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Hashtag Skater Girl: Popular Culture and Extreme Sports

ABSTRACT

The extreme board sports industry and skateboarding in particular has been transformed within mainstream media and has increased in popularity compared to the 1990s. Further, the ways extreme athletes receive sponsors, advertise their brand and are seen as ‘athletes’ and role models have also changed in part due to social media. However, on this new sports horizon, do we still find the same old issues of sexism that we see in other sports? Board sports are examined by means of a critical study of Tweets, Facebook postings, advertisements, interviews with amateurs and professionals and observations of female skaters at local skate parks to address and/or illuminate sexist praxis as well as to develop a plan for its management for future generations of extreme athletes.

KEYWORDS

extreme sports
girlhood
girls in sport
gender in sport
popular culture

INTRODUCTION

When the topic of sports comes up in conversation in North America, many think of a host of ‘traditional sports’ like football, baseball and soccer. However, extreme sports are becoming common in the mainstream media, including extreme board sports, with skateboarding at the helm followed by snowboarding and surfing. Other sports that can be defined as extreme sports are wakeboarding and street luge although they are not included in this study.

Tony Hawk and his skateboarding empire generally come to mind quickly when thinking of skateboarding; however, there aren’t many, if any, females who readily come to mind when speaking about skateboarding. In spite of the increase in popularity of skaters such as Leticia Bufoni, Pamela Rosa and Alana Smith, their names are far less familiar. Within snowboarding and surfing the same identity problem arises in terms of the ease of naming well-known female surfers and snowboarders compared to male athletes. Lack of

quick identification makes it increasingly difficult for women to have agency within these sports.

Skateboarding is a staple of the X Games. The X Games—initially called the Extreme Games—is a competition sporting event featuring extreme sports. However as extreme sports has continued to increase in popularity there continues to be a divide between men and women in terms ‘going professional’, of which the primary path is through sponsorship (Pickert 2009). Sponsorships bring opportunities not open to amateurs including prize money and more visible competitions. For example, and unfortunately, Leticia Bufoni has gone on record with *Rolling Stone* to say she does not have a skate company as a sponsor because they did not want females on their team (Hendrickx 2015).

Are there others who have fallen victim to similar struggles, if not within skateboarding, perhaps within surfing and snowboarding? How can this be changed? In my personal experience of learning to skate as a young girl there were a few women skateboarders who were visible to me but is this still the case for young girls today? How are they learning about the sport? What will keep them motivated?

Other important questions concerning females’ participation in extreme sports focus on sexism. Is the garden-variety sexism that women experience the same within extreme sports? That is, is sexism in extreme sports somehow different than sexism in other traditional sports? And if so, what can be done to change this for future generations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Today, boys and girls of all ages participate in extreme sports. Some even become professional—lately, was early as eleven years of age (Whitehead 2016). However, even to the casual observer, the sport also tends to segregate boys and girls. Online opinion articles such ‘How to be a skater girl’ (WikiHow n.d.), ‘How to dress like a skater boy’ (Stanley n.d.) and ‘How to look like a skater chick’ (White n.d.), are evidence of a continued sense of sex-segregated performance. Further, it should be noted that in terms of girl skaters most of the ‘how to’ articles give the advice that girls should dress in a more masculine manner to be ‘accepted’ as a skateboarder, thus proving the dominant masculine lens on this extreme sport (White n.d.).

Beal (1996) not only defines and showcases masculinity throughout the sport of skateboarding, but also argues that boys’ participation has created a new form of masculinity within the sport:

Generally, masculinity is defined as a 'social role that belongs to identifiable groups of men who exist in reasonably historical, ethnic, or religious situations' (Clatterbaugh 1990: 3). In the United States' culture, the attributes of masculine ideal have included individualism, aggression, power, competitiveness, strength, stoicism, and protector. (Beal 1996: para. 1.)

Beal noted that it was a rarity to find female skaters to talk to for the study, finding only four females of the forty-five people she interviewed who were adamant that they did not fall under the 'social rules' that skateboarding seemed to have.

One female noted in particular that '[t]he flexibility of skateboarding was one of the main attractions' (Beal 1996: para. 1) with male skaters suggesting that they decided to skate rather than play football (a sport traditionally perceived as masculine). When she asked about female participation Beal noted that the males seemed taken aback as if they had not thought about it before. Men attributed lack of female participation in skateboarding to not wanting to get hurt or to damage their 'natural' femininity, although some felt bad that more girls did not join in.

