Skateboarding: from Urban Spaces to Subcultural Olympians

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Introduction: Deviance or Incorporation?

Skateboarding or 'sidewalk surfing' emerged in late 1950's southern California, whereby surfers were not in the sea. The aim of this special issue is to benchmark critical research on skateboarding, youth and subculture on an international basis to contribute to the field of research which explores contemporary skateboarding focusing on young people's everyday lives from a cultural perspective. Skateboarding is a very individual thing; it is about balance, and it is also about how you hold yourself in a collective subculture within local communities and global media where 'living side ways' as Friedel (2016) calls it, is a type of philosophy of the everyday. Skateboarding has evolved from a creative urban activity with a legendary past meshed with subcultural values into an Olympic sport and a platform for multinational industry and global enterprises. On this basis there are tensions between subcultural authenticity within skateboarding and the pursuit of instrumental profit sought by corporate companies who are at some distance from the young people themselves.

The process of incorporation for skateboarding in mainstream culture and in sport societies has been slow and a contested one as skateboarding has an open democratic resonance that opposes competition based on authenticity of expression (Beal & Weidman, 2003). The deviant subcultural images of skateboarding derived from dirty and dark urban spaces only given colour and light by Graffiti artists, the perception of damage to property and risk taking in public places saw it as a near criminal activity with 'attractive stunts' (Blackman, 2014; Willing & Shearer, 2016). The appearance of a self-made culture celebrating DIY-subcultural practices offered skateboarding a punk ethos, alongside its brush with hip hop musical artists including Easy E, Lil Wayne and the Beastie Boys. In the cultural West, authenticity drawing from the ideas of subculture tends to prevail as new generations are fostered in this expanding community through independence and creativity, which are still core values of skateboard culture. This legitimacy for Beal and Wiedman (2003) is drawn from ideas of an alternative youth practice, and paradoxically from the glorified mainstream neoliberal culture (Schwier &

Kilberth, 2019). As a result, skateboard subcultures have diversified and become inclusive where the previous predominately male scene as personified by skateboard icon Tony Hawk has been challenged by women and by LGBTQIA+ skateboarders. Hawk could be described as a legend within skateboarding circles from computer games to literature and fits with Willing et al.'s (2019) framework of male middle-aged skaters who can be identified with those who participant while aging in youth subcultural sports suggestive of risk. The tension between subcultural independence and multinational corporates still operates in skateboard culture across ages ranges and within social categories of social class, gender and race.

Skateboarding: Towards 'Skateboard Studies'

Contemporary research on skateboarding and young people is interdisciplinary and reaches across the global, for example see Geertman et al.'s (2016, p. 591) account of skateboarding and spatial appropriation in Hanoi, Vietnam. Thus, an ever-expanding body of work focused on city planning and spatial issues, gender and sexuality, religion, rural and urban life have surged in the last decade (e.g., D'Orazio, 2020; Holsgens, Evers & Doering, 2019; McDuie-Ra, 2021; Nash & Moore, 2020; O'Connor, 2018). The classic literature in the field comprises of a few earlier works. Among these are Borden's book *Skateboarding, space and the city* (2001, 2019) and Beal's articles from the mid-1990s (Beal, 1995; 1996). The updated version of Borden's book has the confident subtitle: 'the complete history of skateboarding'. He describes the newly revised book as 'completely renewed, comprehensively expanded, more intensively researched and panoramic in outlook' (Borden, 2019, p. 2).

