Skateboarders: Gender, Dress, and Social Comparison

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15574/gender/v02/GCB-02

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Previous research suggests that there are relatively few gender-related differences between adult males and females engaged in the same activities. This study examines this issue among teenage skateboarders. Skateboarding girls were similar to the male skateboarders and nonskateboarding high school girls in feeling socially competent, attractive, and accepted by peers. They were similar to boys in satisfaction with apparel but differed from the general sample of high school girls. Skateboarding girls with lower self-esteem were less satisfied with their apparel relative to their same-sex peers; but girls with higher self-esteem were similar to same-sex peers. The argument is made that clothing serves an identification function for both boys and girls, but that self-esteem and gender moderates the relationship. The paper discusses the developmental aspects of participation in cross-sex activities and the role of clothing in social comparison processes.

INTRODUCTION

Skateboarding, a sport with an outlaw aura, a punk image, and with very little public acceptance, has gone through at least three phases of popularity since the 1960s. Its most recent revival supports a $300 million dollar industry in skateboard equipment, clothing, and related paraphernalia. Marketing to skateboarders takes place through special interest magazines, such as Thrasher and Transworld, direct mail, and demonstrations by skateboarding professionals employed by various skateboard companies. The latter, globe-trotting skateboard gurus are the exclusively male idols of the approximately 10 million young skateboard aficionados.

Skateboarding is arguably a sex-typed sport. It is dangerous; there are no nets, no spotters, and, except for helmets and pads, little protection from injury. Skateboarding apparel, often sporting purposefully offensive brand names (e.g., Fat, Stoopid, Pervert, and Fuct), appears to be the antithesis of fashion. Nevertheless, the skateboarding subculture does include a small number of girls who participate both in casual skateboarding and in organized competitions. This paper examines self-evaluations of female skateboarders in comparison with their male counterparts and nonskateboarding teenage girls.

BACKGROUND

Gender and Consumer Behavior in Development

Children grow up in a gendered world in which concepts of "maleness" and "femaleness" are socially defined and surrounded by a network of relationships. The knowledge that there are differences in the behaviors that are appropriate for boys and girls is present in young children and increases with age into adolescence (Huston 1983). For females in this culture, sex-appropriate behaviors include being warm, nurturing, and passive while "maleness" is associated with dominance, aggressiveness, and competence (Deaux 1984; Maccoby and Jacklin 1974). According to Maccoby (1988) children derive sex-role schemas from observation of models appropriate for their sex, a process she calls cognitive categorizing. Both parents and peers reward children for engaging in sex-appropriate activities (Lytton and Romney 1991). However, boys and girls differ in the development of preferences for masculine and feminine activities and things. While boys' interest in masculine activities increases monotonically with age, girls' interest in feminine activities tends to decrease throughout elementary school (reviewed in Huston 1983). Instead, girls' preferences for stereotypical masculine activities tend to increase, possibly reflecting society's differential evaluations of those activities. Thus, girls at all ages are more likely than boys to engage in cross-sex activities and are less likely to receive punishment for these behaviors.
As early as second grade, children make consumption-based inferences about people that reflect gender-related differences in socialization (Driscoll, Mayer, and Belk 1985; Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). Mayer and Belk (1985) found that preadolescent girls were more likely to attribute positive qualities to owners of popular girl's products (e.g., popularity, happiness, smartness, good looks, and wealth). Boys attributed positive characteristics to owners of products most frequently possessed by boys (dirt bikes, Toughekn jeans, Vans, and Atari video games). Gibbons (1969) found that fifteen and sixteen year-old girls made inferences about socio-economic status, lifestyle, and personality based on clothing. Further, positive inferences were less dependent on liking the clothing than on perceiving it to be fashionable. Although some studies have found that girls tend to be more oriented to opinions of peers in making consumption choices (particularly clothing choices), others have obtained opposite results (Churchill and Moschis 1979).

Numerous studies have indicated that acceptance into an adolescent group is influenced by the degree to which the individual resembles group members. These studies suggest that unconventional dress and appearance are related to lack of social acceptance by more normative adolescents. Further, studies indicate that group acceptance of teenagers is less dependent on similarity of values than on appearance. For a review of this literature see Kaiser (1985).

Social Comparison and Dress
Social comparison can be broadly defined as comparative judgments of social stimuli on particular content dimensions (Kruglanski and Mayseless 1990). According to Festinger's original formulation of social comparison theory (Goethals 1986), individuals use peers as a standard against which to assess their abilities, talents, and other characteristics. Comparators are chosen for the information they provide on specific topics. People may choose either similar others (with whom they identify) or dissimilar others as comparison persons. When group identification is strong, the in-group becomes a positive referent while the out-group is negatively stereotyped. Social comparison exerts its strongest effects in mid-adolescence and can have negative or positive effects on feelings about the self (Tesser, Miller and Moore 1988).

