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Skateboarding beyond the limits of gender? Strategic interventions in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Sweden prides itself as a country where young women can enjoy gender equality. Yet many young women skateboarders still experience discomfort when skateboarding in public spaces. We argue that diverse strategies are required to intervene in the intransigent problem of gender inequality in the male-dominated sport of skateboarding. We discuss two intertwined strategies adopted in Swedish skateboarding contexts, *strategic visibility* and *strategic entitlement*. Strategic visibility is premised on making girls a special case, separated from the boys, and therefore highly visible. The other intervention goes beyond the limits of gender, aiming to achieve strategic entitlement, which takes-for-granted girls' participation and competence. Drawing from ethnographic data, we explore the paradoxical spaces of these interventions, identifying the benefits and risks of each strategy. We conclude that both strategies are important, yet the latter breaks new ground. Strategic entitlement, which constructs skateboarding girls as ordinary and indistinguishable from boys, no longer constructs gender as a limiting factor. Interventions to promote gender equality should include strategies that seek to go beyond gender *and* strategies that acknowledge the significance of gender. We need to keep experimenting with and researching the unintended consequences of all strategies for challenging and changing male dominance in sport and leisure.

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Introduction: claiming space for girls and women to skateboard in Sweden

Spaces for leisure are not easily claimed and occupied by girls and women (Caudwell & Browne, 2011; Scraton & Watson, 2000; Skeggs, 1999). Even when girls and women grow up in societies presumed to have gained gender equality, such as the Nordic countries, their sense of entitlement to public space and to spaces for leisure and sport is still not assured (Formark & Öhman, 2013; Listerborn, 2016; Lundström, 2010).¹ Although gender equality has been prominent as a political endeavour in this region, research on gender and sport has shown that the results have been ambiguous and contradictory (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Fasting & Sisjord, 1981; Klausen, 1996; Larsson, 2014; Tolvhed, 2014), which echoes the international literature (Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 1995). Skateboarding, like snowboarding, surfing, rock climbing and mountain biking, has been categorised as an action,

extreme and alternative sport (Rinehart & Sydner, 2003; Thorpe & Olive, 2016; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013). Recently, these sports have been suggested as potential vehicles for development of gender equality and peace (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013).

Despite the normative ideal in Sweden (and other Nordic countries) of gender equality, reflected in positive scores on the global gender gap index,² we will show how this ideal does not easily translate into girls' entitlement to skate in public spaces without contestation.³ Skateboarding, and other board sports, has been utilised as a tool of empowerment for young women to engage in physical activities and gain confidence to take their place in these male-dominated sports, contributing to the 'girl effect' (Koffman & Gill, 2013; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013). Active encouragement of girls into male-dominated sports and other affirmative action strategies such as girls-only events are premised on making girls a special case and therefore highly visible. But this heightened visibility does not work for all girls, and tends to construct being a girl as the problem (Larsson, 2014; Ryan-Flood, 2009). One strategy, which we call strategic entitlement, takes-for-granted girls' participation and competence in skateboarding, while working towards an ideal world where girls feel entitled to skate in public spaces instead of being relegated to separate spaces and times.

We argue that strategic entitlement, which constructs girls as entitled to space and time to skateboard, and as ordinary and indistinguishable from boys, breaks new ground in strategising for gender equality in sport and leisure because gender is no longer treated as the limiting factor. The idea of strategic entitlement is an important intervention in the ways we think and talk about girls and women's leisure because usually girls and women do not feel entitled to public space and/or time for themselves (Listerborn, 2016; Scraton & Watson, 2000). Strategic entitlement introduces a new way of thinking about girls and women's entitlement to space and time to skateboard and is a useful term for describing a different kind of intervention we identified in our research. Drawing from our ethnographic data, we critically examine the interventions – strategic visibility and strategic entitlement – and identify the benefits and risks of making gender strategically visible and then strategically invisible at local and national scales. We argue that diverse strategies are required to intervene in the intransigent problem of gender inequality in the male-dominated sport of skateboarding.

Our article is structured in five parts. First, we conceptualise the paradox of creating separate spaces and visibility for female skateboarders in order to understand the significance of strategic entitlement where gender separation is not the desired goal. Second, we summarise existing research about female skateboarders, which continues to treat girl skateboarders as a special case, and demonstrates how strategic entitlement offers an alternative framework for dismantling gender inequality in sport and leisure. Third, we describe our methodology. Fourth, we examine strategic visibility and strategic entitlement, identifying benefits and risks. Finally, we conclude with our assessment of the theoretical and practical potential of the ultimate goal of strategic entitlement, of going beyond the limits of gender to create a world where girls (and boys) who want to skateboard no longer feel limited by their gender, and instead feel entitled to skate in public spaces without the need for separate provision.

