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'We sacrifice our bodies for this plank of wood': girl skateboarders, risk, pain, and injury¹

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ABSTRACT

Skateboarding is a masculine-inflected, male dominated informal lifestyle sport which carries inherent risk of pain and injury, which is expected to be met with stoicism as part of claiming 'authentic' skateboarder identity. We examine young women skateboarders' attitudes to these risks, focusing on how they understand, minimise and cope with injury and pain as an ongoing accompaniment to skateboarding practice. We consider how they see injury and pain in relationship to learning and at times experience muscle and injury pain as positive. We conclude that, while young women seem to be taking on the masculinist attitudes to risk, pain and injury that characterise skateboarding as a community of practice, there is some evidence of resistance to this. We also note that the apparent preference of many UK-based young women skateboarders for transition skateparks, due to problems encountered in street spaces, may make them more susceptible to serious injury.

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Introduction

Skateboarding is a sport that is associated with a moderately high inherent degree of risk, pain, and injury. This is partly because it involves travelling on an unstable moving platform, sometimes at high speed; partly because many skateboarding 'tricks' require jumping and landing, often while the board itself has been spun or otherwise moved during the jump; and partly because it takes place either in mainly concrete skateparks, many of which contain high ramps and/or deep bowls, or in public spaces, so falling can have serious consequences. Street skateboarding brings additional dangers posed by traffic, uneven surfaces and the expectation that skilled skaters will use street furniture, including steps, benches, bollards and handrails, as part of their practice (Borden 2019). This risk is seen by both users and researchers as an inherent part of skateboarding identity and authenticity (Abulhawa 2020; Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009; Beal and Weidman 2003).

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Young women skateboarders face additional risks due to the location of many skateparks and popular skate spaces (Kulnych 2020). For example, skateparks located outside of cities are often built on the edges of communities, where they are not overlooked by houses, may only be reached *via* secluded paths, and are usually unlit after dark. Informal or ‘DIY’ skateboarding spaces in cities are often situated in forgotten, frequently post-industrial areas, where no-one much goes, or in multi-use spaces where young women may feel uncomfortable going alone. Young women are also sometimes harassed by members of the public or other skateboarders, both on the street and in skate spaces (Paechter et al. 2023). While we do not have the space here to discuss this aspect of skateboarding risk, it acts as a backdrop to our discussion and will be picked up again in the Conclusion.

In both lifestyle and more formally organized sporting culture, risk, pain and injury are interrelated, and have both subjective and objective elements. McEwen and Young (2011) note that risk taking happens in social settings in which it is valued, and that cultures of risk encourage the normalization of injury (Howe 2001). Howe (2004, 109), writing in relation to elite sports participants, notes further that

risk consists in consciously knowing that I might become injured, but going ahead in spite of that knowledge. In this way, risk culture may be seen as a choice of lifestyle.

Furthermore, Langseth (2011) argues that, in risk sport cultures such as skateboarding, risk taking for the purpose of achieving intense thrills is both linked to masculinity and given social value. Our interest in this paper is partly to understand how young women skateboarders perceive, minimise and cope with risk, and partly to investigate how this is related to masculine-inflected understandings of pain and injury.

Spencer (2012, 120) defines pain as ‘an indicator of body damage, an unpleasant *sensory and emotional* experience associated with an actual or potential tissue damage’. Howe (2001) notes that, while injury can be seen as a more objective breakdown in the structure of the body, pain is subjectively experienced. How pain is understood is culturally determined. (Howe 2004; Spencer 2012). Nixon (1992) argues that sports subcultural beliefs about risk, pain and injury are part of participation in such networks and so are hard to challenge. Furthermore, such enculturation is gendered: children are taught gender-appropriate responses to pain from a young age (Howe 2004). Withstanding pain, and/or continuing to play through it, are closely related to sporting masculinities (Abulhawa 2020; Pringle and Markula 2005). Pain and suffering are also associated generally in Western culture with personal growth (Bendelow and Williams 1995). Sabo (2009, 145) argues that

the ways that we define and interpret sports injury are deeply rooted in long-standing cultural traditions and patterns of gender relations. The “pain principle” is a pervasive narrative or cluster of meanings that became insinuated in Western Judeo-Christian cultural traditions... The pain principle is defined as a patriarchal cultural belief that pain is inevitable and that the endurance of pain enhances one’s character and moral worth.

Risking and accepting pain and injury are therefore associated with masculinity, especially within sporting cultures (Manzenreiter 2013). Skateboarding has traditionally been associated with masculinity and remains male-dominated, despite increasing inclusion of younger women (Abulhawa 2020; Kulnych 2020). It is therefore important to examine how young women are enculturated into skateboarding cultures and how this is related to dominant masculine tropes.

