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Skate For Life: An Analysis of the Skateboarding Subculture

Thomas Slee

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Skateboarding has been around since the 1950s. It first came about as an alternative to surfing when the water was flat but it eventually broke off and formed its own unique subculture based around the act of performing tricks on a skateboard. Riding in backyard pools became the popular style of skateboarding early on, but eventually moved out into parking lots in the 80s where skateboarders would use parking curbs to perform tricks as if it were the edge of a pool. In current times skateboarding has evolved to using many different kinds of architecture and terrains and has seen a tremendous rise in popularity. More and more teens and young adults are beginning to skateboard over traditional sports like football or baseball. Skate parks are seen popping up all over the world, with some bigger cities even have multiple skate parks. Skateboarding is now an extremely profitable industry and skateboarders are now seen as prized demographic by companies who previously had no interest in marketing their products to the group. (Bradley) But still it remains that there is a negative stigma attached to skateboarding

and skateboarders. “To outsiders, skaters are thought of as rebels, social deviants, or simply different. Participants are banned from public areas and signs are routinely posted prohibiting the activity.” (Moore) This general view of the skateboarding population has put several constraints on its members.

A person is most likely to choose to become a part of a subculture during their late childhood or adolescent years. By definition a subculture is a group within a larger culture that differentiates themselves. Subcultures often possess their own belief systems, values, and practices. Often times they help adolescents to develop their own individual identity. The skateboarding subculture is a large group which is primarily made up of younger males. “Estimates of the number of skateboarders in the United States range from 12 to 20 million. Most are able-bodied males aged 8 to 22 years.” (Bradley) Subcultures can of course persist across one's entire lifetime and this is seen with skateboarding. Although skateboarding is primarily a youth subculture, some continue to be a part of the culture in their middle age and for their entire lives. (Bradley)

One of the basic appeals of skateboarding to adolescents and teenagers is the freedom that it provides unlike traditional sports where one has mandatory practices and rules they must follow. The act of skateboarding has no rules and the user is free to skate in any manner they please. As it is commonly seen with adolescent activities and free time, adults try to control and structure how they are spent. This is shown through the hold adults have over space and the limitations that are placed upon it. “Minors face increasing numbers of physical barriers to place use and more direct controls of places they might use.” (Childress) For this reason activities like skateboarding that are not structured and supervised are often viewed as harmful and negatively affecting development. (Bradley) However several positive learning experiences have been

linked to skateboarding despite this common thought. “Skateboarding is so much more than just a physical act, it is a way of thinking, doing and living.” (Somers) For some skateboarding becomes a way of life. Members of the culture take pride in defining themselves as skateboarders.

The focus of this paper will be on skateboarding subculture and the values and practices that differentiate it from the dominant culture. Skateboarding subculture is a topic that is commonly misrepresented in the public’s eye. It is often viewed negatively and looked at as a destructive act for delinquents. It is my hope to provide an accurate and in depth look into the realities of the subculture and to show that it promotes creativity and unity among its members, despite internal stratifications of its members. There will be a focus on the style behind the subculture and how skateboarders make use of space, and the difficulties that are faced along with it. I also conducted a study of skateboarding in the Tampa Bay area and review how the area reflects the subculture.

I began skateboarding around the age of 10 years old when the recreation center near my house built a free public skate park. Several other kids in the area began skateboarding for the same reason as well. By the time I was in middle school I got to know just about every skateboarder in the area and skateboarding slowly became a bigger part of my life. Skateboarding to me is fun and challenging and gave me a drive to excel at it. It influenced the way I dressed, how I thought, and changed the way I would perceive the world around me. By the time I reached high school I spent almost all of my free time skateboarding. During this time the skate park had closed down and many of my friends had quit skateboarding. I was forced to explore other areas for places I could skateboard and along the way met many others of various ages who shared the same passion for skateboarding that I did. Out of my entire graduating class

in high school, I was the only person who still actively skateboarded. The quote beside my yearbook photo read “skate for life”. It was at this time I realized that skateboarding would always be a part of my life.

For this paper, I will be drawing on much of the information and knowledge that I have acquired from my years skateboarding and as a member of the subculture. From my personal experience I can provide an accurate and unique perspective to the issue. I reviewed any existing literature on the topic of skateboarding subculture as well as literature relating to youth subcultures in general. For my own study to see how skateboarding is represented in Tampa, I researched and visited several skate parks and other areas that are commonly frequented by skateboarders. At these locations I spent several hours observing and examining the areas and skateboarders that frequented them. I conducted informal interviews with the other skateboarders in order to get a more diverse perspective.

