

12-1-2016

# Skateboarding, helmets, and control : observations from skateboard media and a Hong Kong skatepark

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## Recommended Citation

O'Connor, P. (2016). Skateboarding, helmets, and control: Observations from skateboard media and a Hong Kong skatepark. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*. 40(6), 477-498. doi: 10.1177/0193723516673408

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# Skateboarding, Helmets, and Control: Observations from Skateboard Media and a Hong Kong Skatepark.

Pre-published version accepted by *Journal for Sport and Social Issues*.

O'Connor, Paul. 2016. "Skateboarding, Helmets, and Control: Observations From Skateboard Media and a Hong Kong Skatepark." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*. doi: 10.1177/0193723516673408.

## Abstract

Skateboarding has a global reach and will be included for the first time in the 2020 Olympic Games. It has transformed from a subcultural pursuit to a mainstream and popular sport. This research looks at some of the challenges posed by the opening of a new skatepark in Hong Kong and the introduction of a mandatory helmet rule. It explores attitudes to helmets in skateboard media, the local government, and among the skateboarders who use the new skatepark. It argues that helmet use is not only an issue of safety but also an issue of control. From the skateboarders' perspective, it is about participant control over their sport, and from a government perspective, it is about accountability. The contrast between the two approaches is explored through the concepts of edgework and audit culture. As skateboarding continues to become a mainstream sporting activity, such issues of control will prove to be more relevant and must be negotiated in partnership. The growth in new skateparks, many of which are concrete, underlines the need for this discussion. It is argued that helmet use will continue to be a site of conflict as skateboarding becomes further incorporated into a mainstream sport, and that how helmets are represented in skateboarding will come to indicate who has control over the sport.

## Introduction

*A young man approaches the skatepark and he finds the gate padlocked. The security guard points to his head saying "Tau Kwai" (頭盔). He refuses to let the man in unless he has a helmet. The man opens his backpack and shows the guard his helmet.*

*The gate is then unlocked. Having gained access he enters the skatepark and zips up his bag leaving the helmet inside and proceeds to skateboard around the park.*

This paper explores the issue of helmet use by skateboarders through an analysis of skateboard media and a case study of a Hong Kong skatepark with a mandatory helmet rule. It seeks to understand why skateboarders choose to not wear helmets, and why the Hong Kong government continues to keep large parts of a publicly funded skatepark off limits to users regardless of the safety equipment they wear. The discussion provides a transnational comparison to research on skateboarding and reveals some of the challenges skateboarders and government departments face as they pursue often-contradictory interests. In both the media analysis and case study presented, a variety of contested views about helmet use appear as an unresolved aspect of skateboarding's growing popularity and shift towards recognition as a mainstream sport. Underlying these conflicts are cultural perceptions of risk, attitudes to voluntary risk taking, and issues of control and accountability. The paper concludes by addressing how control is a central concern of skateboarders with regard to helmet use at the TKO park and similarly control is a key issue for the government department that manages the skatepark.

### **Skateboarding: A Shift to the Mainstream**

Over the last 20 years skateboarding has seen a considerable rise in popularity with its own global superstar in the guise of Tony Hawk, mass endorsements, the X-Games, and video game franchises. The popularity of skateboarding in the 1970s has been well documented as has its subsequent demise in the late 70s and late 80s

(Borden 2001; Yochim 2010). Helmet use has fluctuated through different eras of skateboarding as have concerns about safety. The current popularity of skateboarding is most clearly connected to the legacy of subcultural street skateboarding in the 1990s. This practice eschewed helmets and other safety gear as skateboarders used their boards as tools for urban appropriation, that was typified by its freedom, spontaneity, and creativity.

