

Girl Skateboarders: active girlhood, alternative sports, and urban space

Leverhulme Trust Grant RPD-2021-054

Final Report June 2023

The Grant

Start date: 1st July 2021

Completion date: 31st March 2023 (3-month no-cost extension granted to original completion date of 31st January due to Dani Abulhawa's maternity leave)

Those undertaking the research:

Principal Grantholder:	Carrie Paechter, Nottingham Trent University 1 day/week, 20 months
Co-Grantholders:	Michael Keenan, Nottingham Trent University 165 hours, 20 months Dani Abulhawa, University of Leeds 63 hours, 20 months Chris Lawton, Skateboard GB approximately 60 hours, 20 months (uncosted)
Research Fellow:	Lyndsey Stoodley, Nottingham Trent University 20 months full-time

Data collection and analysis was based at Nottingham Trent University with research findings shared electronically and through monthly online whole-team. The audio artwork was produced at University of Leeds.

Objectives

We aimed to understand in detail:

1. experiences of girl skateboarders as members of local skateboarding communities;
2. the role of skateboarder identities in girl skateboarders' lives, and how these are related to other, intersecting, identities;
3. incentives and barriers to skateboarding for girls;
4. how young female skateboarders use spaces in skateparks and wider urban areas, and how being involved in skateboarding affects this;
5. how we can improve girls' physical activity levels by enhancing inclusive skateboarding provision.

Research questions:

1. *Lived experience*: How do young female skateboarders experience participating in a local skateboarding community? What makes them take up and stay in skateboarding? What is the relationship between their 'skateboarder' and other identities? What is their sense of belonging, independence, difference and resistance within local skateboarding communities of practice? To what extent is this influenced by trans-local skateboarder cultures and skateboarding-focused media? How does this compare with girls who attend skateparks but do not participate?
2. *Community inclusion and exclusion*: How do other members of local skateboarding communities view young women skateboarders? How do they behave towards them in the skatepark? How do girl skateboarders react to this?
3. *Interaction with skateparks*: How do girl skateboarders operate within skateparks? How do they use the space? What are the physical, social, or other constraints and enablers for this? How is this affected by interventions to support female participation (e.g. in relation to trust, perception and effectiveness)?
4. *Wider urban environment*: How do girl skateboarders operate within and move around the wider urban environment? How is this affected by participation in skateboarding and using skateboards for transport?

Research activity

Specifics of the research undertaken

Fieldwork was focused on three main locations in or near to two cities. Flyoversⁱ is a partially indoor, managed skatepark in Bedrock, North-west England. High Hill Park is a public outdoor skatepark near the centre of Hillwood, English Midlands, and Parish is a public outdoor skatepark in a large village near Hillwood. Flyovers and High Hill Park were identified in advance; Parish during the research as a contrast to the other two. We conducted observations at all three skateparks, at different times of day, season and weather conditions. Observations included both conventional field notes and a specially designed spatial mapping tool 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, noting power dynamics in encounters with others. This was paper-based for safety reasons, with maps scanned for electronic retention. In managed skateparks observations encompassed times when the park was open to all and times when participation was officially restricted to beginners or girls and young women. The Research Fellow also sometimes participated as a skateboarder, as a way of meeting potential participants. To supplement our research in these spaces we also carried out observations of other skateboarding sites and events in and around the same two cities, including informal street spaces. This is unusual: most previous studies have focused on one specific, usually park-based, location.

We used our presence in the spaces, supplemented by snowball sampling, to recruit participants. We carried out individual and paired interviews with 32 young woman skateboarders aged 8-28, ranging from novice to experienced and expert skateboarders, 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 who do not skate themselves; and a skate shop manager. We also attended and audio recorded a meeting organised by a fourth, managed skatepark, Gnarly Ramps, to elucidate the experiences and opinions of nine young women using their space. 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. Interviews were transcribed using a secure transcription service and

audio recordings destroyed after the transcripts had been checked. To include an element of participant research, we organized an exchange visit between young women attending Flyovers and Gnarly Ramps. This involved seven young women in total. During the first visit and between then and the second, they shared notes and videos of their skateboarding activities, which we used as a prompt for a recorded focus group discussion on the second occasion. Transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo. Ethical clearance was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Business, Law and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