Theorising skateboarding spaces

The practice of space and place is relational: 'space [and place] unfolds as interaction' (Massey, 2005, p. 61), including sensory interactions between skateboarding bodies and surfaces, amongst skateboarders, and between skateboarders and spectators (Borden, 2001; Bäckström, 2014; Fors, Bäckström & Pink, 2013). Female skateboarders' experiences of such relational interactions, which legitimate (or not) their sense of entitlement to skateboard in particular spaces and places, reveal how unequal gender relations play out socially and spatially in ways that can then provide insights into how gender relations are operating at a broader societal level.

In this section, we present our conceptual tools for understanding the mutually constitutive process of how skateboarding spaces are constructed through social relations and material social practices and how the social relations of skateboarding are spatially constructed, drawing on Doreen Massey's (1992, 2005) work. Paradoxical space, developed by Gillian Rose (1993), is another conceptual tool

for understanding young women skateboarders' ambivalent experiences of (in)visibility in a range of spaces (skateparks, media representations, etc.) in Sweden. Ambivalence is also embodied in young women skateboarders' desires to claim space and/or to minimise their visibility in space. Iris Marion Young's (1990) work on bodily comportment in space provides useful tools for thinking about what girl skateboarders' entitlement to space might look like in practice. These conceptual tools enable us to explore visibility in a material context to complement existing attention to visibility in media contexts in feminist action sport studies (Bruce, 2012; Lisahunter, 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

The ambivalence women and girls often express when talking about their sensory experiences of space and place can be explained by Rose's (1993) concept of paradoxical space. Girls and women often talk about feeling objectified and at the centre of a space, where they are self-consciously aware of being watched and judged by a male gaze, whether men are present or not (Rose, 1993). Simultaneously, girls and women also feel like they occupy the margins of space whenever they feel they are not legitimately entitled to be there or they feel they should minimise how much space they take by confining their bodies to as small a space as possible (Young, 1990). Often women feel like they are at the centre and the margin simultaneously and paradoxically (Nairn, 1997; Smith, Nairn & Sandretto, 2015).

This paradoxical occupation of the centre and margin often corresponds to ambivalent experiences of belonging, of feeling like an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. Rose's conceptualisation complicates the insider/outsider dichotomy often utilised by research participants in action sport studies to determine social and cultural belonging and authenticity, and problematises the position of the participant researcher (e.g. Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Pavlidis & Olive, 2014; Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013; Wheaton, 2002). Rose theorises how we can experience being an insider and outsider simultaneously, socially and spatially. Feeling like an insider might happen for female skateboarders who experience a sense of belonging when they feel competent at the skatepark (Pomerantz, Currie, & Kelly, 2004) but this sense of belonging might simultaneously be undermined if their visibility as a girl skateboarder generates too much attention and/or comparisons with male skateboarders, creating a feeling of being an outsider. Hence, girls and women experience contradictory spatialities structured by the paradoxical social relations of centre/margin and insider/outsider (Rose, 1993). In turn this creates paradoxical experiences of visibility and invisibility. To be at the centre is to be visible but it is not always a comfortable visibility and to be at the margins might create a comforting invisibility but this can be frustrating if it limits opportunities and spaces for girl skateboarders to enjoy skateboarding.

Women and girls' contradictory experiences of visibility and invisibility confirm how the spaces they occupy are seldom of their own making (Rose, 1993). The hyper-visibility of a space that feels like a 'thousand piercing eyes' contributes to girls' heightened self-consciousness and a heightened sensory experience of space as something hazardous (Rose, 1993, p. 146). Being watched and judged means that women and girls do not feel entitled to occupy public spaces such as a skatepark and they absent themselves, in effect participating in their own erasure (Rose, 1993).

Making girls a special case in skateboarding research

Research on gender equality in sport in the Nordic countries demonstrates how masculine norms continue to exist, but are also contested, on the sports field as well as in sports organisations (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Fasting & Sisjord, 1981; Klausen, 1996; Ottesen, Jeppesen, & Krustrup, 2010; Svender, Larsson, & Redelius, 2012). Researchers have also been successful in initiating and implementing change. In Sweden, Olofsson (1989), who wrote the first feminist doctorate on women in sport, also helped develop *The Sport Equality Plan* (1989/2005). But the goals of *The Sport Equality Plan* to 'promote women's right to do sport' and later to 'challenge the male dominance of sport' did not always have these intended consequences (Larsson, 2014). For instance, interventions to achieve gender equality have focused on girls and women, which constructs girls and women as the 'problem' to be addressed, rather than boys and men (Larsson, 2014; also see Fagrell, 2000; Grahn, 2008; Larsson, 2006; Redelius, 2002; Svender et al., 2012). Larsson highlights the unintended consequences of one 'gender equality' intervention in Physical Education, which entailed the shift from separate classes for girls and boys

to co-education, and ironically how this privileged boys in terms of higher grades and their sense of influence over class content (Larsson, 2014; Larsson & Redelius, 2008).