The growth in skateboarding is demonstrated by its pending inclusion as a new sport at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games (Surfer Today 2015, BBC Sport 2015). The shift of skateboarding from a subcultural activity to a diffuse mainstream sport is difficult to chart because skateboarders are generally not members of sporting clubs or teams, and do not rely on organised events to participate. Estimates of skateboarders globally are accordingly vague but suggest numbers in excess of 12 million in the United States and as high as 50 million globally (Hanlon 2009). One informative measure of the growth of skateboarding is represented in the increasing number of skateparks being built in towns and cities throughout the world. Borden (2001:68-84) states that in 1997 there were 165 skateparks in the United States, by 2014 that number had grown to 3500, an increase of 2021% (Transworld Skateboarding 2014). In addition to this growth the United States Centre for Disease Control has recommended that an additional 9000 skateparks be built across the country to meet the needs of existing users and to support healthy lifestyles (Transworld Skateboarding 2014). One website records 9371 skateparks worldwide (Concrete Disciples 2015) an estimate that may well be conservative as it notes only six of Hong Kong's 14 skateparks. The growth in skateparks worldwide is also accompanied by moves to preserve some skateparks as heritage sites indicating that skateboarding has a recognised cultural legacy (Brown 2014).

The growth in skateparks signals a new set of problems for local governments who manage these facilities, and seek to keep users safe. At the heart of this problem is a contradiction. On one side there is a celebration of the lauded benefits of recreational risk taking in sports such as skateboarding, snowboarding, and parkour (Wheaton 2013). In opposition there is increasing governmental control and commercial interest in skateboarding which ultimately alters the way in which skateboarding is practiced and legitimised (Howell 2008). The primary mode of governance has been legislation enacted in various countries worldwide to keep skateboarders out of city centres and to fine skateboarding in public places (Borden 2001: 251). This type of governance has been extended by designing city centres to actively deter and exclude the practice of skateboarding (Borden 2001: 254, Woolley, Hazelwood and Simkins 2011). Skateparks have become a way to offset this exclusion and make skateboarding legitimate in designated spaces. This serves to both confine skateboarding geographically, often to peripheral urban spaces (Jenson et al 2012), and impose rules of usage (BBC 201).

Helmet use is the key focus of this discussion. How can we make sense of the fact that not wearing a helmet in skateboarding, which is generally regarded as a 'risky' activity, is the norm? Skateboarding and risk have been explored in existing research (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 2006; Young and Dallaire 2008; Attencio, Beal and Wilson 2009), but the issue of helmet use is often peripheral in these discussions, just as its discussion is marginal or absent in niche skateboard media, an important feature of the discussion explored below. A number of works have also taken a quantitative approach to risk assessment and injuries in skateboarding (Everett 2002; Sharma 2015) but again provide little insight to the issues surrounding helmet use. This paper asks how is helmet use represented and discussed in popular skateboard media, how

and why a helmet rule has been enforced in a Hong Kong skatepark, and what are the attitudes of skateboarders to helmets at that skatepark?

Changes in skateboarding over the last two decades have resulted in a host of new and open attitudes to the sport. Lombard (2010: 475) identifies this shift in the way skateboarding has been increasingly incorporated into ‘commercial and governmental processes’ and how, as Thorpe and Rinehart (2012) argue, action sports NGOs have become a vehicle for neo-liberal ideologies and economics. In this analysis skateboarding can be understood as increasingly conforming to what Harvey (2005: 5) has called the ‘conceptual apparatus’ of neoliberalism. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent in the contemporary moment than in the esteem and merit awarded to individual work and entrepreneurial activity (Harvey 1989: 171). Skateboarding, as an individual, skilled, and risky pursuit, fits seamlessly into neo-liberal pedagogies of self-management and independence as Howell (2008) has noted. This, combined with the potential health benefits of an active young population in an era of portable online media and inexpensive junk food, continues to be a driving reason for the support given to skatepark construction. It is however important to highlight that while skateboarding is increasingly recognised as an activity that can be celebrated as congruent with mainstream values, to many skateboarders the purpose of skateboarding is not to develop a work ethic, to channel creativity, or to maintain a healthy weight. Many skateboarders retain a subcultural identity and are deeply sceptical of skateboarding being represented as a sport (Jenkem Staff 2014), a facet of a Nike marketing campaign (see [www.dontdoitfoundation.org](http://www.dontdoitfoundation.org)), or the Olympics (Wharton 2015). To many people skateboarding is a pleasurable activity that delivers friendships and a cultural identity. Just as governments and educators are increasingly willing to include and recognise skateboarding as a schema for success in the neo-

