

Over 40 and Still Skateboarding: Identity and wellbeing in the older skater.

Abstract

This chapter looks at the notion of active ageing and wellbeing as it is demonstrated through middle aged skateboarders. Through qualitative interviews and an interpretive analysis of media articles, the notion of the middle-aged skateboarder is unpacked. Here skateboarding is understood in terms of fun, happiness, identity, and wellbeing. Middle-aged skateboarders appear to acknowledge the health benefits of being active and obtaining exercise through skateboarding, however, their main focus appears to be pleasure. They also question notions about what it means to ‘grow up’ and seek to normalise skateboarding in later life. These dynamics are echoed through examples of professional skateboarders, and a vibrant social media presence of ‘older skateboarders’ on Facebook groups and Instagram. In contrast to much of the debate surrounding active ageing and sports participation for the middle-aged and ageing, skateboarding is presented in terms of emotional wellbeing, and community. Some respondents even touch upon spiritual elements highlighting that the activity has profound meaning and resonance in their lives.

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Introduction

Skateboarding has seen a considerable renaissance in the second decade of the 21st century. It has become a widely recognised inclusive sport open to all varieties of ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity. Moreover, it has also become distinctly heterogenous in terms of the ages of its practitioners. A variety of recent books highlight these transformations and acknowledge that skateboarding has become increasingly fragmented (Atencio, Beal, Wright, & ZáNean, 2018; Borden, 2019; Lombard, 2015; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). While the activity has matured into a global culture, awarded legitimacy as an Olympic sport, it has also been recognised as a powerfully influential force in pop-culture over the last twenty years. I have previously argued that the descriptive label of ‘youth culture’ is out of step with the reality of skateboarding (O’Connor, 2017). Similarly, a variety of research has sought to understand how individuals age within subcultural scenes (Bennett, 2016; Hodkinson, 2011; Taylor, 2010; Willing, Bennett, Piispa, & Green, 2018). These works highlight the challenges of participation in, for example, the ‘goth’ or ‘punk’ scene, whilst navigating adult responsibilities such as work and parenthood. Yet, it is often the case that with age, subculture participants carry an aura of authenticity and knowledge that continues to mark them as valid members. This is certainly true of many older skateboarders, but so too is the fact that long-time participation can also provide access to a ‘subcultural career’ (Snyder, 2017). An exploration of the skateboard industry reveals considerable participation and organisation by veteran skateboarders. These are individuals who have spent their lives skateboarding. In contrast to these ‘legacy skaters’ are ‘returnees’ those who ceased skateboarding for sometimes decades and have returned in their middle-age. This chapter addresses representatives from both groups and the identity and wellbeing they access through their skateboarding. The sportification of skateboarding, that is the increased organisation and institutionalisation of skateboarding as a sport that includes facilities, coaching, and inclusion in large multi-sport competitions, is however not the main draw of my participants to the activity. Older skateboarders may well be interested in losing

weight and keeping fit, but these are often reported to be by-products of the more general wellbeing achieved through the activity. I argue that wellbeing for the older skateboarder is premised both on community, the legitimacy of fun, and a sense of identity unconstrained from other elements of their lives. In pushing these themes to a theoretical position, I also suggest that skateboarding can act as a positive outlet for the middle-aged worker who may well be navigating forms of precarity in their career or self-identity. This takes on further significance with the broader understanding of wellbeing as a subjective experience beyond health, and in part related to new age philosophies and spirituality (Heelas, Woodhead, Seal, Szerszynski, & Tusting, 2005; Heintzman & Mannell, 2003; Sointu, 2016). Thus, the middle-aged skateboarder is framed not as an agent pursuing ‘active ageing’ (Tulle, 2008) but one seeking pleasure, meaning, and a sense of security in later life.

Framing the Middle-Aged Skateboarder

In positioning an understanding of middle-aged skateboarders there are a number of perspectives to consider. Firstly, the frame of middle-age is typically understood to begin around the age of 40-45 and extend to the age of 65 (Perryman, 2000). This frame is premised on several factors including the time of life when most adults have either settled in a relationship, or career, and are perhaps raising a family. This frame is also a guide at best, and is open to considerable critique in light of social change. As Arnett (2000) argues, many adults are no longer meeting the traditional social landmarks their parents and grandparents made at similar ages. In part this has been argued as an effect of economic austerity, providing young adults with narrowing opportunities to consolidate their social and financial independence in their twenties and subsequently thirties (Standing, 2014). However, as a social fact, and strongly related to both the tyranny of youth and the scrutiny of the ageing body, I argue that 40 continues to be widely recognised as the beginning of middle-age.

