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## **'Be a Pedestrian...or be a Skateboarder'**

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### **Abstract**

The title of this article comes from a skateboarding video called *Waiting for the World* (Blueprint 2000), and forms the starting point of the discussion. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a pedestrian not only as one who walks on foot. but also as 'one who is dull, prosaic, or uninspired.' Skateboarders - skaters or 'sk8ers' for short - see themselves in opposition to these ordinary people. What sets skaters apart from the rest of society, in their eyes and others', and what is the significance of this for their identity? The aim of this article is to investigate what it means to be and become a skateboarder in Sheffield. In order to do this I am going to look at the construction of skateboarders' identity - individual and collective - through mapping both the internal and external influences upon them. For the purposes of this research these influences on their identity can be arranged into four main categories, that form the basis of the analysis:

- Style, image and subcultural practices.
- The categorisation of skaters by skaters and others.
- The media, commercialisation and consumerism.
- The construction of space and belonging.

As well as looking at the specifics of skateboarders' identity, this research attempts to explain in more depth what skateboarding actually is. Is it a

lifestyle, a sport, a hobby, a subculture, or something not yet defined? This is a difficult area because there is no clear-cut answer. Even skaters themselves are not a hundred per cent sure about how to define the activity. In a beginner's guide to skateboarding it argues that:

'Skateboarding offers the same excitement as surfing and skiing. It has an advantage over these sports however, because it can be enjoyed by those who have no access to surf beaches or snow-covered slopes. It is an urban sport, offering an exhilarated mixture of speed, skill and fun' (Arnold 1977: 11).

However, it has been argued more recently that,

'a skateboard is no longer a piece of sporting equipment, like a tennis racket. Instead, it's more like an electric guitar, an instrument for aggressive, irreverent, spontaneous self-expression' (Beato 2001: 2).

This suggests that skateboarding has become not only a sport but also part of participants' identities, making it a relevant area to study in relation to social identity. I wanted to choose a research topic in which I could explore this sociological topic and I postulated that skateboarders are a group for whom one doesn't have to guess their identity. Whether someone is a skater or not is relatively easy to workout because they have a skateboard (unlike a music subculture, for example). Skateboarding has also had a recent increase in popularity:

'There's a skateboarding craze at the moment,' Ben says. 'Well to some it's a craze; to Sam it's a religion... ' (Bedell 2001: 1).

It seems you can't walk around town these days without coming across someone either on or carrying a skateboard; unless, of course, it's raining - which ruins your wheels - and which happens a lot in Sheffield! Another point is that skateboarders and their associated culture have been around since the 1960s, yet they are overlooked within academic work.

Before it is possible to assess where skateboarding stands today, it is important to take into account that skateboarding and its culture are not

new phenomena and are continually evolving, making it important to look at how they have developed historically.

### **'From surf to streets' (Borden 1998: 2)**

'The history of skateboarding is shrouded in mystery'. (*Sidewalk Surfer* 1996, cited in Borden 2001:13).

Nobody knows exactly when the first skateboard was produced. It consists of a deck (basically a plank of wood), two trucks (the axle mechanism), and four wheels. Skateboarding first originated around the mid-to late 1950s when children, and then surfers, attached roller skates, forming the trucks and wheels, to planks of 2 x 4 wood (Arnold 1977, BBC 2002, Borden 2001). Surfers could replicate surf moves on tarmac roads and banks when they couldn't take to the sea, hence the nickname 'sidewalk surfing':

'Through surf-related moves, surfers recombined body, board and terrain, simultaneously copying one activity (surfing) while initiating a second (skateboarding). The modernist space of suburbia was found, adapted and reconceived as another kind of space, as a concrete wave' (Borden 2001: 33).

At this time skateboarding was predominantly confined to the U.S. West Coast. The first commercial boards, produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s, looked very much like surfboards with a pointed front end, and using steel instead of the clay wheels found on the roller skates (Arnold 1977: 12).

By 1972-3, the second wave of skateboarding was taking off, with boards that look much like the ones today, with aluminium alloy trucks, steel axles, and urethane wheels (Borden 2001: 18). With the technology improving all the time, the sport was expanding across America and had become recognised in the U.K. and other parts of the world. Skaters were experimenting with the vertical walls of suburban backyard pools, initially riding around the pools in death-defying motorcyclist fashion and later travelling vertically up and down the sides of the pool. At this time, the 'frontside air' move was developed, meaning that skaters could lift off in the

air and produce spectacular moves at the top edge of the pool such as 'turns', 'grabs' (grabbing the board with your hands whilst in the air), and 'plants' (placing any part of your body on the top of the ramp or pool to create a pose) (Borden 2001: 20). Skateparks were also developed during this time and the first concrete European skatepark was opened in 1976. In 1977, even Prince Charles risked life and limb on a skateboard (BBC 2002):

'By 1977, skateboarding had turned into a \$400m a year business... Just a few years later, however, the boom ended. Skateparks shut down because they couldn't get insurance, equipment sales plummeted, and the money disappeared' (Beato 2001:3).

However, skateboarding hadn't completely disappeared and in the second half of the 1980s, it began its third wave. Boards became larger, wider and more rounded at both ends. The 'ollie' was invented, a skate move which involved flipping the board into the air by pushing down on the rear tail of the board, allowing for a lexicon of moves to be developed. The sport also became more street based, and confined 'not so much to the suburban drives of California but to the inner city cores of other cities worldwide' (Borden 1998: 2), as well as involving ramps and purpose built skateparks. This paved the way for how skateboarding looks today.

'But by 1994, skateboarding looked to be in a terminal state. Even Hawk, several times a world champion, was wondering what to do next for a living' (Martin 2002: 22).

Then, just as before, it bounced back and the fourth wave of skateboarding began. This time it was fresh, 'new school', and based mainly around technical 'streetstyle' skating (Borden 2001: 25). The boards had changed again: now they were slimmer and lighter with increased 'pop' (a technical term for the bounce in the board), making them perfect to develop more complicated streetstyle moves.

The main difference between this fourth wave and its predecessors was its backing by industry and commerce. Skateboarding is now a three billion

dollar a year industry (SPAUSA: 2001: 1), with a whole new range of manufacturers making boards, t-shirts, wheels, trucks, caps, wax, videos, and more. These include, Blueprint, Blind, Alien Workshop, Chocolate, Flip, Girl, World Industries, Element, Habitat, Shorty's, Toy Machine and Zoo York, to mention a few.

### **Skating in Sheffield**

Sheffield has quite a large skate scene with a variety of places to skate. There are two main skateparks, one at Devonshire Green in the City centre, and another in a converted warehouse called *The House*, not far out of the City centre near the Ski Village. The City Council are also considering plans for a third at Millhouses. There are a few skate shops in Sheffield. The main one, located near Devonshire Green, is called *Sumo*, which has its own skate team and is home to the internationally renowned pro skater Mark Baines. The City Council has also recently banned skateboarding in particular areas of the City centre.

All of this made Sheffield an interesting place to carry out my research. However, before exploring what it is like to be, and become, a skater in Sheffield, it is necessary to review the academic literature, in order to set my research within its theoretical context. Following that, I will explain why I chose to collect the information through interviews with the skateboarders themselves, and how I did this. Then I will present my results and the conclusions that can be drawn from the research, before offering some suggestions for further research about skateboarding.

In order to place my own research on skateboarders in context, it is important to look at several areas of academic work. These include:

- *Social identity*: What makes someone a skater, and why, and how much, does that impact on their identity?
- *Subcultures*: Previous research on youth cultures allows us to analyse the collective aspect of shared identity in a group such as that of

skateboarders. It will also help to eventually define what skateboarding is, a sport, a subculture or a lifestyle.

- *The construction of space*: Space is important to skaters, given the current local legislation banning skateboarding from many town centres across the U.K., including Sheffield.
- *Skateboarding*: This will help to place my research within what has already been done and pull the other reading into focus.

These areas of research build upon each other: first looking at the individual level, moving on to the interactional level, and finally looking at the institutional level of identity.