liberal economy, skateboarders may similarly adopt this rhetoric in order to acquire more access and provisions for skateboarding. On reflection, both parties co-operate and share elements of a common language while pursuing their own interests and objectives.

### **Framing Skateboarding in Hong Kong**

This paper explores the issue of helmet use with reference to a Hong Kong skatepark, TKO (Tseung Kwan O) that opened in 2014. Hong Kong provides a unique transnational contrast to much of the existing work on skateboarding. It builds on work performed by Wheaton (2013) in South Africa and Thorpe's (2104) broad analysis of transnationalism and media in action sports. As a Special Administrative Region of China with a population of over 7 million people, Hong Kong has a hybrid identity as a post-colonial space between East and West. Fundamentally skateboarders in Hong Kong share a knowledge and cultural repertoire of style, embodiment, and values that places them as part of the global skateboard community. Local specificities present interesting nuances in how skateboarding is practiced in the city. For example the urban density of Hong Kong means that street skateboarding is often a nocturnal activity as it is only late into the night that Hong Kong's streets and plazas become empty. Over the past decade the territory has been a node for touring skateboard teams passing through East Asia and visiting China, a form of patronage and publicity bolstered by the transnational social and business networks of various figures in the Hong Kong skateboarding scene. The importance of skateboarding in China is all too apparent to the average North American skateboarder who will most likely be familiar through video footage of well known

skatespots in cities such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. American professional skateboarders have been flown out to Chinese cities to record one or two tricks in order to complete their video parts. This practice is indeed a product of the fact that Chinese cities have a surplus of accessible office plazas and urban architecture well designed for the purpose of skateboarding. At the same time these cities lack anti-skateboarding legislation and enforcement (Vice Sports 2015). China has provided an economic way to film and document skateboarding and it also represents an enormous market for skateboard companies (Woo 2014). The increasing importance of skateboarding in China, both in terms of business and participation has received little acknowledgement in academic work. Sedo's (2010) seminal analysis of skateboarding in China provides an historic context from which more work must develop. While being part of China, Hong Kong retains its own legal system and cultural distinctiveness, an identity that is also apparent in its cosmopolitan skateboarding community that has its own diverse history. Skateboarding's popularity in the 1970s extended to Hong Kong (Mafai525324 2012) and it has remained in the territory in one form or another ever since. Veteran skateboarders speak of their efforts to build ramps, open shops, and produce skateboard 'zines' throughout the 1990s. By the early 2000s the popularity of skateboarding within the city was met by the introduction of various 'skate stopper' devices and architectural adjustments to prevent skateboarding in city spaces. In response skateboarders asked the government to provide a legitimate space for skateboarding and Hong Kong's first public skatepark was opened in 2002. Warren Stuart a veteran skateboarder and advocate for the Hong Kong skateboarding scene describes this first skatepark as a compromise in order to appease safety concerns. The planning of the park was devised with safety zones, 'beginner, intermediate, and



expert' a design that Stuart says goes against what he and most skateboarders had envisioned. Subsequently the LCSD has invested further money in skateparks across the territory of various different sizes. Unlike skateparks in the USA and UK, Hong Kong's skateparks are entirely publicly funded and require the synchronisation of various government departments because of the paucity and cost of land. The TKO skatepark for example was planned 10 years ahead of its completion as it was part of a large scale and interconnected development project.

