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‘Free therapy’: Young woman skateboarders, mental health and body self-compassion

Carrie Paechter
School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Michael Keenan
Social and Political Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Lyndsey Stoodley
Independent Academic, UK

Chris Lawton
Skateboard GB, UK

Abstract

In this paper, we use a theoretical framework derived from Frank’s concept of the communicative body, and Berry et al.’s typology of body self-compassion, to examine and understand the mental health benefits of skateboarding, as discussed by young woman skateboarders. In response to the open question, ‘What are the benefits of skateboarding’, we were given a wide variety of mental and, to a lesser extent, physical, health benefits, both short and longer term. Our research combines theoretical approaches from Frank’s typology of the body with Berry et al.’s ideas about body self-compassion. Given the relative paucity of research into the mental health benefits of this popular lifestyle sport, our research contributes to the wider literature on lifestyle sports and health, while providing an example of where communicative and compassionate bodies can be found. Specifically, we demonstrate several ways in which young women’s skateboarding practice contributes to their mental health, and show the centrality of body acceptance and fluid physical creativity to this relationship. We also note that young women skating together are particularly able to access this and to experience the joy and calm of connected and communal skateboarding.

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Corresponding author:
Carrie Paechter, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Chaucer Building, Goldsmith Street, Nottingham NG1 5LT, UK.
Email: carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk

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Introduction

Skateboarding is a popular lifestyle sport which, while traditionally male-dominated, is increasingly being taken up by girls and young women, especially since the Covid-19 lockdown period (Bäckström and Blackman, 2022; Clark and Sayers, 2023). This increase in young women's participation in a traditionally masculine-marked sport (Paechter et al., 2023a) led us to study the lived experiences of girl and young women skateboarders.[1] In this wider project, we wanted to gain a rounded understanding of what it is like to be a girl skateboarder, why young women take up and continue skateboarding, and the facilitating and inhibitory factors towards this sport (Paechter et al., 2023b). As part of our interviews with skateboarders, we asked about the benefits of participating in the sport. In response, most of our respondents talked about the wide-ranging mental health benefits they perceived as resulting from their skateboarding. We explore these in this paper.

Health is a multidimensional and contested concept (Green et al., 2019). Much health research, including around skateboarding, is based on a positivist epistemology, in which quantitative and epidemiological measures and outcomes predominate (Dumas and Laforest, 2009; Paechter et al., 2023a). The qualitative experiences related to health and wellbeing in skateboarding have rarely been systematically studied, while there is considerable research on the negative impacts of skateboarding on health, particularly related to the risk of injury (Paechter et al., 2023a; Yochim, 2010). Meanwhile, anecdotal accounts from within the skateboarding community indicate considerable mental health benefits. These accounts are presented via comics, blogs, websites and podcasts,[2] and have had little purchase on the academic public health literature.

Where mental health benefits are discussed by researchers, findings are positive. Clark and Sayers (2023) found that young women and non-binary people skateboarding in a local public park during the Covid-19 lockdown experienced this as alleviating anxiety during the pandemic and supporting them in healing from previous mental ill-health. O'Connor (2021), having studied older skateboarders, reports several well-being benefits, including personal space and calm; nostalgic joy; and a means of navigating depression (Friedel, 2015). Fang and Handy (2019) note that students using skateboards as a means of travel to university did this because they found it fun, relaxing and a source of relief from stress: additional advantages to what was also embraced as a cheap and convenient travel option. Sorsdahl et al. (2021) also report well-being and mental health outcomes from a youth skateboarding programme in deprived areas of South Africa; it is unclear, however, whether these derive from skateboarding itself or from the wider social and personal support provided by the mentors or the associated life skills teaching. More generally, Molcho et al. (2021), in a study of a nationally representative Irish adolescent sample, found that physical activity was significantly correlated with positive mental health. Studies by Jackson et al. (2021) and Bélanger et al. (2019) point to a relationship between outdoor play, exercise and mental health in children and young people.

Moen et al. (2016) further note that playful sporting activities produce both pleasure and a feeling of striving towards personal growth.

Several studies focus on the mental health and wellbeing benefits arising from the wider community connectedness that comes from being part of a skateboarder or skatepark community. Walker et al. (2016) used a three-phase questionnaire study to suggest that skateboarding provides participants with the social capital to support their physical and mental health. Bradley (2010) concurs, arguing that unstructured activities such as skateboarding can both satisfy adolescent needs for relatedness and provide opportunities to develop social skills (Shannon and Werner, 2008). Similarly, Taylor and Khan (2011) found that skateparks can provide social capital and support. The beneficial effects of social connectedness from participating in a local skateboarder community are supported by wider studies of the relationship between social connectedness and mental health. For example, Saeri et al. (2018) found a positive and reciprocal association between a subjective sense of social connectedness to a group and mental health across time, and that social connectedness was also a predictor of future mental health. Wickramaratne et al. (2022) in a scoping review, note that, in adults, social connectedness is protective against depressive symptoms and disorders. They found that, even in 'emerging adults', high social support is predictive against depression and anxiety symptoms.

