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Skateparks as communities of care: the role of skateboarding in girls' and non-binary youth's mental health recovery during lockdown

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ABSTRACT

This paper details findings from our research into girls' and non-binary young people's take-up of skateboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis contributes to wider discussions on gendered relations, young people's embodied capacities and leisure adaptations in response to ongoing changes such as the pandemic. Based on qualitative interviews with 18 young people at a London skatepark, we found that the physical culture enacted there facilitated recovery from mental unwellness developed during or preceding the Covid crisis. This recovery was generated within new patterns of embodied movement, through relationships engendered in the space, and within the collective community ethic that was fostered at the skatepark. The temporal pause from usual routines during the pandemic created a space for collective critical reflection, healing and renewal within what we describe as a feminist ethic of care. We argue that this ethic contrasted in particular with the growing expectations of schooling and 'intensified girlhoods' that have come to characterise gendered everyday lives and therefore represents an alternative pedagogy of hope and recovery for these young people.

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Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic took effect globally, young people's relationships to leisure, health and everyday life were faced with profound challenges and interruptions prompting concerns around their overall wellbeing in the UK and elsewhere (Constantini et al. 2021; Poulain et al. 2022; Sonuga-Barke and Fearon 2021). Researchers are still beginning to understand the lived adaptations and resourcefulness that arose in the face of this crisis and its relationships to leisure; as new interactions and patterns of engagement were taken up (Sharp, Finkel, and Dashper 2022). There is recent evidence that some of these leisure adaptations have involved a rise in female skateboarding (Skateboard GB 2022; Thomson 2021), thus challenging its historical cis-male dominance (Abulhawa 2020; Carr 2017). Skateboard GB has also reported increased funding for skateboarding alongside its growing visibility following the successes of teen girls Sky Brown and Bombette Martin in the Olympics (Skateboard GB 2022).

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These trends necessitate further attention towards understanding how girls and gender non-conforming young people engage with the public space of the skatepark, how communities are formed and how fostering ownership from marginalised users of these historically cis-male oriented spaces affects the cultures that exist there. Within this premise of changing leisure patterns, our research explored the uptake of skateboarding by a group of girls and non-binary young people at a community skate park in an inner-city area of London during the pandemic. Our aim was to understand how these previously excluded young people engaged with the site of a public skatepark and how a sense of community was fostered there with the broader goal of contributing to ongoing insights into making skateparks more accessible. We understand skateboarding to be a site of physical culture where gendered active bodies are varyingly 'organised, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power', which recognises dynamic changes and interactions (Silk and Andrews 2011, 4). Accordingly, our research contributes to wider feminist understandings of the gendered formation of physical cultures as sites of subcultural resistance, creativity and healing (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2013; Heywood 2007; Stasko 2007).

Within this paper we focus in particular on gendered experiences of mental health and the role of the skatepark as a site of recovery during the pandemic. Drawing on ideas of embodiment and physical capacity, our findings suggest that the interruption to usual connections, routines and practices both generated a state of embodied 'crisis' and opened up creative possibilities for recovery. For girls and non-binary young people who subsequently began using the skatepark, recovery was facilitated through the gendered reordering of space, the forging of a skate community, and the reimagining of habits of movement and interaction that previously characterised everyday schedules. These practices are all seen as contributing to a process of recovery from some of the physical and mental health problems the young people described as arising before and within the Covid crisis. Our research thus explores the gendered significance of leisure for girls and non-binary young people who took up skateboarding over this period and its potential for challenging more individualised narratives of mental health. This is accomplished within a capacities approach focusing on young people's resilience and resourcefulness as forged within caring communities.

Gender, skateboarding and youth sport

Research into gender and skateboarding has straddled tensions around the early potential of action sports to offer alternative gender relations against the ongoing domination of these sports by young, able bodied, white cis-males as 'core' participants (Beal and Ebeling 2018; Dupont 2014; Thorpe 2018). Tensions around authenticity, resources and space remain a contested dynamic in skateboarding subject to feminist interventions, urban demographic shifts and forces of commercialisation and growth in its mainstream popularity. As more girls and other non-traditional skateboarders have joined and its participant demographic has widened, skateboarding can now be understood as a creative cultural practice and site of identity formation that is both inherently inclusive and exclusive (Derrien 2019). The growing role of sporting structures and corporate influence within skateboarding has also led to ongoing tensions around ownership and authenticity (Kilberth et al. 2019). However, Beal and Ebeling (2018) argue that the further

incorporation of skateboarding into mainstream structures like the Olympics, which go against skateboarding's traditional countercultural ethos, has also offered new opportunities to previously disenfranchised girls and young women. This raises additional important questions about the growing use of skateboarding as a vehicle of youth development and the ways in which girlhood might be represented amidst wider conceptualisations of both postfeminism and neoliberalism (Thorpe 2018).