As a general process, social comparison is closely aligned with symbolic interactionism (Solomon 1983). Both hold that products play an important role in impression management and self definition by providing information about others and information about the self. Subculture dress can be seen to signal group membership and to symbolically reflect group values and beliefs (Brake 1985; Hebdige 1979). Thus, a particular "look" is characteristic of not only punk rockers (plastic, chains, and safety pins), but also college academics (jeans, tweeds, and earth tones). In order to produce a correct representation of a group member, subculture members, especially neophytes, must use comparison information provided by core members of the subculture.

Social comparison processes occupy an important place in relative feelings of deprivation.
According to Francis (1990), clothing deprivation
is dissatisfaction resulting from lack of physical comfort and/or psychological discomfort associated with peer comparisons. Francis and Liu (1990) found that feelings of clothing deprivation/satisfaction among adolescents were not related to aesthetic clothing values but were related to economic and social values. They suggest that adolescents assign relatively low importance to aesthetic values but high importance to social values. Consistent with these findings, Kness (1983) found that feelings of deprivation among adolescents also appear to be more related to peer comparisons than to actual deprivation.

Much work has examined the role of fashion in the perception of others and of the self and the function of style in subcultures. However, there has been very little in the literature that addresses the relationship of gender to the implementation of style and its effect on product satisfaction among subculture adolescents. This study examines the relationships between gender, clothing deprivation, and self-evaluations of one identifiable group of adolescents, skateboarders. We proposed that, for skateboarding teenage girls, a conflict exists between gender norms and subculture norms with respect to clothing expectations. Based on the sex-typed nature of skateboarding, the disparity between the skateboarders style of dress, and the idea that products are used as bases for social comparison, we expected skateboarding girls to express more deprivation and have lower evaluations of themselves than either skateboarding boys or the sample of the general population of teenage girls.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Subjects**

The study was part of a larger study of 221 teenagers involved in skateboarding. Because the numbers of boys and girls in the original sample was vastly different (almost 95% male), we randomly selected male subjects from the original sample for this study. Because they were few in number, all of the female skateboarders were included in the study. The final sample of skateboarders consisted of 30 boys and 12 girls, between the ages of 12 and 20.

The comparison sample of 31 teenage girls was constructed by randomly drawing from a larger sample of 336 high school students. These subjects were 14 to 18 years-of-age and were enrolled in home economics classes. Samples were tested to ensure homogeneity with the original groups with respect to critical variables.

**Instrumentation and Procedures**

Skateboarders, both boys and girls, were recruited at two sites on the west coast, where skateboarding contests were being held. Only those adolescents who were active skateboarders and defined themselves as such were included in the sample. The general high school sample was recruited from the home economics classes of six high schools, also on the west coast. All subjects completed a questionnaire containing a measure of perceived clothing deprivation, developed by Francis (1990). The original scale consisted of two factors: Inability to Buy (14 items) and Clothing Deprivation Relative to Peers (5 items). Because of scale length considerations, only the five items loading highest on the first subscale were retained in the present study. These items were: 1) My friends spend more money on their clothes than I can afford; 2) I think that my family does not have enough money to buy me all the clothes that I need; 3) My clothes are cheaper than my classmates' clothes; 4) I feel poor and shabby because of my clothes; and 5) My friends and classmates have more appropriate clothes for group activities and dating than I do. All of items on the second subscale were included: 1) My clothes are as nice as my friends' clothes; 2) I think I dress as well as my classmates; 3) My friends like my clothes; 4) The colors of my clothes flatter me; 5) My clothes are completely up to date and fashionable. Responses to scale items were collected on a 5-point scale (1=never; 5=always).

In order to analyze the scale, both subscales were coded so that higher scores represented greater satisfaction and lower scores represented greater deprivation. The reliability of the two subscales was tested and found to be similar to the original scale. Cronbach alphas were .76 (Clothing Deprivation Relative to Peers) and .53 (Ability to Buy). The combined scales yielded a Cronbach alpha of .67.
Additional questions about self-concept and subject demographics were also included on the survey instrument. Adolescents completed the social competence items from the Perceived Adolescent Relationship Scale (PAR) (Andrews and Francis 1989). These items asked adolescents to rate their attractiveness, popularity, and ability to make others like them, in comparison with other kids their age (1 = low; 7 = high). Subjects believing themselves to be more attractive, more popular, and more able to influence perceptions of others were assumed to possess higher self-esteem. In addition, subjects were asked to provide a measure of economic stress by rating decrease in family income (1 = no decrease; 4 = substantial decrease) and increase in demands on income (1 = no increase; 4 = substantial increase). Examples of situations that might cause an increase in demands were provided: medical or health costs, purchase of a new home, college tuition, or the birth of a new family member. Observational data and respondent comments were also collected.