Theoretical framework

For a theoretical underpinning to our discussion, we have turned to Frank's (1991) conception of the communicative body. Frank suggests a typology of the body in use within social contexts, consisting of four ideal-typical styles of body and body-object relatedness, each of which has a different way of resolving the action problems of control, desire, other-relatedness and self-relatedness (Paechter, 2013; Shilling, 1993): the disciplined body; the mirroring body; the dominating body; and the communicative body. Of these, he considers the first three to be problematic, while the fourth, he argues, 'is less a reality than a praxis', which we might find in the beginnings of 'in the aesthetic practices of dance and performance and the caring practices of medicine' (79). We argue that skateboarding also has the potential to produce or enable communicative bodies, and that this is part of what associates skateboarding with mental health.

Frank suggests that 'the essence of the communicative body is that it is a body *in process* of creating itself.' (79). While the body's contingency is a problem for the other three body styles, for the communicative body, fully experienced by the person whose body it is, contingency is its possibility. The body 'produces itself as an expressiveness recreating a world of which it is a part' (80), using itself to convey emotions through dyadic sharing with others. While the body is still formed among institutions and discourses, 'these are now media for its expression', enabling more than they constrain. Frank argues that dance is a site at which communicative bodies may be found; we suggest that these qualities are frequently shared with skateboarding as an analogously creative practice (Clark and Sayers, 2023; Walker et al., 2016):

> Dance is producing in its expressiveness, and the dancer must be associated with her or his body. Dance evolves through the contingency of the body…this contingency being dance's source of

> change and inspiration. Most important, dance is communal. Dyadic relation with others who join in the dance implies an associatedness which goes beyond one's own body and extends to the body of the other(s). (Frank, 1991, 80)

While skateboarding (like dance) can be a solitary pursuit, it is frequently undertaken communally, with people skating alongside each other in the same space; 'street missions' in which a group skates through the streets together; and synchronised movement, for example where several people swoop in sequence around a bowl.

Frank (1991) also noted the importance of recognition to the communicative body; it wants to communicate with an audience. While we have identified some problems with this, particularly for young women (Paechter et al., 2024), it remains the case that being recognised by others as a skateboarder, and having one's actions understood, are important to most skateboarders. Frank's description of what communicative bodies want in this respect reflects well the (in some cases intermittent) experiences and desires of many skateboarders, including girls and young women (Paechter et al., 2024)

> What communicative bodies are about is the capacity for recognition which is enhanced through the sharing of narratives which are fully embodied. What is shared is one body's sense of another's experience, primarily its vulnerability and suffering, but also its joy and creativity. (89)

Here both the excitement experienced by the vicarious thrill of watching an expert skateboarder enjoy their body through skateboarding, and the shock from injury clips shared on social media (Paechter et al., 2023a) are reflected in Frank's framework.

Frank's typology, while theoretically important, does not provide a direct link to the conceptualisation of mental health. For this, we turn to the concept of body self-compassion from Berry et al. (Berry et al., 2010), something which is particularly important for the mental health of young women. Paechter (2013) has previously argued that the communicative body is specifically associated with body self-compassion. Body self-compassion is a concept developed from a wider theorisation of self-compassion (Neff, 2003; Neff and McGhee, 2010), but focused more explicitly on the body. Berry et al. (2010: 295) describe it as

> a kind, understanding and non-judgemental attitude individuals extend towards their body in response to their perceived physical imperfections, limitations and failures.

Based on their phenomenological interview data, they suggest that body self-compassion consists of three core components, supported by the behaviour of others as facilitators or catalysts: appreciation of one's unique body; taking ownership of one's body; and engaging in less social comparison. Although our data do not point quite so specifically to these three aspects, we take Paechter (2013)'s theoretical linkage with the communicative body into our analysis. We argue that body self-compassion, especially the acceptance of failure, is a feature allied to the communicative body that is developed through skateboarding and consequently supports the mental health of young women and girl skateboarders.