Over the past two decades, skateboarding research has documented a swiftly changing urban youth sport landscape brought about through the rise in skateparks and skate intervention programmes globally in countries including Afghanistan, Palestine, America, Sweden, Australia and South Africa (Abulhawa 2022; Atencio et al. 2018; Bäckström and Nairn 2018; Bradley 2010; Sorsdahl et al. 2021; Thorpe 2017). This body of work has found that skateboarding has largely outgrown its rebellious or countercultural status and is now frequently positioned as a vehicle of youth development capable of promoting outcomes such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem and often direct career pathways towards achieving social and economic success (Atencio et al. 2018). This research has also highlighted an important distinction between the adult-led framing of skateboard programming and provision with young people's own motivations for skateboarding and the benefits they perceive from their experiences. Young people's descriptions of their skateboarding experiences have premised social networking and friendships, a sense of belonging and identity, as well as positive mental health through relief from stress (Atencio et al. 2018; Bradley 2010; Corwin et al. 2019; Sorsdahl et al. 2021). Indeed, as Petrone (2023) argues, disenfranchised young people in particular may juxtapose skateboarding with the demands of schooling and other youth development goals. In Petrone's (2023) research he argues that skateboarding provided an alternative form of learning that offers a broader critique of formal educational structures. Yet despite documenting the rapid growth of skateboarding and the potential it offers for young people, research into youth skateboarding provision continues to identify gendered and racialised discrepancies in young people's experiences. In their wide survey of youth skateboarding across the USA, researchers found that 'skaters of colour and female-identified skaters experience skateboarding differently from White and male-identified skaters' and believed it affected how they were treated by others as well (Corwin et al. 2019, 16).

These gendered and racialised discrepancies can be traced historically through the development of skateboarding as an alternative 'action' or 'lifestyle' sport. Skateboarding subculture has been found to have constructed a countercultural, 'DIY' (Do-It-Yourself) ethos within often illicit uses of urban space and a rejection of mainstream sporting and corporate cultures (Dupont 2014; Wheaton 2010). Feminist analyses have demonstrated how the construction of skateboarding subculture as oriented towards risk taking, rebellion and physical performances of bodily skill also actively excluded girls and women and further entrenched a traditional gender order (Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009). For example, in Dupont's characterisation of a subcultural skateboarding hierarchy, females were positioned by skating elite as at the lowest level of participation known colloquially as 'invisible girls and ramp tramps' (Dupont 2014, 564). Atencio, Beal and Wilson (2009) similarly found that within skateboard culture women were constructed as lacking in skill and risk averse, qualities that were also prerequisites for acceptance and authenticity. The lack of gender inclusion in skateboarding has been attributed to key factors including

normative sporting structures, media representation and leadership composition (Beal and Ebeling 2018, 101). Additionally, Olympic recognition and further sporting regulation and interventions for girls may also bring with them their own set of challenges around which bodies are 'able' to take part and to what ends as elite performances may overtake aims of overall participation.

Despite barriers to their participation, there is ongoing evidence of feminist interventions in skateboarding that continue to challenge traditional gender hierarchies and other forms of dominance (Beal 1996; Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2013; Beal and Ebeling 2018; Wheaton and Thorpe 2018; Abulhawa 2020). Our research contributes to this body of feminist work in understanding the gendered relations of skateboarding as a site of contestation, sociality, collaboration and activism and by situating this analysis within wider discussions around learning, education and mental health. We do this by exploring the capacity for learning and mental health recovery through skateboarding against what has been described as a postfeminist educational landscape which constructs both intensified forms of girlhood and new sporting femininities (Clark 2021; Ringrose 2013; Thorpe, Lyndsay, and Megan 2018). Schooling and its demanding schedules and expectations were, however, abruptly interrupted during the Covid crisis, thus creating new sets of embodied politics for young, gendered subjects.

Schooling, leisure and the regulation of youth health in the pandemic

Beginning in 2020, the UK government's initial public health strategy focused on the biomedical impact of coronavirus through contagion and its perceived threats to physical health. In response to these fears, schools and other public settings where young people might gather were closed, people were limited in their interactions to household 'bubbles', and physical activity outdoors was initially restricted to one hour per day. The closing down of schools meant that phases of 'home' or online learning were initiated by schools, which were varyingly experienced by young people with differing access to technology and parental support (Andrew et al. 2020). Following initial fears over soaring infection rates and the capacity of National Health Services, subsequent concerns have focused on the mental health impact of Covid for young people in particular (DHSC 2022). The interruption of regular patterns of socialisation, learning and activity were further compounded by fears around contagion, thus generating a collective anxiety around young people's wellbeing often understood in terms of a mental health crisis.

Perspectives in youth studies have frequently centred young people's relationship to risk as framed within media-generated crises (Tsaliki and Chronaki 2020; Turnbull and Spence 2011). In line with these aims here we seek to explore claims of a mental health crisis critically both by interrogating how and why a discourse of crisis has been constructed for young people and how young people themselves acted resourcefully and creatively in adapting to this crisis. Young people's narratives of health and their responses to these are therefore situated within a series of Covid-generated tensions around issues of risk, public vs. individual health, schooling, autonomy, and mobility. Our research draws on insights from a growing body of critical health perspectives that have situated schools and formalised extracurricular sport as key sites where young people's bodies have been regulated within individualised and moralised constructions of health and achievement (Evans and Davies 2004; Evans et al. 2008; Francombe-Webb, Clark, and

Palmer 2020; Rich 2018; Wright and Harwood 2009). As these insights have observed, health and its indications are best conceptualised within a context of neoliberal capitalism where ideas about personal responsibility and self-management have become central to the way we understand ourselves and our bodies. Attempts to regulate public health have particularly come to target the bodies of young people in schools and youth provision where varying policies and initiatives take place. Over the past decades, schools have been tasked with multiple health challenges including tackling the obesity epidemic (HM Government 2016) and more recently with addressing concerns around a mental health epidemic in young people (Weisbrot and Ryst 2020).