One of the main reasons for the negative attitudes about skateboarding and the difficulties faced by skateboarders is due to the way they use space. There are generally two distinct areas in which skateboarders use to skate. These areas may be defined as skate “parks” and skate “spots”. A skate park is any area, publicly or privately owned, that’s intended use is for skateboarders, and skateboarding is permitted. Skate spots on the other hand are any areas that are not intended for skateboarding, but skateboarders use for skateboarding. Skateboarders often use public space in a way that is typically deemed unacceptable by city governments.

“Skateboarding often invites negative reactions by adults and those in charge of maintaining public space.” (Kato) Because of this skateboarding activities are usually restricted legally to skate parks. (Kato) The city of Tampa, Florida’s statute regarding skateboarding on public and private property reads as follows:

Sec. 25-172. Use of skateboards, coasters, roller skates, in-line skates, etc., on public and private property.

(a) It is unlawful for any person to operate or ride a skateboard, coaster or other similar device on any of the following locations:

- (1) On any city street, road or roadway;
- (2) On any sidewalk in the Downtown Central Business District, with the exception of roller skating and in-line skating, which are permitted between sunset and sunrise;
- (3) On any sidewalk in the Ybor City Business District, including 6th, 7th and 8th Avenues;
- (4) On any public parking lot or ramp;
- (5) On any public property where signs prohibit it;
- (6) On private property, unless permission is granted by the owner, lessee or other legally authorized individual.

For the most part, this statute bans skateboarding just about all areas of Tampa except for property that is owned by the skateboarders themselves, which is rare due to skateboarding being primarily a youth subculture, or skate parks. This is a major dilemma that is faced by skateboarders.

The majority of skate parks are operated by local city governments. They are being built around the United States much more commonly and there are multiple reasons cities chose to build them. Sometimes the skateboarders themselves lobby to the city to build one as they are disallowed from skating elsewhere and need somewhere to skate hassle free. In other cases the city chooses to build the park in an effort to get skateboarders to stop skating at local shopping centers, downtown areas, and other places. City officials argue “that they stop young people skating in public places, help reduce youth problems, enhance community life, and more generally enliven our cities.” (Bradley)

City run skate parks often place several restrictions on their users. Often times they require users to pay a fee and/or skate under several set rules. Failure to pay the entrance fee or failure to follow the parks rules may result in being told to vacate the property or potentially being trespassed from the park and ticketed. “Suburban community attempts to regulate and control skateboarding activities by building a skate park, implementing prohibitive devices, making skateboarding in public spaces illegal, and monitoring activities.” (Kato) Not only do skate parks impose many rules on an activity which is meant to be an expression of freedom, which are normally strictly enforced by staff members, but they also make a distinction between what is good and bad skateboarding, where skateboarding at a skate park is seen as good and skateboarding on another person’s property is seen as bad skateboarding. (Kato)

Despite this a number of group interviews were conducted among users at specific skate parks which found that among the younger and teen users, there was a positive attitude about the parks. To them the skate park was a place where they could socialize with their friends and they could get better at skateboarding and learn new tricks. To them it is viewed as a friendly place for activity. On the other hand he found that non-users of the skate park viewed it in a more negative light. Typically they are viewed as unattractive to anyone other than the users of the park. One parent stated “From a mother’s perspective, I have found skate parks to be quite threatening places, they’re usually very isolated . . . they are lonely places, they are covered in graffiti which irks me and I find them really ugly.” (Bradley) Even when the obvious negative factors of property damage and business disruption are removed in the skate park setting, some outsiders still view it negatively, including parents of skateboarders. The act of skateboarding itself and being a skateboarder, not simply the harm that results from it, seems to carry this negative stigma. (Bradley)

Although it is not as rare as it used to be to see girls riding skateboards, the majority of skateboarders are still male. This is commonly reflected in the skate park setting. As noted by Bradley “skate parks are predominantly “male spaces,” but, the masculinity apparent at skate parks is an “alternative masculinity” reflected in values of personal freedom, self-expression, and cooperation, rather than the more traditional masculine values of aggression, power, and competitiveness.” (Bradley) This attitude among skateboarders separates them from traditional competitive male sports. Skate parks generally foster a friendly environment among the users and there is often little hostility. It is common for other skateboarders to cheer for each other when any trick is landed regardless of the difficulty. Even in organized skateboarding competitions this attitude is still seen. In one particular competition a writer noted “Regardless

of gender, discipline, ethnicity, or age, the participants in this study routinely embraced each other, supported each other by showing encouragement and appreciation, and showed no signs of negative emotion toward other participants, despite the fact that prize money was on the line. This lack of negative emotions infers an inclusionary construct within the skateboarding culture.” (Moore)