Methodology

Our analysis is based on interviews and two group discussions as part of a wider 20-month study of the lived experiences of young woman skateboarders[3] aged 8–27. The study focused on three main locations, two urban and one rural, in or near two English cities, plus associated skate spaces nearby. We used semi-structured interviews as a main method due to their usefulness in giving us a detailed understanding of respondents' ideas about skateboarding and their potential for uncovering previously unanticipated results (Forsey, 2010; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Strauss, 1987). Participants had a wide range of abilities and experience and were recruited through our presence observing, and, occasionally, participating, in these spaces, plus snowball sampling from those already identified for interview. Our respondents encompassed park-only and street-only skateboarders, plus some who skated in both kinds of spaces. Our study is therefore unusual in its focus on multiple skateboarding spaces and communities in both urban and rural locations, and on skateboarders practicing a range of approaches and styles. We carried out individual and paired interviews with 32 young woman skateboarders, two of whom were on a break from skateboarding but who hoped to return. We attended and audio recorded a meeting convened, independently of our research, by a managed skatepark, Gnarly Ramps (not one of our focus sites) to elicit the experiences and opinions of nine young women using their space. We also organised an exchange visit between young women attending Flyovers (a managed skatepark which was a focus site) and those from another managed park 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 prompts for a recorded focus group discussion on the second occasion. We also interviewed 15 others (e.g. managers, and coaches) involved in skatepark sites, but their responses are not used in this paper.

All interviews and group recordings 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 in NVivo using a predominantly inductive reflexive thematic analysis process, in which themes were mainly allowed to emerge from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In this paper, our analysis is fully grounded, in that we asked the broad question, 'What are the benefits of skateboarding?' and then open-coded the responses. Nineteen interviews/group discussions mentioned mental health as a benefit, sometimes several times.

We now examine how our young woman respondents understood skateboarding as contributing to their mental health and general wellbeing, through several interrelated themes. We start with a brief discussion of skateboarding as providing freedom and fun, and then consider the importance of focus and flow, two elements closely related to the fully embodied communicative body (Frank, 1991). Our next section considers the direct mental health benefits our respondents thought they gained from participation. Social connectedness is also significant for good mental health, so this is discussed

next, followed by a section on self-development through skateboarding. Finally, we discuss another aspect of body self-compassion, which is an important contributor to mental wellbeing: physical health. While this was less commented on by our participants, some did raise it as a benefit of skateboarding, particularly during lockdown periods.

'It's just play time, I think': Freedom and enjoyment

Much of the literature around skateboarding and wellbeing focuses on skateboarding as a fun activity that many young (and older) people enjoy (Fang and Handy, 2019; O'Connor, 2021; Schwarmberger and Stiff, 2023; Taylor and Khan, 2011; Walker et al., 2016) and which provides mental health benefits by engaging them with a like-minded community (Borden, 2019). Our interviews reflect this. Most of our respondents were clear that they participated in skateboarding because they enjoyed it, and that other benefits, such as competition success, or even learning new tricks, were less important. Baby (23)[4] summed up their enthusiasm:

> I mean, my main aspiration with skateboarding, as ever, just to have fun. I do it for me, you know what I mean, I do it, I find it really fun, I do. Even just cruising around, not even doing tricks. I just love doing ollies so much. And back 180s, one of my favourite tricks, love them, oh, gorgeous. Yeah, it's just fun. My main thing is always just to have fun.

This reflects both the creative aspects of the communicative body and body self-compassion as focused on appreciating the body for what it is and can do.

Some respondents associated the fun of skateboarding with the excitement of a risky sport (Clegg and Butryn, 2012) and the adrenaline rush that comes either from the activity itself or from succeeding at a difficult trick. Olivia (8) said that skateboarding made her 'over-excited…like just really really excited'. Enjoyment did not, however, require successful performance:

> It's nice, there's a lot of adrenaline, especially when you're trying to do a new trick, and you've nearly got it, or even when you fall. (Ican'tshuvit, 16)

Some people deliberately searched out risk-related adrenaline. For example, one of the participants in the exchange experience focus group sent us a clip of a group of people riding down a road at night, commenting in the group that, 'we just find hills, and bomb them, and just…it is pretty fun'.

Some respondents talked about a feeling of physical freedom. This was partly related to the confidence that comes from feeling comfortable on the board and being able to cruise around without too much thought. For some, though, the experience went beyond this. Luna (14) described it like this:

> It's really weird. Like, say, if you're skating around really fast, and you've got like the wind in your hair and stuff, it's like that. And also being able to do different things, and ramps. And you can kind of just forget everything. It's really fun as well.

We see here how respondents' comments reflect both the experienced embodiment of the communicative body, and its creativity (Beal, 1996). This free-flowing creative aspect of skateboarding (Clark and Sayers, 2023; Walker et al., 2016), as experienced by our young woman respondents, is further developed in the next section.

'It just clears your mind': Focus and flow

As well as talking about the excitement of skateboarding, some of our respondents discussed the way it brought focus and a sense of flow to their experience. Learning to focus is an important aspect of child and adolescent development. Bradley (2010) suggests that 'developmentally superior' leisure contexts support participants in learning to focus on tasks, while Bélanger et al. (2019) note that time spent outdoors, especially when associated with physical activity, improves attention and reduces ADHD symptoms in children. Several respondents told us about the deep focus necessary for skateboarding, and how this gave them a sense of wellbeing and calm, reflecting O'Connor (O'Connor, 2020)'s observation that skateboarding is a 'conflation of play, ritual, and meditation' (202) and Yochim (Yochim, 2010)'s comment that, due to the high level of concentration involved, 'it offers a sense of transcendence, escape, meditation and fulfilment seemingly unavailable in [her respondents'] other domains' (193).