However, schools' attempts to implement the economic and political imperatives they have been tasked with consequently generate their own set of particular pressures and regulations around young people's bodies. School curricula are increasingly led by 'the barren managerial mantras of liberal individualism – achievement, assessment and accountability' (Evans and Davies 2004, 10). For example, research by Evans et al. (2008) has explored how a combination of exams culture, school generated hierarchies and moralised health discourses simultaneously produced performance and perfection codes for young women. These codes then translated into young women's mental and physical ill health in their experiences of eating disorders developed in school. This postfeminist intensification of responsibility and achievement has been seen as particularly relevant to young women positioned as at the vanguard of social change and therefore subject to expectations of successful femininities within increasingly busy extracurricular schedules (Gill and Scharff 2013; Pomerantz and Raby 2017; Rich 2018). Such feminist critiques have therefore revealed how negative body image, anxiety, perfectionism and intensive self-criticism can all be seen as symptoms of these new postfeminist imperatives. As the global pandemic took hold, however, many young people's intensive schedules came to a halt, and new ways of being, interacting and moving were opened up. Restrictions brought about through the Covid pandemic therefore can be seen to have generated a state of embodied crisis in which bodies were interrupted from their usual connections, routines and practices.

Bodies in crisis

The Covid pandemic has been theorised as an unprecedented crisis which disrupted 'everyday life and livelihoods globally' thereby creating new 'Covid societies' with profound changes that we have yet to understand fully (Lupton 2022, 1). As Lupton describes, these changes go beyond the obvious health and medical implications of the disease's devastation and have created new patterns of movement, sociality, work and leisure. Thorpe (2017, 57) notes that studies of youth mobility in 'disrupted and conflicted spaces' have revealed both devastation as well as 'new forms of youth resourcefulness and activism' characterised by agency and resilience. These approaches focus on both the restrictions and possibilities opened up for youth in moments of crisis by exploring new 'capacities for good health, recovery and well-being' (Lupton 2022, 11). This possibility of emergent capacities for good health and recovery is taken up in our research which reveals how gendered 'bodies in crisis' during the pandemic were also met with new possibilities for movement and interaction during a transition to different forms of leisure such as skateboarding.

This dynamic capacity for change is further demonstrated through Chris Shilling's (2008) conceptualisation of embodied social actions, which provides a means of thinking through how bodies adapt in response to their evolving physical and social environments. Shilling suggests that environmental changes or crises can open up possibilities for new identities and capacities for action. Shilling describes an ongoing process of bodily change through three interconnected phases or modalities of embodied action: habit, crisis and creativity. These modalities characterise varying levels of conflict and equilibrium between the 'social and physical environment, biological need and bodily potentialities' (Shilling 2008, 12). In the first modality of habit, embodied subjects engage in routinised practices that have adapted to their surroundings allowing efficiency and effectiveness in meeting ongoing needs. School routines, extracurricular schedules, and social interactions with friends and family can all be seen as part of these routinised habits that shape embodied orientations to the world.

Although habitual modalities are usually sustainable and adaptive, they are also subject to interruption during periods of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant restrictions. Shilling describes the crisis modality of action as taking place when there is a mismatch between social and physical surroundings so that routine ways of acting become impossible or ineffective. The pandemic can thus be understood as a societal crisis that simultaneously invoked individual 'bodies in crisis' where modes of learning, interaction and movement were all significantly altered. Shilling (2008, 18) describes how such severe disruptions to routine can result in 'existential crises' where individuals suffer as their 'entire habitual mode of orientation to the world is shown to be fragile and impermanent'. Despite the disquieting and unsettling nature of these disruptions, however, Shilling argues that they can also encourage people to seek out new horizons of possibility developed through changing adaptations to the body/environment dynamic in modes of adaptation. He describes this creative modality as a process of 'creativity associated with actions that alter certain aspects of oneself and/or one's surroundings in order to repair or enhance one's embodied capacities for action' (2008, 19). This process of repair or recovery can also challenge previous understandings of former routinised habits as body-subjects both adapt to new conditions and call into question previous modes of engagement with the physical and social environment. Within this formulation, recovery can be seen as an emergent capacity that simultaneously calls into question previous habits and routines through differing orientations to both the environment and the self.

For example, Fullagar's (2008) feminist analysis of the role of leisure in mental health recovery suggests that leisure activities forged within supportive leisure communities also facilitated a different 'care of the self' that was key to health and wellness for women so frequently taken up with the care of others. Similarly, in describing feminist DIY subcultural activism, Stasko (2007, 208) further emphasises the role of community within acts of healing that move towards a 'central goal of wellness and communion'. Stasko contends that feminist DIY subcultures have the capacity to forge spaces of well-being and happiness in acts of '(r)evolutionary healing' against the effects of systemic racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. These feminist insights further emphasise the need for understanding how recovery might take place within ongoing processes that draw on collections of gendered movement and sociality brought about through the skate culture developed in the park. Our analysis below accordingly describes this process of recovery as rooted in a feminist ethic of community, connection and care generated at the skatepark.