Skateboarding outside of designated boundaries at skate spots is referred to by skateboarders as “street” skating. Street skateboarding in most instances violates the statutes prohibiting skateboarding in certain areas and therefore is considered a crime. Unlike skateboarding in a skate park, there are not set rules one must obey. To many, street skating is the true essence of skateboarding and skateboarders are free of any constraints. In a recent interview, professional skateboarder Bobby Puleo, who has been skateboarding since the mid 80s, defined street skating as “the art of interpreting objects and setups that occur naturally in the streets and sidewalks and incorporating them into your skating. It's the appropriation and use of objects found naturally in any "street" or city environment.” (Puleo) Skateboarders use everyday objects like benches, stairs, or handrails and reinterpret them for their own use. “Skateboarders constantly evaluate architectures for their trickability, and such elements are abundant in urban environment.” (Kato) It is encouraged among skateboarders to use objects creatively, or in a way that other skateboarders have not previously done. This is the aspect of skateboarding that is particularly attractive to me.

The freedom of street skating, however, doesn't come without many challenges. Skateboarders are simply not wanted on property, public or private. Former professional skateboarder and PhD Ocean Howell wrote a thesis relating to how skateboarders use architecture and noted that "skateboarding is a thorn in the side of landscape architects, planners,

and building owners; so much so that there are now design workshops that teach a series of defensive architectural tactics for deterring the activity." (Howell) The city of Tampa recently spent millions of dollars constructing the Curtis Hixon Park in downtown Tampa, where on opening day of the park Mayor Pam Iorio stated that the park was for everyone "except for skateboarders." (Zink)

There are two primary methods used for deterring skateboarders from public areas and plazas. One of these methods is by law enforcement. Run-ins with the police are not uncommon with skateboarders and although they usually only result in being asked to leave the area, they could possibly result in ticketing or arrest. The other method used as mentioned before is the building or modifying of a landscape to exclude skateboarding. Devises called skate-stoppers are commonly attached to bench, ledges, handrails, etc. to prevent damage and paint streaks that are caused by skateboards. In some case public areas are specifically designed to be exclusionary or certain groups. Not only the skateboarders, but other "undesirable" groups are meant to be excluded as well. "The vast majority of such plazas' users are white, educated office workers between the ages of twenty and fifty. It is only this selected public that is permitted to experience this space as psychologically accessible, transparently public." (Howell)



Another important aspect of the skateboarding subculture is the style and image behind it. Skateboarding is viewed in the public eye as an extreme sport with an “outlaw” image. The use of the word extreme has been used to market contests like the X-treme Games (X-Games) as well as certain products to the general public. However, this portrayal of skateboarding is not accurate. As Howell put it “Skateboarding is a spatial practice, an everyday activity that challenges commercial space; but the X Games elides this unmarketable fact, representing skateboarding as paroxysmal, macho thrill-seeking—like 'skysurfing'.” (Howell) Big companies have used these types of marketing strategies to profit off of the increase in popularity that skateboarding has seen.

Some companies have managed to portray an image of skateboarding that is profitable. They “have capitalized on the fashionable appeal of skateboarding to non-skaters, a big part of their business.” (Porter) Some companies that had originally designed products that were targeted only towards the skateboarder population have now expanded their markets to non-skateboarders because of this. Eric Obre, who is the global men's footwear director of DC Shoes, a large company with its roots in skateboarding, made the statement "The idea of looking like a skateboarder without participating in the sport is the reason why the explosion happened, and allowed a company like ours to grow beyond the core scope." (Porter) Though the fact remains, this image that sells and is seen by the public is not entirely accurate view of the skateboarding subculture.