To develop the audio artwork, Dani Abulhawa took anonymised interview data coded as 'allyship'. She used this to develop a script based on three fictional skateboarder characters, who discuss what supports them to access skateparks and develop their practice. This script forms one strand of the audio artwork, and is voiced by actors representing diverse gender and racial characters. The other two strands are:

- A series of invitations and instructions for movement around the skatepark that encourages the listener to observe the skatepark and move around it in different ways. It progresses from the listener occupying a peripheral space within the skatepark toward them taking an actual or imagined position in the centre.
- A piece of music forming the background and anchor for the other two strands. This was created from skateboarding sounds recorded and mixed by composer Guillaume Dujat, who was commissioned to create an oceanic/fluid atmosphere.

Drafts of the work were shared with the research project team. Their feedback was integrated into the final work. The artwork is designed to be listened to in a skatepark or skate spot and is accessible to anyone in these spaces.

The artwork is designed to respond to Objective 5 by enhancing inclusivity of spaces. It offers practical advice and information about allyship in skateparks in a non-instructive, non-authoritarian way. It addresses spatial inequality in skate spaces by inviting listeners to explore and reflect upon their occupation of space in terms of: centre and periphery; duration; taking space; giving up space for others; and holding space.

Problems encountered and changes once the project was underway

The mapping system was harder to devise than anticipated. Initial observations made it clear that we needed to record movement through the space as well as location and activity of individuals, to note which individuals were doing what activity (e.g. skating, smoking, chatting, watching, scooter riding, BMXing), and to record dominant/non-dominant interactions between skateboarders and between them and others in the space. We also needed to have a paper-based system to escape the limitations of electronic mapping tools, and for safety reasons, as many observations were conducted by a lone researcher in an unmanaged space. Our solution was influenced by behavioural mapping techniques, which can be used to record specific activities across a space at specific times.

We developed a coded two-map approach to allow us to depict a wide enough range of variables in a short space of time. This approach incorporated 'place centred' and 'individual centred' maps, which were printed on individual sheets of a4 paper. Both maps used a template which provide space for notes, plus prompts for administrative details such as map reference number, date and time of observation, and the identity of the observer (see Appendix for examples).

We had considerable problems recruiting participant researchers. Most participants were busy with school and work and did not want to commit the time involved to engage at a deeper level. To overcome this we organised an exchange visit between young women skateboarders from Gnarly Ramps and Flyovers, supported by the two skateparks, which provided free entry. During and after the initial visit participants posted videos and comments to a secure WhatsApp group set up specially for the exchange; these were used as prompts and to explore themes in a focus group during the return visit.

We had not appreciated how much the weather would affect our data collection. All three of our focus skateparks were exposed in winter and at times it was too cold or windy to take notes or complete maps. Skateboarding is also strongly weather dependent, and we

lost time due to wet weather during key observation periods (such as summer half term). To compensate, we extended the observation period by a month.

Previous non-UK literature suggests that individual public skateparks have relatively stable attendance/participant groups which occupy the space both regularly and relatively exclusively. We did not find this to be the case: the one such skatepark we identified had to be excluded from the study for researcher safety reasons as it was too isolated for extended solo observation. Our focus skateparks were often empty for long periods, or occupied entirely by young children riding scooters. Even during popular skateboarding times there were frequently no girls or young women skating. We used two strategies to deal with this: we extended our observations and participant recruitment to associated skate spaces within the two cities, including popular street/plaza skateboarding sites; and we relied more on snowball recruitment from both these and our focus skateparks. We also recruited young women respondents specifically from beginner and women and girls' events in the target skateparks. This may have somewhat affected our data as some respondents only skated at these events. However, it also gave us some exclusively street skateboarder respondents, a little studied group.

Conclusions and achievements

Original contribution to theoretical and practical knowledge

The research is significant for several reasons. It is, unusually, a UK-based, multi-site study, focusing on both park and street skateboarders. Women street skateboarders are especially rare in previous literature. It gives a rounded account of the positive and negative experiences of young woman skateboarders, at all skill levels, establishing differences and commonalities between groups. We also interviewed enough young male skateboarders to compare experiences across genders. Publications under review or being revised will contribute to wider understandings about the performative nature of lifestyle sports and about how young women participating in city-based lifestyle sports approach risk and injury. A paper in preparation will make significant contribution around the impact of girls' skateboarding practice in the skatepark and the city. Planned papers will include

contributions on relationships between lifestyle sports, play, and mental health, and on embodied aspects of being a young woman skateboarder.