Methodology

Our study set out to understand how and why a group of girls and non-binary young people were able to take up skateboarding at a community skatepark over lockdown as a pilot investigation that would lead into future research on diversifying skatepark accessibility. We undertook a qualitative approach grounded in feminist praxis which, as Olive and Thorpe (2018, 115) observe, is deeply intertwined with the relationships we forge in places of work and leisure. The research was thus opportunistic and facilitated through Esther's connections to the site as skateboarder, parent and community activist. Esther is also involved in the construction of skateable obstacles known as 'skate dots' through engaging local communities in processes of co-design to ensure that a diverse range of future users inform the construction of new skateboarding spaces.¹ The research was thus guided by a feminist methodology with 'at its core a political and ethical responsibility' grounded in social justice (Olive et al. 2018, 336). The changing demographic of the skatepark over lockdown was observed first hand by Esther who had also overheard how her local skatepark had been 'taken over by teenage girls', at a community event. This 'takeover' coincided with Sheryl's ongoing interest in girlhood and youth sport and presented the opportunity to co-investigate this lockdown occurrence towards a wider aim of understanding how we might make skateparks more accessible through both future planning and ongoing interventions. The skatepark we researched is located in an economically mixed area of urban regeneration in London, UK where community health was disproportionately affected by Covid. The skatepark is a community funded project located in a grassy, tree filled park next to both a children's playground and an adventure playground. The surface of the skatepark is characterised by smooth bumps as opposed to steeper ramps, thus facilitating beginners learning to navigate the terrain. There is also a covered area and benches where people can sit or leave their belongings. As a result, key adults (including Esther) were usually on hand at the skatepark, often skateboarding themselves or supervising younger children. Although we drew on this 'insider' knowledge for additional insights, our findings were specifically collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with girls and non-binary young people who skated at the park. Sheryl initially joined Esther on a site visit to make introductions and visited three subsequent times to conduct interviews.

Esther and I met up at the [skatepark] in April over half-term on a cold but sunny day, both with children in tow. I gratefully noted the covered seats when we arrived where I was able to put down my bag and watch the others skateboarding. We noted 17 girls, two boys, three men and three women skateboarding there. A group of girls were coaching each other up a ramp, taking turns. As it got busier the users carefully watched out for each other, avoiding collisions and 'standing by' if someone fell and hurt themselves. Esther kindly lent us a skateboard and my daughters, upon realising they couldn't stand up very well, mostly scooted along on their bottoms and were deftly avoided by the other skatepark users who seemed to both expect and tolerate novice users of the space.

These notes recorded on the day give a sense of the interactions at the site as well as our positionality in the research. Esther, an 'insider' as a regular skateboarder at the park, was familiar with many of the girls and able to offer tips on skateboarding, and Sheryl as novice skateboarder. We also both identify as feminist, white, middle class, middle aged mothers whose positioning to the world of skateboarding, at least in

a traditional sense, might be described as 'precarious'. Esther started skateboarding alongside her children, learning together as a family. After her children's interest waned, she continued to skate and her involvement with the skate community grew. She explored this as an auto ethnographic study of skateboarding, motherhood and risk in a recent article (Sayers 2023).

We contacted participants in a combination of convenience and snowball sampling stemming from their familiarity with Esther and collected informed and parental consent in line with our institutional ethical protocol drawing on the notion of Gillick competency. In total we carried out eight friendship group interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes each focusing on 18 girls and non-binary young people between the ages of nine and 15. Although we initially identified our participants as girls, our interviews revealed a wider variety of gender identities. For example, Opal (14) explained, 'My pronouns are she/they. So I don't completely identify with being a girl'. Throughout the paper, we use 'girls' to refer collectively to girls and gender-diverse young people as a group, since they frequently did the same and since this was initially how we identified them, whereas for individuals we use their preferred pronouns. The use of girls to include those who might otherwise question standard gender categories is thus also a political strategy in seeking to define the collective experience of being a 'not-boy' in a traditionally cis-male dominated space.

The girls' socioeconomic positions might be described as 'mixed' with around half reporting parental occupations in professional/managerial fields and others with parents on disability leave or lower paying service sector jobs. Semi-structured interviews took place in groups of two to three friends on the grass next to the skatepark and interviews were recorded for later transcription. Institutional ethical approval was obtained beforehand and consent forms were collected for each participant. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms in order to protect their confidentiality.

Each interview was transcribed by the authors and analysed in line with our research questions around understanding both barriers and facilitators of participation. This was an iterative process that involved comparison with each other's codes towards the generation of a thematic analysis reflecting young people's experiences of skateboarding.

Generating a crisis: 'It was just a bit annoying'

Girls described the initial impact of lockdown restrictions as interrupting their regular routines of schooling, friendships, physical activities and other social interactions. Extracurricular sports such as football, basketball, diving and other activities had come to a halt as participants experienced the temporal and physical limbo of lockdown restrictions. Although some of the girls mentioned concerns around loss of physical fitness during lockdown, this was not always the case. Opal, for example, described, 'I got really fit over the first lockdown because I was running 5k every day'. In general girls described the disruption of lockdown in terms of missing family members, not being able to play sport, fears around catching Covid and concerns about keeping up with schoolwork. However, many of these new realities were not realised until later on in the pandemic. Similar to research on young Italians' experiences of lockdown, young people in our research reported some negative feelings of loss, loneliness and uncertainty during the initial phases (Moretti and Maturò 2021).