Csikszentmihalyi (1992, 2002) argues that this concentrated focus on a purposeful activity, in which muscles and brain come together, is related to a sense of flow:

> the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing so. (4)

This sense of embodied flow was clear from Evie (11)'s description of how she sometimes felt when skateboarding:

> But when I skate, and I just do the stuff I'm comfortable with, and it's sort of quiet and I can just cruise around, it just, I feel quite peaceful in a way.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that such flow states are related to 'optimal experience', which is a way of attaining happiness, something that was also reflected in some of our respondents' comments. For YeahMan (22), for example:

> It's like, when you skate, you don't really think about anything, because you don't have time to think about anything, because you're so focused. But then when you land something, it gives you that, like, rush of being, like, this is good, you're having a good day.

Here we see the intense focus of working on a trick finally give way to the joy of success, which then suffuses the rest of the immediate experience. It also gives a young woman a sense of the power of her body and a greater appreciation of its capabilities (Berry et al., 2010).

This sense of focus in which mind and body work together to produce physically complex and difficult processes, such as skateboarding, and even at times to make some aspects feel natural and effortless (Paechter et al., 2023b), is related to the communicative body (Frank, 1991). Immersion within a skateboarding experience can be experienced as a form of improvisation, in which the body is trusted and allowed to move as it wants and to develop different ways of being and performing. Louise (20), for example, when asked how she decided what to learn, told us:

> I don't decide. I just skate and skate until something different happens, you know what I mean? And then you just kind of flow with it. It's all about just being natural, you know, when you learn a new thing.

This was echoed by Baby (23), whose comments reflect the ways in which the communicative body is able to be creative because it is in touch with itself:

> So I think it's just kind of playing around on your skateboard, getting the basics down, to learn how to communicate with your body like that. And almost let your body tell you which way it wants to go, and what trick it wants to do…[…]…I'm very much aware of the inside of my body more than I was. And, like, where all my little tendons are, my ligaments, and what muscles do what.

We can also see this deep focus on the body and its functions as a form of sensory and embodied learning (Michelson, 1998; Shilling, 2017), in which participants simultaneously come to a deeper understanding of their bodies, while their bodies develop an experiential understanding both of skateboarding in general and of specific tricks. In this way, the skateboarding body acts as, in Frank's terms, 'a body *in process* of creating itself,' in which 'the body's contingency is no longer its problem but its possibility' (79). Here, Louise and Baby's developing skateboarding practice is analogous to improvised dance, evolving, in Frank's terms, 'through the contingency of the body' (80). It also reflects their trust in their bodies to have a sense of what to do next without worrying too much about their possible limitations.

'Skateboarding is a life-saving sport': Direct mental health benefits

Mental health was an important category in our analysis, mentioned in both interviews with young women and group discussions, reflecting beliefs in the wider skateboarding community about the positive effect of skateboarding. Three people told us explicitly that they thought it saved lives, and others spoke in detail about the benefits to their mental well-being that they experienced through participation. These were frequently related to the focus and flow discussed in the previous section, but here we consider the mental health benefits of these, and of the associated body self-compassion, in more detail.

Respondents particularly emphasised the way that the intense focus on skateboarding kept them in the present moment rather than ruminating on problems elsewhere in their lives or in their past (Friedel, 2015; Yochim, 2010). Torvei (16) summed this up:

> I feel like, when I'm skateboarding, I feel free. Like I'm not thinking of, like, my trauma that I've had in the past, I'm not thinking of the future or later on, it's just now, in that present.

In this sense, a skateboarder's embodied production of skateboarding, at whatever level, realises itself in the moment, focusing entirely on that and on the relationship between the physical body, the area in which it is operating, and the other bodies in that space (Berry et al., 2010; Frank, 1991). For our respondents, this specific quality of being present in the movement and its requirements had several linked effects. First, it removed intrusive thoughts. As one of our skate exchange participants put it:

> …it makes me feel better in my head. It's like, one of the only times, I've not got like five voices in my head shouting at me to do stuff.

Similarly, Mildred (21) said that:

> I'm so focused on getting my ollies down and, like, whatever, especially when it's at night. I'm just really focused…As I said, I'm really going through it. So skating just takes that off my mind. I'm really, really, bad with dealing with intrusive thoughts and stuff. So skateboarding is just one of the best distractions I can get.

This experience of being brought fully into the body through their deep focus on skateboarding was therefore seen as important as a temporary escape from difficult life events.