### **Social identity**

In order to study the social identity of skateboarders it is first essential to define social identity, and to look at how theorists have conceptualised its construction. The key questions are: what is your identity, why are we who we are, and what influences us to be like we are? A number of theorists have contributed to this line of inquiry, including George Herbert Mead (1934), Erving Goffman (1959), Fredrik Barth (1969) and Richard Jenkins (1996).

Mead (1934) argued that the self is socially constructed, created by taking on the roles of others within interaction. Goffman (1959) followed Mead to argue that the self is constructed within interaction with others, built upon language and facial and bodily communication, as well. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman used a 'dramaturgical metaphor', visualizing life as a stage, arguing that through role-playing social actors gain acceptance. 'The arts of impression management' are concerned with the relationship between the expression that one gives and the expression that one 'gives off' (Goffman 1959: 14). He went on to argue that this is done in two interaction regions: the 'front stage' and the 'back stage' where one learns to make a good impression in context (or 'frame'). In this context we can ask, what effect does impression

management have upon skateboarders? Do they, for example, prepare within a 'back stage' to become a skater on the 'front stage'?

Jenkins (1996) develops and combines these arguments to argue that the construction of identity is inherently a social process, which is fluid and open to interpretation and continues throughout our lives:

'Social identity is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)' (Jenkins 1996: 5).

Jenkins goes on to argue that the social construction of identity (self or social) is the result of the:

'synthesis of (internal) self definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others...the *internal - external dialectic of identification* as the process where by all identities – individual and collective – are constituted' (Jenkins 1996: 20).

The internal-external dialectic of identification operates on different levels: the individual order ('what-goes-on-in-their-heads'), the interaction order ('what-goes-on-between-people') and the institutional order ('ways-of-doing-things') (1997:56). These orders,

'are thoroughly intertwined with each other; occupying the same space and each made up of embodied, socialized, individuals' (Jenkins 1997: 63).

This does not mean that everyone's experiences are the same. The internal-external dialectic of identification operates on a continuum, and different degrees of internal and external influences effect individuals to differing degrees. Jenkins reminds the reader that in everyday life identity is complex. It would be impossible to look at every aspect of skaters' identity, because everyone is different. Throughout this study, however, I hope to touch on at least some of the things they hold in common. I will also use the concept of the internal-external dialectic to explore these common areas of skating from the point of view of skaters. What is it like to be and become a skateboarder in Sheffield?

It is clear so far that, 'Defining 'us' involves defining a range of "thems" also' (Jenkins 1996: 80). Even so, if each identity is individual, different from any other person, what is the point of studying groups, such as skateboarders? However, since '...identification is never a unilateral process, at least there is always an audience' (Jenkins 1997: 57), without at least resisting a given external categorisation one is, to a certain extent, accepting a prescribed identity. How do skaters, as a collective, see themselves, and do others see them in the same or a different light?

'...group identity is the product of collective internal definition. In our relationships with significant others we mobilise identifications of similarity and difference, and in the process, generate group identities' (Jenkins 1996:83).

Barth, in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), argued that in order to understand the construction of a social group it is necessary to analyse interaction across group boundaries. The boundary, and hence the group, may be perceived in very different terms, not only by the people on opposite sides of it, but also by different people on each side (see also Cohen, 1985).

Foucault, on the other hand, stresses categorisation - the external moment of the dialectic of identification - and the power of 'governmentality' within the modern state. The state is a powerful identifier not because it can create identities but because it has the material and symbolic resources to impose them. Thus:

'How one identifies oneself - and how far one is identified by others - may vary greatly from context to context: Self- and other-identification are fundamentally situational and contextual' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 14).

The difference between social identities is who is doing the perceiving, and who is doing the constructing. Whose definition counts most, yours or others? (Jenkins 1996: 52). The questions this raises for my research draw attention to how categorisation affects skaters, not only through their

categorisation by the state, adults and the media, but also by themselves and their peers.

Similar issues have been explored within the labelling perspective in the sociology of deviance by Becker (1963), Lemert (1972), Matza (1969), and others. They argued that it is the reactions of others that defines an act as deviant and labels those responsible deviant:

*'Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders...The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied: deviant behavior is behavior that people so label'* (Becker 1963: 9).

This prompts the question: are skateboarders deviant first, or do they become so subsequently, as a consequence of the responses of others? Are moral expectations largely shaped by the reactions of others, causing the individual's self identity to become constructed through the acceptance of and/or resistance to labels?

Labels may be hugely powerful in shaping our sense of who we are, in relation to significant others and to the wider society, and may be defining influences upon one's self identity. My questions, therefore, are whether, and in what ways, has this happened to skaters in Sheffield? Skateboarders are increasingly becoming banned from many places causing them to become criminalized, but do they see what they are doing in this light?

### **Subcultures**

It can be argued that youth subcultures constitute a group that is labelled from within by members and labelled from outside by others such as, peers, the media, adults, and the City Council. But are skaters a youth subculture?

*'Youth culture is historical and contemporary, it creates the opportunity for young people to forge roles and make identities. It enables degrees of*

differing participation at different ages and at different periods in young people's lives' (Blackman and France 2001: 181).

Youth is an interesting topic, because:

'...adolescence has been invented to create breathing space between the golden age of 'innocent' childhood and the realities of adulthood' (Skelton and Valentine 1998: 4; see also Roche and Tucker 1997: 18; Blackman and France 2001: 186).

It is an ambiguous time, as one becomes trapped between two categories, the adult and the child, the boundaries of which are fuzzy and blurred: '...the adolescent is lost between, belonging nowhere, being no one' (Skelton and Valentine 1998: 6).

But youth is not a uniform phenomenon. A variety of theorists have commented on the construction, values and attitudes of different youth subcultures. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (CCCS) major work was *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1976). The contributors' aim was to deconstruct 'youth culture' into different subcultures, and assess the dialectic between youth and youth market, in order to show how youth subcultures are connected to class relations. Defining youth subcultures as tightly bounded smaller groups within the dominant culture, focused around distinctive activities and focal concerns of the group (Hall and Jefferson 1976: 14), they argued that collective working class youth subcultures, such as Mods, Teddy Boys and Skinheads, were a response to changes in society, and a different handling of the raw material of social existence:

'Sub-cultures capture the social, political and economic spirit of the time and translate what is going on around them into music, fashion, behaviour etc they use to identify themselves' (Roche and Tucker 1997: 144).

Willis (1990) built on this to argue that youth culture in general, not just subcultures, provides a forum for creative consumption. MacKay agrees and argues that identity is expressed through consumerism (1997: 4). Can this be seen to be happening in the culture of skateboarding?

Hebdige (1979) also argued that youth subcultures were oriented around style: objects gained new meanings through recontextualisation, allowing members of a subculture to identify themselves as different from the rest of society. He rejected the concept of homogeneity - the primary appeal of punk subculture, for example, was 'its lack of meaning...its potential for deceit' (Hebdige 1979: 117) - arguing that subcultures produce not one but a range of meanings for any object or text. He also argued that, 'the emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press' (Hebdige 1979: 92), thus connecting with Stanley Cohen's study of the creation of Mods and Rockers, who argued that the media makes 'folk devils' out of those labelled as outsiders, i.e. working class adolescents, which in turn transforms the situation into a potential threat to the wider society, demanding greater social control mechanisms (Cohen 1972: 1, 77, 91-92).

These theories of subculture can be criticised in a variety of ways that are relevant here:

- Firstly, they ignore the possibility of middle class subcultures. This is especially important when looking at skaters, as they are apparently predominantly from this background.
- Secondly, what happens when youths go home? Do they stop being punks or skateboarders?
- Thirdly, wider social issues such as race, gender and sexuality also tend to be overlooked (Roche and Tucker 1997). Research into subcultural groups tends to ignore the women who participate in them and, to a certain extent (except McRobbie and Garber 1975) ignore the possibility of female-based subcultures (Bennett 1999: 602; Skelton and Valentine 1998: 11). Are subcultures really predominantly male? In the case of skateboarding this seems to be true: there are few professional women skaters and it is not often you see a girl on a skateboard. What effect does this have on skateboarders' attitudes towards female skaters?