Our mapping system will be useful to researchers studying multi-user, dynamic public and semi-public informal locations such as playgrounds and city plazas. It is also useful for those such as skatepark managers who want to understand more about how their spaces are used by different groups: our testing of this in a managed skatepark has resulted in changes to their provision. A paper under review will contribute to the literature on dynamic, power-inflected behavioural mapping in public spaces.

Establishing the incentives, barriers and enablers for young women's skateboarding also indicates how skateboarding provision can be designed and/or improved to be more inclusive, including for other marginalised users, such as beginners, older skateboarders, and those with disabilities.

Research question one: Lived experience

Our research found that young women have limited access to local skateboarding communities of practice. They are frequently dependent on male friends to enter and be legitimated even as peripheral participants. This is particularly true for beginners but also the case for experienced skateboarders, whether entering a site for the first time or encountering new skaters in their regular skate space. Some highly skilled young women never felt accepted in some spaces. Facing assumptions that they were 'posers' or less skilled than young men in the same space, they had to prove their expertise immediately on arrival, which was experienced as stressful and performative. Even highly skilled young women were inhibited from skating in some locations if these were dominated by skilled men skateboarders, and those who did were frequently referred to as being 'good for a girl'. Consequently, some young women only skated during women and girls sessions, or at less busy times such as early mornings, restricting their practice opportunities. Some young women actively resisted local male-dominated skateboarder cultures, for example by arranging to meet at specific spaces in large groups.

Most respondents been introduced to skateboarding through male friends or family, frequently boyfriends. Those who remained had developed skills relatively rapidly (in some cases through skateboarding during lockdown), had made friends or allies in a space, or had received continued support from one person. We found women and girls and beginner

sessions to be crucial to young women's participation. Girls found solidarity and allyship in woman and girl sessions, which also gave them access to the full space of the skatepark. Beginner sessions allow young women who want to learn to skateboard to develop their skills in a safe space: while young men described being able to learn from others just by going to a skatepark with a board, this was not the case for young women. Young women experienced a more collective, supportive and accepting skateboarding culture in these spaces.

The influence of skateboarding media in encouraging young women to take up skateboarding was less than expected, though the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics, and especially the age of female finalists, appears to have increased interest from younger girls. Participants watched and contributed to skateboarding media, including posting their own segments and using others' posts to learn new tricks. They were, however, scathing about the sexualisation of some female professional skateboarders, and some believed that this contributed to the sexual harassment they experienced in skate spaces.

There were fewer non-skateboarding girls present in the skate spaces in our study than previous research suggests. We only interviewed two who did not consider themselves to be skateboarders, both of whom had some basic skills. Their limited skill level compared to their friends meant that they were unable to be full community members, taking subordinate roles such as sweeping the skatepark at the start of a session.

Research question two: community inclusion and exclusion

Skateboarding culture generally has a strong rhetoric of inclusion, and this was true of the local community members we interviewed. Young men and boys interviewed were strongly verbally supportive and keen to include girls and young women. Their behaviour, both individually and collectively was, however, frequently excluding. For example, there was little understanding of the importance of explicitly making space for women and girls and supporting them in asserting themselves during turn-taking over obstacles and ramps; this is exacerbated by even expert young woman skateboarders' consciousness of the danger of 'getting in the way'. Young women were also put off by sexualised imagery on skateboards and other paraphernalia. Women and girls reported being directly harassed or made to feel embarrassed by young men in skate spaces: being stared at; being pestered for

their phone numbers; being ignored by an otherwise welcoming community; being patronised and talked down to. They also found it hard to be the only girl in the space, a frequent occurrence. We also witnessed (and experienced) direct intimidation of women and girls in skateparks, by male skaters who deliberately skated too close, or instructed them to move away.