More prosaically, our participants spoke of skateboarding as a way of generally improving their mood, making them feel less sad, or, as Misdabenben (11) put it, 'just happy'. It was also seen by several respondents as a specifically good way to deal with stress and anxiety. This was important both during the Covid-19 lockdown periods that were a recent memory at the time of the study, when several respondents had either started skateboarding or stepped up their activity (Clark and Sayers, 2023), and more generally. For example, Samantha (16) told us:

> Like it definitely took me out of a bad downward spiral of anxiety, and a lot of, like, hard times in my life, I've just skated and felt better, because I've learned something.

This use of skateboarding to relieve stress had to be treated with some caution, however. Some young women talked about periods where ambition to achieve, particularly against external standards of skateboarding performance, had itself caused them problems. Baby (23), for example, said that:

> In that first year, great, I was so passionate, and that's fantastic. But I then trapped myself, because I was like, yeah, I'm going to go pro, I'm going to be the best skateboarder, ra, ra, ra. And then, though, it stopped feeling like fun. It started to feel like, you have to do this trick and you have to learn how to do that if you want to go pro. And that kind of ruined it.

In this respect, some of the wider aspects of skateboarding as an increasingly commercialised and competition-focused activity got in the way of Baby's ability to focus on the

enjoyment of, and be at one with, her communicative body in the moment. Her comment, however, also reflects her developing body self-compassion in that, rather than perpetuating her frustration, she starts to accept her body as it is, with all its limitations and failings. She realises that pushing for professional status will spoil her joyous relationship with both her body and skateboarding, and backs away from it, focusing instead on enjoyment.

For others, there was a more ongoing negotiation with the more performative and competitive aspects of skateboarding and a repeated reminder to themselves to avoid skateboarding itself, providing additional stress. As Heather put it:

> I always try and stop skating when I'm getting very frustrated when I'm trying a trick, because I know that I will let it get to me, and I'm like, ohh, I can't even get that. Because it really takes away my stress from uni…[…]…I don't want to ruin that at all…[…]…So as soon as I'm like, grrr, I'm like no, take a break.

This tension between the desire to improve by learning ever more difficult tricks, and wanting to use skateboarding as a fluid way to focus on and communicate with their body in a more improvised way, underlay several conversations with participants. Despite this tension, however, there was evidence that developing self-compassion, in relation both to their bodies and more generally, allowed them to back away, when they needed to, from the constant desire to improve.

A final downside to the direct mental health benefits gained from skateboarding was a perception among some participants that it was easy to become dependent on it, so that it caused problems for them if they couldn't skate for any reason. As Rosie put it, 'if I don't skate for three days, I'm like, I could cry. I do need to go'. She dealt with this by taking her board with her everywhere, even on holidays.

'It's like a family': Skateboarding and social connectedness

Previous research indicates the importance of community connectedness and social support to mental health, with some studies linking this directly to participation in skateboarding communities. Taylor and Khan (2011), for example, noted the importance of skatepark communities for older teenagers who are becoming less embedded in their families. Walker et al. (2016) found that young skateboarders saw friendship and community participation as major health benefits, and argued that skateboarding provides participants with the social capital resources to support physical and mental health; this echoes by Berry et al.'s (2010) finding that the support of others is important to developing self-compassion. Clark and Sayers (2023) found that the mental health benefits of skateboarding were made accessible to their young woman and non-binary respondents by the ethics of care in the local community skatepark. As discussed above, social connectedness, especially the sense of belonging to a group, is positively and reciprocally correlated with good mental health (Saeri et al., 2018; Wickramaratne et al., 2022).

Community connectedness is also important to skateboarding generally (Atencio and Beal, 2016; Beal et al., 2017; O'Connor, 2021; Paechter et al., 2023b, 2023a).

Respondents discussed both skateboarding friendship and wider community support. While it remains the case that young women find it harder to become full members of local skateboarding communities (Abulhawa, 2020; Beal et al., 2017; Fok and O'Connor, 2021; McCarthy, 2021; Paechter et al., 2023b), several respondents did manage to do this, while others benefitted from the increased take-up of skateboarding by young women, finding communities in girl-dominated groups or regular woman and girl sessions in managed skateparks (Paechter et al., 2023b). For example, Polly (24) and Poppy (26) had set up a local group of young woman skateboarders who would meet at public skateparks and take them over through sheer force of numbers. They had also participated in a women's group skateboarding trip to Barcelona, which Polly described as 'the best thing I've ever done'. Some respondents spoke of only having skateboarder friends, while others told specific stories of support from the skateboarding community. For example, Heather (21) described being injured and being pulled home on her skateboard by her friends, and Rosie (18) had been protected from hassles in a skatespace by local men skateboarders.