- Fourthly, internal differences within subcultures are ignored and the people within them are represented as the same. I hope to show what all skaters hold in common with each other and to assess whether there are many differences within the wider genre of skaters.
- Finally, Roche and Tucker comment that ' "youth" tends to be seen as a problem. Young people are beset by predominantly negative images, are seen as either a source of trouble or in trouble' (Roche and Tucker 1997: 1).

However, the subcultural tradition does offer insights into how young people's activities have become the means by which youth can express itself in a way that is less externally controlled by the adult world:

'Suburban culture means achievement at school, responsible family and emotional relationships, commitment to careers and the constructive use of leisure. Street culture becomes a mythical anti-thesis to this' (Brake 1985: 190).

Within this mythical realm, young people are able to take control of one aspect of their lives, their 'free time':

'It is because they lack power that the young account for their lives in terms of play, focus their politics on leisure' (Brake 1985: 189).

So, is skateboarding seen as a release from adult culture, a place where the young carry out their lives within play and focus on the politics surrounding skateboarding?

From another perspective, Bennett has criticised subculture concepts as too fixed; more fluidity is needed, allowing for the movement of people in and out of the group without its disappearance. He offers Maffesoli's notion of 'neo-tribes' as an alternative, tribal identities expressing the more temporary nature of modern collective identities (Bennett 1999: 605). This connects with the theories of groups and boundaries of Barth (1969) and Cohen (1985). Skateboarders are a group that has now survived for many

years. Could it be that skateboarding is best understood not as a subculture but as a contemporary tribe?

From a different point of view again, Lury (1996) argues that the young became recognized as 'youth' in part because they became a significant consumer market. What are the effects of external definitions of subcultures by the media and commercial corporations? What are the effects of the media and commercialisation upon skating culture? Have the media, for example, spread the word and turned local into global culture?

It has been argued that, 'under late capitalism youth culture becomes available to more young people making it a symbolic set of resources that can aid identity and critical awareness' (Blackman and France 2001: 189). On the other hand, however, these choices are in part provided by and deliberately produced for the mass market, posing problems for the authenticity of youth cultures (Brake 1985: 184). Klein, in *No Logo*, argues that even the so-called alternative cultures are subject to commercialisation to the extent that they are 'selling out' as they are still being lived: 'cool hunters' are the legal stalkers of youth culture, searching out those ever-new marketable fashions (Klein 2000: 72). Marginality attracts attention due to its difference and then becomes a marketable possibility (Blackman and France 2001: 191).

Is this what is happening to skaters? Do they consider themselves as part of the mainstream? Or is it the case that:

'effective sub-cultures are a creation of young people, and they serve a purpose for young people' (Roche and Tucker 1997: 148).

Perhaps young people are not passive or unthinking consumers.

### **Social space**

'It is on the streets that most young people make themselves visible in their attempts to express their independence from adult society; it is 'the streets'

that enable the creation of these cultural activities' (Roche and Tucker 1997: 144).

Spaces and places are the realms in which we experience life, and are the sites of struggle between different groups and their interpretations of their uses and meanings:

'the ordering of space and time results in the stigmatising of some human activities and cultures because they do not fit those modes of order preferred by the dominant society' (Sibley 1999: 135).

Urry adds another dimension to this, arguing that spaces are not simply given but are imbued with memory traces (1995: 24, also see Mackay 1997: 160), connecting with Jenkins' argument that 'space makes no sense outside of time' (1996: 27). Memory is embodied within the self and:

'each individual self is the embodied centre of a social universe of self-and-others, the locus of perpetual internal-external comings and goings, transactional inputs and outputs, some of which are incorporated by the self and some which are not' (Jenkins 1996: 47).

Memories are also embedded within buildings, which therefore take on a different significance from that intended by the architect and are normally more appreciated in passing than as the focus of our attention (Urry 1995: 24). Skateboarders, for example, seem to be more interested in the external features of buildings, such as steps, handrails and gaps, than their function or status. In addition, Lynch argued that spaces are connected to our environmental images and soaked in memories and meanings:

'the world may be organised around a set of focal points, or be broken into named regions, or be linked by remembered routes... potential clues which a man may pick out to differentiate his world...' (Lynch 1960: 7).

For the 'normal' everyday person, these clues maybe paths, landmarks, or districts. Is this also true for skateboarders, however, or do they interpret the city in a different way? Studies of the use of space have:

'highlighted the way that public space is produced as an adult space. Studies of teenagers suggest that the space of the street is often the only autonomous

space that young people are able to carve out for themselves and that hanging around, and lurking about, on the streets, in parks and shopping malls, is one form of youth resistance (conscious and unconscious) to adult power.' (Corrigan, 1979, cited in Skelton and Valentine 1998: 7).

Owen adds to this, arguing that 'the landscape is a reflection of the people that reside upon it; a representation of their values and needs' (1997: 1). How does this connect back to skateboarders? Do they see public space as an adult space, or do they contest that through resistance?

## **Skateboarding**

'...youth cultures claim their own spaces too, and may be as excluding and defensive about them as any nation state' (Skelton and Valentine 1998: 128).

Academic studies of skateboarding tend to be concentrated around the discipline of Architecture, focusing on the use and production of social space and the need for specific skateboarding facilities. Iain Borden, in *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the City*, argues that skateboarders reinterpret the city through skating, thus creating super architectural space:

'...space is produced by that series of dots, through movement and collective evolution. Similarly, the skater's spatial production is a space produced by the skater, out of the dynamic intersection of body, board and terrain' (Borden 2001: 96).

For skateboarders there are two types of space: (1) the realm of constructed space, 'given' in the form of a skatepark, and (2) the 'free' hardware of the city. Ward notes:

'when they [skateboards] first appeared in London, I wondered where on earth they could be used, since there is no room for them in the street. But slowly, in the crowded city, the skateboarders have sought out places smooth enough and sloping enough to develop the art...News of usable sites passes from mouth to mouth among the members of the skateboard cult' (Ward 1990: 113-4).

Because of this, skateboarders have not gone unnoticed by the general public. Adults see skateboarders and other teenagers as a threat to the

public space, and subject them to regulatory regimes, and surveillance. It could, for example, be argued that through recent skating by-laws in Sheffield and other parts of the UK councils are trying to squeeze them out of public space.

In conclusion, the literature suggests a number of questions to explore, in connection with the social identity of skateboarders:

- Why and what makes someone a skater, and how does that impact on their identity?
- What is skateboarding: a sport, a subculture, a lifestyle, or a contemporary tribe?
- What is it like to be, and become, a skateboarder in Sheffield?
- How do skaters (as a collective) see themselves, and do others see them in the same or a different light?
- How has categorisation affected skaters, not only through their categorisation by the state, adults and the media but also by themselves and their peers?
- Are skaters deviant first or do they become so subsequently, as a consequence of the behaviour of others?
- Is skateboarding really predominantly male dominated? What effect does this have on the skateboarders' attitudes towards female skaters?
- What do skaters hold in common with each other, and what are the differences between them?
- Is skateboarding seen as a release from adult culture, a space where the young live out their lives in play, and focus on the politics surrounding skateboarding?
- Do skaters accept public space as adult space, or do they contest it through resistance?

### **The research**

Studies of subcultures have generally used participant observation, collecting ethnographic data. Given the time restraints of the research, and the practical issues surrounding carrying out participant observation -

mainly that I can't skate - this method was unsuitable. I chose to undertake semi-structured interviews.

How did I go about constructing a sample of participants to interview? The first step in sampling is to define the population being studied (Gilbert 1993: 69). In this case, it was skateboarders living in Sheffield at the time of the study, aged 14-22 (not excluding students). It was impossible to conduct a random, representative sample - there was no possible sampling frame available - so a non-probability sampling method was adopted. This means that statistical generalisation from the data are impossible (Robson 1993: 140). However, it does give insight into the thoughts and actions of the group, in this case skaters.

