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An insight into the Rotterdam skateboarding scene, its videography influence, and their reasons for choosing particular street skate-spots.

Abstract

As all self-sustaining subcultures do, they find ways to produce and distribute content for the subject to stay alive. Skateboarding is no different. The sports intimidating atmosphere and negative connotation has steered academia in the directions of the pro's, and what their takes are on the informalities of the sport. This paper intends to understand the relationship skateboarders have with urban space, and how the distribution of skater related content has an influence on this. Interviews conducted with three local skaters in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, gave insights into the behaviours of skaters on the streets vs. the parks, creating and producing content and the generational differences seen within the everchanging subcultural dynamics. First engagements with data show the importance of etiquette of behaviour in skateboarding, particularly when viewing the world through the *skater gaze*. Terminology towards the skatepark, skating street, and spots is clarified, and how these subtle differences affect the way skaters approach space.

Introduction

Say, in a hypothetical instance, you are strolling down the street with uninterrupted thoughts; when suddenly you begin to hear what seems like a construction drill approaching you from a distance. Examining your surroundings; there is no construction in sight. On the contrary, your ears gaze upon a group of youngsters on wooden boards, pushing on the ground gaining speed, as if almost flying with their planks. Gleeful and courageous, they conquer the streets with mid-air tricks and loud polyurethane wheels.

The art of skateboarding has transgressed from the streets or *spots*, the Olympics, NGO's in Afghanistan (Skatistan) or Palestine (SkatePal), into professionalism (sponsorships), to (maga)zines and other (creative) media coverage, to scholarly analysis and beyond. The urban sub-culture encourages creativity and self-expression when practising the sport. Pushing to pop an "ollie"¹ onto a curb, is exemplary of street-skateboarding's accessibility. J. Snyder (2017) states that within the subcultural lexicon, "Graffiti writers, bike messengers, and skateboarders all look at urban architecture from a different, more creative perspective" (p. 170).

Amidst the evolution of the sport; present day street skateboarding flows from designed parks to street spots, which through documentation and distribution become landmarks to those in the scene (Snyder, 2017, p. 16). Documentation in 1990's was done through VHS tapes to distribute video-edits, meanwhile it quickly transformed into an "online media content base" (Bock, 2019, p. 141). While skateboarding production includes clothing, graphics, photography, (maga)zines along with other creative outlets "the video-part to the skateboarder..." [is] "...like the album to the musician" as stated in the 2009 documentary *Skate on Film*.

Having appointed two dominant components within the sub-culture, "spots" and "videos", a gap in cultural knowledge is present in finding parallels between the distribution of spots in videos and architectural appropriation. Discussions amongst (pro)skateboarders may explain the relational phenomena, consequently opening discussion for the academic terrain. Influenced by Victoria D. Alexander's cultural diamond (2003, p. 62), it can be purported that skaters are involved in the creative, distributive and consumer processes of making skate-edits. Moreover, how does this stimulate other skaters to visit locations of video-production? Consequently, the

¹This primary trick in skateboarding consists of the backfoot pushing down on the back end of the board while the frontfoot simultaneously scrapes the board to the front, in order to elevate and land.

question “*How does the mentioning of street skate-spots in local skate videos stimulate other skaters to also appropriate the spot?*” arose.

Theoretical literature

Space, for society and skaters alike, is critical for urban development. Spatial sociologists would investigate how humans turn “natural [space] into social space [and] how they use and exchange it[.] What social, economic, and other processes and forces come into play in these uses and exchanges” (Gans, 2002, p. 329). Hence the relationship between space and skateboarding is crucial in further understanding “spots”. Borden (2014) elaborates on the appropriation of Archigram’s Festival Wing, better known as South Bank, in London, UK, by skateboarders for its “flat spaces interrupted by a series of surprisingly and apparently uselessly angled banks” (Borden, 2014, p. 102). The location of a spot refers to social spaces that make connections between skaters (Gans, 2002, 331) where interactions between like-spirited individuals socialise or “simply a casual compulsion... to form informal groups...” in this cultural practice (Schwier & Kilberth, 2019, p. 8). As already stated, skateboarders can see architecture and space in a more creative way than the standard pedestrian for “the same building can impact people in various ways” (Gans 337). The agglomeration of skaters in specific locations and architecture can “encourage surprising activities” (Borden, 2014, p. 104), where skaters globally even engage in a “pilgrimage” to unlock particular spots, such as South Bank, MACBA, Le Dôme, etc. (Borden 2014, p. 101).