We understand skateboarding cultures as localized communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Paechter 2007; Wenger 1998) which have varying relationships to wider skateboarding subcultures. Those new to the group either have to prove their worth as skateboarders (through performing tricks etc.) to be accepted as full participants, or to join as legitimate peripheral participants who are in the process of enculturation into the community, something that is associated with both the development of skills and the taking on of cultural norms (Wenger 1998). A central part of this process is a gradual acceptance of the inevitability of pain and injury (Sayers 2023) and a willingness to continue skateboarding in the face of this (Howe 2004; McEwen and Young 2011; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2015). Our analysis considers how this takes place, through an examination of young women skateboarders' attitudes to and discussion of risk, pain and injury related to skateboarding. We understand skateboarding as a community of practice which girls want to join and which has acceptance of risk, injury and pain as part of this process. This community is centred around a masculine-labeled sport with a masculinist approach in which stoicism regarding pain is a key subcultural norm.

Methodology

The analysis in this paper is based on interviews conducted as part of a 20-month study of young women skateboarders focused on three main locations in or near to two cities.² Flyovers is 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 village³. 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). Participants were aged between 8 and 27, of a wide range of abilities and experience, and recruited through our presence in the spaces coupled with snowball sampling from those already identified for interview. As well as regular observations in these skateparks, findings from which are discussed elsewhere (Paechter et al. 2023; Stoodley et al. 2022), we also observed activity, and recruited participants, in related street skate spaces in the same two cities. This expanded our respondent group to include street-only skateboarders, though some respondents skated both park and street. Our study is therefore unusual in its focus on multiple skateboarding spaces and communities in both urban and rural areas, and on skateboarders practicing a range of approaches to the sport.

We carried out individual and paired interviews with 32 young woman⁴ skateboarders aged 8–28 (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, including skatepark managers, coaches, those organising local skateboarding initiatives, young men skateboarders, two women whose leisure time is skateboarding based but do not skate themselves, and the manager of a skate shop. We also attended and audio recorded a meeting set up by a managed skatepark, Gnarly Ramps (not one of our key sites), to elucidate the experiences and opinions of nine young women using their space. Finally, we organized 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. Data were analysed using NVivo, using progressively focused coding techniques, in which both ongoing data collection and concurrent coding feed into each process.

Our analysis is located a broad communities of practice framework (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), in which we consider the young women skateboarders to be participants, at varying levels, in wider local, national, and international communities of practice of skateboarding, with their own collective understandings that are shared between skateboarders and passed on to newcomers (Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009; Beal and Weidman 2003). In this paper we focus on how these young women's understanding and acceptance of risk, pain and injury are related to local and wider skateboarding cultures of which they are or aspire to be a part. We are therefore foregrounding their understanding of these.

In the rest of this paper we will focus on the young women participants' understandings of and attitudes to risk, pain, and injury in skateboarding. We will argue that, like young men, young women vary in their perceptions of and tolerance of skateboarding risk, and modify, extend, or limit their activity accordingly. After an initial discussion of how girl skateboarders understand skateboarding risk in general, we move on to focus on activities that they considered to be particularly risky. We then discuss the idea, common within skateboarding, that falling is an inevitable part of learning to skateboard. From here we consider the ways in which injuries are treated as battle scars and status symbols, and how this is related to the sharing of injury stories and crash videos. This takes us to a discussion of the masculine-labeled discipline of pain and how this is understood by young women in skateboarder communities. In contrast to this, we then briefly consider those skateboarders who reported not wanting to skate after a fall, as well as those who told us about the problems and dangers of returning to skating after a serious injury. In our conclusion we note how the unsafe nature for women of many informal skateboarding spaces may make them more likely to be injured while skateboarding. Finally, we reflect on the extent to which young woman skateboarders accept and take up the masculine-inflected understandings of risk, pain and injury that are central to the sport, and consider whether there are points of resistance.

'I Don't do anything stupid': how is risk understood by young women skateboarders?

We asked all our respondents about their own relationship to risk, either as skateboarders or non-skateboarders, and also whether they thought there were any gender differences in this regard. We did not define risk ourselves when doing this, allowing their understandings to emerge from their responses. The general consensus was that any gender differences were likely to be due to the relative lack of experience of the majority of woman skateboarders. In contrast to Fok and O'Connor's (2021) women skateboarders in Hong Kong, who saw men as more likely to take risks, our participants thought that young men were no more

likely than young women to skate in risky ways. There was also considerable variation in whether people considered themselves to be risky skaters, with no obvious gender split. What constituted risk however, was an individual matter, with different people giving different reasons for whether or not they thought their approach to skateboarding was particularly risky. Some also told us that their attitude to risk varied according to their mood. For example, while overall considering herself not to be a risky skater, Baby (23) told us that ‘I have my moment; sometimes I get really on my high, I’m really hyperactive and daring’. In our interviews, respondents often pondered on and discussed the nature of risk, considering what it meant and how they embraced or avoided it. We found that attitudes to risk fell into four main categories: minimising perception of the risk involved; approaches to protective equipment; balancing risk against enjoyment in one’s practice; and risk to others.

Some skateboarders sought to minimise their perception of the risks they were running while skateboarding (O’Connor 2016), by comparing it to other sports (Haines, Smith, and Baxter 2010). JumpyLasagne (11), who considered herself to be ‘a big scaredy cat skater’, thought that

I don’t think it’s like climbing or parkour, it’s like, you could get a bad injury, but it’s kind of quite rare, because it’s something that you can do quite easy if you know how to do it.