In the expanding field of research on skateboarding, girls and women skateboarders continue to be treated as extraordinary and exceptional by virtue of their gender (Atencio & Beal, 2016; Lombard, 2016; MacKay, 2016). In contrast, research about boys and men skateboarders seldom acknowledges the significance of gender, with notable exceptions (Atencio, Beal, & Wilson, 2009; Beal, 1996). In effect, girls and women (researchers and skateboarders, ourselves included) have been allocated 'separate spaces' in the research, and we contest this separation in our analysis section, mindful of Larsson's (2014) research, which demonstrates that a 'co-educational space' might not necessarily be the answer.

Skateboarding girls and women are more visible in a leisure sport dominated by boys and men, similar to other board sports (Lisahunter, 2016; Olive, McCuaig, & Phillips, 2015; Thorpe, 2009). This dominance means that boys and men who skateboard in public spaces often go unmarked, their presence is ordinary. Boys and men often take for granted their entitlement to public space, although this is shaped by sexuality, ethnicity, age and so on (see e.g. Adekunle, 2016; Atencio et al., 2009; Beal, 1995; Mould, 2016; Ursin, 2016). Men are not held accountable for their part in contributing to, or at least benefiting from, an assumed heterosexual male gaze, which objectifies and sexualises women (Valentine, 1993). Instead women cannot take for granted their entitlement to public space and are often blamed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time (Bäckström, 2013; Listerborn, 2016; Valentine, 1992). Such assumptions permeate research about women skateboarders, so that young women's presence in urban public spaces is unusual and often portrayed as extraordinary and 'alternative' within an alternative subculture (Young, 2004; also see Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005; MacKay, 2016).

Research with skater girls in Canada complicates 'the heterosexual male gaze' in its discussion of skater girls' resistance to the gaze of skater boys. Skater girls were critical of giggly, self-conscious 'bun girl femininity', which they dismissed as 'detrimental to girlhood itself' because 'bun girls' were perceived as preoccupied with watching (the boys) and displaying their bodies, rather than skating (Pomerantz et al., 2004, p. 553). Skateboarding women have therefore been constructed as 'other' in relation to men, but also 'other' in relation to other women, especially those perceived as displaying stereotypical heterosexual hyper-femininity.

Despite being outnumbered, women in lifestyle sports such as skateboarding, surfing and snowboarding have clearly been claiming space for themselves (Knijnik, Horton, & Cruz, 2010; Lisahunter, 2016; Olive et al., 2015; Sisjord, 2009; Thorpe, 2009; Wheaton, 2002). Even though women in these sports are increasingly visible, women's position in gender hierarchies continues to be contested and insecure. For example, in research about skateboarding in both California and Canada, hierarchical gender relations favour skateboarders who achieve distinction by taking risks and dismissing fear of getting hurt as a feminine preoccupation (Atencio et al., 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2004; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005). But these contestations invariably reproduce 'risky' skating as the only way girl skaters might prove themselves on the gender hierarchy.

One way of escaping the hierarchical gender order and the judging male gaze has been the establishment of separate spaces for skateboarding girls: material spaces such as girls-only skating at skateparks (Bäckström, 2013; Atencio, Beal, McClain, & Wright, 2016) and mediated spaces such as the skirtboarders' blog (MacKay, 2016). Girls-only events in skateboarding, such as camps, competitions, tours and other forms of affirmative action have legitimised the presence of girls and women in this male-dominated sport in Sweden and the USA (Atencio et al., 2009, 2016; Bäckström, 2013). Such 'girls-only' spaces have acted as springboards for further strategic gender work. Although participation and what that means may differ widely in material and mediated spaces, the Skirtboarders blog, for instance, challenged niche skateboarding media and other male-dominated institutions to ultimately open up space for women to participate (MacKay, 2016; Mac Kay & Dallaire, 2013). But similar strategies in other spheres, such as snowboarding, to create 'women-only' niche media and competitions were mainly ignored by male-dominated structures (Thorpe, 2005). We examine the paradoxical

outcomes of strategic visibility further in our analysis below and introduce strategic entitlement as one way of moving beyond the limits of strategic visibility.

Our research builds on previous studies of gender and action sport in several ways. We continue the project of examining power structures related to gender (Lisahunter, 2016; MacKay, 2016; Thorpe, 2005, 2009; Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). We analyse multiple types of data in a reflexive collaborative manner (Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2002). In identifying two key strategies for women skateboarders to claim material and mediated space, we aim to contribute to the broader project of collective political action to create meaningful spaces for girls and women in sport and leisure. But first we explain our methodology.

Building a rich ethnographic picture over time: our methodology

The research reported here began with a sensory ethnography focused on young women's experiences of initiatives to make skateboarding more gender inclusive in Sweden (Bäckström, 2013; 2014; Fors, Bäckström & Pink, 2013). The sensory ethnography was conducted by the first author between 2008 and 2010 and included digital, visual, textual, interview and aural material (see Bäckström, 2013; 2014; Pink, 2015). All in all, 68 young people gave written consent to participate in the study. They contributed in various ways, some more in-depth and over a longer period of time than others. The participants were mainly Swedish citizens living in urban settings, 90% were female and young (aged between 12 and 36), and were varied in skill ranging from beginners to highly experienced skateboarders with sponsorships. According to their own or their parents' occupations and education, the majority were middle-class.