**{Insert Image: 1 Skateboarders at TKO park. Photo courtesy of Ryan Hui & Hong Kong XFED.}**

## **Methodology**

This research combines ethnographic participant observation with a sociological analysis of niche skateboard media, and existing research on skateboarding, youth, and lifestyle sports. I refer to and cite a mix of skateboard media that reflects attitudes and representations of helmet use. Skateboard videos and magazines communicate to skateboarders a sense of authenticity, community, aesthetics, and cultural values (Wheaton and Beal 2003; Yochim 2010). The important connection between skateboarding and its niche media requires that it be addressed. Skateboard videos and magazines are discussed by Beal and Weidman (2003), while Yochim (2010) refers to such media as part of the 'corresponding culture' of skateboarding. Borden (2015) has suggested that skateboard media can even be understood as an early incarnation of social media. The depth of media materials available on skateboarding led me to make an analysis that included three elements. Firstly I explored both Thrasher and Transworld Skateboarding magazines between June of 2014 to June

2016. This was to look at the most recent information being produced by the most popular skateboarding magazines. These magazines, especially Thrasher, are available in Hong Kong and represent to skateboarders a voice of authenticity on skateboard culture. Secondly I explored a back catalogue of various skateboard magazines (North American, British, Australian, and Hong Kong magazines that included coverage of skateboarding) going back to 2002 in order to identify representations of helmet use and articles that addressed safety equipment. Thirdly I explored online material by specifically searching for issues relating to helmets. The analysis also included skateboard media produced in Hong Kong and the monitoring of Hong Kong based online forums pertaining to skateboarding.

Additional data was provided by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) of Hong Kong government, on the TKO park. This included data gathered from users during May 2014 when they entered the park and signed a liability waiver. After the introduction of the mandatory helmet rule the LCSD ceased to collect data on park users.

The qualitative data presented here comes from informal interviews and observations that took place between April 2014 and December 2015. I observed in excess of 200 skateboarders but became familiar with roughly 50 frequent visitors to the skatepark during this time. This group of skateboarders was diverse with an age range that included young teenagers to skateboarders in their early fifties. My research draws on the day-to-day interactions I had at the skatepark with various users and staff. Conversations revolved around activities at the skatepark, efforts to learn new tricks, injuries, hardware, and opinions of skateboard culture and current affairs covered in skateboard media. My chief concern was to observe how the helmet rule was managed by LCSD staff and skateboarders. The bulk of my research was performed

in English though my piecemeal ability in Cantonese was valuable on numerous occasions. While the majority of Hong Kong's population are Cantonese speakers, English is widely spoken though at varying competencies. Most of the skateboarders I encountered spoke good English and for many of my informants English was their first language.

Having been a skateboarder for over 28 years my approach to fieldwork research was one of participant observer. The strict boundaries of entering the field were therefore somewhat ambiguous as many of those that I met, observed, and skateboarded with were familiar to me personally. I was sensitive to inform people of my status as an academic interested in skateboarding and as conversations developed I asked if I could use quotes in my research on condition of anonymity. The validity and trustworthiness of my informants is strengthened by the fact I was participating in skateboarding with them and became familiar with them over many months. I was aware of who always wore a helmet and those who never did. In consideration of the ethical issues that are encountered in participant observer research (Schutt 2004: 285) there were many skateboarders and park users that I observed yet never spoke to or revealed myself as a researcher. I justify that the observations I have made of them and the inferences I provide here, are anonymous, of no known threat to their wellbeing and were also gathered from a public space. It is also the case, as I was made aware of on many occasions, that my general status was well known to park users even if I did not know them myself. The fact that I was both a professor and a skateboarder was a novelty and my nickname at the park was 'Professor' a term used even by some of the security staff. I participated in a radio discussion on the helmet controversy, was interviewed for a newspaper report, and hosted an academic roundtable discussion on skateboarding. Throughout my fieldwork I would also post

on skateboarding issues on my own blog and found that some of the skateboarders at TKO would read my blog postings. As my research progressed I became increasingly aware of my own attitudes and concerns about helmet use. As a researcher I took a critical look at the issue of helmet use that few skateboarders do; as a result my own attitudes and practices of helmet use began to change. In October of 2014 at the TKO park I fell on the left side of my head while wearing a helmet. I suffered a concussion and became far more concerned with the realities of injuries for users of such concrete skateparks.