Related to this was a tendency to minimise any injury that did occur, at least in the short term, something that is seen in other sports where significant injuries happen, such as boxing and rugby (AlHashmi and Matthews 2022; Howe 2004; Matthews 2021; McEwen and Young 2011; Pringle and Markula 2005; Sabo 2009; Spencer 2012). While several of our respondents had received serious injuries skateboarding, including at least three who had been concussed, they tended to minimise the effects, though this did not stop them showing Lyndsey lurid videos of accidents, as we discuss below. Polly (26) told us about her previous concussion that ‘it’s fine, it doesn’t matter that that’s happened, it happens all the time’. YeahMan (22), was aware that repeated concussions might have caused long-term brain injury, of which she recognised some possible symptoms. Nevertheless, she continued to skate ‘without fail, every day’ without a helmet.

Others used a strategy of ‘knowing what my capabilities are’ (Baby, 23), using this to minimise the risk to themselves by not attempting things they thought they were not ready for. There was a general consensus, particularly among coaches, that serious injuries often arose from people trying things beyond their capabilities (Haines, Smith, and Baxter 2010). This contrasts with evidence from elite sports, which suggests that coaches themselves push athletes into injurious activity (Howe 2004; Tibbert, Andersen, and Morris 2015). There was also a sense that one had to be in the right frame of mind to attempt new tricks and that if one was not one was more likely to fail and get hurt because one had not fully committed to the trick. A few respondents also suggested that some of the more spectacular tricks they saw on social media were simply not worth the risk. Craig (15, a girl) told us:

Well, I do push myself trick-wise, but I don’t do anything stupid. Like, you know, people who ollie, like, I think, I really like appreciate the people who, like, ollie down like 20 stairs and stuff. But I just think it’s, like, unnecessary. I feel like you could just do something [else] like really impressive, like a dolphin flip or something. And it’s way less dangerous, do you know what I mean?

One way to lower the risks involved in skateboarding is to wear protective equipment such as a helmet and pads for knees, elbows and wrists (McIntosh, Patton, and McIntosh 2021). While the younger skateboarders did usually wear some protection, partly because of managed skatepark policies, most of those over 16 did not (O'Connor 2016). Those who wore equipment were reassured by it: for example Craig (15) had hit her head at the skatepark, but 'I had my helmet on, so it was fine'. Others used safety gear selectively, for park skating but not for street, or for specific activities. Mildred (21), who wore neither pads nor a helmet, told us that 'I'm thinking of, considering buying some if I want to start, you know, I don't know, jumping off things'. For others, there was a balance between comfort and safety. Rosie (18), who is mainly a street skater, and who was described by Calum (25) as 'car[ing] the least about her wellbeing out of probably anybody else' told us that on the one occasion she visited the local managed skatepark,

I was, like, right, I'm going to send the vert walls today...I was, like, right, I'm going to put some knee pads on, put a helmet on, put some elbow pads on...[...]. But I just find them really scratchy and, like, restricting. I just hate the feeling. I'd rather feel a bit of pain.

Samantha (16), who having had a previous concussion, is now 'very conscious of, like, falling and hitting my head again' still only wears a helmet if she is at the park; if she is street skating, 'I know how to bail properly'. While this learned ability to fall in such a way as to avoid hitting one's head is borne out by McIntosh, Patton, and McIntosh (2021) study of falls observed in elite skateboarding competition videos, it was not clear how many of the less experienced skateboarders had either been taught or practiced it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that protective falling techniques are learned through solo practice following the example of more experienced skaters. Given that woman skaters often have fewer opportunities for such practice, partly due to lack of access to appropriate practice spaces (Paechter et al. 2023), this may make them more vulnerable to injury.

Choices about when and where to wear safety kit were also related to an idea that one might balance risk and enjoyment (Haines, Smith, and Baxter 2010), particularly as for some skateboarders the adrenaline of risk-taking is part of the experience. Polly (26) told us that since having concussion she now wore a helmet, while her friend Poppy, (24) remarked that 'One of the things to protect your head is probably the most important. You can get by without a wrist, clearly'. However, they were also aware that, while, as Polly put it, 'it only takes one fall to realise you've got to wear a helmet on the big ramps', as people developed more expertise, they were likely to wear less safety equipment. Poppy had noticed, for example, that, 'we all started, like, wearing loads of pads and now people have started wearing less, but then you're doing bigger stuff'. Some felt that it was important to balance risk and achievement against continuous enjoyment. One of the participants in our exchange visit focus group argued that pushing oneself too hard on one occasion might mean that they would not be able to skate on another:

sometimes I'm like, oh, I don't want to push myself; then I'm going to fall and not be able to skate next week. And then it's like balancing it a bit.

