like, oh, that's nice. That would make my day. Yeah.
> Heather: Yeah, true, you always get such nice people coming up to you.

Other young women understood even being scrutinised by other skateboarders as simply friendly interest. Suzie (17) argued that girl skateboarders being watched came partly from interest in any newcomer's skill level, and partly from a general appreciation of the increase in female participation:

> I think also it's cos they're excited that girls come to skate and they're interested so they're all watching you. There's literally nothing malicious about it.

Luna (14) also felt that being watched was part of the supportive atmosphere of the skatepark, and one that allowed her and others to progress:

> Like when I first started, because I think I was a bit, oh my gosh, everyone's looking at me cos I can't do it. But everyone will, like, cheer you on, just support you all the way and cheer you on.

It may be relevant that both Suzie and Luna were interviewed in a managed skatepark, where a supportive atmosphere was encouraged and coaches were often available. Many of our respondents strongly appreciated the explicitly supportive ethos of women and girl only sessions in such locations, which may give those who stick to them a strikingly different experience from skating in more open and overtly onstage street and skatepark spaces. We note, however, that the young men we interviewed did not complain about, or even much refer to, being watched. Furthermore, because most skateboarders are male, it is much easier for them to disappear into a crowd of skaters and only be noticed if they want to be.

Conclusion

Skateboarding can be spectacular to watch, so it is unsurprising that a performance culture has grown up around it. The involvement of photographers and film-makers as core members of skateboard spaces (Dupont, 2014) is an exciting and creative aspect of this, but can also restrict access by centring the onstage and performative aspects of public skateboarding. As a sport that has particularly come to public prominence in a highly visual, media dense period, it has also been part of developments in public space that include skateboarding as a form of street entertainment, something to be watched by skateboarders and the general public alike. This performance culture is exacerbated by an additional performative aspect, in which the authenticity of claims to be a skateboarder are overtly judged and recognised through performance (Beal and Weidman, 2003; Dupont, 2014; MacKay and Dallaire, 2014; Paechter et al., 2023). Most skateboarding spaces are, therefore, onstage, for most participants, most of the time.

It is clear both from our research and from the literature more widely (Atencio et al., 2009; Bäckström, 2013; Bäckström and Nairn, 2018; Dupont, 2014; MacKay and Dallaire, 2014; Pomerantz et al., 2004) that these performative aspects of skateboarding can be experienced as enjoyable or advantageous by young woman skaters. Girl skateboarders in our research particularly liked receiving appreciative comments from members of the public, showing off hard-won skills, and being recognised and accepted as

skateboarders on the basis of demonstrated performance. They also, however, frequently experienced being watched as unpleasant, aggressive, sexualised and harassing.

Young women have less choice than young men about when they are explicitly onstage in public skate spaces, because of their comparative rarity in these spaces. This puts them under a performative solo spotlight, in a taken for granted male space, that exacerbates the requirement that new people to a space or group perform skateboarder in order not to be considered inauthentic. They come under scrutiny, from both other skateboarders and members of the public, even when they are inexpert or just practicing. This makes their participation in local skateboarding cultures harder, particularly for beginners. Our data suggest that this is a problem for all abilities and it cannot be expected that young women will eventually become accustomed to the performative elements of public skateboarding. Some of our respondents had been skating for several years and had high skill levels, yet still found it hard to participate fully in public skate spaces. This suggests that it is a spatial and cultural problem rather than one of experience.

Previous studies suggest that, in addition to gender, other aspects of identity and physicality can affect skateboarders' experience of spaces for skateboarding. For example, Willing et al (2019) report that experienced older men skateboarders also find skateboarding culture less accessible as their skills wane. This suggests that some more challenging aspects of skateparks and other skate spaces may be less accessible to them, due to established intrinsic understandings of who skateboarders are and what they should be able to do (Sayers, 2023). O'Connor (2018), in a study of skateboarders aged between 36 and 55, notes that they, like the young women in our study, tended to use skateparks early in the morning, before they become too crowded with younger skaters and other users. This approach was also taken by an older woman coach we interviewed.

Our findings have implications for the design of skateparks and, potentially, for the organisation of other skate spaces. Purpose-built skate spaces need to have quiet, less observed areas, where beginners can make their initial forays and to which more expert skaters can withdraw to practice their skills. There is an inevitable tension here between safety and privacy, however; it is important that less observed spaces do not become unsafe for women and younger skaters simply because they are less overlooked. Glenney and O'Connor (2019) also argue that cities should

> incorporate skateable features in urban space to include skateboarders in the community and give them access to moving around their city as a form of citizenship (12).

Whether this would make it easier for woman, beginner and older skateboarders to participate is unclear. However, Georgina's previously quoted remark about Central Place, a large plaza-like area in Hillwood where skateboarders mingle freely with other users, suggests that it is a possibility worth investigating. Such spaces are now actively being designed and built: for example a new mixed-use skateable space has recently opened in Nottingham, UK.

While these structural aspects of skateparks are the responsibility of local planners, our findings and their implications should also be incorporated into advice proffered by national and international skateboarding bodies who advise such official groups. It is likely that if we build skateparks which incorporate beginners, diverse abilities and

diverse skills, they will also be more accessible to young women. This would include areas of empty space, which would allow cruising around and flat tricks and be enjoyed by skateboarders of all abilities, rather than just the current emphasis on bowls and ramps. We also recommend that purpose-built skate spaces include areas that are more secluded than the main 'performance' areas, allowing for more private practice.

While considerable work clearly needs to be done in the structural aspects of skatepark and official skate space provision, the organisation of informal skate spaces is partly a matter of how local skateboarding communities choose to set up and use a particular space. Educating more expert skateboarders, especially young men, in how their taken-for-granted space use can inhibit young woman skateboarders, has the potential to work gradually towards more inclusive and less performative space use. Again, we expect that this would lead to greater inclusion not just of young women and girls into such spaces but also of older, beginner, and other less performatively adept and confident skateboarders.

We also hope that the development of skateboarding expertise among young women and girls will also eventually make their right to be present in skateboarding spaces less something that has to be demonstrated through immediate and solo performance and more something that is conferred provisionally until a poor performance suggests otherwise, as is the case for young men in public skate space. This requires a change in skate culture, so is likely to take time. However, as more women enter and become proficient at skateboarding (Bäckström and Blackman, 2022), they will be less of a rarity, and, we hope, more able to claim a skateboarding identity as a right, rather than as the result of scrutinised performance.

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Notes

1. The data underpinning this article can be accessed at DOI: 10.17631/rd-2022-0007-dmix; DOI URI: https://doi.org/10.17631/rd-2022-0007-dmix.
2. Throughout this article, 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 nonbinary people among our respondents. However, no respondent identified themselves to us as nonbinary.
3. 'Girl Skateboarders: active girlhood, alternative sports, and urban space' is funded by the Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant Scheme, June 2021 to January 2023, Grant Reference RPG-2021-054.

4. All names are pseudonyms, mostly chosen by participants. They do not always reflect gender or ethnicity. Ages are in brackets. Where we have estimated someone's age from contextual information, this is indicated by an asterisk.

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