Young (2004) agrees with Beal. Her article 'Being the "Alternative" in an Alternative Subculture: gender differences in the experiences of young women and men in skateboarding and snowboarding' identifies the differing circumstances and experiences of young women and men in extreme sports. Females seem to find more obstacles related to acceptance. Not only do they have to adapt their femininity, or masculinity as it may be, to the sport, Young also found through interviews of skateboarders and snowboarders that women were more likely to be accepted as a snowboarder than as a skateboarder.

Young also noted, like Beal, that fear of injury kept female participation in skateboarding low compared to that of snowboarding because snow could cushion their fall:

'The threat of injury is real; however females are also subjected to other kinds of injuries. The first repercussion of a woman's involvement is to have her sexual-orientation questioned. Due to the aggressive and risky nature of skateboarding, interviewees indicated that women are often labeled and stereotyped as lesbians' (Young 2004: 77).

Of course labels and stereotypes are psychologically damaging as well as possibly limiting economic potential. Females have their abilities to skateboard and snowboard questioned by males, are subjected to male aggression within the sport and are afforded less professional opportunities. The latter problems were mentioned by professional snowboarders

when interviewed by Alana Glass in an article for *Forbes* (2014). Glass reported that the 2013 Winter X Games boasted about thirty-eight million viewers, signifying the popularity of the sport. However Glass also noted that the snowboarding industry is ‘comprised of 70 per cent men and only 20 per cent women’ (2014). The athletes interviewed, Kelly Clark, Elena Hight, Lindsey Jacobellis and Grete Eliassen, all agreed there is a significant difference in the way men and women are treated within snowboarding, especially in terms of media coverage, about which Eliassen says, ‘Women’s action sports are still not televised equally [to] men’s.’ (Glass 2014).

It is the aggression factor that continues to dominate extreme sports. In surfing the term ‘surf rage’ is used to describe this aggression. Nat Young, an Australian surfer, wrote a book entitled *Surf Rage* detailing his experiences with aggression.

However surf rage is not something that only men exhibit, because women can experience the same surge of anger. Despite surfing being seen colloquially as a more laidback sport, there is still an element of aggression that falls within the culture of the sport. Nevertheless it is one of the parts of this sport’s culture that continues to drive women away from such sports, along with the inherent dangers of participating.

GIRLS SKATING LOCALLY, GIRLS SKATING IN ADVERTISEMENTS AND INTERVIEWS WITH AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL SKATERS

Following Gerry Philipsen’s classic ethnography ‘Speaking “Like a Man” in Teamsterville: Culture: patterns of role enactment in an urban neighbourhood’ (1975), my observations of skateboarders have uncovered interesting notions of what being a ‘true skater’ means. Before recruiting and interviewing participants the study was approved by the Old Dominion University (ODU) College of Arts & Letters Human Subjects Committee. Compared to the media’s portrayal of skaters as trouble-makers, drug users and generally as self-absorbed individual, my observations of skaters on the Old Dominion University campus (from August 2014 to March 2016), at Mount Trashmore skate park in Virginia Beach (June - August 2015) and at other similar spaces make it evident, firstly, that female and male skateboarders interact very differently when skateboarding. Not only are their topics of conversations different, but there are many instances where their motivations to skate differ. That is, women were observed to be inclined to skate as a ‘hobby’ compared to men who seek to master every trick within the skateboarding rolodex and hope to potentially get a sponsor, as well as wanting to ‘one-up’ the other skaters who are with them.

During my observations, there were very few girls skating at Mount Trashmore. Having observed the skate park six times between June and August 2015 for two to three hours per session, there were only four or five girls in attendance compared to hundreds of boys. These observations, due to my lack of a skate pass, were made from behind the fence, typically on the grassy hill overlooking the street section of the park, or otherwise from the bleachers on the other side. In contrast, at ODU, however, numerous girls were seen skateboarding along the university's campus. These observations were made while on my own excursions to class. Most of the observations on ODU's campus were in front of the Perry Library as well as the Webb Center.

While with their friends, topics of conversation among female skaters ranged from classes, to music, clothes, friends, family, celebrity scandals, makeup tips and similar topics. However, these were the conversations of girls who seemed to be taking a break from their skateboarding to converse with each other. It was also observed that the girls did not attempt tricks on their boards. They were more likely to roll around at a moderately leisurely pace when not racing to and from class using the board as a means of transportation.