Some skateboarders were also worried about the risks they posed to others, especially small children in public skateparks. BoredBoarder (11) described herself as skating 'cautiously' because she didn't want to hurt herself or anyone else. Concern for young children riding scooters on public skateparks was shared by several respondents, and existed in

tension with annoyance that they got in skateboarders' way, and an understanding that they also had the right to use the space. Poppy (24) summed up the concerns and contradictions:

We've all taken them out, the amount I've smashed into a few five year olds, and just collide, and you're worried that you've hurt them – they've hurt you, but you've got to be more concerned about them because obviously, they're five...[...]...But even then I find it crazy that parents let their tiny children go into like Duckworth Park when it's full of men, full grown men skating at like 1000 miles an hour...[...]...But then I guess they are entitled to use that space.

It is possible that worry about young children is gendered: we observed adult men skateboarders shouting and swearing at young children, or riding deliberately and intimidatingly close to them to force them out of the way or off the skatepark (Paechter et al. 2023; Petrone 2010). We did not see any women doing this.

Overall, risk-taking within skateboarding seems to have been understood as something that relates to the space, the time and the individual's skill level, readiness to skate on that day, and general appetite for or comfort with risk. Within this, however, there were also discussions about what constituted particularly risky activity. It is to this that we now turn.

'I Always avoid like hill bombing': specifically risky activities

Several of our respondents mentioned specific activities and tricks that they considered to be risky. In some cases, they avoided these; in others, they took care around them or asked for help and assistance (for example, having one's hands held) during attempts. What was considered risky partly depended on an individual's personal skill level and style, but there were some things that were agreed to involve more risk than others. Ollieing down sets of stairs, as indicated by Craig, above, was one such activity, though we also interviewed people who did this. Another was hill bombing: fast downhill skating, often in traffic. There is objective justification for being wary of this, as Fang and Handy (2017, 290) found that 'high speeds, like those reached in downhill recreational longboarding, can lead to high Injury Severity Scores'. Nevertheless, some young women did enjoy this activity, with one of the focus group participants telling us that 'we just find hills and bomb them, and just... it's pretty fun'. Others pointed to the dangers of serious accidents in traffic. As Mildred (21) put it:

Hill bombing is way too scary; I don't know how to stop, so. I don't want to, you know, keep going into the main road and get naynayed.

Apart from the more obviously injury-risking activities and obstacles, such as these, plus high vert ramps and large drops, there was some debate about other risks. Heather (22) and Georgina (21) discussed what constituted 'risky tricks' as part of their joint interview.

Georgina: I think she does more risky tricks than me, 'cause I only do, not only, but like I'm more into doing flatground tricks.

Heather: But you try flip tricks that I would be too scared to try, Whereas I like obstacles, and you don't like obstacles, so I guess it evens out.

Georgina: Yeah, and then, yeah, it's about style.

Heather: What you prefer doing, for sure. I like doing things on things, and like, you know, throwing myself on and off things. She likes going flipping it, aaargh.

Georgina: Yeah, I like flip tricks and then, yeah, I think I'm kind of like, not a risk taker.

Heather: It depends... I would say so, because any flip trick is a risk, because you could always land primo,⁵ and die.

Others pointed out that their most serious injuries did not always result from the most obviously risky activities, or even from things that were beyond their capability. Baby (23) who was still recovering from a serious knee injury that had required reconstructive surgery, told us that the switchflip she was attempting at the time was 'one of my easiest tricks really. I should have landed it'. Risk and injury in these circumstances could be related to personal behaviour or circumstances at the time. Elsewhere in her interview, Baby explained that she thought her injury occurred because 'I didn't commit to my trick' while trying to impress those around her.

Others suggested that they tended to fall when they felt nervous, some compensating for this by 'if we're feeling a bit sketchy, we'll ask someone for help' (Mandi, 27).

Apart from the obvious risks of street skating on main roads, other locations and circumstances could be considered inherently risky. As discussed above in relation to the possibility of collisions with small children on scooters, busy skateparks were seen as inherently problematic, and several of our respondents avoided these. Finally, being pushed by friends to try things that they weren't ready for was seen as a danger. Mandi (27) gave us one example of this:

My boyfriend and all his friends were so confident, they were like, oh, just go on this ramp, it'll be no problem, like, you know, one of the big ones. And I like, OK, you know, I'll see how I feel. And, like, literally just faceplanted and it was horrible.

Although most participants cited the support and encouragement of other skaters as important for their development, they were also aware that this could lead them to try things beyond their current capabilities, with greater likelihood of getting hurt.

'You have to fall so you learn again': falling as learning

Within wider skateboarder culture, falling, experiencing pain and getting injured are seen as part of the process of learning (Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005), reflecting wider sporting cultures in which pushing the body into pain is part of developing more advanced skill (Brady 2019; McEwen and Young 2011; McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020; Nixon 1992; Shilling 2017). As part of their gradual insertion into skateboarding culture, young women new to skateboarding were expected to learn and understand this, and to react with increasing stoicism as they developed as members of the group. That falling is part of learning was mentioned explicitly by both skaters and coaches, and was emphasized to newcomers by old-timers. Even our youngest participants talked about it, although none of them had experienced any serious injuries. It was not just that falling was seen as a regular and unavoidable part of skateboarding (Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005); it was a process that one had to go through in order to learn and develop (Sayers 2023). As Rosie (18) put it:

If you're not falling off, you're doing something wrong... But I, if I'm in agony, my body's aching, I'm proud of myself, because I know that I've learned something. And, like, you have to fall off to learn a trick; it's just how it works.