RESULTS

Observations

Even without considering special skateboarding equipment, the appearance of the skateboarders in this study could be used to differentiate them from nonskateboarders. Skaters favored a unisex, doomsday style that featured baggy shorts and t-shirts, backward baseball hats, scruffy athletic shoes (not necessarily matched), braided or studded arm bracelets, beads, and skull caps. T-shirt logos either advertised skateboard company products or expressed counterculture or progroup themes (eg., "skate or die"). Shorts and t-shirts tended to be ripped and frayed. Hair styles ranged from long and dreadlocked to skinhead. Tatooes and earrings were common among the older boys; girls had a variety of hairstyles, including punk styles. Although girls at the contest professed to be skateboarders, had protective gear and skateboards, and participated in practice sessions on the ramps, few of the sample of girls actually competed in either of the contests.

Respondents shared their feelings about themselves, their lifestyle, and their consumption values in written and oral comments. Statements were provided by a small percentage of the sample and were collected informally. However, they supported the conclusion that skateboarders see themselves as separate from the modal high school population and aligned with the punk subculture. Consistent with social comparison theory, in-group members were seen positively, while out-group members were negatively stereotyped. In the words of one teenager: "Jocks suck. Punks rip. I hate antiskaters."

Skateboarders of both genders espoused a philosophy of antimaterialism. They actively avoided brand names (other than skateboard company names) and generally expressed disdain for more brand-conscious individuals. Although similar attitudes are likely to exist in the general population of teenagers, the prevalence of antimaterialistic comments does suggest a connection between the outward possessions of skateboarders and their underlying value systems:

"People need to relax and accept people for what they are as themselves . . . not judge them on the basis of looks, sports car, or color."

"I don't really care what people think about the way I dress or act. I am just myself."

"It shouldn't make a difference what kind of clothes [or] income status [you have] or what kind of person you are. Just have fun."

Thus, skateboarders assumed a style that was counter to what the dominant culture would find pleasing, seemingly in a conscious effort to separate themselves from modal teenagers and to communicate rejection of the value the larger society places on external possessions.

Psychometric Analyses

Questionnaire results showed that female skateboarders were older on average than boys, $M = 17.7$ years (girls); $M = 15.4$ years (boys), but this difference was not significant. Girls spent less time skating during the school year, $t = 3.39$, $p < .002$, and during vacations, $t = 2.87$, $p < .008$. Girls rated themselves as less skillful than boys, $t = 4.34$, $p < .001$, although most boys and girls
described themselves as intermediate in ability. When asked to rate degree of general approval of skateboarders on the part of society, both boys and girls responded that skateboarding was held in low esteem by nonskateboarders.

In order to examine feelings of self-esteem among the groups, t-tests were conducted on the PAR items. The results indicated no differences between either male or female skateboarders and the nonskateboarding girls in ratings of attractiveness, popularity, or the ability to make others like them or in the combined PAR score.

Although the groups did not differ in their self-evaluations, feelings about the self are logically related to clothing satisfaction; therefore, PAR scores were included as a variable in the analyses of clothing deprivation. The PAR items were summed and a median split was conducted on the total index, Mdn = 14. A series of 3 (group) x 2 (PAR) ANCOVAs were conducted using the total scale score and the two subscale scores as dependent variables. Age was used as a covariate. When the total satisfaction score was the dependent variable, there was a marginally significant main effect only for the PAR index, F(1,66) = 3.69, p < .06. Teenagers with higher PAR scores had higher scores on the Clothing Deprivation Scale, indicating less deprivation and more satisfaction overall.

In order to further examine these data, the subscales of the Clothing Deprivation Scale were used as dependent variables in separate 3 (group) x 2 (PAR) ANCOVAs. When Deprivation Relative to Peers was the dependent variable, the analysis showed main effects of group, F(2,66) = 6.66, p < .002, and of PAR scores, F(1,66) = 4.34, p < .05. The covariate, age, was also significant, F(1,66) = 7.83, p < .01. Means for both subscales and the total scale are displayed in Table 1. Skateboarding girls with lower PAR scores were less satisfied with their apparel (relative to their peers) than the sample of girls from the general high school population. Girls with higher PAR scores were highly similar to the general high school population. Skateboarding boys expressed less satisfaction with their apparel than the sample of girls from the general population; however, they were more satisfied relative to peers than skateboarding girls with lower PAR scores. Compared to skateboarding girls with higher PAR scores, they were less satisfied. A similar analysis, conducted using the Ability to Buy subscale, showed no differences between skateboarding girls and boys in Ability to Buy. Similarly, skateboarders did not differ from the sample of the general population of high school girls with respect to this variable. Examination of the economic index also indicated no overall differences between the general sample of high school girls and either male or female skateboarders in level of economic stressors.