Identity formation also takes place within communities, and is a crucial aspect of adolescent development (Head, 1997). We discussed skateboarder identities explicitly with respondents, and asked them how these related to other identifications (Paechter et al., 2023b). For some respondents, this was a central aspect of understanding who they were, expressed most forcefully by Torvei (16), who told us that skateboarding had given her the opportunity

> to find myself, really, I think that. I mean, before I came here [the skatepark] I was quite lost. I didn't know who I was, or what I wanted to be. I think when I started skateboarding, I found my own identity and who I wanted to be. I think it has found me.

For others, however, skateboarding was, as Mildred (21) put it, 'just one of the, another thing that adds to the list of what makes me me'.

A sense of connectedness to a wider skateboarding community also meant that people could move home between cities, or even countries, and easily find 'their people', making this a less dislocating experience than it might otherwise be. Georgina (21), for example, an international student from South-East Asia, was clear that it made it easier for her to make friends in Hillwood despite her different ethnicity:

> I realised since last year, skateboarding is the thing to help me fit in here. Most of my close friends are from skateboarding, cos, like, my face is different, but skateboarding is a language; you don't have to mind too many things.

That some parts at least of their local skateboarding community felt 'like family' that engendered a level of trust which supported our respondents in social confidence and in feeling able to try new things, within and beyond skateboarding.

Related to the salience of community connectedness gained from skateboarding is the way that the communicative body is itself focused on connection. Frank (1991) argues that

> The communicative body's desire is for dyadic expression, not monadic consumption. It produces itself…as an expressiveness recreating a world of which it is a part. Whether it produces joy, sorrow, or anger, it uses itself to express these. (80)

He also notes that:

> Recognition is the medium of the communicative body. The performance artist seeks not just the attendance of an audience but their recognition. (87)

For young women skateboarders, this means that, while skateboarding alone can be fun, it is often more rewarding to skate with others who accept one into the local skateboarding community, and to work with and alongside them to develop the improvised activity that can constitute a good skate session. Some young women also communicated as skateboarders through uploading videos of their successes, failures and injuries. We have discussed elsewhere (Paechter et al., 2023b, 2024) how being accepted into skateboarding communities can be harder for young women, and the (generally disliked) expectation that they perform their skateboarder identities on arrival at a skateboarding space. These factors can make it more problematic for young women's bodies to be fully communicative in mixed skateboarding sessions. There are clearly tensions between the dyadic aspects of the communicative body and young women's concerns that sometimes their skateboarding performances ended up being solely for others, detracting from their own delight in movement. Nevertheless, our respondents did talk about the joy of skateboarding with friends, and it was clear from both observations and interviews that woman and girl skateboarding sessions were important opportunities for young women to move together and with mutual recognition and appreciation in ways that felt both creative and communicative.

'You believe in yourself more': Skateboarding as self-development

Feeling able to take oneself out of one's comfort zone and experiment with new things is important for long-term health and wellbeing (Bradley, 2010; Shannon and Werner, 2008; Sorsdahl et al., 2021). In the context of skateboarding, this is partly related to the development of social skills and confidence and partly to the experience of perseverance in the face of failure: these both foster greater self-acceptance and, consequently, self-worth. O'Connor (O'Connor, 2020) noted that skateboarding is unusual in that it rejects the neoliberal framing of failure as only acceptable if it leads to later success. He suggests that

> Many skateboarders deal mostly with failure and I would argue that the ethic of accepting and tolerating failures, both ours and those of others, is currently lost in the promotion of skateboarding. (281)

This underlines not just the centrality of failure and perseverance in skateboarding but also the high value given to them by practitioners.

Clegg and Butryn (2012) suggest that the parkour participants they interviewed had a proactive engagement with fear and uncertainty, something that would support wider self-development. Similarly, our respondents felt that, by facing fear in the skatepark, they learned to have more confidence in other areas of their lives. As Baby (23) explained:

> I just think, it constantly challenges me in a really healthy way. Physically, emotionally, mentally…I think it forces you to face fear. And I think by facing that fear in the physical, and with skateboarding, because it's very mental as well you know….[…]…So I think, overcoming those things, in this specific area, actually then bleeds out into every area of my life. And I become more comfortable getting out of my comfort zones everywhere else.