This reflects findings from other studies in which serious athletes spoke about the pleasure and satisfaction gained from aching muscles following hard training (Howe 2004; McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2015). In this sense, pain from falling is also construed as part of progression. For example, YeahMan (22) embraced falling, as part of learning a new trick:

When you fall off, you're one step closer to landing that thing that you really, really wanted to do for a really long time. So when it's like, you can see it's nearly there, but you fall off every time, and it kind of hurts a little bit. But you just know that if you do it a couple more times, you might land it.

Pain associated with both injury and muscle fatigue could thus be seen as positive, and a potential source of pleasure and satisfaction. Falling was also seen as part of a diagnostic process in which one could analyse why one fell and correct it next time, making one more likely to land the trick. As one of the focus group participants, put it, 'it teaches you definitely what not to do'.

Risking falls also was seen as part of the process of committing to a trick, without which one would not be able to learn it. This meant that those people who avoided falling were not expected to develop as skaters. Suki (24), for example, argued that she was unable to develop beyond cruising (and therefore could not have skateboarder status) because she was scared of falling. This reflects the subcultural understanding that falling is a core part of skateboarder development, and something that cannot really be avoided.

Falling was also seen as about learning and demonstrating qualities such as patience and persistence, both of which were considered essential to successful skateboarding. Respondents talked to us about how dealing with the challenges of fear of risk, pain, and injury were part of an overall preparation for life. Baby (23) said that 'it forces you to face fear', while Georgina focused on how what she had learned within skateboarding applied beyond it:

I think skateboarding is never just about skateboarding. It's about, it involves so many things, like your mind, literally...taught me so many things, how to adjust my mental [attitude], how to deal with things...[...]...it's like preparing for real life things when [they] try to come to you and you have [to] mentally prepare.

At the same time, these claims for skateboarding are related to what Atencio, Beal, and Wilson (2009) refer to as 'the distinction of risk', arguing that 'the ideals of freedom and risk are integrally linked with D.I.Y. [skateboarding] culture' (6). They suggest that this is particularly associated with dominant skateboarder masculinities and the idea that women skateboarders are more risk-averse than men, and therefore cannot be fully part of skateboarding communities (Fok and O'Connor 2021). In particular,

The practices associated with street skateboarding set up the conditions whereby respect and authority distinguished men and provided them with capital, since they were seemingly able to place themselves at risk and perform difficult technical tricks.

In contrast, women's habituses had less exchange value, despite the fact that women also frequently valued risk-taking. (11)

Atencio et al. argue that, because the men in their study were considered the greater risk-takers, this made them more able to 'freely use the skateboarding spaces and determine local patterns of use' (12). Risk-related status claims also appeared to us to be related to

battle scars in themselves being treated as status symbols: in Attencio et al.'s Bourdieuan framework, they became symbolic capital. We will now discuss the salience of bruises and scars, as perceived and experienced by our respondents.

'Do you want to see my scars and my scans?': skateboard tales and battle scars

Injury stories were a particular feature of our interview data: as Ican'tshuvit (16) told us, 'every little bruise you have, you have a story to tell behind it'. This may be partly because we explicitly asked people about bad experiences while skateboarding, but respondents were eager to tell us stories about their worst falls, accompanied by photographs and videos of their more horrific injuries. Cullen (2010, 2011), writing about young women's stories of drunken escapades, points to the salience of these in constructing and upholding particular forms of femininity and for establishing and negotiating status within the friendship group. She argues that

Within storytelling practices both the narrator and the listener have a key role to play, in the flow of information, the to and fro of questions, asides and interconnecting stories. These produce a complex collaborative shared narrative as stories are told, heard, reframed and acknowledged. (Cullen 2011, 122)

While the context of the stories being told to us is different, being part of a research interview rather than between girls and recorded as part of ethnographic immersion, we argue that they have a similar function for individuals and within the wider context of the skateboarding community. Several of our respondents had kept either photos or video of their injuries, including in some cases the actual moment of injury, and some had also uploaded these onto social media, often as part of an overall narrative of their skateboarding journey (McEwen and Young 2011). Several relished the chance to relate their gorier tales as part of an overall narrative of suffering for skateboarding. Baby (23) told us:

I love [talking about her serious leg injury], actually. I'm like, everyone, do you want to see my scars and my scans? I've got screws in my knee: do you want to see the x-ray? Like, let me show you something.