Borden's first edition of the book was described as no less than a bible for people interested in architecture, skateboarding or just sport in general (Danielsson, 2004). The reason for this praise was the encompassing nature of the text. The updated version surpasses the forerunner, much in line with the author's own words. *Skateboarding and the city. A complete history* is literally heavier and bigger in scope. The 370 pages are glossy and there are inspiring skateboarding photographs in colour on nearly every page. It both looks and feels like a coffee table book. Luckily, for the authenticity of the book some of the content is scruffier than that. However, it says something about the journey that skateboarding as a cultural form has taken the past decades. Skateboarding has evolved materially and technically from sideways surfing in California but also from the forerunners of skateboards, such as the kid's kick scooters. It has furthermore evolved culturally and socially in relation to an always-present mediated context from the early skatezines, via movies and VHS, to present day

videos on internet. This particular aspect is important for Buckingham (2009, p. 133) whose account explores how young people make representations and learn their craft via online forums to produce typical aesthetics forms in skateboard videos. In Borden (2019), 100 QR codes linked to specially curated YouTube video clips provide glimpses of the visual popular culture of skateboarding. The historic overview maps out both significant research and major trends. Doing so, Borden's work has the extraordinary potential to be valuable for both academics and people with a keen interest in skateboarding. It straddles the original aims of the subculture and its 'outsider' status, alongside its growing institutionalisation as a legitimate area of study in the academy (Blackman, 2000).

Borden's updated book is one among several recent publications where an overview of skateboarding history as a youth culture, subculture, sport and experience is outlined as a map of the subject area. Lombard (2016) introduced a wide-raging introduction to skate studies on a general level and included a variety of scholars with various theoretical and methodological approaches. Her edited anthology comprised narratives of authenticity, community, creativity and entrepreneurship, but also of capitalism and neoliberalism. In a similar vein, Butz and Peters (2018) collected several scholars to frame the growth of skateboarding culture and phrases according to its history and content. In their anthology, claiming the birth of a new academic field by the title *Skateboard Studies*, the subcultural content of DIY urbanism, punk and neoliberal masculinities were challenged by gender inclusion practices and by progression along the lines of race and ethnicity. According to Butz and Peters, the implications of the physical activity of skateboarding is 'ripe for exploration within a number of different academic disciplines'. A further anthology edited by Kilberth and Schwier (2019) expanded from the inclusion of skateboarding as an Olympic sport in the 2020 Olympic game. They asked if the subculture of skateboarding was in danger of losing its identity. The authors discussed the shifts from play to sport and, from stairs and streets to parks and podiums. These key anthologies overlap in content and discussions, and in authors. Borden, one of the authors of the classics mentioned above features in all three of them, Beal in two. In sum, skateboarding culture has changed over the decades and could now be identified in terms of what Bourdieu (1996) would define as a cultural field of knowledge, cultural resources, and creative content.

Pushing boarders

Cultural change does however not occur without people changing it. Recently, but before the Covid pandemic, two unique conferences were held in London, UK (2018) and in Malmö, Sweden (2019). The conferences were named *Pushing Boarders*, because they were supposed to push boarders forward and also 'pushing' is a skateboard term. The first conference started with a launch party at the skate park House of Vans in Waterloo and then held both at the skate park and at the Bartlett school of Architecture, University College London (see Figures 1-3). The second one was held both at Bryggeriet, a skate park in Malmö, and at Moriska Pavillion cultural centre in Folkets Park (People's Park). None of these conferences were 'ordinary' academic conferences, but both included a fair share of academics and practitioners of research. According to the program of the first conference, *Pushing Boarders* was 'an experiment', because the organisers were not sure if they should call it a conference or not. On the website, *Pushing Boarders* was described as 'A unique line-up of skaters, academics, NGO's, campaigners and policy-makers presents a series of talks and Q&A celebrating the social impact of skateboarding worldwide'.[1]

The conferences bestowed a productive sprawling mix of skateboarding in practice, and of talking about skateboarding from a variety of perspectives including both academic presentations and more personal biographical journeys, exhibitions with artistic content and photographs from NGO projects and presence by commercial organizations. The impatient and creative emergence of the multiple aspects of society and culture jammed into an academic conference venue to explore youth subcultural practice causes uncertainty and tension focused on identity and personality but also through the physical restrictions imposed on the activity of skateboarding itself. Skateboarding, with its itchiness is not easy to define and this may well be its particular and continuous characteristic. In an era where 'hybridity' has become a buzzword, skateboarding has been subject to forms of incorporation and resistance via hybrid professions and hybrid organisations who want their slice of skateboard culture. Skateboarding remains individual and yet celebrates diversity, singularity and collective, it thrives and works through contradiction and challenge. It is not easily captured! Borden's book (2019) mentioned above, may also be an effective example of a hybrid publication as it has the extraordinary potential to be valuable for both academics and young people with a keen interest in skateboarding at an 'ordinary' level.