### **Media and Helmet Use**

Skateboarding is often a site of concern because of its popularity among young children (Wheaton 2013: 48; Clemmitt 2009). Media reports have criticised professional skateboarder Tony Hawk for skateboarding with his four year old daughter whilst not wearing a helmet (McCormack 2012) and also focussed concern on the rising number of head injuries in young children who skateboard and scooter without helmets (Baker 2014, Garcia 2015). In October of 2014 a well known San Diego skateboarder, Marc Delellis, died after being found unconscious in a skate bowl without a helmet (Winkley 2014). Professional skateboarder Ben Hatchell fell off his board and hit his head while competing in the Barcelona X Games in 2013 inciting some to question why ESPN hasn't introduced mandatory helmets rules for skateboarding competitors (Burke 2013). Similarly both male and female skateboarders perform their tricks without any safety gear in the popular Street League Skateboarding competition sponsored by Nike. On July 12 2014 at the Vancouver Van Doren Invitational skateboard competition, amateur skateboarder

Raney Beres attempted an ambitious aerial manoeuvre in a large concrete bowl, essentially a drained swimming pool. He fell hard and fast on to the left temple of his head. He was not wearing a helmet or any protective clothing. Video footage shows a bewildered Beres with blood pouring down the side of his face, being helped to his feet and climbing out of the bowl (World Deece 2014). The following year Beres became a professional rider for 'Anti Hero' skateboard company. While on tour in Israel he had another skateboard accident and was hospitalised with a severe head injury that required the insertion of a metal plate to his skull and 40 stitches (Roy 2016).

Skateboard media that reported the Delellis death (Thrasher 2014a), and the traumatic brain injury of professional skateboarder J.T. Aultz (Alley 2011, 2015; Networkskate 2011) and numerous other accidents, but have been consistently silent on the issue of helmet use in each case. In Thrasher interviews with Beres following both head injuries the accidents are discussed in detail but no mention of helmet use is made in either case (Thrasher 2014b; Roy 2016). There has been increased recognition of the danger of concussion in traditional sports such as Rugby (Quinn 2016) and American Football in recent years (Faure et al 2015). The tragic suicide of BMX rider and X Games champion Dave Mirra has further highlighted the dangers associated with traumatic brain injuries in lifestyle sports (Rosenberg 2016). Professional skateboarder Tony Hawk tends to always wear a helmet when he is skating vert ramps, even so he claims he has experienced 10 concussions throughout his skateboard career (McNamara 2006). Research has indicated that the incidence of head trauma is significantly higher in skateboarding than other lifestyle sports (Sharma et al 2015). As the popularity of skateboarding continues to grow, and as

further concrete skateparks are constructed, this issue must be broached in academic work and skateboard media.

The May 2015 edition of Transworld Skateboarding Magazine has within its 126 pages only two images where helmets are represented and the June 2015 edition of Thrasher Skateboard Magazine, again has only two images of helmets in its 208 pages, in both cases these images are in adverts. None of the other hundreds of photos in either magazine show a helmet in the depictions of skateboarders jumping off high walls, skating empty swimming pools and sliding down handrails. These two editions are representative of others that I have surveyed during my research and are, on the subject of helmet representation, unremarkable.

When helmets are discussed in magazines the resistance to their use is accepted without criticism. Skateboarder Nick Tucker explains that he doesn't visit his local skatepark because they enforce a helmet rule, and no further rationale is required or pursued by the interviewer (The Skateboard Mag 2015). In an interview with British skateboarder Sam Beckett in Kingpin Skateboard Magazine, helmets and pads are rejected because they do not look good in pictures (Kingpin 2013: 68). In another interview skateboarder Rowan Zorilla speaks of how his parents made him wear a helmet when he was younger. He explains 'you know how mothers are, they don't know you've learned how to not fall on your head all the time' (Solo Skate Mag 2015).