Using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, I spent time at skateparks, and other skating spots, talking and getting to know people. These were easily found: I knew where to go in the City centre, and there are a multitude of helpful skateboarding materials which serve as a directory for skating spots all over the country. These included hints in magazines and videos, and specific guides such as the book, *Spots* (Barstard 2001), and the *Knowhere* website (<http://www.knowhere.co.uk>). In order to reduce the bias of the sample I tried to make sure it was not purposive, and not to look for certain 'types' of skater. I tried to be as judgement-free as possible. Ultimately, those who were included in the research boiled down to who was willing and available at the time.

Snowballing was helpful when dealing with elusive groups of skaters. Also, the weather was bad at the time of my research, resulting in a lack of visible skateboarders. Therefore, the indoor skatepark *The House* became a valuable place to go. This may have excluded people from the sample, making it less likely to be representative of the population being studied, but it was generally less intrusive and helped to gain the trust of the skaters.

I conducted 10 interviews with ordinary skaters (not pro or sponsored), each lasting 45 minutes to an hour on average. I also held prearranged informal chats with 'expert witnesses', including Simon Ogden of Sheffield City Council (about the development of the Devonshire Green Skatepark), and employees of *Sumo* skate shop and *The House* skatepark. The small size of the group of skaters interviewed is problematic with respect to generalisation. However, let us remember Becker's argument that,

'what we are presenting is not a distorted view of "reality", but the reality which engages the people we have studied, the reality they create by their interpretation of their experience and in terms of which they act' (Becker 1969: 174).

There are many different types of interview. I opted for a semi-structured, open, informal and in-depth approach. This allowed me to compare interviews, and left room, if needed, for probing and developing interesting areas that I might not have thought about before. I wanted a certain amount of flexibility, so that I could change the order and focus of the interview depending on the participant.

Face-to-face interviews also allow the analysis of non-verbal clues that may give messages which help in understanding the verbal response, possibly changing or even, in extreme cases, reversing its meaning to be picked up on (Robson 1993: 229). I chose not to use an even more unstructured approach because this would make it more difficult to analyse the results and might generate a lot of useless information (May 1997: 124).

Open questions were deployed within the interviews in order to gain access to people's reflections, experiences, thoughts, feelings and comments on particular issues concerning skateboarders and their identities:

'Open-ended questions have a number of advantages: they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge; they encourage and help establish rapport;

and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes.' (Cohen and Manion 1994:227).

Open-ended questions allow for probing, clarification of questions, development of answers to questions and make the interview more conversational, helping to build rapport with the interviewees. They can result in unexpected answers and therefore offer a 'truer' picture of the area in study.

As well as the interviews, other, more informal, ethnographic methods were employed. These included observation and some participation in skateboarding related activities, such as:

- Talking to, and just observing, skateboarders and their friends at the two Sheffield skateparks, Devonshire Green and *The House*.
- Taking photographs of aspects of skateboarding.
- The use of websites, such as [www.thehouseskatepark.co.uk](http://www.thehouseskatepark.co.uk) (for *The House* Skatepark), [www.thesafewaymob.co.uk](http://www.thesafewaymob.co.uk) (set up by local skateboarders that use Safeway as their hangout; their rivals at Tesco can also be accessed through their site), [www.Sumostore.com](http://www.Sumostore.com) (the main skateboarding supplier in Sheffield), and others.
- Collecting newspaper cuttings from local newspapers which helped me to gain an insight into the way skateboarders are represented within local press.
- Playing Tony Hawk's *Pro Skater 2*, a game for *Playstation*. This game has arguably been one of the most influential things in shaping what contemporary skateboarding.
- Reading skateboard magazines such as *Sidewalk Surfer* and *Document Skateboard*.
- Watching videos such as *411* (a skateboarding magazine on film), and the Blueprint video *Waiting for the World*.

The information gathered from these sources helped me devise my interview questions, allowed me to meet more skateboarders to interview,

and enabled me to gain more of an overall feel for what skating was about than I would have just from talking to the skaters themselves.

I felt it was important to test the water, before conducting the main interviews, in order to refine which questions to include and not to include. I began with a conceptual framework derived from the literature review and used this alongside other information gained about skaters from the sources above. I also talked to skaters to help develop a preliminary set of questions. To further refine and test these questions I had help from of my brother, who is a skateboarder himself (but not in Sheffield) and conducted a pilot interview, lasting about an hour and a half. I then revised the questions: adding more as well as making them less leading and easier to understand.

The younger skaters I interviewed needed to be prompted more, while the older skaters tended to answer the questions before I had even asked them. The possibility of intimidation by the Mini-Disc recorder was real, but once the interview got going, interviewees may have forgotten that the recorder was even there. In order to make sure that as little as possible was left out within the interview - due to my preconceptions about what is important to the identity of a skateboarder - I asked at the end if there was anything they would like to add. If there was, I then added this topic to my interview guide as I went along. This might be bad practice, but I felt these extra questions could provide extra insights I had not previously considered. What was important to me, in research terms, might not have been important to the skaters.

Another consideration was my role as interviewer, and interviewer bias. Attitudes to women in a male-dominated sport or subculture could have created an intimidating atmosphere. It is not necessarily inclusive of women, who can be seen as 'groupies.' A lot of the interviewees were surprised at my knowledge of skateboarding especially because I didn't skate myself. Also, because I am in the age category I studied, I might be

more empathetic to the needs and experiences of skateboarders than someone older and supposedly more 'objective'.

In order to build up rapport with the interviewees, I conducted the interviews in situations where the skateboarders would feel most comfortable, asking them to choose their homes, my house or neutral places such as coffee shops or the union workspace. At the start of each interview I explained what I was doing and asked if it was still alright to go ahead. I then started the interview off with some introductory questions, leaving the more sensitive questions until later. Hopefully, this helped them to feel more relaxed.

Finally it is important to be aware of ethical considerations: to respect the wishes of those involved, to weigh up the need for reliable, truthful accounts, and to take into consideration subjects' rights and values (Cohen and Manion 1994: 347). It is important to maintain anonymity, by the changing of names, or to ask for consent to the printing of names in the report and the recording of interviews. Ethics in accessing the groups must be taken into consideration, too: it is necessary to 'phone or e-mail participants to check if it is alright to visit them before doing so. One should always have respect for privacy and assure participants that if at any time they don't want to answer a question then they don't have to.

### **Words of the street: becoming a skater**

*'It affects who I talk to and who I meet, when I eat, when I sleep, stuff like that.'* (Tom)

Why, and what, makes someone a skater, and how does it impact on their identity? The main reasons the interviewees gave for starting to skate were generally centred around their knowing other people who were already skateboarders, their need to get out of the house, and that they thought it looked cool:

*'In the longer term I suppose just because it was cool, like when I was at primary school some of my mates did it but then I moved schools and didn't give it any thought for years. I mean, I had a little one when I was a kid, like one of those little plastic thin ones but it was when I came to university really, I kind of knew the culture a bit but err I just thought it was cool. I met a couple of people that did it and a friend of mine who was quite hefty was out skating one day and he ended up knocking over this poor old lady, and I think it kind of shook him up a bit so anyway, he ended up giving me his board and it is just since then I have loved it and gone out all the time.'* (Joel)

Joe added to this:

*'There was this guy called Matt Drake and one time I saw him skating and, um, he was awesome, and I thought it was the coolest thing in the world, and I started skateboarding. I just wanted to be like Matt Drake.'* (Joe)

This suggests that the attitudes of their peer group vastly influenced them to become skaters. Within the interaction order (Goffman 1959), people take on board the attitudes and actions of others in forming their own social identity, exemplifying the external movement of the internal-external dialectic (Jenkins 1996).