[1] https://www.pushingboarders.com/2018

A Glocal Lens on the Life Cycle of Trend Sports: Sweden

Besides changing over time, it is fair to say that skateboarding culture has not been the same in all corners of the world. In Sweden, where skateboarding grew popular in the late 70's and at the time was dismissed by some as a whim that would pass, it has since evolved in various ways. Inspired by Wheaton's (2004) work on windsurfing, Bäckström (2018) presented ethnographic and historic data collected for a period of twenty years to outline the transformations of skateboarding culture and organisation in Sweden from the 1970's to present day. Stamm and Lamprecht's (1998) model for describing the life cycle of trend sports was used as a starting point for a thematic content analysis over time. Whether skateboarding is a trend sport or not may of course be up for debate, as well as a stages approach per se, but the model has bearing on the changes Swedish skateboarding culture has been through over the years. The model indicates the interrelation of technological innovation, marketing and socio-cultural factors (see Table 1). Like elsewhere, Swedish skateboarding celebrated a subversive past claiming heritage from Californian surfers sneaking into emptied backyard swimming pools during summer draught. The subversive past in a Swedish local setting, however, often played out as DYI construction of skateboards, sometimes even part of woodwork as a school subject, and building ramps from wood spill. As the model shows (see Table 1), every stage in it is characterized by higher degrees of commercialization, organization and recognition. According to Stamm and Lamprecht (1998), each phase has its bearers. In the early stages pioneers and small groups pushes the trend sport forward. In the third phase, the bearers are young people's subcultures. Confrontation against the established sport organizations and glorification of a presumed authentic past is part of the third stage. In Sweden, throughout the years that followed the first boom of skateboarding, it did disappear from every street in Sweden and turned into somewhat of an obscure practice for the chosen few. However, skateboarding never really went away, and in the 1990s it turned cool again, mainly among young men. Present day skateboarding in this geographical context has a much larger number of women riders than three decades ago. Similar to other locations, girls' and women's inroads to skateboarding has taken a winding path (Bäckström, 2013; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). In Sweden, making space available for women skateboarding both in skateparks and in the media was a strategic endeavour (Bäckström & Nairn, 2018).

Consulting the model, it may be argued that skateboarding in Sweden to some extent has followed this model. Currently, numerous examples point to the fourth stage characterized by maturation and diffusion. For instance, it is possible for practitioners to make a living from skateboarding in various ways. Moreover, skateboarding is popular in mass media, goods are mass produces and skateboarding has been integrated in certain school forms. In short, processes of commercialization and professionalization are present. In Sweden as elsewhere, skateboarders once opposing the sport industry and 9-to-5 jobs have transformed from core practitioners to consumers (Dinces, 2011; Dupont, 2014; Lombard, 2010). This depicts a transformation from subculture to a professionalised sport, at least for some and in some places (Snow 1999).

The straightforward processes proposed by Stamm and Lamprecht (1998) in their model are however complicated by skateboarding being formally organized though the National Sports Confederation in Sweden since 2013. Through this organisation many skateboarders are now part of mainstream sports. Paradoxically, the highly commercialised and familiar physical activity is also a national association with non-commercial profit that promotes democratic values. The National Sports Confederation (RF) has a very strong agenda where sports for all is key meaning social inclusion is centre stage.

Besides the recognition of male only athletes in 'sportmen', another complicated fact related to the model goes beyond the Swedish case. Since it was published, media has changed. A 'discovery by media' is no longer a relevant characteristic for the third phase. 'Fanzines' as we knew them before digitalisation are obsolete, but newer types of media have prospered, and skateboarding has a very close relationship with media as this SI shows.