Additionally, there was critical reflection on the way in which a mental health ‘crisis’ had been constructed in the media as contrasting with individual experiences. For example, Arden (13, she/her) noted that lockdown had ‘not been totally negative but not been the best thing ever’ and later added: ‘It’s not left me in my room feeling depressed on my own, that kind of thing. Sometimes it’s just a bit annoying’. Similarly, Abbie’s concerns expressed below seemed to be generated through media and public health narratives around fears of contagion and the size of the outbreak rather than as connected to her immediate experiences.

People were just like, you need to stay at home where I was like a bit scared to go out to skate because it was really busy. So I didn’t go out for a while. Then we were scared about catching Covid. Because I was just a bit worried and it was big. Cos my parents thought I had already had it. (Abbie, nine, ‘I just like being a girl’.)

Concerns around contagion, restrictions on mobility and a sense of the unknown impacted Abbie’s use of space and her ability to use the skatepark or meet up with friends. There was a sense of the scale of the crisis – ‘it was big’ and this was met by a cautiousness around social and physical interactions. This cautiousness necessitated a sort of ‘pause’ where new possibilities were not yet realised and where embodied modes of action centred on protection and containment. The affective fear and anxiety generated through the Covid outbreak was also expressed through concerns around family members and interruptions to the usual family celebrations and holidays. For many of the young people, however, the immediate concerns generated through the initial stages of lockdown were around schooling. Academic commitments, exams, the pressure of schoolwork and lack of direction and support were all mentioned as factors negatively contributing to their mental health. As schools closed and normal schedules dissolved, some participants described a sense of dislocation and confusion, generating a vacuum of structure that led to mental unwellness.

Gemma: Lockdown was tough for me because I didn’t do any lockdown work- I think I did like four pieces out of all of it, which was really bad because my mental health wasn’t in a good place.

Esther: Ok, so you just didn’t feel like you could get on with it?

Gemma: I just sat listening to music on the computer, and I was like I can’t do it, I’m not going to be able to do it.

(Gemma, 14, she/they)

Although some girls described a sense of relief at schools shutting, for Gemma this pressure lingered and became incapacitating as she struggled to reconcile academic expectations with the challenges of online learning. Gemma’s anxiety around her schoolwork became a cycle of incapacity in which she seemed frozen, unable to do the work as well as convinced of her inability to do so. Lockdown was therefore haunted by the anxiety of not doing schoolwork and not feeling like she could catch up. The relentlessness of schooling as a conveyor belt of targets and curriculum materials to be absorbed generated an ongoing pressure that Gemma felt unable to step off or away from. Some of the girls decided earlier in lockdown that engagement with home learning was not worth maintaining due to its high expectations and lack of structure or accountability.

Oh I didn't do any schoolwork. They just gave us the work, but they didn't mark it or anything. They would give us 90% of our work on a Monday and expect us to do it all week. But it was just like so disorganised, and they expected us to do so much. Everyone thought 'yay, time off'. But after like a month I just thought, 'I'm not doing this'. And I'd spend every day at the skatepark.

(Pixie, 14, she/her)

Pixie's initial impetus to do the work set for her by her school in maintaining a modality of routine engagement seemed to feel increasingly unpalatable as she assessed the 'disorganised' format and unrealistic expectations set by her school. She eventually described a break from these pressures through her refusal to engage, 'I'm not doing this', instead spending all of her time at the skatepark. Thus the 'crisis' point for Pixie, which shifted her away from previous habits, was generated not so much by the pandemic itself as by the demands and expectations of schooling and their impossibility within the new environment brought about through lockdown and home learning. Unlike Gemma, who was initially paralysed by this scenario, Pixie experienced a relatively short period of adaptation and reorientation where the skatepark provided an alternative form of learning and interaction. She quickly readjusted to her new environment and learning conditions, reorienting herself towards the skatepark and the collective pedagogy taking place there as girls encouraged each other to attend and try out skateboarding. These creative readjustments were characterised by girls' descriptions of mastering new tricks, teaching others and simply being together at the park. Although Pixie's family initially seemed to support her rejection of formal learning in order to engage in more productive social learning at the skatepark, she was later sent to boarding school as a means of 'catching up'. Once there she developed mental health issues which she directly attributed to boarding school. The role of the skatepark and the process of both learning and 'unlearning' that took place there were found to be facilitated through several key processes described below.

Reordering gendered space

As a traditionally cis male-dominated culture and practice, skateboarding's association with 'deviant' uses of public space have previously been found to constrain girls' access to skate parks and other skate spaces. However, previous research (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2013) has found that whilst many girls felt unwelcome in skateboarding culture more broadly, skateboarding also held potential as a site of feminist activism as girls 'took over' formerly cis male-dominated spaces and practice. This was also the case in our research where, as restrictions eased, parks reopened and regulations on social distancing relaxed, the local skatepark became more and more popular for girls in particular. During the pandemic, this transition seemed to happen 'en masse' at the skate park, as girls collectively met at the park, encouraged friends to join in and often met new friends in the process.