The reality is, however, that skateboarders do put a large emphasis on style in their culture. The amount of skill that is required to excel at skateboarding is great. In terms of athletic ability it may be comparable to that of most traditional sports. However, skateboarders often choose not wear or use the most functional equipment. The reasoning behind this is

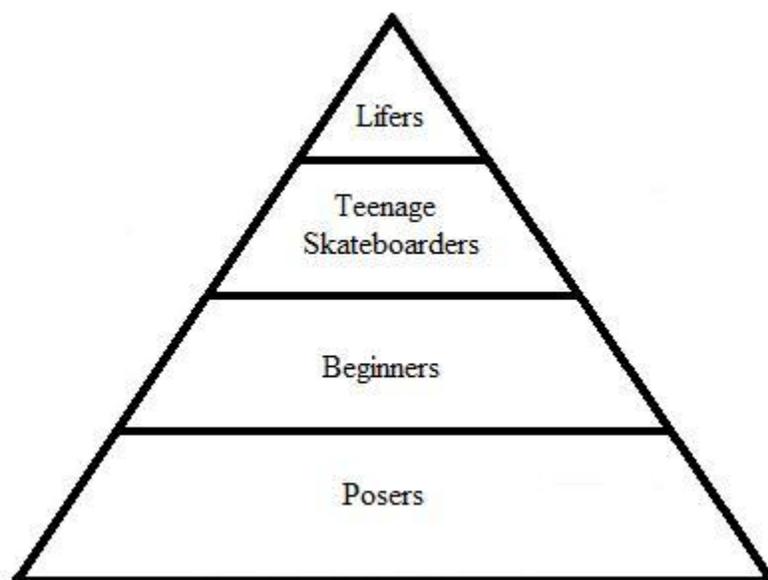
simple, it is all about style. It is not only important to land difficult tricks in skateboarding, but perhaps equally important to make them look good in the process. (Porter) Professional skateboarder Mike Vallely stated in an interview, "I think skateboarding is more fashion than function. It's more aesthetic than anything else. It's more rock 'n' roll than athletics." (Porter)

Simply from looking at the clothing a skateboarder chooses to wear, one can usually see the emphasis on style. There isn't one clothing style that skateboarders strive toward, and they can be very diverse ranging from punk rock clothing with skinny jeans to a more hip hop style with more baggy clothes. The main influencing factors of a skateboarders clothing style are the style of skating they prefer, as well as influence from professional skateboarders in videos, magazines, and friends. Skateboarding shoes are another important aspect behind the skateboarding style. Skateboarding shoes are usually flat on the bottoms and designed to be lightweight. Despite the fact that skateboarding can cause a pair of shoes to be completely destroyed in less than a month, skateboarders don't usually look for models that are more durable. Skateboarders are often seen sporting shoes that are ripped and have torn laces. The reason behind the less durable shoes is because most skateboarders prefer a lighter weight shoe that allows them to feel the board under their feet better than a bulkier more durable shoe would. (Porter)



The most important aspect of the style is the skateboard itself. The board represents the collective identity among the subculture as well as gives one their individual identity as a skateboarder. Skateboard shops carry boards that are completely assembled as well as separate parts so a board can be customized. Skateboarders who have been skating for a while choose to assemble their boards with custom parts in order to get their board to feel exactly the way they want it to. Each board is a unique representation of the individual while at the same time representing the entire culture.

Due to the large amount of skateboarders that are part of the subculture there is a stratification of the members. The primary reasons for this are because of the differences in age groups, skill levels, and dedication to the activity. From my years and experience in the subculture I have determined that there are four different categories in which skateboarders may be classified under. These groups are the posers, beginners, teenage skateboarders, and lifers. These grouping are based on my opinions, however, they are commonly agreed upon by other skateboarders. In some cases these groups may overlap and a person can be a part of more than one group. The groups are simply a means of classifying skateboarders and are not set stone. The pyramid below shows the typical progression of a skateboarder in terms of the group they are a part of and relative size and “ranking” within the subculture. A person begins in either the poser or beginner stage and may move up in the rankings from there. I consider myself to be a lifer, someone who is a skateboarder for life, a realization I came to after I had already been skating for nearly 8 years.



The first group that should be discussed is the posers. Posers are unique group that don't quite qualify as actual members of the subculture and don't usually fit in with the other groups. A poser is someone who tries to present themselves as a skateboarder but doesn't actually participate in the act of skateboarding. This group contributes to a large amount of the purchasing of skateboarding related clothing and shoes. Like it was mentioned previously, the skateboarding fashion may appeal to non-skateboarders who buy skate shoes or wear t-shirts with skateboard related company logos printed on them. People that would fall into this group are likely to be young up to about early teenage years. Their knowledge of skateboarding likely comes from popularized images of skateboarding in mass culture, like the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* video game series or X-games contest that presents a certain image to them. Posers are not actual skateboarders, but rather someone who is into the image of skateboarding and not into the physical act of skateboarding. As members of this group have real interest in skateboarding they tend not to move up in ranking.