Mature and Mainstream?

In July 2021, before the Olympic games started in Tokyo, the President of World Skate Sabatino Aracu launched the Skateboarding Street and Park series to move onwards from the Olympic games into a new era of competitive skateboarding. He claimed the Olympic games to be not 'a destination, but the beginning of a journey for ALL OF US: Skateboarders, Team Managers and NGBs.'[2] This signals that organized international skateboarding is developing

[2] http://www.worldskate.org/skateboarding/news-skateboarding/3364-a-new-era-of-competitive-skateboarding.html

into a more competitive phase. Half a year later, seven women skateboarders were collectively given the Tokyo 2020 Fair Play Award for picking up the reigning world champion Misugu Okamoto, who unfortunately fell during her final run. She was consoled and carried off the skateboard area on the shoulders of her fellow competitors in tribute. Does this mean that skateboarding is now a mainstream sport?

Indeed, skateboarding has changed and become more mature, and some traits are certainly similar to other mainstream sport such as being a part of the Olympic games. Another similarity to mainstream sports is the way this activity is used as a vehicle for social good. Sports for All is the ideological promotion of sports for all people irrespective of social and cultural background, skill or ability. This vein has flooded through skateboarding long before it became an Olympic sport. Besides well-known international projects such as Skateistan where children and young people in Afghanistan before the recent political shift were given the opportunity to learn skateboarding, it has also been used in its place of origin to support physical activity and social development. In 2018, Atencio et al. published *Moving Boarders* with rich empirical accounts from the San Francisco Bay Area showing new roles of youth development and civic engagement.

Outline of this Special Issue Skateboarding, Young Adults and Subculture

This special issue of the journal YOUNG on skateboarding incorporates four articles and explores young people's experiences and involvement within the subculture in the 'here and now' and also through nostalgia. In this special issue we are pleased to see contributions describing both continuity and change in skateboarding culture, style, gender, cultural representations and visual representation. The articles draw on a variety of methodological approaches broadly within a qualitative paradigm. Skateboarding is by no means a homogenous activity and the included articles show some of its width and diversity. Although skateboarding may have matured over the years the articles in this special issue demonstrate subcultural values still permeate in content. Geckle and Shaw's article 'Failure and Futility: the transformative potential of queer skateboarding,' shows how queer skateboarders change the landscape of skateboarding by claiming space for themselves and by queering the predominately heteronormative culture and industry. This is possible because of the queer potential in the practice and aesthetics of skateboarding. For the queer skateboarders, the symbolism of the camp works in their favour.

In Willing's article 'The Film Kids 25 Years on: a qualitative study of rape culture and representation of sexual violence in skateboarding' there is a critical analysis of masculinity which addresses the male-dominance of skateboarding and how certain forms of hegemonic masculinity may include elements of male power and sexual violence. The article provides an occasion to reflect on such issues more broadly in skateboarding culture and in other male-dominated social and cultural contexts.

Thurnel-Read's article 'A Couple of These Videos is all you really needed to get pumped to skate: subcultural media, nostalgia and reviewing 1990's skate media on YouTube', assesses VHS tapes and the formative appraisal of the subcultural formation looking into memory and aging to reveal that skateboarding is now a historical subculture existing in the present which seeks to retain DiY practices and questions the position of masculine rebellion and 'romance' in the culture.

Chuang Li's article, 'Cultural Continuities and Skateboarding in Transition: In the case of China's skateboarding culture and industry' introduces a qualitative study on skateboarding in China. It takes a theoretical stance addressing the CCCS theory of subculture in relation to cultural acceptance and the extent of institutional incorporation of skateboarding within Chinese culture and its fits alongside what is seen as authenticity within skateboard subcultures. Building on this special skateboarding issue we urge other scholars to expand our mission and to continue to direct a critical gaze towards these cultural expressions.

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