We go together as a group. And it's usually just stories on Instagram like, who's going? And you like check or ask the group chat. There's more girls. There's more of a community. Everyone's really nice to each other and doesn't judge each other. I know everyone so no one's going to say anything.

(Darcy, 15, she/her)

The presence of all-girls schools nearby, friendship networking, social media and a contingent of supportive adults all seemed to facilitate the gendered shift that had taken place. Socioeconomic divisions had also been mediated somewhat by the community vibe of the park where some girls described borrowing or being given a skateboard by adult skaters who had taken part in building/fundraising for the skatepark and continued to be a frequent presence. As friends recruited one another and the demographic shifted, the novelty of a 'girl-dominated' skatepark was noted amongst the participants as something that distinguished it from other 'fancy' skateparks with steeper ramps and other features not conducive to beginners. For example, Pixie (14) noted that when she first visited, 'It was like THE place to be for girls'. This gendered reordering of ownership and space contributed to the potential for growth and recovery as a sense of both collective change and individual autonomy were engendered.

Reimagining habits of movement

Schooling also continued to provide a contrast to the emerging atmosphere of the skatepark as academic pressures were compared with the girls' positive experiences of skateboarding. For example, Paula experienced the break from school as an immediate relief and described the sense of freedom and happiness she felt at skateboarding more regularly.

It [lockdown] was quite a positive thing because I really don't like school, so it made me happy that I could just see my friends every day and do what I want when I wanted, like skate or just go out, and it was sunny. It was really nice. Obviously it wasn't a good thing but- (Paula, 15, she/they)

Here Paula described lockdown almost as a kind of utopia where she could see her friends, spend time outside, and experience freedoms she does not usually have whilst attending school. The ability to 'just see my friends every day and do what I wanted' provided a stark contrast with the restrictions of schooling where bodies are highly regulated in terms of space, scheduling and timings (Jenks 2001). The sense of happiness generated for Paula is therefore linked to sociality, place and movement which seem to produce a further physical connection with her environment including the warmth of the sun and the ability to skate or 'just go out' and be where she wanted to be. In exploring the role of leisure as counter-depressant, Fullagar (2008, 37) similarly emphasises the affective range of emotions at play where 'leisure experiences can embody different intensifications of emotional relations'. Paula's account emphasised this sense of joy and pleasure and this was further heightened through the collective experience of girls learning together.

Forging a skate community

The presence of friends, supportive adults and familiar users of the skatepark were all seen as crucial in girls' narratives of feeling both comfortable and excited about learning to skateboard. The affective energy generated through the changing environment at the skatepark is captured further by Nahal's description of learning together within a gendered social collective. Nahal, whose Muslim background could operate as a form

of exclusion in some settings, emphasised the excitement of the park as framed through the forging of what was described as an inclusive skate community.

Everyone was coming, learning how to skate. And so that's when I made friends. And then skateboarding kind of just became a release for me and it was really good for my mental health because there was a lot of struggle and a lot of stress and pressure from school, and how everything was just falling apart around you, but I consistently skated in the pandemic and it just it helped me a lot because I could be away from home.

Because usually in the pandemic you just stay at home all day every day. And it just kills you. It drains your energy. But like when I came out to skate it would just kind of recharge me, then I'd go home and just feel a lot better.

(Nahal, 14, non-binary, 'but legally a girl')

Perhaps most sharply, Nahal's account captured the temporal ebb and flow of the pandemic. Nahal emphasised the state of crisis and regeneration, the creative atmosphere of the skatepark as new people joined, and the sense of collective energy and revitalisation created there within an 'intense coming together of people and things in close proximity' (Bissell 2010, 276). Nahal contrasted this welcoming energy and freedom with the 'struggle, stress and pressure' of school, which continued to make demands of students. This was also mediated by Nahal's previous experiences of leisure as characterised by both gendered and racialised exclusion. As a Muslim Asian, Nahal was one of a very small minority of non-white participants at the skatepark who had taken up skateboarding prior to lockdown and described the difficulties of having to skateboard mainly with boys whilst defying gendered family expectations. Nahal described their family as having cautioned, 'well, you're a girl, you should wear your headscarf and sit down and just be quite reserved and study hard, or whatever'. As Samie (2013) has observed, Asian Muslim women have been forced to negotiate dominant racialised and gendered discourses of their both invisible and hypervisible sporting bodies which negate their own active body work. Nahal's account describes a careful negotiation of normative discourses and one in which Nahal ultimately manages to resist gendered, familial and cultural expectations of their body. Other participants also reported experiences of gender-based discrimination and one instance of harassment that affected their ability to participate in skateboarding previously. Nahal's sense of the energy and momentum generated at the park over lockdown as girls took over the park can be contextualised by these previous individual struggles and seems to also generate a possibility for wellness and regeneration in order to 'feel a lot better'. The skatepark and its relative freedoms and sense of newness were contrasted both with the restrictions of home and schooling as well as providing a sense of hope emerging from the described chaos of 'everything falling apart'. The collective energy, friendly social interactions, open space and ability to move through that space all worked to generate an emergent capacity of recovery in Nahal's process of 'becoming well'.