Skateboarding subjects were also asked about their satisfaction with skateboarding equipment and with clothing used specifically for skateboarding. Pearson product moment correlations were computed between the Clothing Deprivation Relative to Peers Scale and these measures. Results indicated a small positive relationship between the total scale score and satisfaction with skateboarding clothing, r = .27. However, when subscale scores were examined separately by sex, the relationship between Ability to Buy and satisfaction with skateboarding apparel was negative for girls, r = -.33, but positive for boys, r = .31. The relationship between clothing satisfaction (Clothing Deprivation Relative to Peers) and satisfaction with skating apparel was positive for both boys and girls, but it was higher for boys, r = .31 and r = .21 respectively. In addition, satisfaction with other skating possessions was positively related to girls' clothing satisfaction, r = .44, but negatively related to boys' clothing satisfaction, r = -.14.

DISCUSSION

According to social comparison theory, people use similar and dissimilar others as comparators to assess their own standing with respect to abilities, traits and values. For the skateboarding girls in this study, there were two sets of comparators for appearance: members of the skateboarding subculture, who were largely boys, and nonmembers including girls. Although participation in cross-sex activities is more acceptable for teenage girls than boys, we expected that skateboarding girls would identify less strongly with the subculture and tend to use...
both groups as comparators. Thus, they would tend to have lower levels of clothing satisfaction than either the skateboarding boys or the sample of girls from the general high school population. In testing this assumption, the measure of Clothing Deprivation Relative to Peers is particularly relevant.

The hypothesis was partially supported in that lower satisfaction (more deprivation) was found only among skateboarding girls with lower PAR scores; skateboarding girls with higher scores expressed as much satisfaction as the sample of girls from the general population. One explanation for this finding may be that girls who feel better about themselves either identify more completely with the subculture or need less social support than girls with lower self-esteem. Therefore, they are more confident about their consumer judgments. To the extent that such a girl can match the standards of the comparison group, her feelings of well-being are not compromised but are enhanced, even when the standards differ dramatically from those of the general population of other high school girls. These dissimilar girls may actually provide additional information about the correctness of the skateboarders' display. The fact that effects on girls were more dramatic than on boys may be based on girls' greater focus on relationships and sensitivity to clothing cues (Belk, Mayer and Driscoll 1984).

Skateboarding boys and girls did not differ from the sample of girls in the general population in Ability to Buy. In addition, there was no difference between groups in level of economic stress. The combination of these findings suggest that the skateboarder's attire is a form of conspicuous consumption designed to resemble deprivation. As such, the shredded, punk look affected by many skateboarders, regardless of gender, is symbolic of the antimaterialistic values held by the group.

Skateboarding boys and girls did not differ from each other in either satisfaction with their apparel relative to their peers or in ability to buy consumer products. These results support the conclusion that adolescent boys and girls, engaged in the same activities, are likely to use group members for a standards of comparison, rather than exclusively members of the same sex. Implications for marketing are that marketing efforts to skateboarders, and possibly to other teenagers, should be activity related rather than gender related. Further, we would expect with Hebdige (1979) that, as skateboard clothing styles have begun to filter into the general population of teenagers, the style affected by the subculture would undergo change in order to retain its power to identify members. Companies marketing to skateboarders and other youth subcultures need to continually monitor preferences among youth to satisfy the needs of their customers.

Limitations of the study include the small sample size. It would be desirable to conduct replications of this study with expanded samples and with teenagers involved in other kinds of activities. Further, it must be noted that, consistent with what has been observed among other youth subcultures, there is variation in the degree to which any individual skateboarder would resemble the prototypical skateboarder and large variation in the degree to which group members identify with the skateboarders' lifestyle.

REFERENCES


TABLE I

MEAN CLOTHING DEPRIVATION SCALE SCORES BY GROUP AND LEVEL OF PAR SCALE SCORES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Ability to Buy</th>
<th>Dep. Rel. to Peer</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skate Girl</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low PAR</td>
<td>17.83</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>12.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High PAR</td>
<td>17.67</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>20.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skate Boy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low PAR</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>16.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High PAR</td>
<td>19.81</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>16.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonskate Girl</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low PAR</td>
<td>17.18</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>18.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High PAR</td>
<td>17.43</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>20.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores mean greater satisfaction. Subscale scores range from 5 to 25; total scale scores range from 10 to 50.