Research question three: interaction with skateparks

Both our open observation and our mapping indicate that young women and girls tend to stick to the edges of the space during mixed skateboarding sessions, limiting their skating to quiet corners and small spaces between or behind ramps. This contrasts both with male skaters, who generally use most of or all the space at will, and with women and girls in the absence of men, when they take over the whole space. While this was exacerbated in lower skilled skateboarders, it was also the case for high performers. As noted earlier, young women and girls often avoid some public skateboarding spaces entirely, or only attend at quiet times, leaving when groups of men arrive. This limits their skating time and their opportunities to develop higher skills, including the safety focused skill of falling properly. Coached sessions considerably ameliorated this, with our observations suggesting that attendance of men and women skateboarders at these times is almost equal, while women/girls make up at most 25% of participants at other times. However, while these, coupled with women and girl sessions, are essential enablers for women and girls to transition to full participation in open access skateboarding, we observed even highly skilled young women skateboarders struggle to carve out space for themselves.

Research question four: wider urban environment:

Only some of our participants used skateboards for travel, limiting our evidence base. In some cases, this gave them a sense of power and control in the urban realm, for example when travelling fast downhill, skating away from trouble, or curving through crowds. Others, however, experienced considerable harassment, for example being asked by passers-by to perform skateboarding tricks on their daily commute, or stopped by drunks in the evenings with requests for lessons. This could be physically dangerous: for example, participants reported people throwing bottles under their boards to throw them off, and

attempts to grab their boards. Therefore, while skateboarding can open up urban spaces to more playful and creative use, the public view of skateboarding as a marginal or nuisance pursuit still impacts experiences; this can be more limiting for young women than for other skateboarders. Urban planners also sometimes deliberately design spaces to discourage skateboarding. This was the case for Bedrock, where Flyovers skatepark was located, which limited young women's ability to change their interactions with urban spaces in these ways.

Principal Grantholder's personal evaluation

The project provides a strong contribution to the field of gender and lifestyle sports, particularly through its multi-site aspects, the wide variety and skill level of our woman and girl participants, and the inclusion of both park and street skateboarders. Having skateboarders on the research team, and Chris Lawton's wider perceptions through his work as part of Skateboard GB, has been particularly illuminating. We were also able to enhance our understanding of the findings by discussing them with skatepark managers and coaches, both at Flyovers, one of the focus skateparks, and at Gnarly Ramps, which, while not a focus site, showed considerable interest in our research.

Our objectives were largely met. However, we were able to make fewer maps than we hoped due to the erratic use of the skateboarding spaces under observation and the problems posed by poor weather conditions at some times of the year. Nevertheless, those we did make are illuminating and make a good contribution to the research. The mapping method itself will be a useful tool for future researchers. We had planned for a larger participant research element, but the nature of skateboarding communities and the informality of the culture challenged plans for more structured engagement. This did, however, allow us to innovate and our exchange incorporated research, community networking and friendship building in new ways, which could be developed further.

The interview data is the strongest element. It is detailed, reflective, and encompasses children, young people and adults, from the entire skill range. The data from the recorded meeting and the focus group are also important, particularly when young women confirmed or built on each other's contributions. We also have good non-mapping observation data which needs to be analysed more fully.

Although aspects of our analysis are published or submitted, we still need to do more work on some areas. We have data on the embodied aspects of being a girl skateboarder, and on mental health benefits, which need further analysis and writing up. We should also do some more analytical thinking about the relationship between work (in terms of doing considerable hard practice) and play aspects of skateboarding for young women, particularly given the increased visibility of and participation in skateboarding competitions up to and including the Olympics. I would also like to be able to spend some time reflecting more deeply on the power/knowledge aspects of the research and how gender/power/knowledge relations are important to participation in skateboarding communities of practice.

For members of the research team this project has opened new pathways in research and opportunities for community impact. It has allowed us to develop considerable expertise in researching fluid, informal outdoor spaces. It has allowed me to develop my understanding of both active girlhood and of gendered lifestyle sports cultures. I have also personally engaged with the local skateboarding community through learning the basics of skateboarding. This has enabled me to understand more fully the visceral experience of skateboarding, and thus deepened my understanding of the research context and participants' experiences.

Team members benefitted from opportunities to widen their own research interests and develop academically through the guidance they received from my experience and leadership.

