

Conceptualising grey spaces in skateboarding: Generating theory and method for use beyond the board

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Abstract

This conceptual paper elaborates on the paradigm of 'grey spaces' in skateboarding. It presents the fundamentals of the grey spaces concept as a bond between the material and symbolic and provides three core arguments. Firstly, it suggests that the simplicity of the concept works to make the complexity of skateboarding accessible. In doing so it opens the opportunity to bond elements of research on skateboarding to other lifestyle and action sports, and more broadly to a variety of disparate scholarly realms. Secondly, it identifies a nascent movement in skateboard studies to craft and adopt bespoke methodologies that speak to the specificities of skateboarding as a social, sensual and urban act. Thirdly, it proposes some possible frames by which grey spaces can be adopted to theorise elements of skateboarding and make conceptual bridging beyond the niche frame of the sport, and lifestyle/action sports more generally. These frames relate to pollution, active ageing, sport for development and peace, and identity. In conclusion, grey spaces are advocated as a paradigm to encourage scholars of skateboarding and beyond to connect and communicate through a shared frame. It also advocates for plurality and has a political component that suggests that even though there may be something unique in skateboarding, it can be known, communicated, understood, and even applied in other contexts.

Keywords

Grey spaces, skateboarding, methodology, pollution, sports for development and peace programme, active ageing

Introduction

This conceptual paper elaborates on, and further conceptualises, the paradigm of 'grey spaces' in skateboarding (O'Connor et al., 2022). This discussion is focal on skateboard studies and offers a way to build theoretical and methodological development within this

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area of scholarship. It presents the fundamentals of the grey spaces concept as a bond between the material and symbolic and provides three core arguments. Firstly, it suggests that the simplicity of the concept works to make the complexity of skateboarding accessible. In doing so it opens the opportunity to bond elements of research on skateboarding to other lifestyle and action sports, to offer researchers a means to circumvent the contested sportification frame of skateboarding scholarship, and to connect with a variety of disparate scholarly realms. Recognising the contributions of existing empirical work, grey spaces are posited as a concept that could both unify the voice of skateboarding scholarship and provide a tool to connect and foster dialogue with work beyond it. Secondly, it identifies a nascent movement in skateboard studies to craft and adopt bespoke methodologies that speak to the specificities of skateboarding as a social, sensual, and urban act (Glenney, 2023; McDuie-Ra, 2021a, 2021b, 2023c; Stoodley et al., 2024; Vivoni, 2009). These are both complimentary to the grey spaces paradigm and can both work independently from it or be absorbed into it. What grey spaces offer to such methodological innovation is a means to temper and moderate translation into other fields while resisting inward-looking tendencies in skate studies. Thirdly, it proposes some possible frames by which grey spaces can be adopted to theorise elements of skateboarding and make conceptual bridging beyond the niche frame of the sport, and lifestyle/action sports more generally. These frames relate to pollution, active ageing, sport for development and peace, and identity.

Grey spaces is a concept derived from an attempt to situate skateboarding in a research agenda that addresses environmental concerns framed by the Anthropocene. O'Connor et al. (2022) argue that skateboarding is bound to grey materialities and in particular, the anthropogenic rock of modernity, concrete. They argue that the concept is part of trope of chromatic leisure that has tended to equate wellbeing and health with natural spaces, both the green outdoors and blue waterways. Grey spaces are offered as a tool to problematise this salubrious framework by demonstrating that skateboarders who play in urban space work with and derive health and well-being from polluted urban spaces. A nuanced symbolic schema is also a key contribution of the theory, and one that arguably makes it more intellectually versatile than the often-uncritical association of nature leisure with well-being and environmentalism. Grey spaces hold the capacity to articulate that skateboarders, as purveyors of urban leisure, are at once subjects *of* and contributors *to* pollution. They are policed, excluded, and challenged in their use of urban space, seen as a social pollutant by bringing noise and disruption to the normative frame of the city as a place of commerce. They are also heirs to the unwanted, toxic, and dangerous parts of the city and are frequently used as a tool to cleanse and gentrify spaces (Chiu and Giamarino, 2019; Cianciotto, 2019; Howell, 2005). Building on the grey spaces concept, Glenney (2023) demonstrates how skateboarders have a skill in working with pollution. He identifies 25 skateparks across the USA that have been built on toxic brownfield sites and suggests that grey spaces can be extended to frame toxic, polluted, and hazardous zones. Glenney's argument demonstrates the material and symbolic use of grey spaces at various levels, but most overtly in the notion that grey (concrete) is used to conceal grey (pollution).

The origin of the grey spaces concept is therefore tightly connected to both recent work on chromatic leisure (Britton et al., 2018; Buser et al., 2018; De Sousa, 2007;

King and Dickinson, 2022; Wheaton et al., 2019), and also Clifton Evers's (2019a, 2019b) associated concept of polluted leisure. While these frames remain potent for further development and extension of the concept, I provide only a partial response to these themes in this paper. It is apparent that the grey spaces concept holds vast potential beyond the frame of the Anthropocene. The contribution of this paper is to demonstrate the possibilities for researchers of the symbolic and material, writ large and small, to work with and build from the concept of grey spaces. My focus is to further conceptualise the concept and to firstly speak to skateboard studies as a now evident and distinct body of scholarship. I therefore omit a pending and necessary engagement with the conceptualisation of chromatic leisure in favour of a frame that speaks, in this instance, to the sociology of sport.

It is evident that skateboard studies have come of age with a robust body of scholarship spanning over two decades (Atencio et al., 2018; Bäckström and Sand, 2019; Beal, 1995, 1996; Borden, 2001, 2019; Brayton, 2005; Carr, 2017; Donnelly, 2008; Dupont, 2014; D'Orazio, 2020; Giamarino et al., 2023; Glenney et al., 2023; Howell, 2008; Hölsgens, 2021; Jenson et al., 2012; Lombard, 2015; McClain et al., 2018; Németh, 2006; O'Connor, 2020; Snyder, 2017; Thorpe, 2013, 2014b; Thorpe and Olive, 2016; Thorpe and Rinehart, 2013; Vivoni, 2013; Wheaton and Thorpe, 2018). Skateboarding has also been represented in a number of innovative academic conferences that fuse scholars, activists, and professional skateboarders for panels and debates (Mostly Skateboarding Podcast, 2023; Pushing Boarders, 2018; Pushing Boarders, 2019; Surf/Skate Studies Collective, 2023; Thrasher Magazine, 2023; Willing, 2019). Many of these seek to remake the academic conference in the guise of skateboarding with horizontal inclusion of panels rather than keynote speakers. Yet distinct theory and method derived from within this niche body of scholarship finds limited impact and purchase beyond skateboard studies itself.

The key contribution of this paper is to identify that these works have become building blocks on which to cultivate conceptualisation. At present there is a lack of transferable theory from skateboard studies, especially a paucity of conceptualisation that can be extended to realms beyond the genealogy. Perhaps because of its niche and uniqueness, scholars have difficulty using skateboard studies to talk about non-skate-related things. I propose that grey spaces can work as an example, showing how theory and method can be tailored to the specifics of skateboarding praxis, and made relevant to scholarship beyond. I anticipate that this might open up skate studies to other sports scholarship and niche physical/urban cultures providing a paradigm that is both accessible and malleable to combined use. My purpose is not to be polemical about grey spaces. I propose it as a conceptual stimulus, not an edict. To make this case I refer to a range of secondary sources and draw on some elements of my ethnographic research and methodological development. The original qualitative data drawn upon in this article comes from an ongoing research project approved by the University of Exeter under ethics application #2954607.

Grey spaces as reductionist

Describing work as reductionist tends to be understood as a criticism. It suggests that the theory or argument is simplistic and constrains, or limits opportunities for extended

analysis and debate. Arguably, a key task of sociological work is to be reductive, to model the social world with schemas and frameworks that contain it (DiTomaso, 1982). However, normative and positivist tendencies in sociology can mean that reductionism comes at an intellectual cost. Ontologically, reductionism can lead the sociological theorist to become a cartographer that *confuses the map for the territory*. In this section, I propose that the simplicity of the grey spaces paradigm works not to reduce the complexity of the sociology of skateboarding, but to capture it. I also identify and seek to explain the ways in which extant research in this area has engaged with social theory and yet, has generated limited original theory.

Work on skateboarding has frequently been rich in its use and adoption of social theory. Iain Borden's (2001) seminal work utilised Lefebvre's (1991) 'production of space' to theorise how skateboarders remake urban space. Konstantin Butz (2012) provides a rich engagement with Deleuze, Guattari, and Baudrillard in his exploration of the development of skate and punk culture in California. Belinda Wheaton (2004, 2013) has theorised skateboarding and a host of complimentary sports as 'lifestyle' in line with Giddens' 'Lifestyle Politics' (1991) and Beck's (2013) focus on individualism in the risk-infused late modernity. Holly Thorpe has conceptually framed her research on action sports with a range of social theory, drawing on feminism, Foucault, Bourdieu, and new materialities (Thorpe, 2008, 2010, 2020). She also draws on Lefebvre and utilises his theory of rhythmanalysis to explore skateboarding and responses to disaster (Thorpe, 2013). These works are only a few of the many that employ a wide array of social theory in skateboarding studies. They demonstrate the diversity of the subject matter, and the plurality of concepts adopted to elucidate it.

This conceptual diversity is of interest because it also demonstrates how skateboarding studies have sought to apply theory amenable to their context rather than develop theory. One reason for this may relate to the fact that skateboarding research has struggled to adequately define its subject matter. The frames of sport, subculture, art, crime, and leisure are all of close relevance to skateboarding, but have proved insufficient to capture the scope of the activity. This has led Glenney and Mull (2018) to propose that skateboarding is unique unto itself. They claim, 'skateboarding exists in a plurality of kinds and in so being is *sui generis*-of its own kind ...' (2018: 438). While they defend this idea to make other points about urban ecology, it is worth connecting this argument to that of Mircea Eliade (1959) who similarly claimed that religion was *sui generis* and could only be explained in religious numinous terms.

Eliade was an anti-reductionist and rejected any other understanding of religion that was not directly from the believer themselves (Segal, 1983). I propose that the claim skateboarding is unique poses some conceptual and methodological challenges for skateboarding research. It also raises questions about other physical cultures and the extent to which participants and adherents recognise those to also be *sui generis*. I am sympathetic to the ineffability of skateboarding but resistant to the notion of it being *sui generis* because it is exclusionary. To address this potential impasse, I provide three succinct examples. Firstly, the claim that skateboarding is distinct is somewhat essentialist and at worst protectionist. In part, the framing of *sui generis* makes the topic of enquiry singular, isolated, and indescribable. Secondly, this framing of 'unique' is perhaps a reason why skateboarding research has imported theory rather than made its own. It also speaks

to a tendency in skateboard scholarship to look for comparisons, to find something that skateboarding is 'like' as a result of being unable to say what skateboarding 'is'. For example, skateboarding is like a religion (O'Connor, 2020) or like queerness (Geckle and Shaw, 2020) like gentrification (Howell, 2005) like academia (Snyder, 2017: 5, 114, 153). Skateboarding is not anti-theoretical, but it has tended to develop adjunct theory in which it builds on an existing framework rather than makes its own. For example, O'Connor's 'lifestyle religion' (2020) builds from Wheaton's 'lifestyle sports' which derives from Giddens, and MacKay and Dallaire (2014) developed 'skate-feminism' from Schumacher (2014) who develops an annex to feminist theory. This is not problematic; it signals a quest for versatile theoretical tools and demonstrates, partly, how skateboarding scholarship has come of age. However, these theoretical developments tend to be topic-specific rather than broadly applicable and extendable. What I am concerned about is that they represent a theoretical type of parallel play. These niche topics require some unifying frame that can offer a fluid dialogue between and beyond them. Thirdly, the *sui generis* argument also leads to a tension between the internal coherence of skateboarding as understood by practitioners (emic) and its objective comprehension by outsiders (etic). It is notable that many skateboard researchers are skateboarders themselves. This might not be too unusual because as Malcolm (2012: 5) suggests, 'for the sociologist of sport, sport is both work and play.' However, in combination with my other points, it does beg the question if skateboarding research can do more conceptually to bridge and bond with scholarship beyond its direct niche.

I propose that grey spaces operate as a reductionist concept that opens up debate on skateboarding and presents a bespoke emic method from the field of skateboard studies accessible to research beyond. Therefore, I am sympathetic to the notion that there is something 'unique' about skateboarding, but I do not presuppose that this is unknowable. Grey spaces as a concept communicates connection. It is not a polarising concept, it does not reify oppositional extremes. I propose it to be an inclusive concept that embraces nuance and ambiguity. Because of these qualities it offers redress to some of the dominant orientations of urban infrastructure, leisure, and play spaces theorised from, and constrained by, the Global North. These conceptual features of grey spaces also find resonance in a range of empirical sociological work on skateboarding where the sites of skateboarding are themselves argued to be hybrid (Glenney and O'Connor, 2019) and the social context of the culture responds to a plurality of voices and identities (Willing and Pappalardo, 2023). Therefore, as I explain more fully in the next section, grey spaces also hold methodological potential.

Skateboard methodology

I have outlined the context in which grey spaces offer some conceptual utility to work with the uniqueness of skateboarding, and also offer a theory apropos to it from within. In doing so I identified an emic tendency in skateboard studies, in which the researcher is often also a skateboarder. In this section, I propose that the conceptualisation of grey spaces can also work with and contribute to skateboard methodology. This is a timely practice as there has been limited work in tailoring methods specifically for the research of skateboarding. Only very recently has an overt discussion on methods

become prominent in skateboard research, evidenced in the work of Duncan McDuie-Ra (McDuie-Ra, 2021a, 2023a, 2023c; McDuie-Ra and Campbell, 2023) and others (Abulhawa, 2020; Glenney, 2023; Sayers, 2023; Stoodley et al., 2024). However, it is possible to see that there has always been an implicit 'skateboard methodology' in older work too. Grey spaces provide a way to formalise and extend this work, to frame extant and nascent methods in an epistemological and ontological framework.

Skateboard methods can be traced to the foundational work in skateboard studies by Iain Borden and Becky Beal. Borden's (2001) work on skateboarding, architecture, and space is densely theoretical, yet it is informed by content analysis of a wealth of skateboard media. Magazines, photographs, and video provide source material for Borden's theorisation. In essence, his method of engaging in the subcultural media of skateboarding, is part of skateboarding praxis itself. As Yochim (2010) identifies, skateboard culture is communicated through media, it is a 'corresponding culture' in dialogue with its media. Borden's work is therefore also representative of a skateboard method. Similarly, in Beal's (1996, 1995) first work with skateboarders a standard qualitative observation and semi-structured in-depth interview method was adopted. As Beal's fieldwork continued she became attached to two tight friendship groups of skateboarders and used participant verification to gauge both the veracity and authenticity of her analysis. Beal taps into the expertise of her informants and connects with what Butz and Peters (2018: 13) identify as the 'status of expert' that all active skateboarders offer to skateboard studies. While Beal is not a skateboarder she goes to great efforts to grasp and present the emic perspective in her work, and in some form becomes a member of the skateboard 'crews', the experts, she studies.

The emphasis in these examples, is that the qualitative method of observing and discussing skateboarding is very much part of skateboard culture itself. This is an ontological point, the reality of skateboarding is socially negotiated, it is not an objective fact. Arguably, positivist work on skateboarding that is epidemiological and quantitative omits a significant part of its subject, a method understood and practiced by its participants. Therefore, methodological development in skateboarding can be fruitful in working to capture the context and rhythm of what it is studying.

Similar points can be made with research teams that have a mix of skateboarding and non-skateboarding members. In one such example, a map-making methodology was used to understand the way skateboarders used space, which uncovered the layered ways in which the mental maps of skateboarders included not just physical features, but also temporal, and social dimensions. The researchers used this data to compile their maps into a hybrid layered form replicating the praxis of the skaters themselves (Jenson et al., 2012). In another mixed research team, the mapping of the use of skateparks by young women skateboarders identified a disconnection between occupying space and access and participation in space (Stoodley et al., 2024). These qualitative engagements demonstrate the material and symbolic bond in skateboarding that grey spaces as a concept anchors.

Recent work in skateboarding has begun to be more self-aware and deliberately innovative of its methods. Francisco Vivoni (2009) makes a methodological point in proposing that skateboard research employs a 'below the knees' approach. This framework is innovative and analogous to grey spaces in being both spatial and symbolic. Vivoni sees below the knee as representative of the grounded elements of skateboard culture in

contrast to the spectacular attempts of skateboarders to escape the constraints of gravity. Below the knee also corresponds to the framing provided by both skateboard photography and videography, where the lens is often positioned 'below the knee'. This also alludes to skateboard media itself being 'below the knee' symbolically as grassroots, DIY, and often subversive. Vivoni also identifies the archetypal urban locations of skateboarding, streets, curbs, ledges, steps etc. as 'below the knee' locations and critical for understanding and comprehending the culture.

Further extending the 'below the knees' framework, Duncan McDuie-Ra presents a 'rolling ethnography' (2021b: 38) that works with the praxis of skateboarding itself. This method can be contrasted with the oblique qualitative method of walking interviews which privileges both knowledge of space and engagement with the local context as critical (Springgay and Truman, 2022). He also applies the 'below the knee' schema fruitfully in his work on skateboard media, highlighting how skateboard videos provide an informal archive of urban development over the last 30 years (McDuie-Ra, 2021a). It is notable that McDuie-Ra applies this methodological orientation with versatility to a range of terrain, both East Asian and post-soviet Central Asian cities. In further innovation, a fusion of both rolling and below-the-knee method is operationalised in the sensory exploration of skateboarding sound by Glenney et al. (2023). In this research, the texture of the city is sought by camera and microphone placed at the nose of a skateboard and participants respond to both video and prompts about the sonic world of skateboarding, a sound that resonates from below the knee in all instances.

In my own ongoing research with older skateboarders in the UK I have sought to further develop a rolling ethnography that broadens skateboard research to the cultural forms of the activity. After recent projects where I was mostly interviewing participants online, I have been skateboarding with participants in order to embody their locations and build a deeper rapport with them through skateboarding at 'their spots'. Travel is part of skateboard culture that I have imported into this methodology, in addition to photography and videography. Some early insights from this method speak to the way that skateboarding with informants opens up a deeper level of communication and understanding. In one instance an interlocuter told me they started skateboarding just a few years ago because they had always been interested. After we had been skating for a while he volunteered additional information about how his musical career had been derailed due to injury and skateboarding offered something both complex and exciting that filled the void. It appeared that this elaboration unfolded not through the methodological probing of questions for elaboration, but through a deepening rapport of skateboarding together. In another interview, it was clear that my knowledge of visiting and skateboarding at one woman's local skate park meant we had shared knowledge of the temporal rhythm of the park and its personalities.

These examples highlight both an organic use of skateboard methods in certain research (Beal, 1995, 1996) and movements toward more conscious methodological development bringing in skateboarding as praxis, epistemology, and ontology (McDuie-Ra, 2021a; Vivoni, 2009). A further point is that grey spaces work to stimulate methodological development. For example, Vivoni's (2009) 'below the knee' touches upon a rich conceptual frame of greyness in which niche skateboard media is a key epistemological source for researchers. This again connects to Borden's (2001) early work.

There are, for example, certain forms of skateboard media and publications that are informal, self-published, and difficult to source. Magazines, zines, pamphlets, VHS video, Instagram accounts, and 'cease and desist' merchandise all hold significant cultural relevance in skateboard culture and are analogous to the 'grey literature' that academics use (conference papers, dissertations, statistics). Further, the development of such methods offers some interesting insight into the emic perspective of skateboarder-skateboard researchers who are oriented to the sensual and symbolic world of skateboarding, and its 'below the knee' perspective. These methods are oblique; nuanced, subtle, and indirect. As such they correspond with the symbolic ambiguity of grey spaces. Therefore, grey spaces is a paradigm that can contribute to skateboard methodology, offering a simple frame to situate oblique methods and emic perspectives that can complement the epistemological and ontological orientations of a range of researchers.

It might be appropriate to consider the concept working as a grey Ariadne's thread, a way to trace connections amidst these various methodological innovations, the symbolic, posthumanist, and assemblage-oriented theory used in skateboard and lifestyle sport research (Cherrington, 2022; Geckle, 2021; Giamarino, 2017; Kidder, 2012). By pulling on the thread of greyness we might find a tool by which to navigate the maze of interconnected options that such research has created, and work to develop and deepen our enquiries. I will now proceed to propose what some of these future orientations might be.

Possible framings of grey spaces

There are potentially numerous ways to frame future research within the conceptualisation of grey spaces. The reductionist frame offers both a simplified way to engage with skateboard scholarship and an opportunity to build theory in a malleable context. Grey spaces offer liminality and nuance and are perhaps only rigid in its grounding of a fusion of both material and symbolic elements. Most importantly, grey spaces work to make skateboarding research, its findings and theories, relevant beyond the niche. In the following framings, I propose possibilities for future research. I address pollution, ageing leisure, sports for peace and development, and identity. I know of scholars working to apply grey spaces in other realms, and I underline that the frames below are just a selection I see potential in through reviewing the extant literature. These are possible frames rather than a map and plan of future development.

Pollution

Firstly, pollution is of primary relevance as it resonates with how the grey spaces concept originated. The work of Clifton Evers (2019a, 2019b) on polluted leisure identified how pollution can be physical, symbolic, social, political, and post-human. His work is also resistant to the linear association of blue spaces as salubrious. Researching surfers in Fukushima who returned to their waters with Geiger counters, he identifies the ways in which individuals employ forms of resigned activism (Evers, 2019a). This is a paradigm proposed by Anna Lora-Wainwright (2017) to describe the ways residents in toxic villages in China make small adaptations in their behaviour to tackle the pollution that

has transformed their everyday lives. The polluted leisure of skateboarders is evident, unlike the green and blue spaces paradigm, skateboarders occupy nominally urban locations, frequently use streets with acrid car fumes, and make DIY spaces in abandoned urban wastelands amidst rubble and rubbish. Skateboarders represent both polluted leisure and resigned activism, often seeking polluted spaces as those with the most potential for prolonged and undisturbed play. As Glenney (2023) argues, skateboarders are frequently gifted polluted sites that are toxic brownfield zones rebranded as newly built skateparks. The thick concrete cap seals the toxicity underground while skateboarders play above. Both the material and symbolic notions of grey are distinct in the pollution framing. Skateboarders utilise the material grey spaces of the city and play amidst fumes, dirt, and shiny concrete that caps toxic soil. Yet symbolically skateboarders can also be framed as pollution, policed out of city centres, fined, and excluded with defensive architecture. The enduring framing of skateboarders as subversive and criminal endures with their exclusion from urban spaces even with the legitimisation of skateboarding as an Olympic sport (Kilberth and Schwier, 2019; Wheaton and Thorpe, 2018). Similarly, they occupy a liminal space as mediators of pollution, working with spaces that are problematic socially and adopting them as ludic. Amidst these threads of enquiry, the larger theme of the Anthropocene remains fertile for discussion, especially with the varied dichotomies of the Anthropocene and the perils of their popular usage as described by Autin (2016). Like the Anthropocene skateboarding is commonly discussed within a range of dichotomies, as individual/communal, mainstream/deviant, inclusive/exclusive, American/Global. Grey spaces offer a way for theorists beyond skateboarding to work amidst such contested poles and embrace plurality.

Active ageing

Secondly, grey spaces are a rich frame for the ways to capture and theorise older people in leisure and beyond. Active ageing has been integrated into neoliberal agendas of personal responsibility regarding health and wellbeing (Lloyd et al., 2013; Mayhew, 2005). 'In the politics of active ageing, physical activity is upheld as the universal remedy for the acclaimed problems of ageing' (Mansfield, 2020: 288). Wheaton (2017; Wheaton, 2016) has addressed 'silver surfers' in her research on ageing in lifestyle sports, and connected the material essence of grey hair to the symbolism of age. Research and travel writing on the active roaming of Australia's grey nomad movement touches on both the active leisure of older people and aspects of their precarity (Coote, 2021; Hillman, 2013; Pearce et al., 2021; Richardson, 2013). A number of extant works on skateboarding have already addressed ageing participants in innovative ways (O'Connor, 2017, 2021; Willing et al., 2018, 2019, 2023). However, none has utilised the grey spaces concept to address this field of enquiry, which offer rich space for theorising. Some of the literature on ageing skateboarders may be regarded as 'grey' in a double sense as it is self-published, in zines, and blogs (Eisenhauer, 2016; Sutton, 2023; Unger and Earhart, 2018; Weyland, 2002). I emphasise that grey spaces are not proposed as a superior frame to that of 'silver surfers' or 'grey nomads', rather it proposes a lens through which both debates can remain distinct and also link to one another.

An excellent example of the capacity for grey spaces to offer innovation is provided by the autoethnography of Esther Sayers (2023) who leans into the ambiguity of starting skateboarding later in life as a woman over 40. Her work embraces the role of ageing womanhood beyond childrearing and the capacity for adventure in physical risk. Again, grey spaces can be theorised to make further connections with the sociology of ageing, gerontology, tourism, and use of space. Grey spaces enable this work to sit alongside the lifestyle sport frame of 'silver surfer', the active ageing leisure trope of 'grey nomads', the self-published 'grey literature' on subcultures, and others possibilities.

Sports for development and peace

Thirdly, grey spaces offer potential for the politics of sports for development and peace programmes (SDPs) which have become a prominent focus of lifestyle sport philanthropy (Thorpe and Chawansky, 2016; Thorpe and Rinehart, 2013). A rich array of sociological work has been critical of SDP initiatives and the ways in which sport is often uncontested as a force for good and an automatic contributor to youth development (Coakley, 2011; Darnell et al., 2018; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Hartmann, 2016; Spaaij, 2009). The SDP movement mirrors some of the same dynamics of the active ageing agenda in which physical activity is always seen to be salubrious and is frequently stripped of its social context. The sexism and homophobia of many sporting cultures is just one instance in which the SDP frame is shown to be problematic (Chawansky, 2014; Hortigüela-Alcala et al., 2022; Magrath et al., 2013). The gendered values and hierarchies of some sport and coaching environments can perpetuate or leave forms of exclusion and discrimination unchallenged. The academic literature on skateboarding SDP, or as Thorpe (2014a) frames it Action Sports for Development and Peace, initiatives has tended to be critical of the politics, exotica, and commercial framing of some skateboarding charities and NGOs (Abulhawa, 2020; Critchley, 2022; Friedel, 2015; O'Connor, 2015, 2020). Here, grey spaces can offer nuance and be both critical and positive of these movements recognising the nexus of meaning in which they are imbedded.

Identities

Finally, grey spaces can offer analytic potential to deal with plural identities in flexible ways. This is particularly significant as there has been increasing inflexibility in polarising populist discussions on cultural and social issues that rob people of both their complexity and compassion and these debates are often amplified in sport coverage (Scovel et al., 2022). Research on skateboarding has been prolific on issues of gender inclusion and exclusion (Abulhawa, 2020; Atencio et al., 2009; Beal, 1996; MacKay and Dallaire, 2012, 2014; McCarthy, 2021; Paechter et al., 2023; Pomerantz et al., 2004; Willing, 2020; Yochim, 2010). Recent scholarship on skateboarding has also identified its capacity to embrace and work with alternative sexualities. Geckle and Shaw (2020) demonstrate how skateboarding can be considered queer in its anti-establishment style and embrace of failure. Just as Vivoni's 'below the knee' perspective captures the oblique that is part of the essence of greyness, so too does Geckle and Shaw's queerness resonate with the suggestive nuance of grey spaces. Race and ethnicity in sports is another

area that is a complex and contested terrain explored in sociological work (Back and Mills, 2021; Boykoff and Carrington, 2019; Carrington and McDonald, 2001; Penfold and Cleland, 2021). However, skateboard research in this area shows remarkable balance in both speaking to racism and inequality and also identifying multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multifaith communities and friendships (Corwin et al., 2019; McDuie-Ra, 2023b; Williams, 2020, 2022).

These frames are just a few in which I see potential for extant work on skateboarding to utilise grey spaces to theorise and develop methodologies that can have impact beyond skateboard studies. There are many more that I have considered and discussed with peers, and there are surely countless more beyond my consideration. The purpose of this section is to agitate and activate the sociological imagination on skateboarding, lifestyle sport, and the sociology of sport more broadly to see how grey spaces can be applied. But why?

There are valid questions that can be levelled at the intent and content of my argument. Why is this necessary? What does grey spaces offer that extant research and theorisation does not? Firstly, I have sought to argue that skateboard studies have come of age and that existing work has built a genealogy with a variety of theoretical strands. My concern is that some theory like 'lifestyle sport' and 'skatefeminism' is adjunct, while bespoke theory such as 'below the knee' captures some specifics of skateboarding praxis but might have limited application beyond. I believe that grey spaces offers something flexible in its reductive frame, offering a way for skateboard studies scholars to communicate beyond their niche with tools crafted from within. It is not because skateboarding is sui generis that it must have some bespoke theory. Moreover, it is because of its contested and sui generis framing that skateboarding and its studies might get hindered in their capacity to generate dialogue and connections beyond their niche. Skateboard studies could be aided in this process with a conceptual frame that is both reductive and open to innovation. It offers a way to make skate studies less inward looking and graft its findings to new domains. This then leads to another question, does grey spaces suggest skateboard studies need to catch up with theorisation, or does it signal a realm of study being primed for innovation? I do not know the answer to this, and it is only through experimentation with grey spaces and other extant and pending conceptualisations that we might be able to fashion answers in the future.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a conceptualisation of grey spaces as a material and symbolic paradigm that embraces nuance and ambiguity to capture the complexity and specificity of skateboarding culture. I have shown how grey spaces emerge from a discussion on polluted leisure and skateboarding in the Anthropocene. This frame underlines the value of thinking about the material and symbolic amidst the various dichotomies of global catastrophe. It also demonstrates how grey spaces can be versatile beyond environmental debate.

In identifying that skateboard scholarship has come of age, I have also shown that a robust body of work has signalled a need for theory to respond to the diversity of this genealogy and be versatile enough to communicate its discourse beyond the niche of

skate studies. I have argued that grey spaces work as a reductive tool to simplify the contested complexity of skateboarding and attend to its uniqueness.

Finally, I have proposed some possible frames where grey spaces could be fruitfully applied. These include pollution, active ageing, SDP, and also identities. My purpose here is to simply provide possibilities and not to scaffold a way forward. Some of the most fertile ideas I have about grey spaces are not flagged in these frames and work with other forms of leisure and play that are liminal. For example, the potential application of grey spaces in rooftopping, childrens' right to play in the streets, and urban space beyond the Global North. I am most optimistic for the capacity of grey spaces to be conceptually augmented with more debate on chromatic leisure. The remarkable Palaboy Skatecamp situated in Cebu, Philippines, combines concrete DIY obstacles with sea, sand, and plush tropical vegetation. It fuses some of the most distinct examples of grey, blue and green space in a grassroots East Asian enterprise. In such a reflection grey is not a bland hue, but one of middle range, a colour of combination and nuance. I also commit to and advocate for greyness because of the political weight and intent of the meaning of nuance. In hybridity, collaboration, liminality, and greyness I find hope in the promise that ideas, people, and politics can meet and combine.

The contribution of this paper has been to promote grey spaces as a reductive concept that builds bridges between fields of enquiry. This is not a polemic but an invitation for others who might see potential and opportunity in this conceptualisation. It also advocates for plurality and has a political component that suggests that even though there may be something unique in skateboarding, it can be known, communicated, understood, and even applied in other contexts.

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