In the realm of sports a number of works have recognised the importance of the ‘active ageing’ agenda in stimulating a positive association with participation in sport into and beyond middle age (Desjardins & Warnke, 2012; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009; Pike, 2011). Shirani (2013) observes a host of anxieties surrounding sport participation in middle-aged men who have become new fathers. Her research identifies both delayed fatherhood and the challenge of physical competence in sports despite prolonged longevity. She notes that participation in sports by age 40 amongst her informants, was surrounded by concerns about age, performance and perceptions by younger sports participants. Yet Shirani’s work typically observes team sports such as football. When framing skateboarding as a sport I recognise it as conforming to the qualities of ‘lifestyle sports’, defined by Wheaton (2013). Differing from institutional sports, lifestyle sports have no uniform, rules, or time-frame, and are understood as relatively recent sports, consumerist, with their own set of ethics and principles. Wheaton has explored ageing surfers and recognises (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017; Wheaton, 2017) the social benefits relating to new ways surfers engage with surfing and make a meaningful space for themselves in what has long been seen as a youthful activity. This provides a helpful context to frame middle-aged skateboarders. Certainly, skateboarding as a ‘lifestyle sport’ is not mediated by the same principles as institutionalised sports. For example, football may typically be understood as competitive, the object is to succeed in scoring goals and not to concede them from the other team. In skateboarding there is a much more fluid understanding of success, and one that is open to failure as a contingent part of the activity, of both learning and progressing.

However, a variety of news reports and magazines have sometimes derided the middle-aged skateboarder who they frame as ‘sad’ and in the midst of a ‘mid-life crisis’ (Coan, 2014; Lewak, 2015; Shepherd, 2015). Typically, these criticisms are levelled at men and tend to trivialise the middle-aged skateboarder as a joke, dovetailing with the anxieties expressed in Shirani’s (2013) research. There are in contrast a variety of rebuttals that celebrate the fun and

freedom men can have in rekindling their love for the lost passion of their youth (Brooke, 2014). In contrast representations of middle-aged female skateboarders are often more positive and celebrate their inclusion and participation in skateboarding (Jepsen, 2012; Larbi, 2018; Maine, 2015). A distinction in this gendered discussion is that men are scrutinised for chasing their youth, while women are celebrated for facing their fears.

Within the niche media of skateboarding, representations of middle-aged skateboarders that are positive and celebratory and very common (O'Dell, 2017; Old Skateboards, 2015; Pappalardo & Wisenthal, 2015; Phelps, 2016; Ride Channel, 2017; Thrasher Magazine, 2015). To celebrate his fiftieth birthday Tony Hawk performed fifty of the tricks he has invented showcasing both his legacy and his continued ability to skateboard at the highest level (Ride Channel, 2018). Some skateboarders like Hawk, continue to be influential into their fifties. Others have created blogs (Eisenhauer, 2016) and self-published their own content on the experiences of being an 'older' skater (S. Thornton, 1996; Weyland, 2002). Many of these accounts are humbled and self-deprecating and represent an awareness of changing physical competence. However, the prominence of middle-aged skateboarders in both professional skateboarding and the inner workings of the skateboard industry has received some criticism that was becoming increasingly vocal on social media, message boards, and even in academic forum during the writing of this chapter (Pushing Boarders, 2018).

For the purposes of this research middle-aged skateboarders include any skateboarder over the age of 40 who practices street, park, vert, or longboard skateboarding. I recognise that the prominence of this group relates to various intersecting issues, firstly the coming of age of skateboarding including a cohort of individuals who never stopped skateboarding since their youth, secondly returnees who have come back to skateboarding later in life, thirdly novices who have been attracted to skateboarding because of its increasing prominence and the

legitimacy it has received through both media and the creation of public skateparks in their local neighbourhoods. My research question is to understand how skateboarding contributes to the perceived wellbeing of middle-aged skateboarders.