It appears that many skateboarders regard head injuries as a hazard, but not a particularly probable hazard. Skateboard media helps communicate this, but as Yochim (2010) suggests these representations also correspond with the values and norms of skateboard culture. The belief in the safety of skateboarding is also widely legitimised by quantitative research that indicates that skateboarding is less dangerous

than other ‘traditional’ sports (Clemmitt 2009). However amongst all ‘extreme’ sports, skateboarding carries the greatest risk of traumatic head injuries such as skull fractures (Sharma et al 2015). The impact of head injuries can have serious effects on life quality (Sharma et al 2015) and is especially troubling for youth where brain development is still taking place (Clemmitt 2009). Therefore it is apparent that skateboarding is safer than many sports but particularly hazardous when head injuries do occur, particularly for children.

One epidemiological and qualitative study by Dumas and Laforest (2009) interrogates the safety of skateparks in Canada by recording the number and severity of accidents at skateparks. Their research indicates that skateboarding in skateparks should not be regarded as any more dangerous than other traditional sports. Their research was performed at modular skateparks where constructed metal and wooden equipment was standard. A comparison study for concrete parks with large curved transitions is not available and is thus a pending issue for researchers. One respondent in their work argued that she found helmets ‘ugly’ and not ‘gracious’ and made skateboarders look like novices lacking in competency (2009: 26). Such comments point to the issue of control once more, suggesting that the helmet is not simply for protection but symbolic of style and skill.

The current popularity of skateboarding in the age of social media has meant that old patterns of information sharing that used to be focussed on the skateshop, skateboard magazines, and the team videos produced by skateboard companies (Yochim 2010), has been altered. Various long running skateboard magazines such as Skateboarder, Slap, and Sidewalk have ceased production in recent years. Some believe that the popularity of user made content on Youtube is displacing the dominance and control of niche skateboard media (Kerr 2015). One example has been the rise of the

skateboard company Revive owned by Andy Schrock who has at the time of writing over 978,000 subscribers to his Youtube channel. In contrast the Youtube channel of Thrasher magazine, one of the most well known names in skateboard media, has 1,025,881 subscribers. One way to analyse this is to simply consider who is producing this material. While it is unclear exactly who watches these videos I encountered some skateboarders, both young and old at the TKO park who had Revive boards or clothing bought from their online store. A further indication of the impact of Revive is observable through online discussions where heated and extensive debates have been held on the authenticity and legitimacy of the brand (Shreddit 2015). This shift could be considered a re-appropriation of skateboarding from the periphery, engaging a novice group of participants lacking sub-cultural capital and 'core' involvement who are often overlooked in research on lifestyle sports (Donnelly 2006).

Josh Katz is a rider on the Revive team and a Youtube skateboard personality with over 291,000 subscribers to his channel. Katz is a strong advocate for helmet use always wearing a helmet in his own skateboard videos. Specifically addressing his attitudes to helmets he argues that the common types of skateboard injuries to ankles and elbows heal fast, but brain damage is permanent. On the issue of aesthetics, he acknowledges that 'helmets aren't that cool, but I am not wearing one to be the coolest guy at the skatepark' noting also that fashions change he suggest that one day helmets might be cool (Katz 2013).

In June of 2015 veteran professional skateboarder Mike Vallely released a short street skateboarding video in which he wore a helmet throughout (Nieratko 2015). Vallely's decision is remarkable because as a professional skateboarder for 28 years he is accustomed to not wearing a helmet and has built a career buoyed in large part by his



tough and hardy attitude. In a podcast on the issue, Valley recasts the issue of helmet use as a new form of risk taking, being brave to break the mould and admit that there is no valid reason to not wear a helmet (Mike V Show 2015). There is no doubt that Valley's decision carries some weight in the skateboarding community, his Facebook and Instagram accounts have thousands of comments of support. However the impact of his veteran status is compromised by a new generation of professional skateboarders who don't wear helmets, and unlike him and Katz, dominate coverage in skateboard magazines and videos.