The next group is the beginners. As the name suggests, this group consists of skateboarders who have recently began skateboarding, and their skill level is low. Members of this group are typically younger as most kids begin skateboarding around the time when they are in middle school. This group is not fully immersed in the subculture yet and has little knowledge about skateboarding. They commonly frequent skate parks and often do not venture much further than local schools and shopping centers close to where they live as far as street skating goes. Every skateboarding must be a beginner at some point and a good amount of skateboarders don't make it past this stage and they are likely to quit at some point for a variety of reasons. Beginners usually skate with others who are beginners, but at skate parks there are often all different groups of skateboarders skating together. From my recent experiences at skate

parks and encounters with beginners, they seemed to be more or less unaware of the other skateboarders around, often getting in the way.

Teenage skateboarders are those who have advanced past the beginner stage and skateboard during their teen years mostly while they are in high school. Skill level can range from low to very high among this group but is mostly somewhere in between. It's possible for members of this group also to be a part of the beginner group. Like the beginners many members of this group quit for one reason or another, usually around the time they get their driver's license or graduate from high school. Also like the beginners they frequent skate parks commonly and because some have the means, they might be willing to travel to skateboard. Out of all the groups this group is most likely to give skateboarders a bad name by vandalizing property or loitering at shopping centers. Similar to the beginner group my only usual encounters with this group are at skate parks. However, they tend to be more respectful and aware of the other skateboarders around them. From what I have noticed this group seems to be most likely to follow the current fads among skateboarders, whether it be a certain clothing style or brand of products that is popular among well known professional skateboarders.

The last group, the lifers, is considered to be the elite group among skateboarders. Lifers may also be referred to as "soul skaters." Members of this group are extremely dedicated to skateboarding and will continue to skateboard for their entire lives no matter what factors get in the way or it. The skill level of this group can range from low to high however it tends to be more on the high side due to the great amount of time that they are willing to put into skateboarding, though a genuine love for skateboarding rather than simply skill is their main pursuit. The age of this group is typically older, around the 20s and 30s, or even older. However, there is no set age one must be to be a part of this group. There is a possible overlap

that some skateboarders that fit into the teenage skater category might also fall into this category. At some point one will come to the realization that they are going to skateboard for their entire life and it isn't just some fad. As one skateboarder I talked to put it, "you just know."

Professional skateboarders would fall into this category. They may partake in a variety of different styles of skateboarding include street skateboarding or vert skateboarding. Members of this group takes a more creative approach to skateboarding and are willing to seek out and travel to different types of architecture and terrain to skate. All of the skateboarders that I skate with on a regular basis are a part of this group and all but one are over the age of 20. I and one other are university students and the rest work full time jobs, skateboarding just about any opportunity they get.

This section of the paper will focus on the skateboarding subculture in the Tampa Bay area. Tampa is well known by skateboarders because the Skate Park of Tampa (SPoT) hosts the famous Tampa Amateur and Tampa Pro contests each year. There are also three additional public skate parks located throughout the city, as well as several well-known street spots. For my study of the subculture in the area, I visited the four skate parks a few times each for several hours in order to see the kinds of skateboarders that frequented the parks as well as their attitudes toward skateboarding. I conducted several informal interviews in order to understand their perspectives. I also visited skate spots located in the downtown business district of Tampa and on the University of South Florida campus in an attempt to see the extent to the street skating in Tampa and any hostility towards it.

The first skate park I visited was the Desoto skate park located near the port of Tampa and somewhat hidden away. The park is free with rules posted at the entrance, one of which was the requirement of helmet, but there was no one around to enforce them. The park is small and the obstacles leave much to be desired. Each time I went to the park there was no more than three other skateboarders there, one time it being completely empty. The users were mostly beginners and teenage skateboarders who would go to the park occasionally. From what I was able to gather there was no one group that frequented the park on a regular basis and the general consensus was that it wasn't the best park but it was still fun.

The next park that I visited is a place that is referred to as the bro bowl. The bro bowl is a Tampa landmark that was built in the 1970s. It is completely free to anyone and has no restrictions. It is the only location in downtown Tampa where skateboarders are free to skate. The park consists of only one downhill style bowl. Recent attempts to demolish the bro bowl were stopped by skateboarders who got together to help preserve what is one of the last

remaining 70s skate parks in the country. This park was relatively crowded for its small size with most of the user being teenagers and some even older in their late 20s. Most of the skateboarders there to just visit the landmark as its simple design doesn't offer much in the way of challenge.