Wellbeing

A preoccupation with health has been the objective physical measures of active bodies free from disease. So distinct is the norm of measurement that a trend of the ‘quantified self’ (Lupton, 2016) has emerged to chart various markers of health through wearable technologies and the capturing of big data. Yet this data can be regarded as providing an imperfect, or incomplete vision of a more holistic understanding of health. The World Health Organization (WHO) has described health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (World Health Organization, 2006). Wellbeing is importantly included in this description expanding on the notion of health, but it is not elaborated upon. Harvey and Taylor (2013, p. 4) recognise that wellbeing is a popular phrase in policy and denotes a state beyond physical health. They describe wellbeing as encompassing ‘emotional stability, clear thinking, the ability to love, create, embrace change, exercise intuition and experience a continuing sense of spirituality.’ While health may be measured by objective standards of weight, physical achievement, and big data, wellbeing is more ambiguous and is not easily measured, or confined to quantification. An important measure of wellbeing is subjective, the self-monitoring and reporting of our own feelings and perceptions of everyday life and our interactions.

The focus on subjective wellbeing is argued by Heelas and others (2005), to be diffuse in contemporary consumerist culture. They highlight how an array of products and activities are described as having experiential qualities and are framed with a focus on self-discovery and personal development. Their examples include items at sale in supermarkets, book stores, and

pastimes such as cookery, gardening, beauty, and health, all oriented toward a subjective notion of feeling good and caring for oneself. ‘Subjective wellbeing culture, we may conclude, has to do with the cultivation of ‘good’ feelings, and is ultimately focussed on feeling good about oneself’ (Heelas et al., 2005, pp. 84-85).

Thus, in addition to the active ageing agenda (Pike, 2011), which has been argued to be in part of a neoliberal project for cultivating self-care and responsibility, the discourse of subjective wellbeing legitimises both taking care of oneself and pursuing pleasurable experiences. Thus, a focus on wellbeing is more than physical health. As we see in the testimonies of my informants, the range of elements described by Harvey and Taylor (2013, p. 4), become relevant in the experience of skateboarding in middle-age. Skateboarding as a sport and health activity is described to be much less significant than the attributes of wellbeing, cultivating joy, a relationship with peers and children, spirituality, and offsetting depression.

Methodology

This research draws on the findings from 30 interviews with middle-aged skateboarders, and ethnographic fieldwork performed in Hong Kong, and the UK. Initially participants were recruited through Facebook groups aimed at middle-aged skateboarders. A total of 25 interviews were performed via Skype or telephone. A further five interviews were performed face to face in Hong Kong. Interviews were structured around the theme of a skateboard biography and facilitated participants structuring their own narratives about their life skateboarding. I used a brief interview schedule to steer the later parts of each interview toward central themes about wellbeing, ageing, and the meaning derived from skateboarding. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then analysed and coded identifying recurring and connecting themes. As the research was both explorative and

interpretive, a wide variety of issues emerged relating to social networks in Hong Kong (O'Connor, 2018) and the notion of temporal capital (O'Connor, 2017).

To supplement the findings from the structured interviews, I also draw on insights from ongoing ethnographic work in Hong Kong's skateboarding community. Here I have acted as a participant observer skateboarding with a variety of middle-aged peers and reflecting and observing, in the field, on themes that have arisen in my interviews. A significant aspect of this research is that I also identify as a middle-aged white male skateboarder and thus many of the issues that I explore have personal relevance. Rather than this being a hinderance to the objectivity of the research, I argue that it facilitates rich insight providing the interviewer with a working knowledge of pertinent themes, and also access to explore and verify the veracity of claims from the perspective of a sports participant with 'insider knowledge' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 116; Wheaton, 2016). I have also witnessed first-hand how skateboarding provides a serious emotional outlet for peers who have experienced personal trials in the collapse of long-term relationships, career challenges, parenthood, and substance abuse. The research was approved by Lingnan University's ethics committee.