Since 2010, the first author has continued to collect skateboarding media including documentaries, films, books and media images, building a rich ethnographic picture of Sweden's skateboarding scene. The sensory ethnographic data and subsequent media data have enabled us to analyse local and national interventions in the material and mediated spaces of skateboarding in Sweden over a decade.

A national network of women skateboarders – *No limit* – was formed in 2007 to challenge gender inequalities in skateboarding. *No limit* introduced a range of initiatives including 'girls-only' skate hours, skate camps and skate tours, which facilitated both strategic visibility and strategic entitlement. In 2011, *No limit* produced a documentary *Crossing Boarders* (2011) and in 2014, a book *Skateboarding – not just for tjejer*. In 2016, the Swedish male-dominated skateboarding magazine *Giftorm* produced an issue where girls' visibility in skateboarding seemed to be taken for granted. We include this magazine issue in our media analysis as an indication of what *No limit* has achieved in Sweden, while mindful that one issue of *Giftorm* does not mean gender equality in skateboarding in Sweden has been achieved.

Our cross-disciplinary analytical perspectives were informed by proximity and distance (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2014). The first author is an insider and outsider to skateboarding in Sweden as a well-known researcher active for over two decades in the field while the second author is an outsider who questioned what might be taken-for-granted in Sweden. Our mutual reflective practices (Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2002), informed by theoretical feminist approaches and everyday skateboarding issues, identified particularities from the Swedish context, which made them more visible to author 1. Various communication technologies enabled our joint analysis of diverse data, supplemented by time together in Sweden and Australia, which deepened our collaborative analysis. More specifically, the analysis reported here entailed sustained engagement with and analysis of interviews, participant observation fieldnotes, the documentary *Crossing Boarders*, the book *Skateboarding – not just for tjejer* and the magazine *Giftorm*, which publishes 6–8 issues per year. We took a theory-driven approach to our analysis (Belcher, 2009). Theoretical concepts, already outlined and primarily from feminist geography, informed the analysis reported here (Massey, 1992, 2005; Rose, 1993). Our analysis and theorisation of each strategic intervention proceeded via the collaborative writing process itself (Atkinson, 1991).

We examined how strategic visibility and strategic entitlement operated in paradoxical ways within the material spaces of skateparks and within different kinds of media spaces. Paying attention to the

paradoxical effects of well-intentioned interventions to address gender equality is important because it identifies unintended consequences, which can inform further development of effective strategies and/or demystify the consequences of existing interventions (also see Alton-Lee & Densem, 1992; Larsson, 2014). We turn now to our analysis.

Strategic visibility and strategic entitlement: contradictory consequences

As we will show the two strategies are interconnected. Nevertheless, we will discuss them separately for clarity. We begin with strategic visibility, which is premised on making girls a special case, separated from the boys, and therefore highly visible. Strategic visibility creates the conditions for strategic entitlement, which assumes girls' entitlement to participate in skateboarding without special treatment and separate provision. As we will show, both strategies have apparent advantages, but also unintended consequences (Larsson, 2014).

In earlier work (Bäckström, 2013), 'normalisation' was used to describe what we are now calling strategic entitlement. We have deliberately moved away from using 'normalisation' which implies girl skaters should aspire to, or be compared with (male) norms. Strategic interventions to create new ways of thinking about gender relations are always bound up in existing ways of thinking too. Theoretically, we wish to move beyond the limits of the always present implicit male norm, but we are conscious of how difficult this is, as we acknowledge in the following analysis. We nevertheless demonstrate how strategic visibility and strategic entitlement can be culturally disruptive in different ways and with different effects.

Strategic visibility

The national network of women skateboarders *No limit* launched two nation-wide tours, which promoted skateboarding demonstrations and competitions at skateparks, to attract girls and women to try skateboarding. These events attracted varied audiences including youth groups, families and elderly people, generating a real momentum of interest in, and the strategic visibility of, girls and women skateboarders in the material spaces of skateparks (see Figure 1). The first *No limit tour* was launched in 2008 and the second tour *Crossing Boarders* in 2010.

The network also created strategic visibility in media spaces by developing an exhibition, which accompanied the skateboarding women on tours and other events (see Figure 2). The exhibition was set up on the fringes of skateparks and attracted many viewers curious about the initiative. Panels displayed the story of how *No limit* was founded, why the network was needed ('to support skateboarding women in a male-dominated sphere') and how it would cease to exist when it was no longer needed. A map of Sweden identified the locations of skateparks with 'girls-only' times. Other events such as 'girls-only' camps and contests were advertised next to the map. The exhibition in effect put women skateboarders on the map and demarcated time and space symbolically *and* materially for girls and women to skateboard.

Young women participating in these events attracted media attention ranging from televised mainstream media to niche skateboarding magazines, including print and digital media. In addition, the young women themselves announced their activities and whereabouts through their own social media accounts.