New Tampa Skate Park is city run skate park located at the New Tampa recreation center. It cost the city approximately 4,000,000 million dollars to build the all concrete park. Due to the high price of construction an entrance fee of four dollars is required and safety gear rules along with other rules are enforced. The park was mostly frequented by beginner skateboarders who live in or around the neighborhoods near the recreation center. The park had a large variety of different terrain packed into the small area of the park. The overall feel of the park gave me the impression that it was built as a way to get skateboarders off of other property like shopping centers in the area.

The final skate park I visited was the famous Skate Park of Tampa. This skate park is a privately owned skate park that is owned by actual skateboarders. The park costs eight-ten dollars for entry and does not require users to wear padding equipment. Because the owners are knowledgeable skateboarders themselves, they were able to create the park in a manner that it is able to cater to every group of skateboarders. There two courses located in two separate warehouse, one is for beginner skateboarders and the other is for more skilled skateboarders as well as a 13 foot vert ramp outside. On most days of the week you can see just about all types of skateboarders of a wide variety of age groups and skill levels. The skateboarders at the park all had positive opinions about the park acknowledging the effort and dedication to skateboarding that is shown by the owners and employees. Of all of the parks located in Tampa it is no surprise that the one owned and operated by skateboarders is most appealing the culture in the area.

Aside from simply visiting the skate parks in the area I was also interested to see how the culture existed as far as street skating goes. In any large city, the obvious location that skateboarders would head toward when looking for skate spots is the downtown area. Downtown areas usually have many stair sets, ledges, plazas, and other architecture that are appealing to skateboarders. I made several visits to this area on the weekends and did not come across any other skateboarders while I was there. Most of the spots in this area were either skate-stopped by property owners, or heavily guarded by security personnel. Though I did notice evidence of skateboarding at some locations, it seems to me that street skateboarding in downtown Tampa is more of a thing of the past. Other obvious street skating locations are college campuses. Like downtown Tampa many of the skate spots at the University of South Florida have been rigged with anti-skateboarding devices. Despite a lack of skateboarding presence on the campus I did notice an abundance of people riding long boards as a method of transportation and for riding down the parking garages on campus.

As shown in this paper, the skateboarding subculture that exists is a unique one. An unconventional set of values, style, and world view have resulted from the act of skateboarding that aren't commonly seen in the dominant culture. The subculture's values also differ from those seen in more typical sports in a sense that there is less emphasis placed on competition as well as an alternative masculinity. Unlike traditional sports, winning is not the driving force. Creativity and aesthetics play a large role, in a sense making it somewhat of an art form. Despite the internal stratifications that exist, making distinctions between the members of the subculture, they still have the same common goals and face the same challenges.

The negative stigma that is still attached to skateboarding even with its rise in popularity is challenge skateboarders must deal with. The negative view of skateboarding is can be seen just about anywhere in the form of signs prohibiting the activity or skate stoppers on benches and handrails. There is no denying the fact that skateboarding can cause damage to property though the stigma seems to result from not only that but a misunderstanding of the subculture by outsiders. This may be due in part to its inaccurate portrayal in popular culture as it is often displayed as a mindless and destructive activity. Perhaps non-skateboarders having a more accurate understanding of skateboarding would be of benefit to both of these groups.

“Understanding the culture of skateboarding can be insightful for politicians, adults, or scholars who seek to develop stronger relationships with young people.” (Moore) A better understanding could lead to less anti-authoritarianism among skateboarders and possibly remove that negative stigma it holds.

In some instances and effort is made to improve the relationship between skateboarders with the building of a skate park in hopes that it will contain skateboarding and keep it away from businesses. Though the efforts to contain skateboarding only to skate parks will never

succeed. Street skateboarding will always exist to some degree despite even attempts to stop it by means of surveillance and anti-skateboarding devices. “Skateboarding uses public space temporarily for unique and unintended purposes. This makes it a challenge for those who strive to contain, displace, and exclude them from general public space.” (Kato) Lack of understanding by outsiders can work to the skateboarders’ advantage to some degree in this aspect. Non-skateboarders don’t view architecture in the same manner that a skateboarder does and as long as there is architecture, skateboarders will figure out a creative way to use it for their own purposes.

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