### **Edgework and Audit Culture**

The issue of helmet use analysed in this paper sits between two poles on a hypothetical continuum of control. One pole, edgework, seeks to defy and overcome risk through the practice of developing controlled expertise, the other, audit culture, pursues a defensive approach to accountability reducing risk by measured control. While aesthetics and conformity is a component of attitudes toward helmet use, I argue that combined with freedom and choice the crucial issue appears to be one of control. This is an issue of participant control over the activity of skateboarding that has been distinguished in research (Beal and Weidman 2003; Wheaton and Beal 2003) as a key feature of skateboard culture.

In his original exploration of edgework Lyng (1990) proposed that people engage in specific types of voluntary risk taking as a form of transcendental play. Lyng asserts that part of the appeal of edgework is that it provides an escape, or at least a reality, that is lacking in the orchestrated banality or everyday life, a point also made by Lupton (2013: 207) among others. Writing on adolescents and the attraction of

edgework Miller (2005: 154) notes that ‘modern life is increasingly mechanical, bureaucratic, rigid, impersonal, and alienating. Many people feel that they have lost the ability to control their lives.’ Indeed Lyng acknowledges that the edgeworker is not to be understood as simply a thrill seeker. Edgework requires expertise and knowledge and is therefore founded on control, he does argue that the control they achieve may in some ways be illusory and that their familiarity with risk serves for them to also underestimate danger (Lyng 1990: 872).

Lyng (2005: 8) extends his analysis to discuss the ‘risk society’ of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) and connects the valorisation of risk taking as part of contemporary neoliberal social politics. Risk taking can provide a freedom from the alienation of routine yet it is seen as the necessary skill to advance in the capricious neoliberal economic and social climate (Lyng 2005: 9-10). It quickly becomes apparent that edgework is actually centre work, the very type of work that is far from peripheral but central in our contemporary developed world (Simon 2005: 206). Accordingly the rise in prominence of ‘lifestyle sports’, those which are unstructured, can be individually pursued and have no formal or traditional space, fits with neoliberal freedom. In France more than 50% of the population are engaged in ‘informal’ sports such as skateboarding (Wheaton 2013: 4) and in the United States between 1995 and 2005 the growth in skateboarding has been contrasted with the decline of youth participation in the traditional sport of baseball (Howell 2008: 476). Wheaton has highlighted the tie between lifestyle sports and the neoliberal agenda stating that, ‘the values promoted by and associated with lifestyle sports, such as individualism, risk-taking and management...are certainly widely cited as the values promoted by neoliberalism as a cultural ideology’ (2013: 5). Despite the ethos of individual responsibility celebrated in neo-liberal ideology, the issue of risk continues to be

influential in terms of audit and accountability. Even in the neo-liberal paradigm individuals are criticised for not taking precautions against risks. Blame can be imagined as the shadow of risk, wherever there is risk there is also potential for blame. For example skateboarding is celebrated for its work ethic, but can be chastised when performed without protection (McCormack 2012; Baker 2004).