Although *No limit's* strategic visibility seemed to work on the national scale, our research demonstrated how visibility was a complex issue for girls and young women individually. For some young women, visibility meant they felt under scrutiny in public space, which complicated the pleasure of skateboarding, while others enjoyed the recognition and the benefits of sponsorship. Often young women shifted backwards and forwards along a continuum of contradictory experiences between feeling 'visible *and* acknowledged' and 'visible *and* scrutinised'; their position on the continuum did not coincide with skateboarding skill or with age.



Figure 1. The tours inspired women to try skateboarding and attracted varied audiences including youth groups, families and elderly people, e.g. Crossing Boarders tour in Skarpnäck, Stockholm, 14 August 2010. Photo: Bäckström.



Figure 2. The exhibition that accompanied the skateboarding women in 2010. This showed the 12 skateparks where there were tjej-skate hours. Photo: Bäckström, 14 August 2010. Since then more skateparks have been added.

For some young women visibility was counter-productive. Paradoxically, some young women actively pursued invisibility and marginal spaces in order to skateboard, despite *No limit's* goal of making them visible and centre-stage. Several young women recounted tales during the fieldwork of hiding from the public gaze to practise skateboarding. These young women specifically sought invisibility by skating in open parks at night-time and practising in places where they could not be seen by the public. The common themes in these accounts were the fear of getting caught doing something that others perceived as 'not for them' and the potential embarrassment of their skills being observed and judged as not 'good enough'. Even experienced skaters such as Jolene (all names are code names) articulated the consequences of strategic visibility, exemplifying other women skateboarders' experiences (including beginners):

I think it's really bad ... because ... you get stared at. Everywhere I go I get stared at. If I am skating in the street and we are five people then everybody that passes will stare the most at me. They don't watch the guys as much, they watch me, like 'yeah, a girl, what's she doing?' And when I come here [to the indoor skatepark outside girl skate hours], the whole skate park sort of turns. Everybody watches what I am wearing, what brands I use and you really get looked hard at. But that's the way it is. (Interview 100118, Jolene, 27 years, experienced and sponsored skateboarder)

Jolene articulated a sense of space as a 'thousand piercing eyes', which produced her heightened sense of being watched and judged (Rose, 1993, p. 146). She was aware of being the centre of attention, which made it hard for her to concentrate on her physical performance. Jolene reported how she avoided competitions because of the heightened visibility of that situation. She commented that liking attention, or at least being able to handle it, was a necessary part of being a woman skateboarder.

Negotiations of space and visibility were particularly apparent in relation to *tjej-skate*, i.e. girl skate hours in one skatepark where the fieldwork was conducted. Opening up spaces for girls and women only meant closing the same spaces to boys and men. When it was time for *tjej-skate*, the boys already in the area needed to make way for them, which they did slowly and reluctantly, muttering about their unfair exclusion. These separate times and spaces were also breached. The door was always left open which allowed for spectatorship and commentary on skills by passersby, who would sometimes stay for a while in the doorway. These interruptions slowed down or even stopped some girls from practising skateboarding. Jolene and Ally, both experienced skateboarders in their late 20s, even left the area when they thought the accompanying father of a young girl was staring at them (Fieldnotes 100118).

But being more visible as a girl skateboarder, and in the public gaze, also had advantages. Carro related how her visibility as a girl skateboarder resulted in sponsorship. She talked about the deal she had with a local skateboard shop, which occasionally gave her free skateboards and large discounts on her purchases. In return, the shop wanted her to take part in competitions. The shop sponsored a team of skateboarders and they specifically wanted a girl on the team, which Carro explained in terms of visibility: 'You are very visible as a girl' (Interview 100610, Carro, 16 years, experienced and sponsored skateboarder). For Carro, visibility as a girl gave her the advantages of sponsorship but also compelled her to compete thereby exposing her skills to formal judgement. This visibility relied on her skateboarding skills and may thus be interpreted as part of a possible new wave of female visibility (Lisahunter, 2016). Female athletes have also capitalised on this visibility through self-promotion in social media by branding their empowered entrepreneurial selves (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

For young women who skate, being at the centre and strategically visible was therefore paradoxical, conferring sponsorship, as well as space and time to skate, but always at the cost of being watched and judged. For some young women, strategic visibility was experienced so negatively they deliberately sought invisibility by skating in marginalised spaces at marginalised times. In effect, some young women shunned the strategic visibility and being at 'the centre' that *No limit* had attempted to create, and instead sought out the invisible margins of space and time to skate (Rose, 1993). Irrespective of whether young women skaters embraced and/or rejected strategic visibility, their visibility as skateboarders in Sweden is now more commonplace as a result of *No limit's* interventions, which entails their engagement in everyday spatial and social negotiations with boys and men and with other girls and women (Massey, 2005).