Even the most casual of observers of men and women portrayed in advertisements for board sports will find differences between the ways gender is exploited. A simple Google search of any of the three sports of surfing, skateboarding or snowboarding brought up telling evidence: multiple pictures of men in action poses but only one woman in an action pose. Scrolling further through the pages of images there are countless pictures of men on skateboards flying through the air, sailing through a bowl, or in the middle of a 'flip trick.' The few females that are pictured include one in the middle of grinding the edge of a bowl and another of a girl sitting on, but not using, the skateboard. Further research into the photograph of the girl sitting on the skateboard reveals that the photograph was originally posted on the art sharing website DeviantArt and received twelve comments about the beauty of the woman (Izzo 2013).

When searching through photos with the keyword 'snowboarding', it is admittedly more difficult to discern whether the figure within the image is a male or a female. The length of the hair is a giveaway on some female snowboarders, however there are others whose gender remains difficult to discern. Using the keywords 'snowboarding girl' in Google search brings up multiple photos—selfies—of girls who are posing before snowboarding while there are a few others that depict females in action poses.

Comparatively, when typing in ‘snowboarding boy’ many of the boys are featured in action and others that show the boys in what appears to be advertisements for snowboarding. Conclusively, when typing in ‘surfing’ most of the image results are of boys surfing large waves. The first picture of a surfing girl that comes up is of a girl in a bikini—rather than a wetsuit as most of the men are wearing—on a comparatively smaller wave. However surfing involves an even bigger issue that should be considered.

Because surfing is a sport where people primarily compete in bathing suits, it is easy to characterize it as a sexualized sport, for women more so than men. However, it does raise the question whether or not women play into this and how it may or may not determine their career trajectory. Alana Blanchard is a surfer from Hawaii and the best friend of Bethany Hamilton, who famously had her arm bitten off by a shark when the two were surfing in the early morning.

Sponsored by Roxy, Blanchard is well known for her modelling as well as for her surfing skills. Blanchard, who became a professional surfer at the age of eighteen, is well-known for her ‘bottom turns,’ combined with the small bikini bottoms she wears; her photos are typically set on her backside. A Google Image search of her name will bring up pictures of her modelling bikinis and action shots of her bottom-turns more than actual shots of her surfing. She has even been interviewed responding to a question about an embarrassing moment she had experienced in the sport, saying that the mother of her boyfriend had suggested that she wear a bigger bottom or even board shorts when practicing surfing so that she didn’t ‘scratch up her money maker’ (Prodanovich n.d.).

To further study what it means to be a ‘typical’ skater girl I interviewed twenty female skaters. I recruited them by email and through personal connections, as well as stopping some on the streets and in skate shops to ask quick questions. I interviewed them via email as well as face-to-face and asked a variety of questions to determine their thoughts on what it means to be a ‘typical’ female skater as well as their experiences within the sport and associated demographic.

Participants were all female and mostly Caucasian with one being African-American. The ages of the women range from eighteen to 30 years old and they primarily came from both the east and west coasts of the USA. One was from the UK. Preliminary questions were asked to get an understanding of what fundamentally makes amateur and professional skaters different. Then questions geared specifically towards their gender were asked: what do you think about female participation in skateboarding/surfing/snowboarding?

Participants unanimously responded that the sports themselves were great, there should be more girls participating and they hope there is a continuous increase in participation. They felt positive about the direction that girls within their sports were going but also mentioned more that could be done. They were all aware that girls are paid less in the sport as well as the attention that is brought to them and the way that there is a certain 'look' that is expected of the girls within the sports.

This later point is illustrated in a recent article that has swept social media. 'Eight-time best female Brazilian surfer, Silvana Lima, was not sponsored for the first thirteen years of her career because she was told "she wasn't hot enough"' (Hunger 2016). Leticia Bufoni, when interviewed for *Rolling Stone*, has also said 'I don't have a board sponsor because most of the big skateboard companies will not sponsor girls. Some of the big brands we met with actually told us that they don't want any girls on their skate teams' (Hendrickz 2015).