This increased confidence in tackling new and scary experiences was also related to overcoming fear of failure, and resilience when it did happen, described by Rosie (18) as 'the getting up thing'. Since skateboarding tricks take a long time to learn, through repeated, and painful, failed attempts (Paechter et al., 2023a), respondents became very used to picking themselves up and trying again:

> It teaches you how to, like, take a slam and get up again, and it's really, it's, like, I have no patience, so it teaches you patience and persistence. (Craig 15, a girl)

This resilience in the face of physical failure is clearly related to body self-compassion in several ways (Berry et al., 2010). First, our respondents, while valuing what their bodies could do, also did not expect them to perform as desired all, or even most, of the time. Physical failure was anticipated, and, to some extent, welcomed, as part of what was necessary to learn new tricks and develop technique (Paechter et al., 2023a). Related to this, they were able to forgive their bodies when they failed. Third, they focused on understanding their bodies and what they were capable (and not so capable) of at any one time, both by analysing their own failure and by studying and carefully copying, and adapting, how others performed tricks and manoeuvres. While studying others' performances in order to learn from them is a healthy form of social comparison, we also found that, in other contexts, our respondents chose carefully when to compare themselves with others. The overriding culture of skateboarding, despite inclusion in the Olympics, remains one of competition only with oneself, and this was reflected in the approach of our participants. Although some did compete nationally and internationally, most of the time comparison with others was associated with play and fun, for example through games of skate, in which players take it in turns to perform a trick which the rest of the group try to copy.

Respondents also told us that the repeated experience of perseverance in the face of failure resulting ultimately in success gave them confidence in their own ability to learn, self-trust and self-belief. For example, Clover (22) said:

> And it's kind of also like, you're pushing your will, in a way, like, I'm not going to land this, but then you're like, I can land it if I just don't think about the negative stuff, and then you actually do land it, like, OK, wow. And you believe in yourself more.

This development of increased self-belief seemed not only to be related to their bodies but also to their lives more widely: for example, several respondents told us that their social confidence had increased because of skateboarding.

In this way, by dealing with fear and failure when participating in a physical activity, our respondents' self-compassionate bodies learned self-acceptance, a key aspect of longer term mental health. At the same time, they were able to appreciate and accept the non-perfectibility of their bodies, and so to be compassionate about their failings. In doing this in the company of other skateboarders, especially other young women, our respondents demonstrated the communicative aspects of their bodily practice, being aware of the vulnerability, suffering, joy and creativity (Frank, 1991) of their own and others' bodies.

'It gives you a reason to be outside': Physical health benefits

Exercise, especially outdoors, is generally important for good mental health in young people (Jackson et al., 2021; Molcho et al., 2021). Bélanger et al. (2019) found specifically that increased time spent outdoors, increases in moderate to vigorous activity, and improved mental health were positively correlated in children and young people. Our respondents noted that skateboarding was an important source of exercise for them, and some linked this specifically with mental health. Of course, skateboarding life is not always healthy: apart from the obvious injury risks we also saw a lot of smoking (both tobacco and cannabis) and drinking at the outdoor skate spaces we observed. Nevertheless, the physical aspect of skateboarding contributed to the mental health of our participants.

Body self-compassion also involves wanting to be healthy and take care of one's body; for our respondents, this was about taking responsibility for their physical and psychological wellbeing. Several respondents had started skateboarding during Covid-19 lockdowns, using it for their permitted hour a day for outdoor exercise (Clark and Sayers, 2023). One of our exchange group participants told us, for example:

> Oh, I started in lockdown, because I was just, like, getting, going crazy. And it just like helped me massively with it, and it helped, just, like, making sure that I'm doing something, and, like, having a focus.

While Brooke (17*) used public facilities for this, telling us that 'the skatepark was looking really empty', others had a more restricted experience. Craig (15, a girl) had 'skated basically on my driveway for like…solid for two-three months'.

Others saw skateboarding as a good way to get themselves out of the house and into fresh air, especially in winter, when non-skateboarding friends would be staying inside. While in the summer, everyone would want to go and sit in the park,

> In winter, it's like, I properly needed that excuse to get out of the house, and I would, like, be looking forward to skating so much. Because it was, like, here's a break from everything that's really depressing and wintery. (Exchange participant)

This use of skateboarding to motivate them to get outside and exercise was mentioned by respondents of all ages and abilities, and recognised as being good for their physical and mental health.

Some respondents also pointed to more specific bodily benefits from skateboarding. Icantshuvit (16) told us that 'it really got me in shape as we were coming out of lockdown', and that this had made her feel more energetic. Mandi (27) had noticed that she was stronger than before, and that she used different muscles. Susie (17*) and Brooke (17*), who skated to college together, pointed out that it gave them 'a little leg workout' in the mornings. Skating also got them to college faster, resulting in 'more sleep'. Being able to get up later benefitted them; conversely, Samantha (16) said that if she woke up early she would skate for an hour before college, to 'feel more awake'. For other respondents, becoming more in touch with their bodies through skateboarding led to them treating their bodies in other self-compassionate ways. Louise (20), for example, had started eating more healthily, finding that this helped her to skate better.