Findings

A change of pace

For 47 year old Canadian Mark, returning to skateboarding after 20 years was a way to get his life back in order. After having a successful career as a lawyer, working 80 hour weeks and jetting all over the world, he finally decided that he wanted to opt out of the corporate rat race and do things that made him happy. While holidaying in Dubai Mark had an epiphany while watching a surfer in his sixties. Impressed at the physical ability and self-confidence of the

older surfer, Mark confessed, ‘I thought, that’s who I want to be when I grow up.’ He began to surf more and over a two-year period made the moved to Bali with his wife and teenage son and soon started skateboarding again. Mark describes the benefit of skateboarding a part of ‘the simple joys’ of life. Riding on his board provides a sense of freedom and exhilaration and also what he regards as a re-education.

When you’re skateboarding, you’ve got to relax, you’ve got to keep your balance, you’ve got to drop your centre of gravity. You know, you’ve got to, kind of, undo the things that “make you successful in other sports,” which is to be tight, strong, and powerful.

At the same time Mark recognised that social media was a motivation to continue skateboarding, by seeing other older skateboarders progress and reach new goals. But the camaraderie he finds online is not confined to that virtual space. Being a skateboarder has enabled him to ‘plug in’ to an eclectic community in Bali where he rubs shoulders with all sorts of diverse people of varying backgrounds and ages. More broadly, skateboarding represents a significant part of a whole life change for Mark. One in which he rejects the laborious work life and consumption of his parents’ generation and instead pursues some of the joys of a simpler life.

Mark, like many others, also saw skateboarding as a way to enjoy time with his children. This was a recurring theme throughout interviews. Many skateboarders had children who had either ignited or rekindled their parent’s passion for skateboarding and as a result altered the relationship they had with their boards and the skateboarding community.

Responsible Parenting

For 55-year-old Australian Derek, longboarding¹ provides a medium through which he can continue to be an instructive moral actor in his daughters' lives while also being 'hip' and respectable. He mused upon the critical narratives of youth in popular culture. He argued that 'these young people, they will only respect you after you've given them a reason to do so.' Skateboarding for Derek provides not only a space to garner respect, but also works as an important tool, again, for participation in a diverse community not premised on age.

Derek, like others, took his participation in skateboarding in a philosophical direction and saw it as a way to communicate his principles. Thus, when he skateboards around Sydney he keeps a plastic bag to collect discarded litter on the city streets. Part of this was to challenge stereotypes and show that skateboarding does not deserve the bad name it has historically had. Part of it was to simply do good and not make his hedonistic act of riding the board purely self-centred. Yet at the same time Derek and his fellow skateboarders also took a political position in which they asserted a right to use parts of the city that are labelled out of bounds to skateboarders. In doing so they lead by example, always being courteous and considerate of pedestrians and the security guards they encounter. Derek therefore sees his skateboarding as educational 'osmosis' instructing his daughters as they grow up.

'You can tell people what to do. My daughters as well. I can tell them anything. But it was what I did that they watched. They didn't necessarily listen.'

¹ Longboarders are sometimes dismissed by core skateboarders as 'not real' skateboarders. However, amongst the older skateboarders I spoke to there was a distinct softening of this prejudice. Many who were street or ramp skateboarders in their youth had taken up longboarding as a more mellow alternative to trick focused skateboarding.

This account dovetails with the final passages of Thornton's (2016) book where he argues that skateboarding provides an important forum for parenthood, one that both gives room for rebellious risk taking and responsible community participation. Yet beyond these principles, Derek also confided that skateboard is something that gives him peace of mind. Having been a skateboarder for over thirty years, he has a personal connection to his private time on the board, which he refers to as 'me time.' Thus, skateboarding for Derek is both a community act of responsibility, and a personal passion that provides an escape from everyday stresses.

Nostalgic Joy

Living on the East Coast of the USA, but originally from California, 41-year-old Chris was representative of many of the skateboarders I spoke to. He identified with the role skateboarding had in his family, providing time for him and his sons in a way he never had with his own father. He also recognised the consistent role that skateboarding had played in his life, providing him solace and identity as a young teen when his parents broke up, and also an outlet while he served as a Marine granting him access to skateboard scenes in far off places like Japan. Yet consistently throughout our interview Chris spoke about the joy that skateboarding provided him throughout his life. While he acknowledged that this was somewhat ineffable and largely impossible to comprehend for non-skateboarders, his vocabulary when discussing skateboarding included the terms joy, serenity, happiness, and feeling. Like Derek he spoke about the personal space that skateboarding provided for him, a moment of calm away from the responsibilities of paying the bills and the constant worries of

being a family man. While on board Chris claims that he doesn't have a care in the world. Despite skateboarding infrequently as he has gotten older, and losing skill and agility along the way, he describes skateboarding as continuing to provide meaningful release through the simple act of moving or as he terms it 'pushing.' So significant are the feelings he derives from his skateboarding that he seeks to capture it by holding on to all of his old boards and hanging them on the wall of his personal office. I asked him why he does this,

Because it's like a picture. It's a memory. You can remember where you were when the board got all those scrapes, or the trucks got all those grinds. You can remember what you were doing, the feeling that you had when you were doing it at that time. It's like looking at a picture that you haven't looked at in ten years and it just brings back that flood of memories. It brings back that happiness, that joy.

For Chris, skateboarding is a source of joy and fulfilment. In collecting his old boards he is able to construct a diary of his happiness and reflect on the time he has spent skateboarding. Such attention to detail is in no way peculiar in skateboarding, and various skateboarders retain a passion for their old boards. In an interview for a skateboard video magazine, professional skateboarder Kristian Svitak discusses his vast collection of every skateboard he has ever ridden. Occupying most of his garage Svitak describes these mementos as a way to revisit the past. He states 'I'm glad I have them. Most guys I know wish they had them', meaning that many other skateboarders would similarly derive great meaning from their old boards (ON Video, 2003).

Depression

For a collection of my respondents, skateboarding was seen as a meaningful way in which they had been able to navigate depression. Two men, one in America and one in the UK, were both on anti-depressants, and found that skateboarding was an additional tool that helped them with their mental health. Charles for example, who was also the youngest person I spoke to at only 37, reflected on his dead-end job, his failing health, and his need for a creative outlet. He stated that ‘skateboarding to me is pretty much everything. I can’t imagine my life without it.’ He described it as something of an antidote to annoying people and the insanity of everyday life. In discussing the mental health benefits Charles argued that skateboarding had saved him from doing so many ‘stupid things’ in his life. In one instance he described how when he started university he lost his mind and his money taking drugs, skateboarding provided him with an alternative option, a way to do something other than continually partying. He developed a habit of skating solitarily late at night and adopting a nocturnal existence. Unlike most of my respondents Charles, although friendly and talkative, seemed indifferent to the community aspect of skateboarding. Although he did state that ‘if you ride a skateboard you are my friend for life is far as I am concerned’, in practice it appeared that skateboarding provided him with an opportunity to avoid people and do something simply for himself. Throughout our interview Charles was pessimistic about other skateboarders and freely expressed his displeasure with the way skateboarding has developed.

Peter, a 45-year-old artist, holds a clinical diagnosis for depression and anxiety. Skateboarding to him is a ‘big tool for mental health’ as it delivers a release of endorphins and provides him with self-confidence. So important is skateboarding for his wellbeing, that days where work or rain prevent him from getting on his board result in him feeling depressed and lethargic. Being

candid about the importance skateboarding holds for him he stated that ‘the darkest times in my life is whenever I didn’t skateboard.’

This was a theme that was shared by 51 year-old Canadian Debbie. She spoke of a particularly dark time in her life when she broke up with her long-term girlfriend and was left heartbroken and with a high rent to cover on her own. At this time skateboarding, which she had not done for over a decade, became a source of joy and salvation. Speaking about how she made T-shirts for herself and friends with the slogan ‘skateboarding saved my life’, she notes that the community and activity of skateboarding provided a time and space where she knew she was ‘going to be happy.’ She reflects that because of her mental state ‘I could have turned to drugs or drinking’, but instead skateboarding filled her with happiness and provided a space where she felt unconditional acceptance.

These accounts all signify that the joy of skateboarding is not a superficially transient thing. Instead it appears to provide a repertoire of wellbeing that can encompass subjective happiness, community participation, and an identity beyond the confines of work, family, and social status. Interestingly, these are elements that have been identified by both the AARP (American Association for Retired People) and the UK’s NHS (National Health Service) in promotional videos that they have both released in recent years (Maine, 2015; NHS Choices, 2016). These videos target middle-aged individuals, both male and female. In the AARP video Barbara Odanaka speaks of her post-natal depression and how skateboarding provided her with a path back to her own happiness and identity. In the NHS promotional media, professional skateboarder Tas Pappas details the importance of skateboarding for mental health, speaking with candour about his numerous transgressions and the loss of his brother, and fellow professional skateboarder, to drugs and violence.

Spirituality

Several of my informants made allusions to religion or spirituality in some form, highlighting that skateboarding provided an outlet and source of communication to connect to ‘bigger issues.’ Matt from Kansas spoke about the fact that skateboarding was his religion and that while most of his community was in church on Sunday morning, he was out skateboarding, visiting local skateparks, or bombing down hills uninterrupted by the traffic of the working week. One skateboarder with whom I explored the issue of religion in depth, regarded skateboarding as somewhat analogous to religion. He saw that like religious traditions skateboarding offered a space of worship, and a sense of calm concentration that he referred to as mediation. He saw that this was a fragile state and that if not respected such serenity would result in injury. Taking the comparison further he indicated that community was a large part of skateboarding and something that religions similarly seek to foster. To him, the bonds developed through skateboarding were both deep and meaningful. His final link related to the human need to transcend, to search and push for more, and to aspire to leave the earth and reach for the heavens. I have argued more fully that skateboarding provides a new perspective on the sport religion bond in some ways becoming a lifestyle religion, focal on individualism, creativity, and consumptive pop-culture (O'Connor, 2019)

For other informants the links were less distinct but still observable. Fusing skateboarding and pop-culture, 41-year-old Londoner Archie spoke of one veteran skateboarder as guru who he admired and studied his videos, art, and writing. Speaking of Mark Gonzales Archie stated that ‘he is kind of like the skateboarding equivalent of Yoda.’ For 42-year Jordan from Chicago there was no interest in spiritual exploration in skateboarding, but there was a strong notion of the idea of church and community. For Jordan skateboarding was a social lifeline, all his friends were skateboarders, along with all their wives. He reflected on the fact that he was extremely lucky to have such bonds with peers at his age and recognised that his colleagues at work had no comparable community to plug in to and to garner support from.

Conclusion

I have grouped the responses of my informants into five categories that relate broadly to elements of wellbeing. If we refer back to Harvey and Taylor's (2013, p. 4) definition of wellbeing, it is clear that the themes described above represent distinct connections. Firstly, the notion of a 'change of pace' is evocative of embracing change, clear thinking, and exercising intuition. Mark was able to restructure his life in a healthier and more fulfilling way, taking a departure from his high-pressured office work and pursuing an alternative lifestyle. He, like others, was also a concerned and devoted parent. For the respondents who combined their skateboarding with parenting their time on the board became part of an expression of love to share with their children, and to impart knowledge and wisdom, cultivating emotional stability not just in themselves but hopefully also in their children. The relevance of this emotional wellbeing was framed in the experience of joy, which for Chris was also connected to a narrative about past achievements derived from his collected boards. The other side of this joy was the spectre of depression, or heartbreak which a number of skateboarders were able to overcome, or navigate because of the happiness, freedom, and elation they derived from riding their boards. In the final segment I referred to nascent expressions of spirituality, in which skateboarding provided a way to make a personal connections with issues and concerns of both a communal and cosmic scale.

Of central importance in the accounts of middle age skateboarders that I have collected, is a general ambivalence to the benefits of the activity in terms of physical health. Indeed, the notion of sport was regarded with caution by my respondents. To them, skateboarding seemed to mean more. On at least two occasions when I asked informants to try to explain what skateboarding meant to them, I was confronted with grown men fighting back tears, literally lost for words in grasping to communicate the importance and gravitas of their pastime. One

informant in his fifties simply chose to explain that skateboarding is who he is, relating to his friends, how he dresses, and how he views the world. As a consequence, the discussion of skateboarding as a meaningful sport for middle age skateboarders is worthy of reflection. Skateboarding undoubtedly provides the opportunity to maintain an active lifestyle, but more centrally the findings of this research shows that it is significant to emotional wellbeing, providing joy, community, and a spiritual outlet.

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