Lyndsey was also shown a range of varyingly gruesome or shocking injury photographs and videos, including the occasion on which YeahMan sustained her concussion. Rosie had had two 'credit-card' injuries, both in the six months before her interview. Credit-carding is an injury that occurs when, as part of a fall, the board comes up vertically and on its side between the rider's legs, smashing into the genital area. In women this is very painful and can result in serious bleeding which requires hospital treatment. In addition to offering to 'show you a picture of all the blood at Hipster, it was horrible', Rosie gave us a graphic description of the short- and long-term effects of her injuries on each occasion:

I remember standing there and thinking, oh my god, that was really painful. Then I was like, right, it might be all right. Then I just felt loads of liquid going everywhere and I thought, oh, god. So I went round the corner...[...]...I was walking round and blood was coming out my trousers. I had shorts on and jeans on, but blood was coming out my trousers everywhere... [...]...And it was so painful, but, to be fair, it wasn't as painful as the second time I did it... [...]...I did it again two months later. And that one was so much worse. I walked home and it got to a point where I just couldn't walk. I felt like I had, I felt like I had a ball sack growing... [...]...Still now, when I ride my bike, it's painful.

Rosie's story also points to the chronic pain that is a relatively little discussed but ever-present part of being a full participant in skateboarding communities of practice.

Heather (21) and Georgina (22) talked about how more serious falls could bring out solidarity among skateboarders: Heather's sprained ankle story included being pulled home on her board by her female friends. These collective responses to injury reflect those reported by Pavlidis and Fullagar (2015) studying roller derby, a women's sport culture. They report that, in roller derby subculture, pain is both avoided and sought, seen as a source of pride which conveys knowledge of the game, expert status, and toughness. They note that, similarly to female skateboarders, roller derby players celebrated injuries by uploading photographs to social media, and by a public veneration of women serious injury during play:

When, in a bout, one of the women breaks a leg or other bone, or is otherwise seriously injured, the entire stadium goes quiet and all players 'take a knee', stopping the game and kneeling on the track until the player either gets up or is removed. (495)

This contrasts with the tendency to minimise or cover up injury in wider competitive sporting cultures (Howe 2004).

For our skateboarders, less serious and dramatic falls were mainly experienced as embarrassing, and often dealt with through humour. One of our exchange participants told the group a story about hill bombing alongside the tramlines:

I once fell as the tram was coming. I had a can in my hand and I fell. Skateboard flying, I scraped all my arm, and my mate runs down and goes, you know, you didn't spill the can, and the can was full, not a drop was anywhere.

YeahMan (22) thought that learning 'to laugh it off' was part of becoming a skateboarder, encouraging others to laugh with rather than at you. While we were told more gruesome than amusing fall stories, the latter were certainly part of the general repertoire.

'I Took it like a G': the discipline of pain

Injury stories such as those discussed above appear to be central to wider skateboarding culture. Accepting the likelihood of injury-related pain and being brave when it occurs are therefore part of what allows young woman skateboarders to claim full membership of the local community of skateboarding practice: as one of the participants in our exchange focus group put it, being a skateboarder is about 'showing dedication, falling down, getting up, carrying on'. Heather (21) and Georgina (20) gave us a whole list of injuries which they felt justified their skateboarder identities, including: bruises; snapped ankles; a broken chin; lumpy legs; bad knees; a bad back; and summed up by Georgina: 'skateboarding is just, like, hurting you'. There was a general tendency to carry on skating after injury, without taking time off for healing (Shuman and Meyers 2015). This had led in some cases to longer term problems, which were discussed with a mixture of pride and regret, as a sign of commitment to skateboarding. Rosie (18) told us that her elbows had become 'swellbows' from constant soft tissue damage: 'but give it a week and then you'll be landing on it again, and it just gets bigger'.

Getting up again and getting back on without fuss is something that is valorised by the wider skateboarding community, including girl skateboarders (even if their stoicism is not

always recognized by the men (Beal and Weidman 2003; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005)). Abulhawa (2020, 76) notes that ‘the performance of ‘struggle’ is central to skateboarder authenticity, which is marked by displays of stoicism and physical endurance’; she further argues that this is associated with masculinity.

While our young women respondents did not use their embracing of such qualities to claim masculinity, and, indeed, argued that girl skateboarders were as likely to take risks as boys, they did use their acceptance that skateboarding ‘forces you to face fear...in the physical’ (Baby, 23) as part of their claim to skateboarder identity. Craig (15, a girl) said that one of the benefits of skateboarding is that ‘it teaches you to like take a slam and get up again... [...]...it teaches you patience and persistence’. Our respondents valued their ability to deal with pain and injury. Baby told us with pride about what happened when she snapped the tendons in her knee, requiring reconstructive surgery and months of rehabilitation. Initially, she tried to get back on the board and carry on:

Made me feel quite like a boss. I’m glad I did it, you know, because I took it like a G... [...]...I hobbled to the cashpoint, and I hobbled myself home ... [...]...I did it, and I knew something was wrong. I think I was trying to deny it, but I felt a pop in my knee, and I’d heard a pop in my ear, and it felt very unstable... [...]... and at the time when I did it, I could, like, put a bit of weight on my toes, and just kind of hobble a little bit... [...]...It was just I was kind of chill... [...]...and I stood back on the skateboard, and I was like, ooh, and then my knee felt weird. I was like, oh no, get off, that feels wrong. But because I was doing that, I don’t think anyone thought it was anything abnormal.