Strategic entitlement

At national and organisational levels, both *No limit* and the *Swedish Skateboarding Association* explicitly aim to dismantle the significance of gender in the skateboarding context so that young women can take for granted their right to skate without questioning this entitlement based on their gender. Both organisations have produced publications that assume skateboarding is socially and culturally ordinary, rather than extraordinary. But strategic entitlement does not logically develop from strategic visibility, which depends on women being a gendered minority. We now examine this second strategy in terms of its benefits and inherent risks, beginning with the example of a woman skate coach, followed by an analysis of media material published by *No limit*, and finishing with a recent issue of the Swedish skateboarding magazine *Giftorm*.

For some women skateboarders such as Pernilla, who worked as a coach during tjej-skate hours, skateboarding was already an activity where girls' participation was unremarkable and ordinary. She even found it hard to understand the difficulty some girls experienced when entering the skatepark while boys were there: 'To me, I just go in and ride my board, because I am accepted. Or, maybe not accepted, but I take my space. I don't accept anyone taking up my space, because it is my space, sort of' (Interview 090302, Pernilla, 19 years, coach, experienced and sponsored skateboarder). For Pernilla, gender seemed to be a problem for other girls, but for her it was less important and she felt entitled to take up space, although there is a hint of uncertainty about this when she finished her sentence with 'sort of'. Despite Pernilla's status as a coach and sponsored skateboarder, her 'sort of' could be interpreted as expressing uncertainty about her entitlement to space to skate, or even her sense of entitlement to express a desire to feel entitled, or both. Her claim 'I don't accept anyone taking up my space, because it is my space' articulates entitlement nevertheless, which we believe is important to foster as a strategic intervention.

No limit's documentary about their second tour *Crossing Boarders* (2010) is another example of strategic entitlement, of making skateboarding ordinary for tjejer. This 20-minute-long skateboard documentary, published on Youtube, is chronologically structured with dates and names of places, and like other skateboard films it has no voiceover.⁴ Form and content resemble other skateboard videos available on the Internet from commercial skateboarding companies and private skateboarders.

Crossing Boarders literally and metaphorically crosses over, blurring gender borders. Because there is no voiceover to remark on the significance of gender or to highlight the prevalence of girls and women's competence as skaters, the overall effect is of unremarkable ordinariness. It is not always possible to distinguish girl from boy skaters, instead skaters seem androgynous in their embodiment, comportment and dress. The widespread adoption of practical clothing such as jeans and t-shirts, which allow for freedom of movement and provide some form of protection from hard surfaces, also blurs gender distinctions, contributing to the documentary's androgyny. The documentary therefore represents tjej-skaters as ordinary, varied in their competency and present in significant numbers, much like their male counterparts who are also ordinary, not always competent and who currently dominate in terms of numbers.

Crossing Boarders de-emphasises the significance of gender in a bid to strategically promote young women's entitlement to skate without being self-conscious about their gender, but risks rendering this group relatively invisible in its androgynous representations of competent skateboarders. Strategic entitlement might not be an effective strategy if it goes unnoticed, a point we return to.

The next example of *No limit's* attempts to promote strategic entitlement is their book *Skateboarding – not just for tjejer* (2014). Playing with *presumptions* of skateboarding being male-dominated, the translation of the book's title claims that skateboarding is not just for girls, creating a sense that boys can no longer take for granted they are the dominant group of skateboarders and hinting that boys *might* even need affirmative action. The title of the book implicitly positions girls and women as part of the skateboarding 'norm', as ordinary participants, and therefore entitled to skate. In effect, *No limit* playfully re-invites boys to skate as though they are now the minority, implying girls have magically become the majority.