For a spot to become so renowned, the distribution of skate content is primal in the equation. Mainstream, male-dominated articles and content dominate explanations of media portrayals of spots and skaters (K. Bock, 2019, p. 139). Girl-empowering sport content is equally as rich when subliminally encouraging other skaters to visit spots. *Gizmo* (2019) was Nike SB’s first all women featured video-edit in collaboration with *Skate Like a Girl*, a USA based skateboarding NGO. *New Wave Skate* based in the Netherlands, *Sobre Ruedas Girls* based in Colombia and *Skatistan* in Afghanistan are just a few examples of global platforms encouraging female skateboarding. Portraying their activities through social media in means of encouraging others to engage. Engaging with (post)feminist literature taking note on “humanitarian shifts” in communication representing girls in the global south, analysing Skatistan and their social media portrayals of Afghan girls skateboarding. Without doing justice to their magnificent chapter, Thorpe, Hayhurst and Chawansky wrote, one has briefly summarised the connection of positive imagery of “Afghan girls in headscarves” and “looking excited”, creating “positive imagery” (section Beyond Poverty Porn, para. 1) on their media campaigns can stimulate some to “volunteer” at Skatistan (section The Power and Politics of Producing and Consuming Images of Afghan Skater Girls, para. 11).

Having further defined the concepts of media portrayal (video-parts) as well as the importance of spots, a link between the two must therefore be established. While Skatistan is an empowering medium for pushing skateboarding in the Global South, there is a gap in micro-sociological analysis of amateur skateboarders appropriating their local scene through DIY video-parts and street-skateboarding encouragement.

Methodology

Unintended covert observations upon the Rotterdam skate scene’s creation, distribution

and consumption of skate content have already been of influence in the commencing of this research paper. Wherefore, in order to grasp a richer understanding of the reasoning local Rotterdam skateboarders skate certain spots, a series of semi-structured interviews came into action. Semi-structured interviews are optimum in doing a micro-analysis of the scene for it will make clearer the intentions, thoughts and maybe collective consciousness of three skaters, the informality is a coincidental parallel to the sport's comportment. An interview guide was designed for realising the interviews with coherence, meanwhile there was room for open dialogue and drifting and to ensure validity when analysing data post research. This was chosen to allow for fluidity in dialogue and also reach deeper understanding of the topic if given the opportunity. A quota sample-group is a collection of local skaters with extensive skate-portafolios, a sample bias is present because the interviewees are my friends. Paul (he/him) 25, has been skating for 14 years, Jannes (he/him), 24, skated for 12 years and Robin (he/him) has skated for 6 years. This means they already have and constantly are discovering new street-spots, creating skate-edits of various production-levels. After conducting the interviews and transcribing, thematic analysis took place. Here, common themes and topics are grouped as patterns to find correlations in knowledge. As a skater myself, contact with respondents, themes and awareness of skater behaviour and mindset are pre-inscribed in my approach to the study. While this can be a positive factor in my prior understanding of the subject, it can also count as a bias. I therefore went into the interviews and coding process with a clean slate method in mind.

Findings

The interviewees had parallel opinions in regards to the questions asked. To commence, the *skater gaze* is (omni)present in all of their responses. With this, it is clear to say that the interviewee's view the world as skateboarders. Therefore, when interacting with architecture they already have an opinion towards its skate-ability, as Robin described "that's just kind of ingrained in the skater's mind". They seek banks, ledges, curbs and comfortable flat ground. Consequently, in their responses they used skater terminology such as NBD's and ABD's which are: never/already been done in relation to tricks at spots. Their skater identity has also been shaped by the media they consume, as Paul stated that he consumed "all of it" for example "if I can get my hands on it, a magazines... pictures, that's like connected with instagram I guess" and "videos for sure". Robin and Jannes likewise mentioned skate video consumption, and Robin actually produced a skate scene. We get insights that Instagram's video etiquette is for "instant short videos" which tend to be filmed in the park. The park, all agreed, is for "practice", however it is said that "lots of kids nowadays don't really go street skateboarding, you know, and just go to the park 'cause they want to film like 1 trick 'cause it's like an achievement... the instagram influence." Here, as seen in the literature review, there is the generational differentiation between VHS tapes and the instagram generation. The dynamic between filming and skateboarding therefore is at its core. Because of this then the level of skateboarding is rising as well with newer generations and "you can see it with general, like, developments in skateboarding right now" said Paul. Meanwhile, "skating street is usually for me when I really have, like, a mission to, to film something" in relation to a bigger video production. The skaters were clear when stating that a video part was all about skating in the street. Publications through the media have made skateboarding more accessible than ever.