Whilst Nahal described this affective encounter as generating capacities of revitalisation and wellness, Darcy focused on the affective sense of 'happiness' and its facilitation within the friendships and bodily autonomy of the atmosphere generated at the skatepark.

Sheryl: How did the pandemic affect you?

Darcy: Well, I was able to dye my hair loads of different colours. Because before the school wouldn't let me. But now they will.

Pixie: My school doesn't. It's so dumb.

Darcy: Changing the colour of my hair just makes me happier. And skating made me feel happier. I made loads of new friends that I hadn't talked to before and that just made me feel really happy. Because before quarantine I was just waiting to get home all day to watch tv and I didn't hang out with my friends.

(Darcy, 14, she/her and Pixie, 14, she/her)

Darcy's account of happiness is again strongly contrasted with the regulations of schooling where the gendered monitoring of student's bodies through school uniforms and dress codes acts as form of governance (Raby 2010). Darcy's account also emphasised the enforced sedentariness of schooling's accompanying patterns and routines. In her mobilities-oriented account of children's television viewing, Bell (2011, 385) argues that children may be using television viewing to resist the 'feel' of being busy as a means of addressing 'particular mental health needs in longer, busier and more stressful days'. Similarly, Darcy's previous routine of sedentary schooling followed by sedentary television consumption with little space for socialisation conveys this sense of a relationship to time which is highly regulated and where carving out space or rest for oneself is challenging. Yet during the pandemic, many of these regulations were eased and Darcy was able to discover new modes of mobility and interaction characterised by less study time, the ability to dye her hair and to hang out with her friends at the park. The affective atmosphere of 'happiness' generated through these new patterns facilitated a possibility for recovery from previous routines and restrictions. Being together with friends and the new social connections generated also seemed to foster a strong ethos of care and support among the girls as they described encouraging one another to take part or learn a new trick. Girls frequently noted the value in skateboarding in familiar space and community. For example, Hannah (12, she/her) in discussing her preference of the park stated, 'Everyone knows everyone and will be kind and caring and aware. I prefer the community here'. This sense of care was further extended to physical intimacy and the prevention of harm as Hannah and her friend noted they held each other's hands doing new tricks, 'in case anything happens'. It was clear that this ethic of care was fostered both in the community space and the relationships engendered there.

The skatepark as atmosphere of recovery and its facilitation of movement and care in particular are perhaps most vividly illustrated in Hannah's account of severe mental unwellness. Hannah's mental illness is manifested through serious thoughts of self-harm which she describes as being alleviated through skateboarding.

Before I skated I was in counselling for being really suicidal and then I met- well I re-started talking to Jenna, who's helped massively. I have to credit to her. And then she got me into skateboarding, so I bought a skateboard. It wasn't the best but it worked, and then I started really getting into it and all of a sudden because I had a reason to go out and go actually do something productive, I just motivated myself to that, and it made the thoughts completely go away. They have been coming back lately, but I know that if I go out and skate they really go away for a time, like a moment in time that I can- I don't know how to explain it but it really helps basically.

(Hannah, 12, she/her)

Although Hannah's experience varies from other participants in terms of the severity of her mental illness, the atmosphere and process of recovery she describes have many significant overlaps with other girls using the skatepark which illustrate some of the nuanced ways in which one might move towards 'wellness'. Hannah's experience is framed by a sense of care in the form of a friend who reinforces Hannah's importance and worth as a source of both concern and attention. A feminist ethic of care (Noddings 2013) is further inscribed through Hannah's growing ability to provide self-care, to 'motivate myself to do that'. The time and energy she dedicates to herself seems to generate capacities of optimism and hope, where skateboarding becomes 'a reason to go out and actually do something'. New forms of movement, sociality and relationships to space are generated as Hannah connects with the 'right here, right now feeling of the body and its environment' (Duff 2016, 63) as her moving body encounters the rhythms and bumps of the skatepark and the other bodies interacting there. She describes these encounters as an escape from the thoughts that have plagued her previously. Hannah's experience further illustrates the ways in which 'mental health' as Duff argues, is never a fixed outcome and instead exists along a spectrum and within a particular set of spatial, political and social factors which may shift towards 'health in illness'. Hannah recognises her escape, her 'moment in time' as temporary but as forming a reprieve through new patterns and interactions that are continuing to generate feelings of capacity and wellness.

Discussion and conclusion

Throughout this paper we have described how a group of girls and non-binary young people were able to creatively adapt to pandemic conditions in processes of healing and recovery generated at a local skatepark. Despite collective strategies, the girls' experiences of lockdown were also inflected through differences of socioeconomic status, racialisation and gender identity. Socioeconomic status influenced the type of space they had at home, parental resources, parental attitudes towards skateboarding and the type of schooling they attended. For example, Pixie was able to make up for lost education by attending boarding school later and some girls also mentioned that their skateboarding had been supported by additional lessons or paid visits to skateparks bought by their parents. In contrast, participants like Nahal had had to 'make do' with a penny board until they were given a skateboard and worked hard to both negotiate and defy parental, gendered and cultural expectations about their active body. Nahal was also the only Asian Muslim participant in the study and one of a few non-white minorities in a space dominated by whiteness. Non-binary participants including Nahal were further defying heteronormative expectations which Nahal alluded to in their self-description as 'legally a girl'. The relatively high number of participants using 'they' pronouns and/or identifying as non-binary (7 out of 18 participants) may suggest a higher than normal acceptance of gender diversity within skateboard culture and these participants did not allude to particular challenges or differences for them within the skateboarding community although this does not mean they did not exist. In fact, diversity and inclusion did seem to function as a strong feature of the skatepark described by our participants in its fostering of a caring community.