However, as Craib (1998) points out, it is also important to look into the internal dimension of emotions and the unconscious. How do skaters feel about skateboarding? What emotions does it provoke? What is their *Skate of Mind* (a skate shop in Covent Garden, London)? All of the interviewees said that skateboarding made them feel as though they were achieving something out of nothing. Something that takes a lot of effort to execute, as well as offering frustration when something goes wrong with the trick: 'Everyone has good days and bad days.' (John) It made them feel:

*'Happy, fun, a good laugh, pain, anger, annoyance and sadness if your board breaks. A whole range.'* (Matt)

And also involved:

*'Immense concentration, time just flies by, rush, adrenaline, exciting, dangerous. It is kind of a high, like a totally different place to be in your head, you just kind of feel like alive. [laughs]'* (Joel)

As well as the emotions produced by skateboarding, what are skaters' justifications for continuing to skate? What are the uses, if any, of skateboarding? Again the interviewees tended to agree with one another in that skateboarding is fun, easy transport, exercise, good for you, and a way of meeting other people:

*'It's a good mode of transport for me. It gets me everywhere, 'cause I hate buses, they suck arse. So I skate everywhere. The next thing is going out having a laugh, having a good time going out doing some tricks, stuff like that... Just chilling out with friends, you know, just chilling out down the car park, pulling some tricks. It's fun mostly, and getting out of the house.'* (Joe)

This links to with Becker's (1963) argument that becoming a recreational deviant involves three stages: (1) learning the technique, (2) learning to perceive the effects, and (3) learning to enjoy the effects and justifying your actions. Replace 'deviant' with 'skateboarder', in order to shed light on why, and how, one might become a skater in the first place.

### **Being a skater in Sheffield**

What do skateboarders hold in common with each other, and what are the differences between them? Is skateboarding a collective or an individual activity? The general consensus of the interviewees was that skateboarding 'is definitely a social activity' (Ben). However, it also seems to be individual at the same time:

*'I often just go outside my house and practice by myself, and if I am skating to college, or whatever. But mainly I have to say that I like skating with other people, you just go and hang out for ages, that can be really cool. People can teach other people, but when it comes down to it you have got to learn it yourself, that's what I found. It is easier to work it out for your self. The first time I learned to land a heelflip I didn't even realise what I did differently. It just comes with practice.'* (Joe)

*'I think I am a bit of a freak. I like to go out skating on my own, because if you are going out for a street skate then, on my own I can dictate where I go, how fast I go, and how long I stay at certain spots... It is also social, because you buzz off each other. If you didn't go out with other people, then I would probably end up stopping after a while, because you wouldn't get any better. They give you tips and stuff. I don't know you just enjoy it better.'* (Joel)

The performative side of skateboarding - others watch while one does one's trick - links with what Goffman (1959) argues, and shows that skateboarding is, in part, developed within two regions, 'front stage' and 'back stage'. This also connects back to the reasons for starting to skateboard. Does this, however, mean that skateboarding is a competitive sport?

*'For me, when I am out doing things, whatever the crazy trick is, whatever I am trying to lob myself off, I just do it for myself.'* (Neil)

Most of the interviewees argued that skateboarding is generally only competitive in the sense that you are competitive with yourself:

*'It is always about your own standard you know, I am damn well going to do a kickflip, and yer, there are competitions, but I think generally people aren't too interested in that. I think it's more for pros, you know, who are really good and enter competitions and stuff.'* (Brendan)

*'Everyone encourages each other and it is a nice learning atmosphere.'*  
(John)

Joe, however, offered a different standpoint from the rest of the interviewees:

*'Very much. So everyone is, like, I want to be better than him, he wants to be better than me. But it is, like, we are all better at different things, so it doesn't really matter. You want to be as good as other people, but everybody has like a different style. It is kind of competitive and not.'* (Joe)

Skateboarding can be an individual activity as well as part of a larger group at the same time. This supports Brake's argument (1985) that youth culture offers a reference point for the development of an individual identity.

However, is a person's identity as a skateboarder permanent or transitional? A 'lifestyle' or just a 'phase'? The skateboarders interviewed tended to feel as though *'You are always a skater'* (Matt), or that, *'Most of the people I know have been skating for years and years'* (Ben):

*'It is incredibly addictive actually... When I can't skate, or I don't have my board, I dream about doing tricks and dream about different places to skate. You always want to do better and you always want to do more. You always want to find a better place to skate. I think I would just miss the enjoyment of it and everything about it.'* (Joel)

However, it seems as though this is not true for all skaters:

*'...three types of skater. There are, like, the people who quit and quit forever, then there is, like, the ones that stay in it for ages and ages, and then there are, like, the people that keep coming back to it. I quit before for a while, but then I came back to it. I can see myself sticking with it now. It's getting over, like, the first initial slump where you can't even ollie up a curb and everyone else is doing kickflips to nose stalls, and you're just, like, yer,*

*right! It depends when you skate, how long you skate, and whether you have people to go with and stuff. ' (Joe)*

Continuing to be a skater is connected to learning the moves and style. Skateboarding is a very visual sport and as well as learning from other skaters, aids such as videos and magazines (for example, 'The Knowledge' section in *Sidewalk Surfer*) not only help to learn the tricks, they also help to give an insight into the cultural practices of skateboarding:

*'...you can watch them when it is raining. It helps to give more of that collective feeling and understand who you are more, as a skater. It helps you to understand what the whole image is, where it's from, and what it's about It inspires you for your own style, and you know everyone knows which skaters. they like the style of, and which tricks and where to go... Sometimes you might not have been skating much, or you have had a bad skate, and a week goes by and you randomly watch a video or read a magazine and just suddenly you are like, oh man, this is so amazing, and you are just inspired to go and skate. You are well up for it.' (Joel)*

*'I mostly look at the pictures in Sidewalk. I read them mostly to find out about the latest gear. Everyone looks through the magazines and plans out their boards, like ahead, and it turns out they never get that one.' (Henry)*

One interviewee even went as far to say that the 'Skateboarding videos are the scene...' (Matt). This again connects with with Becker's argument (1963: 46), that in order to become a deviant one must first learn the technique. Once skaters have learnt the moves they are more likely to stick with the activity and make it part their lifestyle. Pro skaters represent this end of the continuum and three of the interviewees hoped to do this in the future:

*'Mark Baines, that's his job, he is a professional skater. I think I will do that when I leave school. The skating life for many people, especially in Britain,*

*would just be having a job in a skate shop or something, that meant you could just go skating whenever you want.'* (Ben)

One of the people who works at *Sumo*, Sheffield's main skate shop, said:

*'What is happening with skaters is this continuing cycle of a 20 per cent core of skaters that will always skate, and an 80 per cent periphery of skaters that are in it for the fad.'*

In this sense, it could be argued that my sample of skaters is biased - to the core - and that it is skaters who are more into skateboarding that are more likely to be interviewed.

Having established that skateboarding tends to be a collective activity, are there no divisions within it? One pro skater argues that:

*'All skateboarders are created with the equal opportunity to become unequal'* (Steve Caballero, 441VM, issue 31).

One of the questions posed here is whether skateboarding is really male dominated? This seems to be true: there are few professional women skaters and it is not often you see a girl on a skateboard. What effect does this have on the skateboarders' attitudes towards female skaters? Most of the interviewees saw girls as, 'groupies, hanging around the skatepark to pick up guys' (John), and argued that girls found it harder to skate due to the pain involved and the 'fear of the fall' (Neil). Therefore, skateboarding is seen as more of a spectator sport for girls:

*'I knew a girl that skated, but she gave up because she's a girl. She found it harder than everyone else it seemed...more scared of falling over.'* (Brendan)

*'I know maybe one or two girls that have boards, but I don't think I would really call them skaters because they can't ollie [laughs]...I don't think it is a*

*sexist sport or activity, I think more and more girls are doing it and I think the guys are happy for that, but, for a start, it is really painful especially when you are learning. I think that probably puts a lot of girls off, and it is quite an aggressive thing to do.'* (Matt)

*'My mate Owen's woman only skates to (a) piss me off and (b) be with Owen all the time.'* (Joe)

It is important to acknowledge that my results here might be unreliable, due to being female myself. It would be interesting to find out whether a male researcher would collect the same results.