Publications and other outputs

Published outputs:

Paechter, C., Stodley, L., Keenan, M. and Lawton, C., 2023, 'What's it like to be a girl skateboarder? Identity, participation and exclusion for young women in skateboarding spaces and communities'. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 96: January-February, 2023

Abulhawa, D. 2023, *Skatepark Allyship: an audio artwork*
<https://daniabulhawa.bandcamp.com/album/skatepark-allyship-an-audio-artwork>. This is being distributed via skateboarding media, including posters and stickers containing a QR

code link being sent or handed out to skateparks and skateboarders. In the first two months since release, this has received 512 unique engagements, including 122 complete plays.

Outputs under review:

Paechter, C., Stoodley, L., Keenan, M. and Lawton, C. "It feels like a big performance": space, performativity and young woman skateboarders'. Revised paper under review with *Sociological Research Online*.

Stoodley, L., Paechter, C., Keenan, M. and Lawton, C., "I don't want to get in anyone's way": developing a behavioural mapping tool to explore how girl skateboarders navigate place and power in managed and unmanaged skateparks'. An earlier version of this was presented at the Leisure Studies Association Annual Conference, 2022.

Output being revised for resubmission:

Paechter, C., Stoodley, L., Keenan, M. and Lawton, C. "We sacrifice our bodies for this plank of wood": girl skateboarders, risk and injury. Under review with *Sport and Society*.

Outputs in preparation:

Keenan, M., Paechter, C., Stoodley, L., and Lawton, C., 'Finding space, self and satisfaction in skateboarding: exploring women and girl skateboarders' innovations in connecting and distancing from established skate culture'. An earlier, differently titled, version of this paper was presented at the RGS-IBG International Conference 2022.

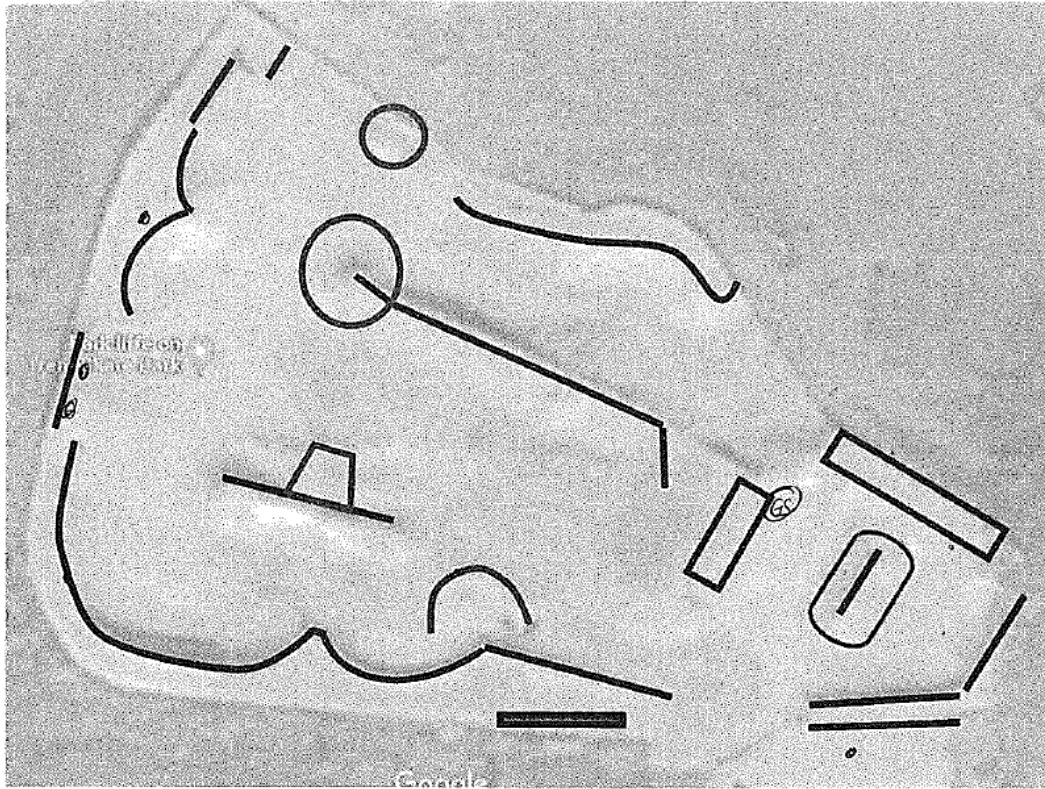
Future research plans in this field:

Carrie Paechter and Chris Lawton have a funded NTU/University of Nottingham doctoral student investigating the use of a new multi-use skateable space in Nottingham. Carrie Paechter and Mike Keenan have drafted an application for knowledge exchange partnership funding. Due to challenges in the voluntary and charitable sectors our established partners were unable to engage with the bid in 2023; we will continue to engage with them and seek to progress this bid when circumstances allow their involvement. Carrie Paechter and Mike Keenan are in the early stages of a bid exploring the possibilities of research into the implications of skateboarding for healthy ageing. Lyndsey Stoodley is preparing a postdoctoral bid focused on young women's participation in the

similarly male-dominated world of manual trades training. Dani Abulhawa is discussing a possible collaboration with skatepark designers, CANVAS, and Campus Skatepark to promote the audio artwork across three different skatepark and spot locations. We hope this will lead to research into the artwork's effects on inclusivity and behaviour change.

Appendix: example maps

Map showing location and activities of users



Map Number: 1.1
 Date: 26/8/22
 Time: 15:07
 Observer: LS

Total Number of Users:

Total Skateboarders	2
Girl* Skateboarders	1

Other active participants:

	Scooter	Rollerskate	BMX	Other
F*				
M*				

Other activity

	Teaching	Film/ Photo	Socialising	Specta ting
F*				
M*				

Notes

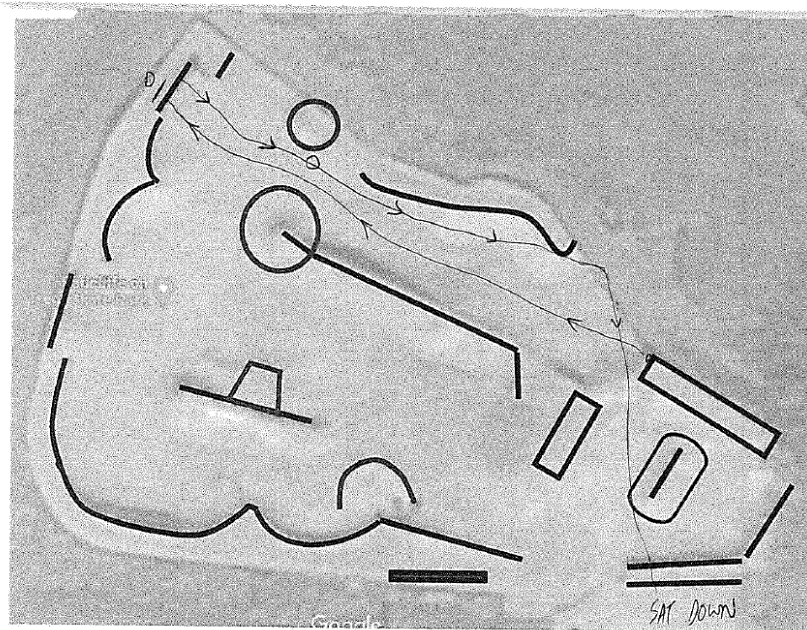
Girl skateboarder, about 6 years old.
 Very good - dropping into spine/bowl

3 boys on scooters, 1 on bike

1 dropped into 8ft on scooter "I nearly died"
 they're all about 10/11.

Girl

Map showing movement of one user



Map Number: 1-2
 Date: 26/8/22
 Time: 15:07
 Observer: LS

KEY

- ★ Celebration/Stoke
- Practicing something
- Interaction- dominant
- △ Interaction- subordinate
- Stop
- X Fall
- ↔ Direction of travel

Notes

Girl, 6, sh dropped in +
 down full length of park
 boy said "see, she can
 do it"
 She then dropped in again
 and he said to his mum
 "she can even do that."
 one lap + she sat on
 bleachers w/ 2 women
 1 older, presumably mum + sister

ⁱ Pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity.