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The skater's ear: a sensuous complexity of skateboarding sound

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ABSTRACT

The sound of skateboarding is an issue fraught in controversy: the sound is a common basis for public noise complaints as well as participant praises. We consider a possible basis for this controversy, an inherent subjectivity of skatesound, one that is truly in the 'ear' of the beholder. This paper centres subjectivity in the sensory lives of a group of 18 adult skateboarders. These interviews provide rich qualitative data on the sonic spectrums of skateboarding, including how skateboarders describe skatesounds as both unpleasant *and* lovely, and the importance of adding music and the annoyance at headphone use while skateboarding. The findings show that skateboarders critically enjoy skatesound and are aware of its unpleasant affect. Evidence is presented that further advocates for skateboarding as leisure sport that is both attractive and rewarding to individuals who may be marginalised (disability, neurodiversity, age, gender, ethnicity) by the institutionalisation, and constraints of mainstream sport.

KEYWORDS

Skateboarding; leisure; sport; sound; disability

Introduction

Sound has tended to be a peripheral topic in skateboarding studies in comparison to a common focus on the 'skater's eye', the ability of skateboarders to quickly notice the skate-ability of spots, various forms of urban architecture (Borden 2001). But as our research demonstrates, sound is a central experience in the sensuous and symbolic lives of skateboarders. This research shifts focus from the spectacular, visible, and overt ocular styling of skateboarding and its various medias to the aural world of skatesound.

This work is influenced by the anthropology of the senses which orient to the 'wisdom of the body' (Uzwiak and Bowles 2021, 127), a sensuous scholarship (Stoller 1997), and the necessity of close and reflective listening (Feld 1982; Rice 2013; Back 2007). This sensory context provides insight on skateboarding's unique 'aesthetic order' that is often in conflict with more commercialized activities like mainstream sport (Dickinson et al. 2022). Through theory and qualitative interviews, our paper offers some provocative insights into the role of lifestyle sports in the pursuit of creative, social, and informal recreation.¹ Skateboarding

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is described by our participants as a richly joyful, deeply sensual, and culturally complex activity in which they have been able to deepen their self-knowledge, spatial engagement, and social connectiveness.

Discussion

The skater's ear

To begin, let the reader imagine Gina, who suffered an ear injury and needs an ear transplant. She wakes from her operation to find that her ear donor was a skateboarder. As she walks the halls of the hospital she hears a sound familiar, a clacking on the cracks. She whips her head in gleeful anticipation, only to find another patient rolling their suitcase. She recovers and, on her way home while waiting in the tube, hears the screech of brakes and finds part of herself in anticipation, in the thrill of some hunt. As she walks back to her flat, she hears a rattle sound, a grind, and a set of cheers. Part of her is annoyed, while another part of her dances sideways in celebration. It is as if the sounds of skateboarding transport her to their cause, extending her mind to an activity that unlocks a knowledge of the city previously unknown.

This thought experiment and our paper's title refer directly to a short work of fiction published in the September 1987 issue of *Thrasher Magazine* by Don Redondo. 'The Skater's Eye' tells the brief tale of a young woman who receives an eye transplant from a deceased skateboarder. She soon becomes aware that the eye has a will beyond her control and strays to gaze over urban features. Her new eye is drawn to parking lots, empty pools, concrete banks and even vertical walls. At one point the skater's eye dwells longingly on a prominent item of fetish for street skateboarders, 'she found herself staring at painted curbs' (Redondo 1987, 70). Ultimately the woman is disassociated from skateboarding, even ridiculing skateboarders in the final few lines of the story, while her new eye enhances her dreamlife and waking appreciation of the city.

Redondo's story is remarkable as it riffs off the popular association that skateboarders possess a unique 'eye', or a way of seeing the world that is qualitatively different to non-skateboarders. Borden (2019, 218) notes how the notion of a skater's eye (sometimes gaze, glasses, or goggles) has become part of skateboarding folklore, relating to how skateboarders not only register their urban environment, but search it constantly for possibility. The skater's eye also highlights a prominent association of skateboarding as a visual culture, a perspective that this paper seeks to challenge. We aim to disrupt the notion of visual dominance in skateboard culture and attempt to turn the reader's ear to the importance that skaters place on auditory in skateboarding practice, culture, and theory.

Our focus in this paper is to transplant the eye for the ear by exploring how skateboarders engage and make sense of the sound of skateboarding. This contributes directly to a broader point that Borden (2001) makes on the skater's eye, that skateboarders do not tend to immerse themselves in the conceptualization of their activity. Yet as Borden argues, skateboarding is 'embedded with ideas' in a way that make it a 'lived concept' (Borden 2001). Borden's insight suggests skateboarding as more attentive than reflective, a point illustrated by David Abiker's (2022) claim that skateboarders, 'do not know the knowledge that only they possess. This makes them the philosophers of the street (*philosophes du bitumen*).'

Skateboarding is pre-reflectively interlocked with its spaces, motoric skills, and shared experiences (Woods et al. 2021) and may constitute of a kind of 'enskilment' (Ingold 2021, 61).

Our paper contributes to this sociological discussion of skateboarding by addressing these conceptualizations through the sensuous and symbolic reflections of our interview participants. There we find further evidence to advocate for skateboarding as a leisure sport that is both attractive and rewarding to individuals, particularly those who may be marginalised (disability, neurodiversity, age, gender, ethnicity) by the institutionalisation, and constraints of mainstream sports (Engell, Larsen, and Elmoose-Østerlund 2024).

We also present qualitative accounts of skateboarders dealing with a paradox, their conscious reflection on the abrasive, sharp, and unpleasant sounds of skateboarding, and their passion and joy for these jarring noises. This is a lived paradox that skateboarders embody—understanding the unpleasant and grating noise of their craft yet relishing the joy and knowledge it affords them—also speaks to a dynamic symbolic element of skateboarding. Drawing on the notion of the greyness of skateboarding as both material and symbolic (O'Connor et al. 2023), we also suggest that skatesound is itself a grey noise (Schneider 1988), blurring oft-made distinctions between noise and sound. This greyness is alike Schrödinger's cat, existing as both adored and reviled at the same time, a kind of quantum duality of the senses. Critically, this is not a mere relative difference in opinion, but two opposing notions recognised and held simultaneously by skateboarders themselves. Thus, the project of skatesound further contributes to the conceptual greyness of skateboarding as elusive to taxonomy, moving us further from polarity towards new horizons of possibilities.

Our discussion proceeds by identifying extant work on skatesound. We observe a growing interest in the sensory and symbolic aspects of skateboarding, but a limited focus on the issue of both sound and noise. From these accounts we posit that skatesound is both an overlooked and polarising issue. The method of our research is unpacked and we clarify how we sought to elicit reflection and discussion on intersecting issues of skatesound. We identify two oppositional claims in our findings: (1) an opposition to the notion that sound is a peripheral element of skate culture, and (2) that skateboarders uncritically enjoy skatesound and are unaware of perceptions of its unpleasant affects. We then discuss some dominant themes from the analysis of our interviews that include reflections on the 'head whip', 'joy', 'extended mind', and finally how skate culture creates the meaning of sound through 'media'. We conclude by advocating for both the recognition of the rich sensual world revealed by skatesound discussion, and the ways in which skatesound demonstrates further instances of inclusion and engagement for non-typical and marginalised sports participants.

The sounds of skateboarding

Skateboarding scholarship is arguably most dominant in the fields of epidemiology, urban studies, and the sociology of sport (Borden 2001; Mitchao et al. 2022; Yochim 2010). In these realms risk and injury, urban space, and cultural organisation become the primary focus of research. However, the sensual and symbolic side of skateboarding is a growing focus of research with philosophical consideration of the taxonomy of skateboarding as a sport (Glenney and Mull 2018), its philosophical components (Glenney and O'Connor

2023; Sayers 2023; Bäckström 2014), and its inclusive ethical attributes (Willing and Shearer 2015; Willing and Pappalardo 2023).

Sound has long been a consideration of skateboarding scholars, yet it is relatively underdeveloped as a paradigm by which to understand the sport and the experiences of its participants. Marc Touché (1998) provided the first sustained academic discussion on skateboarding sound offering a range of symbolic descriptors fashioning skateboarding in the city as a type of urban orchestra. This orchestra can carefully avoid the visual gaze of pedestrians, and security guards but not their ears, as skateboarders are unable (or unwilling) to perform their movements quietly.² Deftly tracing the continuum between body, board, and space Touché notes that the skateboarder not only makes noise in novel ways, but also listens uniquely to the city and its textured surfaces. He offers the idea that skateboarders have an *ear under their feet* by which they engage with the urban field, hear, and listen in an extended way that is difficult for non-skateboarders to comprehend.

The 'Texturologies' art project (Boutin 2023) plays with the same assumptions and offers a museum-grade display of a sensual haptic encounter with the world of skateboarding through immersive video, synched vibratory boards, and the enveloping sound of skateboarding across disparate surfaces. This encounter with sound and the urban, is a motif that architectural historian Iain Borden (2001) was early to articulate as a production of space in line with the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre. Sound plays a consequential part in Borden's work, operating as a field by which skateboarders garner and apply their knowledge of the city. The enquiry into sound is then extended by Maier (2016) in ethnographic work with female skateboarders in London. The issue of sound comes to the fore as skateboarders are presented as sonically creative, remaking the city not simply in their physical movements and material engagement with the urban through grinds and slides, but also transforming the urban soundscape.

As skateboarding scholarship has gathered momentum, a new 'sensuous' turn is unfolding in which scholars have sought to understand more embodied and symbolic accounts of the activity (Hölsgens and Glenney 2025; Hölsgens 2024; Sayers 2023; O'Connor et al. 2023; Hölsgens 2021; Abulhawa 2020). As Bäckström (2014, 754) argues in the Swedish context, 'knowing skateboarding is to know its 'känsla', which can be translated as sensuous experience, affect, descriptions of affect and, moreover, knowing its cultural and social settings.' This is further evidenced in the account of her ethnographic work in an indoor skatepark in which the sound of skateboarding resonated noisily and is described as 'thumping, throbbing and banging noises' (2014, 763). The noisy aspect of skatesound is similarly a focus of complaints when new skateparks are petitioned in local communities (Carr 2007; Tony Hawk Foundation 2022), however, extended academic focus has, to date, only begun.³

A most recent contribution by Pao Nowodworski (2023) expands past work by Borden (2001) and this recent sensory turn of skateboarding by discussing the sensory order of skateboarders. While the sense of balance, known as the 'vestibular' sense, plays a most crucial role in the skater's body-centred dynamic movement, it must be coupled with vision to produce the skater's 'gaze,' a multisensory endeavour that includes the imagination to generate the skater's 'action space' wherein a trick is performed at a spot.⁴ Nowodworski gestures at the contribution of the tactile and auditory senses: the feet feel the board and the ears convey the board's contact with the distinctive tones and rhythms of different elements of the city. The ears also provide social and material distinctions, where and what

other skaters are doing on which surfaces, along with the hidden dangers of pebbles and other non-skateable surface materials.

Nowodwarski stops short of suggesting that skateboarding connects these senses into a single monolithic sense field, something that may be considered in future work following Ingold (2007). Is Nowodwarski's discussion the beginning of a fuller account of skateboarding's multisensory array, adding more fine-grained accounts of its distinctive sounds and foot feels. Might smell and taste contribute to this multisensory array, with bodily fluids such as sweat and blood mixing with alleyway 'funk' of skateboarders preferred spaces of urban pollution (O'Connor et al. 2023)? Does the riskiness of skateboarding's exploits add to this sensory array, perhaps paralleling a kind of 'vertigo game' feeling like a child's 'whirling dervish' or highwire walking that Caillois and Barash (2001) describes as 'an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind...surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with a sovereign brusqueness' (Caillois and Barash 2001, 23). We've just begun to consider the peculiar sensuous nature of skateboarding's urban endeavours as we focus our efforts beyond the visual.

A robust conceptual exploration of *skatesound* by Glenney, Boutin, and O'Connor (2023) interrogates the challenges posed by the abrasive sounds generated by skateboarding. They take as their point of departure the many complaints received regarding the noise of skateboarders in cities and skateparks. In response they present a spectrum of theoretical approaches to skatesound: the subjective, semiotic, soundscape, and texturology. While they seek to mediate an understanding between skateboarders and non-skateboarders, they also note that amongst skateboarders there's a paradoxical like *and* dislike of skatesound' (Glenney, Boutin, and O'Connor 2023). It is from this observation that the present paper proceeds.

Method

Our research involved 18 semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of skateboarders. This approach fits with our epistemological frame of qualitative interpretive knowledge, in contrast to a positivist approach that presumes a universal quantitative measure to the issue of sound; skatesound is a qualitative stimulus that cannot be fully measured in decibels in spite of attempts to do so (see Carr 2007). Instead, we privilege the knowledge of sound as it is symbolically and intellectually considered by our respondents. While our interviews were originally planned to be conducted in skateparks, they were eventually all performed online *via* the Zoom video-call software. The reasons for this adjustment were largely due to the weather challenges of the British winter during the window of time that the research was active. However, this adaptation while not only being consistent with the iterative and craft nature of qualitative enquiry (Seale 1999), also facilitated a wide range of international collaborators and additional unplanned snowball recruitment. Zoom also presented the opportunity to share visual and audio aids with participants *via* hyperlinks and screen sharing. A further benefit of the Zoom platform related to its auto-transcription feature which provided an, albeit imperfect, easily accessible transcript for revision and coding. These auto-transcripts were also shared with the participants, so they had their own record of their conversation. The project was approved by the University of Exeter's Ethics Committee under the application identity number 518898.

Interviews were conducted between November 2022 and February 2023 and varied in length from 60 to 100 min. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 51 with a mean age of 30. Consequently, our research speaks to the reflections of adult skateboarders, and would be further enhanced by future work incorporating the voices and perspectives of young participants. Participants had an average of 12 years skateboarding experience. The most novice skateboarder aged 22 had only three years of experience, in contrast to a 44-year-old participant who has been skateboarding for 36 years. The varied duration highlights a range of captured experience and familiarity with the components of skatesound. A total of 14 of the participants identified as Male, four identified as Female, and one presented as non-binary. Seven of the participants were from the UK, three from the USA, three from France, two from Canada, and one from Sweden and Germany respectively. Three of the participants (all male) had hearing impairments that required them to wear hearing aids, however only one participant used hearing aids while skateboarding as their hearing loss was most profound due to bilateral microtia requiring a bone conduction hearing aid. Four participants (three male and one non-binary) also reported some diagnosis that placed them on a sensory spectrum related to either autism or ADHD, or a combination of the two.

Recruitment flowed by word of mouth and social media 'sharing' on Instagram. To underline the ways in which sound is a marginal topic in skateboarding discussion, many participants expressed curiosity and bemusement on what we would discuss. The semi-structured interviews all followed a simple schedule that asked participants about their definition of skateboarding sounds, experiences of complaints from the non-participant public, their views on headphone/earbud use during skateboarding, and considerations of the sound and experience of two skateboard video examples. One of these was a famous short clip of Ray Barbee in the video *Ban This* (Peralta 1989) and the second were two examples from Max Boutin's 'Texturologies' installation: a clip of a film of the path of a skateboard over tiled ground from the perspective of the skateboard. This clip was played twice, once with sound, and once without (see [Image 1](#)). Lastly, in a deliberate design feature, participants were asked to reflect on two quotes from an extant academic work on skateboarding sound (Touché 1998). They were recited as follows:

[Quote 1] 'The skateboarder has an ear under his feet'

[Quote 2] 'A group of skaters as an orchestra'



Image 1. Screenshot from *Texturologie* by Max Boutin.

The interviews were therefore unambiguously reflexive about the topic of sound in skateboarding and structured around this issue directly rather than probed for organic reflections on the topic. One co-author was the designated interviewer, pacing interviews as an unfolding collaborative discussion and would share his insights and prompts at specific points in the interview to elicit the responses of participants to ideas they had not voiced (e.g. with reference to a quote by Touché, or by voicing a ‘devil’s advocate’ rhetorical opposition to an idea they expressed). Around one third of the participants followed up the interview with subsequent emails, sharing references, videos, music, social media posts, or further written up notes about the ideas explored in their interview.

Interviews were coded in an iterative process of transcription review, and revision alongside the audio recordings of the Zoom interviews. Iterative here is used to denote a back-and-forth interplay between audio recording and text. A foundation for thematic coding was derived from the eight research themes used in the semi-structured interview (simply coded as Description 1, Ear, Feet, Complaint, Music, Headphones, Video, Description 2). From these categories a variety of themes focussed on in this paper were derived. An insight gained from the design and performance of this research was that even though sound was the central feature of discussion, participants frequently used the notion of sound to contextualise a range of skateboarding issues. Skateboarding biography, friendships, mental health, city space, and media tended to be fused into the responses offered. This was a significant methodological point and relates back to Borden’s (2019) observation that skateboarders do not tend to conceptualize their activity, bracketing reflection for lived practice. However, sonic prompts appeared to work as conceptual prompts, increasing reflective inquiry for most of the interviewees. A methodological insight is that a qualitative sensory focus in skateboarding, and more broadly sport, can work as a mechanism to elicit rich sensual talk.

Findings

The most distinct findings from the research relate to two issues being revealed. Firstly, that there is a paradoxical relationship between the positive identification of sounds by skateboarders and a negative impression by non-skateboarders. Secondly, the sound of skateboarding is an issue of significance to participants.

A skatesound paradox

We begin with a short discussion of the first finding. The paradox we set out to explore is rendered more complex in these accounts. Skateboarders speak of their love for the sound of skateboarding yet also describe it as noisy and abrasive. Many of the respondents described the challenging sound of skateboarding in evocative sensory terms, such as ‘clattering’ ‘the sound of drills and angle grinders’, ‘an irritant’, the sound of ‘beer bottle on beer bottle’, of ‘bone on concrete’, ‘rolling, rough, smooth tickling in my ear’, and ‘rough and in your face. Loud in the best way’. On various occasions this sensitivity to the sound of skateboarding is manifest in skateboarders choosing not to skate through residential zones, or noisy tunnels, or feeling overwhelmed by the claustrophobic monotonous soundscape of skateparks.

One participant, Tricia, a 28-year-old skateboarder, describes this skatesound paradox that many of her clients' experience. Tricia offers skateboard classes as a form of therapy and frequently helps children with sensory needs who have diagnoses of autism spectrum. In dealing with depression and low self-esteem, the act of skateboarding works to mitigate some of these emotional experiences but at the same time they are confronted with the challenge of working with aversion to types of noise. Her account contributes to a recognition of the nuance in skatesound, the role of skateboarding in including people alienated from sport, and the broader discussion of autism and sport (Ives et al. 2021; Thomas, Lafasakis, and Spector 2016, 280–281; Askate Foundation 2023; O'Connor 2015, 38–39; Borden 2019).

She crafts her interventions to work with the specific needs of her clients. For example, holding sessions in an old 'shitty' skatepark with very few other people so that they are not distressed or over sensitized by the noise of many skateboarders. However, for some people the older skatepark with its rough concrete presents unpleasant sounds and she adapts by providing softer wheels that reduce noise with attention to specific activities to mitigate such issues. Tricia is thus well aware of the paradox invoked by skatesound, one that is noisy and abrasive and yet the essence of the very activity that is being used as a therapeutic tool.

A related case example external to these interviews comes from personal correspondence with Steve Mull, a professional skateboarder who has misophonia, a condition of extreme annoyance to common sounds like breathing and chewing, and for Steve, skatesound. 'I learned this about myself at Woodward Skatecamp. I couldn't escape the sound.' The condition of misophonia, however, has more to do with the sounds others make, making skatesound a potentially anti-social experience for Steve. 'If I'm skating myself it's not bad, but if I hear someone else skating and I'm not expecting it then it can get on my nerves.' Steve's sensitivity to the skatesound of others presents a case most familiar to non-skating pedestrians, whose annoyance to skatesound is well documented, adding still more diversity to skatesound complaints (Glennay et al. 2023).

All participants had some experience of the noise of their own skateboarding annoying others. Similarly, all of the participants were sympathetic to this issue and provided balanced responses. In some examples they rejected the rationale of noise complaints in cities where cars, bars, and construction work seemed noisier than skateboarders. In reflection they also considered residential areas and how noise could be amplified by certain architectural design, adding to the irritant of skatesound. Seven of the participants described the sound of skateboarding in very positive emotional terms, 'it makes me feel comfortable', 'something I like and recognise', 'texture', 'a calling', 'lovely and wonderful'. Throughout all the interviews there was clear understanding that skateboarders were attuned to the pleasures and benefits of skatesound, but also were aware of its jarring, sharp monotony akin to an 'idling chainsaw' (Glennay, Boutin, and O'Connor 2023, 3). Occupying both stances might suppose that skateboarders are immersed in a complex form of aversion therapy, or that they are oriented to a baseline of tolerance for noise.

We designed this project to address sound in both skateboard media and academic work on skateboarding revealing that sound is a well-considered feature of skateboarding. All the respondents related in some capacity how important sound was for them in their experience of skateboarding. In fact, the conceit of our research project was to artificially isolate sound as a singular issue. The interviews demonstrate that skateboarders associate great

meaning to sound, using it to: verify the success of their manoeuvres, judge the veracity and capacity of surfaces for use, harness it as a social cue, and derive a panoply of symbolic and sensual meanings from it. Thus, sound is socially distinctive from skateboarding's visual culture, and can be hidden from reflective attention. Sound is not something reducible to the visual field without remarkable depletion of meaning as the meaning of sound for skateboarders is multidimensional.

Sound: overlooked but not ignored

Our respondents demonstrate that skateboarders think of sounds as in unison, as a quality, signifier, and index associated with multiple factors. This emphasis of variety demonstrates that skateboarders have a rich sensual world in which sound plays an important role. As a result, by focussing on sound this research points to the multidimensional experience of skateboarding as sensual, emotional, social, textural, and even existential. This adds weight to Borden's (2019, 211) claim in reference to a passage from *Sidewalk Surfer* magazine, that skateboarders see themselves as having an 'enhanced experience of life' beyond the dull material world of mindless consumers. While this claim could be framed as elite subcultural arrogance, the depth of sensory allusion in our interviews suggest that this might be an earnest account of skateboarding. Coupled with Simmel's (1903) account of how cities overwhelm the senses and churn out 'blasé' minds, skateboarders appear to have a unique sensory array built for the city. This fits with other research which views skateboarding as an activity that enlivens one's senses in the city, interrogating its textures, paths, and places in ways that present as a new way of knowing 'from below' (McDuie-Ra 2021).

Our results highlight that skatesound is neither a peripheral concern, nor simply a celebrated issue. One demonstration of the way the prompt to describe skatesound opened up frequently layered and complex responses, was offered by Amy. A 42-year-old North American female skateboarder of South East Asian heritage, Amy was a returnee to skateboarding. She had skateboarded in her teens but was bullied by a group of female school peers and eventually stopped skateboarding as a result. Finding skateboarding again later in life, she had become overwhelmed with the transformation in the sport, finding a level of community and acceptance that was absent for her in the 1990s. She also celebrated the way skateboarding afforded her an augmented identity, not constrained by her career, or role as a mother and wife. Her description of the sound of skateboarding extends in multiple directions...

Soothing. Very, very soothing [...] I think, because I find so much joy in it. The word soothing is very multifaceted, because I smile when I hear the sounds, because I know exactly what it is. Right? And I know no matter where I am, standing outdoors, even indoors. But mostly outdoors. Given the space that I'm standing in. I know exactly the reverberations what sounds that will make on the concrete, how the concrete's been cut up so that those sounds are constant and consistent, but then it brings feelings of joy and feelings of freedom and feelings of comfort because again, it is something that I find so much joy in, and I know that someone else is enjoying it too.

Amy's insights present skatesound as integral to both the activity, its culture, and its way of producing knowledge of the city, a knowledge that is often captured in skateboarding's various visual medias. We now turn to a more focussed analysis of four features of skateboarding to which sound directly contributes.

From Amy's response we extract three key themes that will structure our following analysis of the interviews. Firstly, the notion of recognition that we frame under the title of 'head whip', then the overt notion of 'joy'. A third theme of extension is evidenced in the way Amy identifies a connection to space, material textures, and the pleasure of others. We explore this through the notion of 'extended mind'. Finally, we add an additional theme of 'media' to make sense of the way that so much of skateboarding is a 'corresponding' culture in dialogue with media (Yochim 2010) and for our purposes the sound of that media.

Head whip

The 'head whip' is distinct in seemingly being a universal experience of skatesound. All participants reported this experience in some form or another. It relates to the instinctive, pre-cognitive reaction skateboarders report on hearing skatesound whilst out in the city, at work, or at home. The physical response is to quickly 'whip' your head around and search for the source of that sound. Leo a 21-year-old skateboarder who began skateboarding at the age of 10 answered the question with a visual demonstration. He quickly 'whipped' his head to the side. He described that he would be 'immediately drawn' to the sound and that he would be curious to find out who was skating, what they were wearing, what they were doing. Alfie described the head whip alike the reaction of an excited dog, a 'base of the brain' response. Tom, a 45-year-old skateboarder who has been skating for over 20 years described how he frequently hears skateboarders go past his office. The sound draws him away from his desk and computer and he will go to search for the source of the sound by gazing out of his office window. When asked why he does this he explained that the sound pulls him away from his current focus and gives him a sense of wonder. He wants to see who is skateboarding, is it a friend, is it a new person to meet? Twenty-five-year-old Fiona described the skatesound and the head whip as a 'calling' or invitation...

Kind of sounds like a calling. I don't know if that makes sense, but I feel like a lot of skateboarders can relate to hearing the sound of skateboarding when they're not necessarily around it. Like when I'm in my apartment. I can hear wheels going down the sidewalk, and I kind of feel connected to that person already, like I just will run to my window and kind of see what's going on to see if it is a skateboarder, and like likely it is. But for someone else. I feel like it just kind of sounds like what you would expect like wood banging on the concrete like a banging sound.

Fiona articulates a range of associations that connect to the conceptual frames discussed by Glenney et al. (2023). She recognises a subjective and semiotic valence to the sound, but also extends this. Interestingly she recognises the irrelevance and even irritation of the sound to others who do not share a skateboarding sensibility. What is so provocative about the 'head whip' accounts are the way in which the siren call of skateboarding is imagined with relish and excitement. Skateboarders vicariously enjoy the pleasure of the activity, but also share an impulse of curiosity and possibility, is this a friend, or an opportunity to make a new friend? What is this person doing, where are they going? What are they riding or wearing? The 'head whip' exemplifies an embodied connection to skateboarding and a cultural identity. To hear skateboarders share this same reaction is to comprehend a deep connection to sound and its associations. In our short rewrite of Redondo's (1987) *The Skater's Eye* that uses a transplanted ear instead, the recipient experiences the 'head whip'.

Joy

Embedded in the ‘head whip’ accounts are expressions of emotional excitation. The associative element of skatesound is thus one where joy appears to abound. This is a significant observation for the sociology of sport, where the joy of participation can be disregarded as superficial in comparison to athleticism, competition, or accolades. Yet our accounts of the skater’s ear signify that joy is a *serious* part of skateboarding and perhaps one of the most dominant and important attributes. This is an observation that can be connected to debates on serious and civil leisure (Stebbins 2001; Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins 2013; Mair 2002). Several of our participants identified that skateboarding was an outlet that offered important creativity and freedom, and a departure from personal and social issues they encountered.

One very accomplished and intellectually analytical skateboarder, 23-year-old, Alfie spoke of his troubled education, challenges with both autism and ADHD, and how skatesound was central to his sensory world. He described skatesound as ‘lovely and wonderful’ but also explained how tuning into the rhythm and flow of skatesound had enabled him to become a more empathetic person, to push beyond the base challenges of the difficulty of skateboarding and be invested in creating something pleasurable and meaningful. Alfie spoke of how his sensory engagement with skateboarding had helped him deal with anxiety, find pleasure, and become more self-aware of his neurodiversity.

A similar account was offered by Steph a 23-year-old non-binary skateboarder. Steph commented that since starting skateboarding 3 years ago, they had become more aware and understanding of their neurodivergence. Another 19-year-old skateboarder with an autism diagnosis described skateboarding sound as soothing like ASMR videos. In various research skateboarders offer accounts of the emotional significance of the activity. It is often described as therapeutic, joyful, and even religious (Sayers 2023; O’Connor 2020; Yochim 2010). The accounts of neurodiverse skateboarders add to these findings and suggest a pleasure in the activity that contributes to self-awareness and control over the sensory overload people with autism frequently experience. Here joy dovetails with serious leisure and civil leisure to enhance the lives and communities of people, especially those marginalised by the constraints of other sports, as exemplified by Tricia’s clients who felt alienated from sport discussed above.

Extended mind

A significant insight from the interviews can be related to the current philosophical debate on extended mind (Clark and Chalmers 1998). This notion builds from the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) by which people’s senses and engagement with objects can be understood as part of the world at large, or the world sensing itself (Ingold 2011, 12). Just as writing down thoughts on paper extends the mental into the physical, so too does intentionally reverberating a sound into the city extend its spatiality—a soundscape becomes a mindscape. Soundscapes are ways of knowing the city, interacting with it, and becoming a part of it. The concept posits that mind is not bound to material engagement strictly by its biological determinants, but can interact with external artefacts in a way that these become part of the mind of the subject.

These erudite philosophical theories find empirical grounding in the skatesound accounts of skateboarders. Frequently skatesound is described as connecting vicariously to the

experiences of others, providing a conduit to understand where they are, what they are doing, and how they are feeling. In earlier comments from both Amy and Fiona they described feeling what others are feeling through skatesound: a connection to other people and to the materials of the city. Similarly, participants made many comments on how skate-sound worked as a heuristic, or shortcut to an array of physical determinants of space, texture, movement, and even trick performance. Skatesound works, for some, as an affirmation about the world around them and even operates as a tool of delimited precognition. We have already relayed accounts of how skatesound provides vicarious joy as one imagines the pleasure of the skateboarder producing the sound. This notion immediately connects to the thesis that extended mind can also operate as extended affect (Colombetti and Roberts 2015). When one hears a successful completion of a trick, like a long grind across a ledge, they simulate the experience in their mind, imagining their own body doing the trick. The connecting tool to this extension of mind is the skateboard, an object of extension to the senses and affect of the skateboarder.

Skateboarders would talk about how trick sounds conveyed a sense of affirmation that things were working well. This is similar to the way in which mechanics might listen to a car to provide a diagnostic on its performance (Keizer 2012). Perhaps more provocatively some participants suggested that the sound could signal the efficacy of a manoeuvre, if the 'pop' of an ollie or flip tick sounded *good*, it was a signal that the trick would be landed.⁵ Thus, very quickly a skateboarder might register speed, surface, and trick type in a small soundbite of skatesound and feel a great many things as a result. Fiona alluded to this by invoking the 'skater's eye' metaphor and applying it to sound as a further sensory extension.

You know, you have the skateboarder, goggles, and it's really weird, because again, like people who don't skate don't have this. So, I do think it is an extension of yourself when you become a skateboarder.

A further example of this extension relates to responses of participants to two videos shown during the interviews. Both are part of Max Boutin's (2023) Texturologies art installation and show quickly moving ground from the view of a skateboard (Image 1). The two videos shown to participants are identical with the exception that the first has no sound. The video was used to elicit some anticipatory responses from participants about sound. Frequently participants would report predictive comments about the skatesound and how the second video with sound offered validation, or enhanced knowledge. Dan (21-year-old) responded as follows

I knew what it would sound like, and I guess the second video just confirmed my suspicions.

Participants could feel and hear the surface in their body and mind. Some commented on the hardness of the wheels, and changes in direction. Although the video is unusual as a skateboard video as it gives a first person POV experience, the media did appear to produce some form of extended or augmented predictive and anticipated experience in participants, and this was tied to the knowledge they derived from the skateboard as mediator of those surfaces. In some cases participants commented on the way certain sounds were connected to cities. Tom for instance reflected at length how MACBA in Barcelona had a unique sound relating to the stone used at that location. There were similar accounts of specific sounds relating to spots, and broader soundscapes relating to cities.

Just as Merleau-Ponty suggests the blind man who habituates themselves to a cane, feels the world by extension, skatesound reaches out into the world, perhaps like an echolocation device. As Dean (2023, 159, 174) reveals in interviews with blind skateboarders, sound extends the skater's spatial knowledge of their spaces beyond touch, either from the surfaces themselves, or 'beepers' that some use as a beacon to help navigate specific obstacles. That the sounds of skateboarding extend bodily knowledge of skaters further supports the notion that the skateboard operates as extended mind, is a way by which we understand the city and other users through a shared knowledge of the city's sound and meaning.⁶ To push the notion conceptually as Ingold (2011) does *via* Merleau-Ponty, it is not just humanity that is sentient but the world at large and thus all boundaries, biological or otherwise are illusion. Skatesound is thus a means to know the city with a depth not otherwise possible through mere pedestrian consumption. Thus, skatesound not only provides some means to grasp Ingold's conceptually challenging suggestion that the city is somehow 'alive', but accounts for the possibility that skateboarders really do escape Simmel's diagnosis of an urbane blasé mind.

Media

A significant part of skateboard culture relates to a shared knowledge of skateboard media. Yochim (2010) describes this as a corresponding culture where skateboarders articulate shared subcultural knowledge through video and magazine, and contextualise performance, tricks, and meaning through media. During the research several skateboarders sent videos and Instagram posts to further underline the importance of skatesound. In one instance a comical video was shared about a skater hearing a skateboard and 'whipping' around to search for the source of the noise, then dangling out of the window to catch a glimpse of a passing skateboarder.⁷ Others shared videos that showcased pleasing skateboard sounds of grinds, carves over pool tiles, or deftly popped tre flips. Media also formed part of the interview schedule.

One item of shared media in the interview was a clip of Ray Barbee from the video *Ban This* (Peralta 1989) which is notable for an absence of skatesound only music during the montage. Participants commented on how music often added to the stoke of skateboard videos, but the absence of skatesound was problematic and disappointing. Ben (30-year-old) commented...

Talking about the Ray Barbee video, there's like disappointment to not hear the skateboarding sounds.

Many spoke of enjoying music played in skate videos as they came to associate it with particular skaters and tricks. Fiona spoke of *Escape* (*The Piña Colada Song*) by Rupert Holmes which she previously disliked, yet upon seeing a video with one of her favourite skateboarders Marissa del Santo (Duke 2017), in which the music was used, the song has now become a favourite because it provides a sensation of skateboarding stoke.

In a further example 35-year-old Jules sought to explain how whenever he heard certain music it transported him into a skateboard video. To underline the power of this example he mentioned DJ Shadow. This instantly affected the interviewer who in response conjured the image in his mind of Andrew Reynolds doing a kickflip noseblunt slide on a picnic table riding a Ghostface Birdhouse board in the video *The End* (Mosberg 1998). Similar examples

occurred in nearly every interview underlining both Yochim's (2010) point that skateboarders communicate through media, and also highlighting the importance of sound in skateboarding beyond simply the skatesound. This topic connects to a more prominent field of sport sound research that relates to the use and consumption of music in sport (Durrant and Kennedy 2007; Bateman and Bale 2008). Music is reported to be a motivational and ergogenic factor in sport, that is, enhancing effort and performance. Such is the potency of this association that Karageorghis and Terry (2019, 15) suggest 'music can be seen as a type of legal drug that athletes can use in training'.

Video games were a further example of media that six participants referred to. Interestingly their reflections on the importance of games like *THPS* (Tony Hawk Pro Skater) from Neversoft and the *Skate* series of games from Entertainment Arts, encompassed both music and skatesound. Two participants referred to the influence of *THPS* in introducing them to a range of music and how certain songs now have a permanent link in their minds to the game. This theme is elaborated on in depth in Cole Nowicki's (2023, 56–63) book on the cultural impact of *THPS*. One participant celebrated the attention to detail in *THPS* in which the tricks tended to sound correct, but some grinds clearly sounded wrong. He noted that he would often turn off the soundtrack as he got sick of the songs, but he would never turn off the skatesounds. Another participant even described skateboard sound alike the haptic vibration experienced from the joypad when playing video games, a source of information that augments your knowledge of what is unfolding.

Earbuds

Music also presents as a distinct topic of division when related to the use of headphones, or earbuds, while skateboarding. Roughly half of the participants were against skateboarding while listening to music *via* headphones. The three chief complaints were that listening to music was anti-social and that when skateboarding you were participating a communal activity. Gavin (23-year-old) felt so strongly about this that he would approach people wearing headphones while skateboarding and ask them to remove their headphones and come join in the session with him and his friends, to engage socially. The second common concern was expressed by Eddy (51-year-old) who stated that he couldn't imagine skateboarding with ear buds in because of the danger. Partly this was a concern about not hearing cars, or other skaters. It was also a shared concern about not tuning in to the sound of the board and picking up on vital diagnostics about the terrain and performance of the skateboard. A less common but associated complaint was that headphones were a distraction from the pleasurable sound of skateboarding. So, while music can provide both stoke and ergogenic benefits, the practice of skateboarders 'cocooning' themselves in a different 'auditory' world (Karageorghis and Terry 2019) is contested. However, the popularity of earbud use in competitive skateboarding is significant. Some professional skateboarders have headphone sponsorship and there was a suggestion that for younger skateboarders earbud use may be more widely accepted than for older skateboarders.

Those who did chose to listen to headphones had manifold reasons for doing so. Some, like 22-year-old Andy, simply wanted music to accentuate his focus and stoke, while Fiona used headphones as a social barrier when she was the only female skateboarder on the session and wanted to enhance her confidence. In contrast Steph used headphones to battle sensory overload of skatesound that was particularly prevalent in indoor skateparks. Three

participants also had hearing impairments that required them to use hearing aids. Of these three, two chose not to wear their hearing aids whilst skateboarding and reported that the devices introduced unwanted noise that interfered with and distracted their performance. Joshua, a 44 year old skateboarder offered this reply when asked if he wore his hearing aids whilst skateboarding...

No. Not at all. Too loud. It's the noise of the wheels, its amplified, and wind, you know, when you're skating along even though it's not windy. I'm not saying I skate fast or anything [laughs] but like you know you get the air passing through [the hearing aids] and it's really disorientating, and it can be quite overwhelming.

The wind is significant in this response as it is not typically a part of skatesound, and amplified wind works as a distraction from the more nuanced sound of the board. The only skateboarder who continued to wear hearing aids whilst skateboarding had more profound hearing loss and a bone conduction hearing aid which did not amplify the wind sound. Joshua stated that the only impact his hearing loss had on skateboarding was the social side, amidst the noise of skateboards it would become very difficult to chat with people. He quipped that if you are trying to talk with him on the session, 'good luck with that.'

Contrasting the experiences of skateboarders with hearing loss and their use of hearing aids with attitudes to headphones provides a broad account of how media, music, and amplified sound work in the motivational and social worlds of skateboarders. Similarly, it was common for skateboarders to appreciate how music in video, or whilst skateboarding as either a portable sound system, or *via* headphones could enhance the experience. However, when given the choice between skatesound or music, as a hypothetical 'one or the other' scenario all chose to forsake music.

Conclusion

Our research presents rich qualitative responses to the enquiry into skatesound. Firstly, we identify that sound is a primary issue in the lives of skateboarders. While Borden (2019) is correct that skateboarders do not tend to conceptualize their craft, all the participants in our research were able to relate some significant and often poignant engagement with the notion of skatesound. Secondly, we observed that skateboarders held opposing understandings of skatesound simultaneously—a skatesound paradox. They typically had a positive valence to skatesound, but were also aware of its negative valence and would attune their behaviour in some circumstances to counteract this. The comprehension of the good and bad of skatesound simultaneously gives further orientation to the greyness of skateboarding (O'Connor et al. 2023) to occupy a space resistant to tidy classification.

Skatesound also provided an opportunity to identify shared cultural and embodied acts in skate culture. The precognitive 'head whip' stands as an overt example of shared experience and sensitisation to skatesound. Alongside varied reflections on joy, empowerment, and self-knowledge skatesound can also be explored through expression of extended mind, and extended affect. Most importantly, through skatesound we explored the varied ways individuals were able to engage in a sport who might more typically be marginalised in other physical cultures and institutionalised settings (Ives et al. 2021; Harada et al. 2011). The sensual worlds of affect, autism, hearing loss, age, gender, and ethnicity all intersect in these accounts and suggest a rich realm for additional enquiry.

Notes

1. It is somewhat uncommon to refer to skateboarding as a sport, choosing 'lifestyle', 'subculture', or 'culture' as more fitting categories (Gazeres 2023). However, skateboarding's inclusion in the 2020 Olympic games and beyond, the long history of skate competitions stretching from the 1970s to today, as well as a recent trend amongst competitors to train and be coached, suggest that skateboarding is at least 'part' sport (Glenney and Mull 2018). Including skateboarding in the 'sport' category, however, may lead to a subversion of sport's seemingly necessary 'competitive' and 'rule-bound' features (Glenney 2017). In a word, if skateboarding is considered a sport, then the concept of sport must change, a point of some interest in recent sport scholarship. For instance, many skateboard scholars have distinguished 'mainstream sport' from 'alternative sport' or 'action sport' (Kellett and Russell 2009; Thorpe and Wheaton 2011; Thorpe 2016) or have described skateboarding as an 'extreme sport' (Rinehart 1998) or 'street sport' (Alkemeyer, et al. 2005), shifting sport away from a category to a spectrum of human activity. We use the phrase 'lifestyle sport' (Wheaton 2013) throughout to key in on the fact that skateboarding's primary activity of spatially conditioned athletic performance so deeply permeates aspects of this chosen way of life that aspects of lifestyle gain greater import over athletic performance.
2. Though not mentioned by Touché, skatesounds are largely dependent on the hardness of the wheel used: the harder the wheel, the greater the clacking, squealing, and pounding of the sounds. A softer wheel, while smoother and quieter, is viewed by most skaters place the entire set-up 'out of tune', with complaints that tricks do not sound right and that the overall experience is reduced.
3. Skate scholarship's current turn to the senses of skateboarding was most evident in the Stoke Sessions conference held at San Diego State University in April 2023. Here a total four papers were presented on the topic of sound in skateboarding (Surf/Skate Studies Collective 2023). One common feature of these enquiries was the notion of music in skateboard media and the role it plays in the culture. This again becomes a focus in latter parts of this paper.
4. It should be noted that there exist many skateboarders who have a variety of blindnesses, using a 'white cane' during trick performances as a substitute for sight, with their imagination playing a significant role as they artfully perform some of the most difficult maneuvers in skateboarding. Do they share the same 'skater's gaze' as skateboarders who use sight when assessing their action space for trick play. Do they share the same 'action space' as skaters with sight. We would most certainly venture a 'yes' to both questions, though find these questions worth an account of their own.
5. For example, see Jason Lee tries to articulate how a 360 flip should sound/feel (from 6 min mark) *Nine Club Clips* [YouTube] 'Jason Lee And The Evolution Of 360 Kickflips' <https://youtu.be/d4EscAuvz0M?si=DxTTm49OxJaSa5QX&t=360>.
6. 'If I want to become habituated to a cane, I try it out, I touch some objects and, after some time, I have it "in hand" [...] Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments. (Merleau Ponty 144-45/178-79).'
7. aimeemassie 'I'm like a 5 year old when they hear the ice cream truck #skate #skateboarding #skatergirl #skateboard', Instagram, May 18, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/reel/CO_rGIGpvog/.

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