When dwelling into the iconography of street skateboarding, it is important to clarify the differences between skateboarding at the skatepark, in the street and at spots. The skatepark, they mentioned as advanced skaters, “is just for practising” said Robin, or as Paul explained it “the park is basically what people do when they go to the gym” “a training”. Skateboarding originates from being in the streets, building parks was a way for policy makers to compromise with the surplus of skaters on the streets, so explained Paul. Skating at the street “has a lot more facets to it like, exploring, imagination”. Skating the street can be anything, because anything is “skateable” really, however it is important to have a good atmosphere and sharing street skating with friends. Using his skater gaze, Jannes said “this [spot] looks crusty, but it could be in that spot and I just never go there because it's so far away and I'm like, yeah, if I would go there by myself or with one or two friends it would probably not even worth it.” Anything can be a skate-ground if you look at it accordingly. And therefore to clarify the slight distinction between street skating and spots has to do with landmarking. In relation to videos, a spot is a space with “traffic” and constant flow amongst the skateboarding community, “a place with a lot of ABD's”. Here media and international streaming of skate content take action. Skaters get insights of spaces to skate when seeing others post content like this, either through a skate edit or a short clip. Famous spots in Rotterdam include Maritiem Museum, Grafisch Lyceum, Museum Park and more.

Having clarified this one can approach why “If you actually look at videos [parts], then it's street like. Street is and will usually always be the essence of skateboarding”. The three interviewee's mentioned the creativity and challenging essence that comes when skating a street spot, there “is a grand spectrum of freedom that the street can give you”. Accordingly there are attributes which enhance the essence of a spot, and for the intent the skater occupies the space. It was clarified that a comfortable street spot entails “nice flat ground”, “ledges” which can work as a manny pad as well as “some traffic” because people contribute to the atmosphere. On the other hand, if the intention to visit a spot is to film and get a clip, all interviewees agreed that this is your opportunity to show your creativity. Paul, who created a full video part, reflecting on his work, said for the next edit who would indeed include less conventional spots. He explains “It's OK, but I think it's always nice to see like an interesting spot, like it's almost nice to see something that's like how would you come to the idea to make a trick there or something and not like just the curb you know, because it curbs the curb you can grind on it or slide in it or jump on it, and jump out but that's it”. It is safe to say that creativity is central in skateboarding. In the videography one takes the whole atmosphere of the street into account when making the clips, further supporting the light of creativity in skateboarding. When confronting “urban design” therefore, skaters look at it with the intention to possibly, or never, skate this with the desire to film there.

Conclusion

Through discourse analysis Robin, Paul and Jannes shared their relationships with skateboarding. The clearest thing to state is how skateboarding had such an impact on their relation with their surroundings, approaching everyday quotidien spaces using their *skater gaze*. Differences can be noted on particular terminology which became clarified when analysing the transcripts of the interviewees. Thus, the differences between skating at the park, on the street

or at a spot were clarified. All three have their own approaches to videography as well, whether it is a quick clip or a full skate part. Generational differences also have different approaches to media production, although Instagram has taken over its distribution for all mediums. Things which need to be reconsidered for future analysis and thus making a more concrete understanding of the skate scene, according to Rotterdam's skate scene should begin with a more holistic sample group. Women and queer people also make up a percentage of the skate community and should also be represented in this study. The understanding of the relationship between appropriating a spot and skater satisfaction is as well quite limited. It would also be interesting to see how the younger generation feels towards the opinion of those older than them.

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