### **Style and image**

*'Before it used to be skateboarders in a little category of their own, but now, there is so many skaters that they have split.'* (Brendan)

Other divisions between skaters appear to centre around style and image. Subcultural theorists such as Hebdige (1979), Hall and Jefferson (1975) and Willis (1990) have argued that the collective social identity of the subculture is expressed through style. Based on this research, I suggest that skaters are categorised by other skaters on the basis of a number of different stylistic and image-related factors. There are many types of skaters and one skater can fall into one or a number of them:

*'There are loads and loads, absolutely tons, of different types of skaters. Metal, punk, hip-hoppers, tech, gnarly, skatepark skaters, vert, street. The list goes on there are loads of different types.'* (Tom)

The first item that affects the image and style of a skater is their board. From the interviews, it appears that the importance given to the board is generally more centred on technical quality than the brand name:

*'People set up their boards for different things. I have like, low trucks and small wheels for tech skating. If I was to have higher trucks, you get more pop, like jump, and gnarly skaters have, like, more of that kind of a set up. Tech skaters have more of a lower set up. It is not strictly true, but you can kind of tell what sort of a skater they are from their set up and, like, how mashed their boards are. So, like, if the sides are really puffed out, you can tell that they don't land flips much, and if the base is all starched you can tell that they can do noseslides and tailsides, or a scrap mark at the back of the tail means you are pretty lame at doing stairs. Skaters like the feel of certain boards.'* (Joe)

*'I have a Blueprint...I find their boards really cool. They are pretty durable, but usually I skate Alien Workshops, because they have the best feel and I like the shape, symmetrical.'* (Matt)

*'If a skater is deemed not to have a 'proper' board, e.g. from All Sports or other sports shops, not a specific skate shop then, you are going to get the piss taken out of you.'* (Ben)

The brand of board is still important in some respects, as technical quality has connotations with respect to brand, and half of the ten skaters I interviewed currently skated *Blueprint* boards:

*'Blueprint every time. It's all about the cost and they are British, which is good to support them so the scene gets better over here.'* (Neil)

*'...my dream board would be Royal trucks, Bones Swiss bearings, maybe, and then, like, say Accel wheels and Alien Workshop limited edition board. It just doesn't happen 'cause you never have enough money.'* (Joe)

It is now possible to get boards with rock band names on them, made by proper skateboard manufactures, such as *Korn* boards by *Shortys*. Joel deduces from this that brands are probably more important,

'...for the younger skaters, like. Yer, if I go to the skatepark fairly often, a lot of the younger skaters will ask me what board I have, but I am not really too fussed about it. I would rather have a good board, I am not a labels guy.' (Joel)

Clothes and music matter, too. In 1975, the Z-Boys 'rolled around the freestyle platform that had been set up for their competition looking anything but free or stylish in their tight gym shorts and crisp white slacks' (Beato 2001: 1). However, it seems that, because of the increase in the number of skateboarders, style and image have become more important in classifying different types of skaters:

*'Tony Hawks Pro Skater on the Playstation, like, brought it to a wider audience recently, but it started its increase before then, with a lot of bands, punk and ska bands, skateboarding and people think this is cool, so they took up skateboarding, and then obviously one thing lead to another and they told their friends, and they told their friends, and it grew, and then, err, nu-metal came out and it kind of became a thing from that, like, Limp Bizkit and Fred Durst and OPM and all that bullshit!' (Joe)*

'Now  
are  
in  
town,



there  
shops  
every

*skateparks are cropping up everywhere. Shit skateparks are cropping up everywhere. People are just, you know, there are loads of new skaters*

*thinking they are Tony Hawk or whatever. Rodney Mullen is the real hero of skateboarding but Tony Hawk is worshipped by every non-skateboarder there is.'* (Tom)

*'The X-Games were on TV and I think it became really cool and a lot of companies cashed in on it, even the BBC has got a little skate ramp slot in between programmes, and it is just people cashing in on the image. I think because it has come from such an underground background, which is a really cool thing, I think it's been, you know, cashed in on by advertisers and stuff, to put forward an image when they don't understand it at all.'* (Joel)

On the one hand this was interpreted by interviewees as, 'Good, because people get into skating, lots of little kids and then they buy the boards and then the industry grows' (Ben). On the other hand, however, this means that 'You get overcrowding in parks' (Brendan). This increased popularity of skateboarding it has caused greater internal categorisation within the skateboarding group, through style, image, and musical choice:

*'It is just one thing that I have noticed, these little Goth skaters that go around wearing Slipknot hoodies and stuff, they don't seem to be in it for the skating and no one likes them really. It's like a fashion accessory to have a skateboard under their arm, no one really likes them. But there's a lot of them, so it doesn't really matter. They can hang around together.'* (Ben)

*'If you looked at me, you would think I am a hip-hop skater, from the way I dress, because it is more clean cut and I am not wearing black nail varnish, or have those silly little badges all over my bag [laughs]. Stupid little things like that, or blue tint in my hair and stuff, wearing eyeliner and going out with many holes in your like jumpers and stuff.'* (Joe)

*'There are skaters that just listen to one type of music, like hip-hop or punk, but I think you will find that a lot of skaters listen to a wide range of music. I think it depends on the type you like to listen to whilst skating.'* (Joe)

Due to the small number of people I interviewed, it is not possible to define tightly the different groups within skateboarding. This would be an interesting line of inquiry for further research. Despite these divisions of style and image, Joel and others claimed that:

*'Skateboarding is a really all embracing thing. It is a really all accepting sport. But, yer, divisions about, music, style, clothing. There isn't really a skater, there are just all kinds of people that like skating and for various reasons... You can go to a skatepark and chat to anyone and they won't look down on you because of race or age or ability or sex or anything. I have seen eleven year olds getting respect from twenty-eight year olds for doing a trick at the skatepark.'* (Joel)

This complements Bennett's argument (1999), about the need to see contemporary groups as more fluid than allowed for by the tightly bound category of 'subculture', encompassing separate groups and classifications within a tribal identity; in this case, including all types of skateboarders. However, my observations suggest that, despite these differences between styles, all skateboarders tend to dress in a similar fashion: baggy trousers, skate shoes, hoodies and a cap. (Borden 2001: 169).

Bennett (1999) argues that subcultures don't grow from their own seed, but are influenced by the media and consumerism, posing a question about how much choice is actually free of the market (Klein 2001)? What consequences has this had for skateboarders, and do they consider themselves part of the mainstream? Or has mainstream fashion enveloped the skater image and style?

*'Like my mate Simon, who has like never skateboarded before, but you would think he was a skateboarder from looking at him, because he wears,*

*like, all the clothes and shoes. But that is because he is into punk and all that.'* (Joe)

*'My first pair of skate shoes I bought in All Sports. I am a big Vans type of person, even though they have sold out loads. I mean you see so many people down the street walking around in Vans...'* (Neil)

*'Skateboarding requires balance, deft footwork and more than a little attitude. Fortunately for the rest of us, none of these attributes are necessary to look like a skateboarder - all you need is a pair of cool name brand flat shoes, a short-sleeve checked cotton shirt and the baggiest trousers available, perhaps accompanied by a low-hanging key chain.'* (BBC 2002)

The skaters I interviewed seemed to be split down the middle, between those who wear labels and those who don't:

*'It is like the stuff I wear. If I was a pro skater, then I would skate for Vans or Axion, Alien Workshop boards because they are my favourite, and like Royal trucks because they are awesome. So basically people are collecting the stuff they would like to be pro for, you see.'* (Matt)

*'It is important to me, because I won't wear some of the bigger brands, just because of what they stand for and what they mean. I don't like the whole commercial thing and I don't want skateboarding to become commercial... I don't want to cash in on the whole, oh look at me I am wearing skate shoes, I am cool. I am going to buy some skate shoes because I like them.'* (Dave)

Sometimes interviewees who said they were not into labels were, in fact, wearing labels themselves. As one told me: 'Skate labels cover up true ownership. For example DC shoes are owned by Nike.' (Neil). Authenticity is sustained through:

*'the magic of peer-to-peer distribution – it worked in freestyle sport cultures, mainly because the promoters were their friends...'* (Klein 2000: 80)

The industry is fooling consumers, keeping the image apparently underground and the ownership local when this isn't always true (Borden 2001: 159). Skaters feel they are supporting the scene, something which connects back to comments about *Blueprint* boards, earlier. In Sheffield *The House* flyer says: 'Owned by Skaters, Run by Skaters', and *Sumo* espouses the same ethos. On the other hand, that youth today are far from passive consumers can be seen through the elaboration of one style into many different sub-categories of skateboarders.