Lacey Baker, another professional skateboarder, noted the differences in opportunities and events for female skaters: 'There [aren't] that many girls' skate contests. X Games has always been the biggest one' (Suzu Productions 2016). The best way to combat this is for there to be more competitions, more events where skate parks are closed for women only, more media coverage of the girls that are participating in the sport and an equal amount of money given to the men and the women that compete.

RESULTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Conclusively, there is nothing that particularly should differentiate males and females with respect to potential amateurs and the careers of professionals. However, there are clear differences in sponsors, endorsers and the nature of exposure. This study shows that a 'typical' skater girl is one who enjoys the sport for its athleticism and freedom, but who is also aware that in terms of media and competitions, men and women are treated differently.

Due to the continued popularity of skateboarding for males and females, organizations and skate parks that offer lessons are continuing to thrive. In the United States there is the 'Skate Like a Girl' organization based out of Portland, Oregon and San Francisco, California that was created by girls for girls. There are indeed many opportunities for men and young boys to join in as well. They offer summer camps, classes and a 'ladies night' to teach and empower girls that want to skate as well as including boys in certain camp classes and opportunities.

Then there is the ‘Girl is Not a Four-Letter Word’ campaign created and run by the professional skateboarder Cindy Whitehead (Whitehead 2013). She was and still is the only female to be featured as the centerfold in a skateboarding magazine as well as having a two-page article in one and was the first female skateboarder to be sponsored by Puma. With this distinction she created ‘Girl is Not a Four-Letter Word’ to increase awareness and recognition for female action sport athletes by highlighting their achievements and interviewing them for her site where girls as young as seven are featured. But more improvements can be made.

What is needed are more digital narratives and websites for girls who are just starting out as well as those who wish to continue to improve. On such a site there would be sections that explain the kinds of equipment that girls will need to parents, the differences between the different types of equipment—there is a difference between the board you can buy at local ‘big box’ stores and those that can be purchased from a skate shop, what to expect when a girl first starts skating, how to deal with boys (or others) who may tell young girls that it’s a ‘boys sport’ and how to encourage girls within the sport. Tips and tricks to improve as well as to increase a girl’s self-esteem should be added to such a site as well as lists of the best places to go when travelling to another city or state (or country) when wanting to continue within the sport. Information and content will be read by locals as well as those managing the site and affiliates that will be created through the use of the site.

More skate camps and classes and organizations specifically for girls and specifically for boys are needed to hold classes specifically for boys and specifically for girls up to a certain age before classes are mixed. These classes should be taught by local skaters as well as professionals with accompanying books for the kids as well as their parents. There is a space in the industry that could increase gender equity. although there are other areas that could be included in future research including other sports.

As for sexism within the board sports industry, additional research on segregation of sexes should be undertaken. Not only do women have a physical advantage inboard sports due to their smaller frames, lower centres of gravity and similar physical qualities, but women are also better balanced for the sport. Future research should document at what age those who participate in board sports should be kept separate or not by gender. From a young age kids are told there are toys and sports that are for boys and toys and sports that are for girls, and yet as they get older the differences between the sexes come into play and differences in support of the genders are highlighted.

CONCLUSION

Sexism, where individuals experience prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination as a result of their gender, is a part of society that continues to be contested. What can be done to change it? Does it need to be a sudden change or a gradual change? The root of the problem needs to be found whether it is within the media, the result of outside pressures or within the activity of skateboarding itself. Within skateboarding there are many areas where the problem of sexism arises; the industry itself, the media, advertisements, differences in opportunities that are given to men and women and the attitudes of those who are watching the sports and have something to say about the profession or the men and women within the sport. But starting the conversation with parents of young girls and boys who want to go into this sport as well as preparing them and their children for what to expect in the future and how to be the change that is needed is the first step in what can be done to change sexism within the extreme sports industry.

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Jessica Jackson holds a BA in English and was awarded the 2014 Hollins University Honour Award in fiction from Hollins University as well as a MA in Lifespan and Digital Communications from Old Dominion University. This paper is based on her MA capstone project, supervised by Dr Thomas Socha, which studied pop culture, women and board sports, with a special interest in skateboarding. Her research interests are within the areas of extreme sports, digital media and pop culture with a focus on analyzing what it means to be a 'typical' athlete within those sports.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Jackson, Jessica (2016), 'Hashtag Skater Girl: popular culture and extreme sports', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 6th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ)*, Sydney, Australia, 29 June–1 July, 2016, P. Mountfort (ed.), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp. 69-78. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2016/>.