Baby’s description, including the language used, reflects both how injured skateboarders are expected to behave, in ways strongly associated with masculinity (Sabo 2009; Spencer 2012), and her pride in rising to that challenge despite what turned out to be a serious injury.

Another way our respondents embraced the discipline involved in skateboarding concerns keeping on going through practice despite pain, or, alternatively, not actually feeling the pain until afterwards. Georgina (20) told us about continuing to practice despite repeated bruising to her legs from hitting the board:

I still remember when I was pushing myself to do a kickflip, and then my whole legs were like, here, here, turned purple, and I still kept skating, and then people were, like, calling me crazy, but I just feel like, if I stopped, then I would lose the feeling, so I just keep doing it, keep doing it.

The young women involved in the exchange focus group also talked about this phenomenon, partly because during the trip one girl had spent such a long time trying to land a leap down a step that when she finally achieved it she immediately vomited, and then later got such bad leg cramp that she was unable to walk (Spencer 2012). This led to a discussion of the ways in which hyperfocus when trying to land a new trick (Sayers 2023) can lead someone to damage their body without immediately noticing. As one participant explained:

If I have an idea, and I really want to do it, and then I kind of try it and it’s kind of working, I get really hyperfocused on it, and I will try it for ages. It’s like you’re in a little bubble, you’re in your own little headspace, and just going, going, going, and I have to like, get... [...]... but when you take a break, you kind of leave that headspace, and you’re like, whoa, my body is effed, fucked up.

Participants also related the experience of pushing through pain and cumulative injury to the excitement and satisfaction of finally landing the trick:

And then you get it, and you're like, I've actually had, you know, achieved something, and you go home, and I'm like, even if it's a small thing, I'm like, oh my god, that's such good...and that feeling'll last for ages, and it's probably why it's so addictive.

Brady (2019) argues that, in sport, suffering partly defines the value of an activity and enhances the enjoyment of success. There was certainly a sense that part of the adrenaline rush of success came from a combination of the inherent danger of skateboarding, and the mental and physical challenge involved in working through the pain of learning to land a new trick. This is related to the eudemonic joy which accompanies successfully overcoming challenges, described by Moen and Firing (2016) in relation to sport and pain in athletics.

'I Guess I'm just scared now': nervousness and reluctance after falling

Despite an overall culture of bravado and persistence through pain and injury, some respondents did talk about not wanting to skate after a fall. While most of these were younger (and generally less experienced with falling) this was not entirely the case, though it did sometimes reflect the seriousness of a previous injury. At Flyovers, the coaches seemed gradually to induct their child students into a stoical skateboarding culture by suggesting that, while one might want to go home after a big slam, one should come back soon so that one didn't lose one's nerve entirely. Not wanting to skate again after a fall was generally seen as a matter of mental attitude that needed to be overcome. This reflects community values of toughness and resilience, discussed both by experienced woman skateboarders and by coaches. Evie (11), for example, said that after a fall she needed to get back on her board and try again at what she was doing, as otherwise it would take longer to regain her confidence. Similarly, Clover (22) told us that it wasn't so much falling that caused a problem, as 'it's the after where you feel useless, and just can't do anything'.

Others talked about nervousness around specific areas of a skatepark where they had previously fallen and how they worked to overcome this. Olivia (8), when asked what stopped her skateboarding, pointed to a ramp and said, simply, 'him'. Several respondents talked about the challenge of overcoming previous injury on specific obstacles, and reminding oneself that, as Jack, a (male) skateshop manager, put it, 'the ramp's not cursed'. For example, one of our exchange focus group participants told us:

Like, literally, like the rail in there that goes down, the only reason I got over that was because I fractured my ankle doing a rail a year ago. And I was, like, OK, F you, I'm going to do it better now, when it's healed.

For those who had sustained serious injury skateboarding, returning could be challenging, partly because the risks arising from falls may be significantly increased. After a break following concussion, Polly (24) found it difficult both to deal with having lost progress, and to overcome her fear:

I think it just goes back to how much of a mental battle the whole thing is of, like, fear, of just pushing yourself through being scared...[...]. And just having the feeling of, oh, that's set me back...[...]. It's quite a hard thing coming back from it and seeing that everybody else was learning, like, to drop in on these massive ramps and I was, like, I can't do it, I can't do it, I'm too scared.

Marcie (28), who has osteoporosis and arthritis and was on an extended break from skating after a serious fall in which she injured her back, told us that at that point she felt, 'I'm out, I'm done with this'. She did still skate occasionally, but with great care and only with support. She felt that there should be greater provision for people like herself who would like to skate but could not risk falling due to disability.

Conclusions

In many respects, the young woman skateboarders in our study share the attitudes to risk of the wider skateboarding community, with beginners of both genders generally more risk-averse than more experienced skateboarders. The approaches of our respondents overall reflect the small amount of previous literature in this area (Abulhawa 2020; Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009; Beal and Weidman 2003; O'Connor 2016), with risk-taking being seen as an inherent part of skateboarding, to the extent that it is considered necessary to learn and progress.