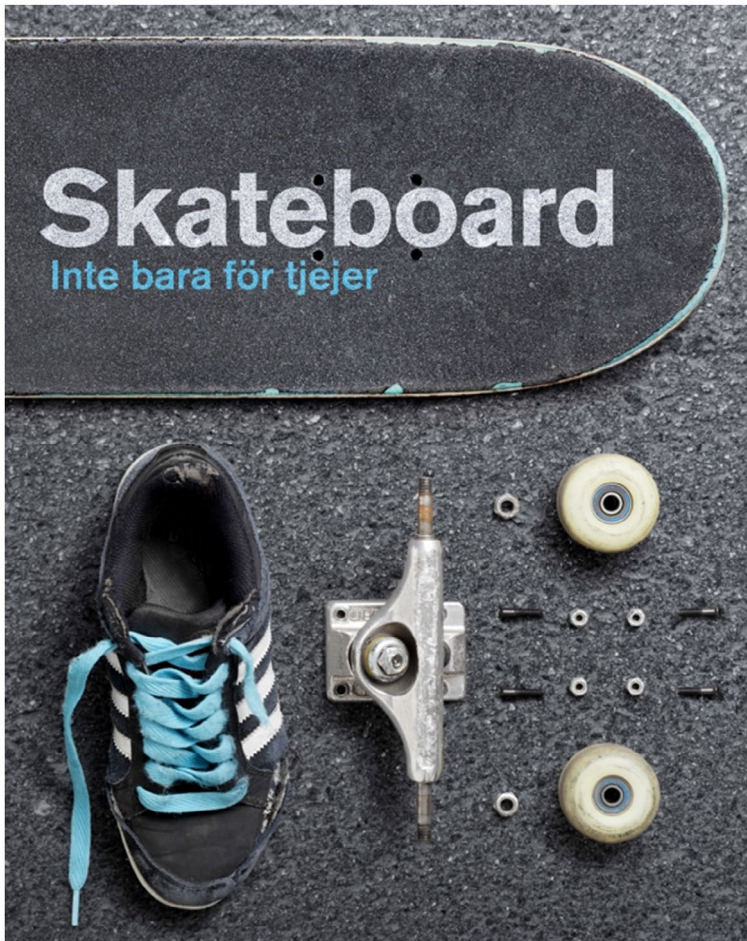


Figure 3. Playing with presumptions of skateboarding being a female practice, *No limit* named their book on girls and women's skateboarding in Sweden: *Skateboarding – not just for tjejer* (2014). © Dokument Press. Reprinted with permission.

The image on the book's cover is disembodied and minimalist, presenting a board, wheels, truck, nuts and bolts and one shoe (see Figure 3). The colour of the shoelaces is the distinguishing colour of *No limit*, which is echoed in the subtitle; this could be interpreted as *No limit's* co-option of blues and greys, which are often understood as stereotypical masculine colours. Together, the title and image could be interpreted as re-presenting an androgynous skateboarder, albeit an androgyny that is more masculine than feminine if the blue and grey palette seems more masculine to viewers. While we applaud *No limit's* innovative re-imagining of the status quo on their book cover, we are also cautious in our celebration of this strategy because playfully flipping structural gender relations upside down does not acknowledge, and renders invisible, how broader structural gender inequalities persist in sports and leisure in Swedish society.

The contents of the book tell a different story to the cover and are more women-focused than the cover implies. The book includes short personal stories from girls and women to convey a sense of who is part of *No limit* and what it has accomplished in terms of skate hours and media exposure, as well as acknowledging pioneering women's achievements before *No limit* existed. Apart from making women's skateboarding 'herstory' visible, several of the people pay tribute to one another for serving as role models in this male-dominated space. Thus, in one book, both strategic entitlement and strategic visibility are evident in the cover and content. In Rose's (1993) terms, the book paradoxically decentres



Figure 4. Playing with presumptions of skateboarding as a female practice, Giftorm portrayed guys' skateboarding – 'killskate' – as the exceptional content in their 2016/6 issue, which contrasts with past issues. © Giftorm. Reprinted with permission.

girls and women on the cover while putting them centre-stage within the book itself. Irrespective of whether this was deliberate or unintentional, mixed messages are in play, which might be confusing for girls and women new to, and those already negotiating, the world of skateboarding. Alternatively, this book could be considered innovative in terms of explicitly combining both interventions.

Our last and most recent example takes the pulse on the influence of *No limit's* strategic work more generally within Sweden. In one 2016 issue of the Swedish skateboarding magazine *Giftorm* (2016/6), the gender order is again flipped representing skateboarding women as ordinary. On the magazine cover (see Figure 4) there is an image of Alexis Sablone, professional skateboarder and medal-winner of X-games, and 18 names of other women skateboarders are listed. At the end of the list, the phrase 'dessutom killskate' (translated 'alongside guys' skateboarding') references the playful assumption that this issue also includes men skateboarders, which reverses the usual position of women's skateboarding in relation to men's.⁵ Notably, gender was not always easily determined in the pictures; like the skateboarders in the documentary *Crossing Borders*, embodiment, comportment and dress were androgynous. Because gender seems invisible, all types of skateboarding could be assigned to all types of skateboarders. *Giftorm* appears to enact strategic visibility and imply strategic entitlement in the

same issue. By naming women skateboarders, and taking their competence for granted, they demonstrate the value of strategic visibility and indicate the possibilities of strategic entitlement. This one-off issue reproduces women skateboarders' strategic visibility and entitlement within the mediated space of Sweden's national skateboarding magazine. One issue does not mean 'equality' has somehow been achieved, and certainly the magazine represents mixed messages between cover and content, but we believe that *Giftorm* provides a glimpse of the impact of a decade of *No limit's* interventions. Such representations in *Giftorm* would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

The importance of multiple strategies: concluding remarks

Strategic entitlement intentionally positions women first and foremost as skateboarders, rather than as women. In the desire to go beyond the limits of arbitrary boundaries such as gender, gender is de-prioritised and destabilised in the taken-for-granted gender order of male dominance in skateboarding. The name *No limit* was deliberately chosen to imagine a world where women skateboarders could take for granted their entitlement to skate in public space, without being limited by their gender. This is an ideal world where separate or special provision for women skateboarders would no longer be needed.