Our findings suggest that skateboarding not only increased participants' desires to take responsibility for caring for their bodies, but also increased their ability to do this. Their enjoyment of skateboarding led to them doing it regularly, strengthening their bodies, enhancing their bodily connectedness, and balancing out the various demands in their lives.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have challenged the prevailing medical approach to skateboarding by focusing not on measurable physical risks but instead on the subjective experience of its mental health benefits. In doing this, we bring to a wider academic audience an understanding of the relationship between skateboarding and mental health that is already prevalent in the skateboarding community. Using qualitative research such as this to demonstrate that skateboarding benefits girls' and young women's mental health, is especially important as this is a group particularly vulnerable in this respect (Clark and Sayers, 2023). Clearly there is room for considerably more research in this area: this is a significant research gap which, if addressed, could provide support for the development and promotion of skateboarding as a mental health intervention. We would particularly like to see more positivist researchers take up the challenge of applying objective measures of mental health to skateboarding practice.

Our findings suggest that the ethos and practices of skateboarding are particularly important for providing a meditative sense of focus and flow for practitioners. Its creative, improvisational nature allows for embodied and sensory learning, both individually and in co-operation with others, fostering a deeper understanding and experience of the body and the consequent development of body self-compassion. The acceptance of, and, indeed, welcoming, of failure and injury as a central aspect of skateboarding practice and culture (Paechter et al., 2023a) further foster a valuing of one's body with all its limitations. We suggest that this prompts and supports the relative lack of social comparison manifested by our respondents, especially in relation to other young woman skateboarders. Furthermore, both the nature of the activity itself and its visible effects on girls' bodies in the form of bruises, scrapes and so on, provide a means by which young

women can challenge or avoid dominant norms of femininity. As Kelly et al. (2005) point out, 'you can't land an ollie properly in heels'.

It is interesting in this context to speculate about how, given the increase in skateboarding competitions and especially the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics, might affect this focus on the immediacy of practice and on valuing the body for what it can do in the here and now. It was notable that several of our respondents deliberately changed their approach to skateboarding when they found themselves becoming too focused on results, telling us that this detracted from the benefits they perceived from non-competitive practice. It is also the case that failing and falling are built into and expected in even Olympic competition and that a run without a fall is often remarked on by commentators. We also note anecdotally that, in our experience as spectators of skateboarding contests (and, in the case of Chris, as an employee of the National Governing Body), even formal competition is characterised by considerable mutual support and encouragement between girl and young woman participants in particular. Given that even the Olympic talent pathway in the UK is rooted in local hub skateparks with coaches coming from the skateboarding community and bringing the wider non-competitive ethos with them, this is maybe unsurprising. However, this appears to go beyond the UK, also being a feature of the 2021 Olympic women's skateboarding event. We hope that national and international coaches will be mindful of this mutually supportive ethos as important for young woman skateboarders' mental health, and continue to foster it in those with whom they work.

Amid widespread concern about the lack of physical activity of young women, especially as they approach their teens (Clark, 2021), skateboarding has the potential to support better physical health, particularly for those girls averse to competition and team sports. In addition, however, our findings suggest that skateboarding could be a powerful vehicle for improving young women's mental health. Given its relative cheapness and accessibility, and the greater spread of young women's skateboarding communities, skateboarding could become an important resource for social prescribers, especially given that much of young women's mental ill health is related to adverse social comparison and lack of body self-compassion (Clark and Sayers, 2023).

Our use of Frank's (1991) framework for analysing how bodies are experienced, coupled with the concept of body self-compassion (Berry et al., 2010) further develops and evidences the theoretical linkages between these ideas previously posited by Paechter (2013) in the context of formal physical education. In particular, we have shown how the concept of body self-compassion can provide an important bridge between Frank's postulation of the communicative body and good mental health as actively experienced. Furthermore, this combination gives us a sound theoretical underpinning for a concrete example of how the communicative body operates in practice and shows how this is a beneficial bodily usage. The combination of these two key ideas allows us to shine a body sociological lens on the ways in which girl skateboarders' practice connects with their mental health, and to show the importance of body acceptance and fluid creativity to this relationship. Our evidence suggests that skateboarding, as a physical creative practice, can be a way of experiencing a communicative body, and that this is particularly accessible to young women who skateboard in woman and girl groups, where performative requirements appear hold less sway. In these contexts,

young women skate together, experiencing both the contingency of their bodies and their social interconnectedness, communicating and improvising with each other and experiencing excitement, joy and calm.

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ORCID iD


Carrie Paechter https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3050-5571

Notes

1. 'Girl skateboarders: active girlhood, alternative sports, and urban space' was funded by the Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant Scheme, June 2021–January 2023, Grant Reference RPG-2021-054.
2. For examples, see: https://www.nikesb.com/whysosad; https://open.spotify.com/show/3kuDijp2GX2EiN6lDgkr7b; https://healthyliferecovery.com/staying-active-in-recovery/skateboarding/.
3. Throughout this paper, we have used gendered terms, and have recognised 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.
4. 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.

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