These findings contribute to growing work on new femininities in sport and the entangled role of girlhood as at a 'representational nexus' between new forms of feminist

activism and ideologies of neoliberal subjectivity within a global economy (Chawansky and Hayhurst 2015; Clark 2021; Heywood 2007; Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017; Toffoletti et al. 2018). Indeed, as the commercialisation and regulation of skateboarding increases, it remains important to ask what forms of participation are enabled in these spaces and which subjectivities are made possible or impossible. We suggest that the girls' 'bodies in crisis' can be understood as having to react and adapt to new environments brought about by the pandemic through creative and resourceful strategies that engendered new modes of action and bodily capacities. We have pointed out how the skatepark itself created an atmosphere of recovery in an ongoing process that drew on collections of movement and sociality brought about through the skate culture developed in the park and its facilitation of a community of care. The girls' experiences at the skatepark, the sense of coming together and the joint learning they articulated, seemed to allow them to narrate a shift away from the isolation, anxiety and physical immobility of lockdown, towards a sense of new possibilities and as reprieve and healing from the mental ill health they described previously. Whilst experiences of mental ill health varied in their intensity, their relief was consistently linked to the take up of skateboarding and in particular to the atmosphere generated at the skatepark over lockdown where new capacities of wellness and hope were facilitated.

These new capacities and modes of being were contrasted in particular with the regulations of schooling and the postfeminist expectations of 'successful femininities' that have come to frame girlhood. A significant finding was that, although interruptions to girls' routines were initially characterised by concerns around contagion and restrictions on mobility, a significant amount of concern was also generated through the ongoing expectations of schooling and the home learning put in place during lockdown. Therefore, the particular 'crisis' these bodies encountered can be seen to be generated additionally through the media, through restrictions imposed on them and through expectations to keep up with the demands and expectations of schooling despite its former structures and support systems no longer being in place. In this context, schooling and the postfeminist expectations of late modernity are revealed as a particular crisis and the skatepark becomes a site for both learning and unlearning the habits and routines previously experienced in the girls' intensified lives.

Skateboarding through lockdown seemed to have acted as a departure from the pressure and intensive scheduling of extracurricular activities and homework and acted as a space of collective critical reflection and support. Participants' meanings and experiences of health during this period generated a critical interrogation of the 'unhealthy' environment and conditions of schooling and intensified schedules more broadly, which contrasted with the less regulated environment of the skatepark and its assemblage of space, bodies and movement. As more and more girls made their way to the skatepark, it was seen to generate a sense of happiness linked to sociality, place and movement. Participants described a collective energy and excitement about something new taking place and contrasted this with the struggle and stress of schooling as well as the containment of being at home every day. Happiness was linked in particular to sociality and meeting new friends, bodily autonomy and physical mobility. Skateboarding provided a reason to go out and be with others in a setting where capacities of hope and a sense of care created possibilities for recovery from previous patterns and restrictions felt by the girls.

The skatepark can therefore be seen to have provided an alternative form of schooling where new modes of being and movement were learned just as the embodied patterns and routines of schooling were interrupted and unlearned. During this brief interlude girls were able to create their own opportunities for learning with their peers and were able to construct themselves differently – often in mixed groups by school, age and sometimes gender. As a result their embodied experiences of the world changed as new patterns, friendships and challenges emerged, offering them time off from the ‘intensified girlhoods’ expected of them. In bell hooks’ (2003) exploration of ‘pedagogies of hope’ as generated through new communities of learning she outlines the possibilities for change of ‘classrooms without boundaries’. She describes these unconventional spaces for teaching and learning as having the capacity to ‘renew the spirit and enable joy’ as a means of imagining otherwise (Hooks 2003, 24). In a commitment to education as the practice of freedom she suggests that such spaces might produce our ‘visions for tomorrow’ as emerging from ‘the concrete circumstances of change we are experiencing right now’ (Hooks 2003, 13). We suggest that lockdown and its attendant restrictions inadvertently generated just such a space for collective critical reflection, healing and renewal in spaces such as the skatepark as a new kind of classroom. Certainly the new forms of sociality and movement taken up at the park seemed to generate critiques of previous patterns and structures that regulated these young peoples’ lives. These new forms of learning are important and worthy of consideration as we continue to carve out new ‘covid societies’. It is difficult to say to what extent girls’ presence at the skatepark and the generation of new patterns created there are sustainable although at the time of our research, the changes that occurred at the park over the lockdown seemed to have maintained momentum. Crucially, however, the collective healing and energy generated at the skatepark over this time provides important insights into young people’s embodied capacity for change and demonstrates possibilities for imagining learning, health and community otherwise.

Note

1. For more information on this project go to <https://citymillskate.com/news-category/press/2023/06/28>

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