Although *No limit's* long-term goal is one where girls and women feel entitled to skate without being limited by their gender, they have deployed familiar affirmative action strategies as well. Initially, they adopted the strategy of separate provision for girls and women, demarcating space and time for girls to skate, and strategically making girls more visible in the media. As our analysis demonstrates, young women's experiences of this strategy were paradoxical, shifting between feeling 'visible *and* acknowledged' and 'visible *and* scrutinised'. The risk of strategic visibility is the objectification and sexualisation of women skateboarders (Lisahunter, 2016; Rinehart, 2005; Skeggs, 1999; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Strategic visibility is not an adequate strategy on its own. We argue therefore for the adoption of multiple strategies to challenge male-dominated sports, including strategic entitlement.

Strategic entitlement was particularly evident in *No limit's* documentary (2011). The documentary portrayed androgynous skateboarding bodies where gender was not easily distinguishable, implying gender does not, or should not, matter. In effect, the androgyny of the documentary problematises the gendered body. Instead, it is the competency of the skateboarders that stands out, without excluding beginners. Strategic entitlement promotes the ordinariness of girls' (and implicitly boys') competency as skateboarders, without drawing specific attention to girl skateboarders as somehow extraordinary in relation to a male norm. Strategic entitlement creates a theoretical opportunity for moving beyond the limits of always imagining comparison with a male norm; we need to train our ways of seeing so it's possible to view skateboarding bodies, dressed in practical clothes, as ordinary girls and women. *Crossing Boarders*, the title of the tour and later the documentary, seems to encapsulate what might be possible here: girls and boys crossing, and blurring, gender borders, destabilising the gender order in the process. Blurring the existence of two clearly distinguishable genders, which usually depends on underlying stereotypes, can benefit girls and boys because gender stereotypes affect, and limit, everyone (Larsson, 2014).

The combination of strategic entitlement and strategic visibility is evident in *No limit's* book published in 2014. We argue that the combination of both strategies in one book is emblematic of the importance of both strategies, indicating that both are still needed. Strategic entitlement was encapsulated in the book cover and strategic visibility in the focus on women's skateboarding 'herstory' within the book. In effect, *No limit* attempted to remove gender differentiation in its book cover, and in the earlier documentary, but then returned to gender differentiation within its book in order to honour women who have been, or continue to be, important role models and leaders in skateboarding in Sweden. Their specific inclusion of women's skateboarding 'herstory' is important, otherwise it could disappear. This signals one of the pitfalls of strategic entitlement, as gender specificity disappears there is a risk that women's marginalised 'herstory' also disappears.

Strategic entitlement also risks going unnoticed if its underlying goals are not made explicit and wider structural inequalities remain unchallenged. Larsson (2014) demonstrates how a well-intentioned

strategy, such as a gender undifferentiated co-educational PE curriculum, ultimately advantaged boys not girls. He attributes the failure of this 'gender neutral' policy to teachers' inability to see the genders as interchangeable. We wonder if *No limit* is attempting something that teachers have not managed? If *No limit's* goal is that gender should pose no limits to girls and women skateboarders (or boys and men skateboarders), then the intervention is not about gender as interchangeable but about gender as immaterial.

No limit is charting an interesting course in its adoption and combination of multiple strategies to address gender inequality in Swedish skateboarding and it will take time before the long-term consequences can be fully appreciated. The ethnographic data reported here demonstrate that the combination of both strategies in Sweden has effectively begun the process of challenging and changing the male-domination of skateboarding a decade after *No limit* was first established. One indication of change is Sweden's skateboarding magazine *Giftorm's* inclusion of tjej-skateboarders as competent and ordinary. Although this one issue in 2016 is more an example of strategic visibility than strategic entitlement, it demonstrates how both interventions were identifiable across different media over time. These strategic interventions happen in multiple material and media spaces, hence the importance of our analysis of these intersecting spaces. These strategies could have wider applicability to other countries, sports and forms of leisure but that will be for other studies to determine. Most importantly, our research demonstrates the importance of continually (re)thinking the significance of gender, of deploying strategies that seek to go beyond gender *and* strategies that acknowledge the significance of gender. At the same time, we need to keep experimenting and researching any unintended consequences in the ongoing political project of challenging and changing male dominance in sport and leisure.

Notes

1. In this article, we occasionally refer to 'tjej' which is a word borrowed from Romani, meaning girl or daughter. In contemporary Swedish language, 'tjej' connotes female and youth although it is utilised by all ages. In this article, we use girl and woman interchangeably because there is no one word that brings these terms together. We also use 'tjej' where possible to reflect Swedish cultural practices.
2. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/rankings/>
3. We are aware that our text may be interpreted as both hetero- and cisnormative. Although sexuality is important, our focus here is on persistent structural gender inequalities and how the empirical strategies we discuss engage with these. We do not discuss, nor assume, a particular sexual orientation related to a particular gender.
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fx19MeHSHa>
5. Despite the women-focused cover, the content is unevenly distributed. The issue included 100 pages in total and showed pictures of 110 women in comparison to 90 men. The published articles totalled 68 pages and included 108 women and 60 men, whereas the advertisements (26 pages) included 27 men and only 2 women.

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