Young woman skateboarders, however, are subject to additional locational risks, due to the marginalised areas in which much street skateboarding and some park skateboarding takes place, making these spaces considerably less safe for young women than for men (Abulhawa 2020; Borden 2019; Carr 2017). This is exacerbated by the pressures put on young woman skateboarders who participate in street and plaza skating, both from male skateboarders and from the wider public. These include: a presumption that young women are likely to be less competent than men; hypervisibility due to the relative rarity of woman skateboarders; and direct hassle and abuse (Carr 2017; Dupont 2014; McCarthy 2022; Paechter et al. 2023). As a result, several of our respondents only skated managed skateparks (which has cost and therefore frequency implications), some only in specific women and girl slots. Others went to skateparks only when other skateboarders were unlikely to be around, such as early morning. Some only felt safe going to certain spots with friends. These responses to locational risk have the following potential effects, all of which make skateboarding less safe for young women in other ways.

First, limited access to skateable spaces results in less practice time, especially solo practice when one is not being watched by others. While this will make progress generally slower, one important aspect of this is less time learning to fall, especially falling in such a way as to protect one's head. While we cannot be certain about this, we were struck by the number of concussions sustained by our young woman respondents, which seems high compared to the findings of other studies (Dumas and Laforest 2009; McIntosh, Patton, and McIntosh 2021; Sharma et al. 2015). It is possible that the hypervisibility of young women skateboarders when others are around, coupled with the lack of safety involved in practicing in spaces such as carparks at night, may mean that some of these skills are less developed in young women skateboarders than in young men, and are not commensurate with other aspects of their expertise.

Second, young women are less likely to commute on skateboards, something that previous research suggests is comparatively safe, unless it involves rapid downhill skating or travelling through high traffic areas (Fang and Handy 2017). Relatively few of our respondents regularly used their skateboards to travel to work or college, partly because of the hassle they got from passers-by (Paechter et al. 2023), and those who skated managed parks were at

least as likely to arrive by car or bicycle as on a board. This suggests that, compared to young men, less of the overall time that young women spend skating involves what is likely to be the least injury-prone skateboarding practice.

Finally, because of general safety issues in some areas of the city, and their experience of hassle and intimidation as street skaters, particularly in popular spots, our respondents tended to concentrate their skateboarding in skateparks, especially managed skateparks. In the UK, these tend to be set up for transition skateboarding, with high concrete ramps, deep bowls and little space for flat cruising and related flatground tricks. While the latter (as Heather and Georgina noted) still have quite a high fall risk, the falls incurred are more likely to lead to sprains and minor breaks compared with, for example, the possibility of concussion involved in falling from the top of a high vert ramp or bowl (McIntosh, Patton, and McIntosh 2021). We do not think our respondents are unusual in their focus on transition skateparks: women's skateboarding in the UK is dominated by park skaters, as reflected in the composition of the British Olympic team, in which there are no female street skaters <https://skateboardgb.org/team>. Fok and O'Connor (2021) also report that most of the Chinese women skateboarders they studied in Hong Kong used skateparks. They argue that a boom in skatepark building there has made the sport more accessible; it is possible that it has also made injuries more likely.

Our findings suggest that, overall, young women skateboarders have taken on wider community attitudes to risk, pain and injury, despite their masculine associations. There is some evidence that they were more likely to admit to nervousness than young men, though this may be because all our men respondents were experienced skateboarders, whereas some of the women were beginners. Nevertheless, in a subculture in which risk-taking is valorised it is notable that only some young woman respondents fully embraced this, which may suggest a level of resistance to dominant skateboarding culture. For example, some woman skateboarders questioned the dominant attitude that only those who can do tricks can become full members of skateboarding communities, with Polly (26) asking whether 'that's just boys, is that just what boys have made up and we're just buying into it?'

It remains the case that young woman skateboarders, like their young man counterparts, treat falling, injury and pain as inherent parts of skateboarding that are necessary experiences if one is to learn and progress. However, the contexts in which young women are able to participate are not the same as those of young men, and in particular have the potential to disadvantage them in terms of safety while skateboarding. This is partly due to the inherent risks involved in being a woman travelling through, or participating in activities located in, less salubrious and more marginal parts of cities: the young women we interviewed were more likely to avoid or feel unsafe in certain spaces than young men. They were also less likely to skate in popular outdoor parks during the day, due to the presence of vulnerable young children and an unwillingness to force them off the park. The knock-on effects of this, however, may also make the activity of skateboarding physically less safe for women, due to their relative lack of access to long periods of practice, particularly of safer falling techniques, and their tendency to focus their practice on transition skateparks. These issues are worthy of further investigation, particularly to inform skatepark design, so that future skate spaces are constructed to include more flat ground and beginner-focused areas.

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. ‘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.
3. All names are pseudonyms, mostly chosen by participants. They do not always reflect gender or ethnicity. Ages are in brackets – where we have had to estimate someone’s age from contextual information this is indicated by an asterisk.
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
5. Landing primo refers to landing on the edge of the board. While some skateboarders do this deliberately as part of a trick, when it happens accidentally it will usually result in the skater landing hard on the ground.

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