### **The labelled skater**

As well as categorising each other internally, skateboarders are also categorised externally by a number of varying groups, including the media, the general public and their peers: group identification always implies social categorisation (Jenkins 1996: 89). How do skaters as (a collective) see themselves, and do others see them in the same or a different light? All of the skateboarders interviewed argued that, generally, others tended to label them as slackers, wasters, and a nuisance.

*'A lot of people see skating as you wasting your life, and that you should be out playing football. They don't just see it as another sport like anything else, you are not seen like that when you wear baggy trousers and stuff like that. You are seen as useless.'* (Brendan)

*'I don't think anyone that I have ever spoken to that's over the age of thirty has been happy that I have been a skateboarder. None of my family are even happy about it.'* (Ben)

Due to these types of attitudes, skateboarders have generally been seen as a problem. It could be inferred that this has led adults and the general public to feel threatened by skaters. In Sheffield, this is certainly how skaters have been represented within the local media:

'...new contender in the 1997 race to achieve Public Enemy No 1 status. A four-wheeled arch enemy that first kickflipped its way into town in the mid-

seventies recently joined forces with a new breed of nineties roller-mayhem to create what many describe as nothing but obnoxious skate anarchy let loose on our city streets' (*Sheffield Telegraph*, 16 January 1998).

Cohen (1972) argues that the influence of the media means that youth are subjected to greater social control. Skateboarders are becoming increasingly banned from public places. A new local by-law states that: 'no person shall in the grounds skate on rollers, skateboard, wheels or other mechanical contrivances' (Sheffield City Council, sign outside The Crucible Theatre). It has apparently even got to the point now where, 'You can get fined £30 by the police now' (Brendan). This raises issues about rights to public space and exclusion from it, as well as the development of skateparks.

So skaters are deviant because they are so labelled (Becker 1963). However, this does not only happen officially. Skateboarders are also being spatially marked as outsiders by the general public:

*'You get hassled at all my favourite skate spots, which is crap. You get hassle from the City Centre Ambassadors, the people in the purple jackets that say City Centre Ambassadors on it, and they tell you to get off your board and stuff.'* (Ben)

*'My parents think it is cool, they are very tolerant of it. Some police are really cool, too, they don't really care and they let you go and even carry on skating places, but others are out just to get people and they can even give you hassle if you are only holding your skateboard, as an excuse to stop you. A lot of adults think we are a nuisance. Actually we are not. I think it is mostly the out-going geeky people at school that end up being skateboarders, not like the trendy trouble makers who go out tagging stuff for fun.'* (Tom)

*'I think where you get hassled most is just skating along the street, skating fast like when you need to get there, like people huffing under their breath at you [makes the noise]. There is like this little two step in town, near*

*someone's house, and basically we are skating there, not making that much noise or anything, and she reckoned she worked night shifts or something, and she told us to go away or she would ring the police, and it was just like really rude, it was not even like she owned the two step, and we were like nowhere near where she lived, but she hassled us like loads anyway. You get hassled anywhere, if you stay there for too long, because of the noise or whatever. You get hassled for grinding and stuff to because it wrecks stuff.'* (Joe)

However, as Henry points out:

*'Some adults think it is really cool that you skate, and ask you to do tricks and stuff. And then there are other ones that are really bitchy about it, and tell you to fuck off and stuff and, like, stuff like that.'* (Henry)

What about the skaters own peer group? Does this group label them in the same as the rest of the general public, or in a different way?

*'It's changed actually like. When I first got into skating you used to get hassle off them, it would be an insult to call you a skater, you would get called stuff like dirty skater, but now those people have probably got skateboards themselves.'* (Brendan)

*'Some think it is cool and would love to able to do it and then there are others that are really two-faced about it. Like the townies who buy Tony Hawks and pretend they are really good at it and then, like, really hate skateboarders, It is really stupid, they say, come on then do a trick, which is really annoying, and laugh if you fall off. When they couldn't even go along. I try and avoid them.'* (Joe)

### **Creating a space of their own: 'Heaven is a half pipe' (OPM)**

The banning of skaters from public spaces has gone hand in hand with the creation of skateparks, giving skateboarders their own space in which to

express their identities. Sheffield City Council re-constructed the former five-a-side football pitch at Devonshire Green specifically for this purpose. However, the skaters themselves are not always happy with the facilities (cf. Owen 1997):

*'It is fair just as long as they build decent facilities, which they don't, they are too small and all ramps. They don't consider people who do different types of skating, like street skaters. They build one just as an excuse.'* (Tom)

*'The skatepark is really a dump, but it's ok... It is too busy on like a Sunday or a Saturday, it needs to be like, the whole size of Devonshire Green... You are waiting about half an hour before you can get a run in, and if you are not very good you often don't get it in.'* (Joe)

Another complaint about the constructed space of the skatepark is about the other extreme sports contesting for the same space. The interviewees expressed their dislike for these groups explicitly, showing how, in constructing a social identity, it is as important to define others as well as ones self: 'Inliners are evil!' (Neil).

*'Most skateboarders hate inliners just because they are inliners, that's just a thing. They reckon they are all rad, when their tricks are all lame, 'cause I can go on them and do exactly the same tricks as they can, you know. Their things are attached to their feet. Some of them are good and stuff but they try to make out that their sport is harder than skateboarding, when it is totally not. You know, if something is attached, to jump you just jump, but if you think about skateboarding, you know, the "ollie" wasn't developed for years after skateboarding came about.'* (Tom)

*'I would like the people, I am sure, but I don't like the image of it, you know, I don't like the way it is so poncy, and the way they try and look cool when it is actually not cool. [Laughs]'* (Joel)

*'[Bmxers]...They constantly get in your way but they don't seem to notice, because they are on a big bike and I am just on a little skateboard. They never really apologise for getting in your way. If they are going for a trick then they just like go for it! They are in their own worlds.'* (Brendan)

*'Skating etiquette has disappeared. There are so many skaters now that they get in your way as much as bmxers'* (Ben).

As a consequence, all of the interviewees argued that the *The House* skatepark is the best place to skate in Sheffield. It is built specifically for skateboarders and inliners, but bmxers are banned, creating a less contested space, with the added bonus of a roof:

*'The indoor skatepark is the best because it's indoors and it always rains in Sheffield... it's meant for skating without the added hassles of the street.'* (John)

However, the general consensus concerning pre-designated space is that it is controlling and excluding, causing skaters to want to continue using the urban space of the city.

### **'Let's take it back to the concrete streets' (Jurassic 5)**

Borden (2001) argues that skateboarders are mainly interested in the external features of buildings, and that skaters interpret the city in different ways to the general public. From my research I have deduced that skaters see the city as a collection of 'skate spots', naming spaces in relation to the architecture instead of the buildings. For example, 'There used to be this really cool three-step by the Egg Box [the Council offices, since demolished]' (Henry). It could be argued that this allows for the creation of power over something uncontrollable (Roche and Tucker 1997: 161):

*'No matter what I'm doing, I'm always looking. Like out the car window or on a train, I'll be looking at places that you might possibly be able to skate.'* (Ben)

*'You walk through town, and you look at the ledges and the benches, and you even look at the terrain. You are always looking out for different skate spots and dreaming about different tricks.'* (Joel)

Recently, architecture has been developed in order to discourage skating. Rails have clamps or chains over them and 'skate stoppers, the lines that cross, and blind spots are appearing all over the place' (Matt). However, skaters feel as though this just creates an extra challenge: 'I love those blind spots' (Joe). *Jackass* (a Channel 4 television program, 2002) illustrated this adaptability with the introduction of 'the human handrail'. Skateboarders also construct their own ramps and grind boxes, in order to create their own personal skate space.

Can it, therefore, be argued that skateboarding is a site of resistance, or a release from adult culture? Hebdige, for example, argues that there is 'no doubt, the breaking of rules is confused with the "absence of rules"' (1979: 92):

*'I am not so into it that it's my life. It's not a rebellious thing that I am doing; I am just having a bit of fun.'* (Brendan)

I suggest that the City Council, in banning skateboarders from the realm of the city, are just antagonising them more:

*'Obviously I am not going to stop skating if I like skating. If I am not doing anything that bad, then you know skateboarding isn't really that much of a hassle... A load of fuss about nothing.'* (Joe)

*'We always go on mad missions, like really late at night. It is just, it is cool, because there is no one else around and that's cool. Just skate around the Arts Tower and the Library [at the University of Sheffield] until three or four in the morning.'* (Joel)

It could be argued that skateboarding is a place to express one's identity, free from society's control. Brake (1985) argues that because young people lack power in the adult world they live out their lives within the realm of leisure: creating something out of nothing, performing the city as an expression of their own unique style (Willis 1990, Borden 2001). As is shown by the next selection of quotes, skateboarders do realise the consequences of their actions. However, they feel as though they should have the right to public space as much as the next person and therefore resist the controls society places upon them:

*'People are so goddamn closed minded. They go, oh you might knock someone over, but if you pull a phat trick in front of them they are, like, Wow! actually that was pretty cool. And it's like, there you go, look how good skateboarding is, and I think that makes me feel good.'* (Matt)

*'It is like really rude, because skateboarding is about finding stuff to skate... We could skate there in the evening or something, and, like, putting metal edges on stuff, so that when we grind it doesn't fuck it up and stuff, they could make it so that you couldn't break it... What I was thinking was why can't they make skateparks of everybody's favourite skate spots, just reproduce everything that's there? Then it's like there is no excuse to skate at the Crucible, or something, because there is no excuse. That's the only way they are ever going to stop skateboards skating street is to take the streets to them.'* (Joe)

*'I can see where they are coming from, you know, really clearly, and, um, not everyone skates, and I can see how people could get annoyed by it. People have got other things to do in the city, like shopping and going to work... But, you know, what right do they have to say how we use the city? The city belongs to everyone. It has and always will be like about the people, about what goes on there, not to do with the building in a certain space... They can't stop us. We are being creative, doing something healthy and positive, and I don't see how they can. They have been so*

*close minded about it for so long, they are slowly coming round now, but it has taken really long. Which is really annoying.'* (Tom)

*'I think that to a certain extent it does make it more enticing and dangerous, and that has always been what skateboarding has been about. You know, it is about dissing the system... It is not just about skateboarding, it is about the whole philosophy of being real and, you know, being a little bit risqué, because you know it is more than just becoming sterile.'* (Joel)

## **Conclusions**

The aim of my research was to investigate what it means to be, and to become, a skateboarder in Sheffield. In order to do this I looked at the construction of skateboarders' identity through mapping the internal and external influences upon them. Jenkins (1996) argues that the internal-external dialectic works on three levels: the individual level, the interactional level and the institutional level. Applying this concept to skateboarders, it is clear that the influences upon their individual and collective identities can be ordered in this way.

On the individual level, my research showed that people other than oneself played a part in wanting to become a skater in the first place. The attitudes of others helped to clarify what it means to be a skater for those new to the sport: nearly all of the interviewees started skateboarding due to already knowing skaters, stressing the external moment of the internal-external dialectic. The emotions felt when skateboarding - such as self-fulfilment, achievement, happiness, exhilaration and the adrenaline rush - also helped to give an insight into the more internal side of the dialectic.

Learning to be a skateboarder was also related to the internal-external dialectic during interaction between individuals and groups. This had an effect on different groups of skateboarders, as well as on separate individual skaters. During interaction, skaters classified different types of skaters as

outsiders, as well as other groups such as bmxers, inliners, the general public, and other peer groups (for example, 'townies'). This generated important stylistic and image-related criteria for defining these different groups. Not only did skaters label others as outsiders, but outsiders also labelled skaters as outsiders (Becker 1963). This showed that group and individual social identity is constructed through the interplay of internal and external definitions, supporting Jenkins' argument that group identification always involves social categorisation and 'defining "us" involves defining a range of "thems" also' (1996: 80).

Finally, through the exclusion of skateboarders from the realm of public space they have been affected by the institutional level of the internal-external dialectic: society's ascribed and accepted way of doing things. Skateboarders reject these values in terms of their leisure activity and have consequently become officially banned from selected public spaces, therefore stressing, again, the external side of the internal-external dialectic of identification.

As well as looking at the internal and external influences on skateboarders' identities, another aim of my research was to attempt to define whether skateboarding is a sport, a subculture, a lifestyle or a contemporary tribe? Skateboarders, as a group, have survived for many years. However, the identity of skaters has not stayed fixed: it produces and reproduces itself, changing its emphasis all the time. This can be seen through the development of skating practices and technology. Skateboarding has also become more urban-based, resisting the external pressure society places upon them. The fashion has changed and, due to an increase in its popularity, skateboarding styles have been adopted as part of mainstream fashion. Hebdige (1979) and Hall and Jefferson (1975) stress the importance of style and image in the construction of a subculture. However, skateboarders appear to be a more loosely bounded group, allowing for the flow of people over its boundaries and further divisions within the larger group:

'...the *'commonality'* which is found in community need not be uniformity. It does not clone behaviour or ideas. It is a commonality of forms (ways of behaving) whose content (meanings) may vary considerably among its members. The triumph of community is to so contain this variety that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries' (Cohen, 1985: 20).

Brake also argues that, 'Youth culture offers a collective identity, a reference group from which youth can develop an individual identity' (1985: 191). Skateboarding is not the only thing that impacts on skaters' identities: they are 'other people' too, and it is essential not to lose sight of this. The wide-ranging influences on their style express this well and although skateboarders seem to be predominantly from similar backgrounds - i.e. white, middle class and male - they are not without their differences.

Another aspect that is important to take into consideration when defining skateboarding is whether the activity becomes part of one's permanent lifestyle, or whether it is considered as a phase. Maturity and age seemed to play a part in the responses given about 'sport' and 'lifestyle.' There were three types of skateboarders identified at this point: those who stick with it forever, those who quit and return to the activity, and those who try it a few times and then decide they don't like it. In this respect it is important to take on board that although some respondents argued that skateboarding was a lifestyle for them, they are not yet even half way through their lives and it is possible that, with responsibility and adulthood, these attitudes may change.

Some respondents did refer to skateboarding as a sport, however, the competition side of which was to be left to the professionals. The X-Games are an example of one such competition. On the other hand, skateboarders do not wish for their activity to become an Olympic sport like snowboarding, as they refuse to let skateboarding lose its underground roots.

None of this means that everyone's experiences are the same. The internal-external dialectic of identification, for skateboarders, operates on a

continuum, where different degrees of internal and external influences affect individuals to differing degrees. Skaters exist between someone who tries skateboarding once and never does it again, or has a board and doesn't use it, to someone who skates every day of the week as a professional skateboarder. The skateboarders I interviewed were somewhere in the middle of this continuum, tending to the more extreme end of the scale. The skaters on *Jackass* (Channel 4) could be interpreted as the fundamentalists of the sport, placing risk and injury at the forefront of their activity:

'the physical body has become one of the main places where control can be exerted. In a moment where most young people can "manage" little else, the body provides one important site for management and also becomes the primary vehicle for the achievement of pleasure' (Roche and Tucker 163).

Therefore, it seems that the best way to interpret skateboarders, as a collective, may be as a contemporary tribe (Bennett 1999), bearing in mind the free flow of people over the group's boundaries, the divisions within the larger group, and the fluidity of a skater's social identity.

More research would, however, be useful. There are many areas of further research into the activities of skateboarders that could be considered, including:

- The roles of women and girls within skateboarding culture (including the so-called 'groupies') and the constructions of their identities. Do they experience similar or different influences to male skateboarders?
- The extreme end of the continuum: how do pro skaters differ in their conceptualisation of skating?
- Policies restricting teenage space, and the provision of teenage space in connection to other youth activities.
- The global impact of skateboarding, in connection with worldwide media and consumerism.
- The attitudes of people in other extreme sports, such as bmx riding and inlining.

- A survey defining the different groups of skateboarders.
- The attitudes of others effected by the actions of skateboarders such as the general public, the police, the City Council and other youth groups.

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