The freedom of neo-liberalism is often contrasted problematically with audit culture, which seeks to control, measure, and predict (Kipnis 2008). Generally speaking audit culture is a mode of governance that has been critiqued in the field of education and academia (Holmwood 2010). Kipnis (2008; 286) identifies audit culture in China as being connected to the socialist ideology and also the cultural legacies of 'Confucianism, Legalism, and Taoism.' In this manner auditing is about maintaining hierarchy. The scrutiny of performance and results is arguably less important than what the audit communicates which is control. The Hong Kong context has thus both a mix of the neo-liberal rationale in the accumulation of capital, and the Confucian tradition of deference to authority and bureaucratic method. It is also important to recognise that Hong Kong has never been an independent territory, experiencing British colonialism and post-colonial integration in 1997 with the PRC. One could argue that deference to hierarchy and authority has a power, significance and justification unique to Hong Kong. In applying audit culture to the issue of skatepark management in the Hong Kong context, the notion of profit can be replaced with loss. As a public facility the skatepark is not intended to generate a commercial profit. What is important is that the investment of public monies be recognised in positive terms and not considered a waste of funds or a danger. The loss that the LCSD seeks to guard itself from is a loss in terms of prestige, face, and public trust. I argue that the methods employed by the LCSD are to control and protect themselves from

liability and to remain accountable. In the case study analysis below it becomes evident that this pursuit is performed in a top down managerial manner where deference to the LCSD rules overrides the experience of staff and users in the skatepark.

### **Case Study: Tseung Kwan O Skatepark, Hong Kong.**

Tseung Kwan O (TKO) skatepark occupies 2688 square metres and was built at a cost HK\$75 million (US\$ 9.6 million) in a densely populated new town in the New Territories of Hong Kong. The skatepark forms part of a larger public park and sports ground that includes a football stadium and velodrome built by the LCSD of Hong Kong Government with public funds (LCSD 2014). Estimates of the skateboarding population of Hong Kong are vague, but are suggested to be in excess of 2000 regular participants with many more involved in skateboarding at other various levels. In statistics provided to me by the LCSD, the TKO skatepark had 1686 visits in May of 2014, averaging over 50 visits each day. During this time the LCSD recorded voluntary information of users that included age, sex, and the type of protective clothing worn. This full data was provided for only 1566 visits, and no helmet use was indicated for any of these visits. It is possible that some users wore helmets but did not record the information on entry to the skatepark. However, in being a regular observer of the TKO park in May of 2014 it is indeed plausible that no visitor wore a helmet during this time as I did not encounter anyone doing so. Of all the visitors recorded, 88% were male and 12 % female, 52% of all users were in the age group 5-19 years and 48% were aged 20 and over. From my own field notes and observations at the park, an average day would include a mix of 70% Chinese and 30% non-

Chinese made up of Whites, Eurasians, South Asians, and South East Asians. In general ethnic representation the skatepark appears to have a more multicultural mix than the broader Hong Kong society. For example data from the Hong Kong Government records that 94% of the population is of Chinese descent (Hong Kong Government 2014). Language use at the TKO park is dominated by Cantonese and English.

The TKO park opened to the public on April 30 2014 to a warm reception. Over 50 skateboarders occupied the park that evening and none of them wore helmets. After three months of use, from 28 July 2014, the LCSD enforced a mandatory helmet rule at four skateparks including the newly opened TKO. These rules were premised on the fact that the skateparks were being opened to the co-use of BMX riders and Inline skaters. Immediately usage of the four skateparks with helmet rules dropped considerably. At the same time the LCSD ceased to take records on the number of users frequenting their skateparks, though staff verified that there was an overall drop in users since the implementation of the new rules.

Reluctant to abide by the rules, to spend money on a helmet they would not wear, many skateboarders decided to climb into the skatepark in the evening and avoid having to pass by security guards. Once in the park the majority of skateboarders would not wear their helmets and ignore the LCSD staff. Whenever staff approached them they would simply skate away in the other direction. Such was the level of resistance to the new helmet rule that the LCSD turned to the police on several occasions. On one evening police arrived with dogs at the Mei Foo skatepark and recorded the identities of all of the skateboarders without helmets. However the police had little power or interest in reprimanding the skateboarders who were not breaking any laws in refusing to wear helmets.

On the evening of 21 August 2014, I witnessed over 20 skateboarders at the TKO park, of which only one skateboarder, a 12 year old boy, was wearing a helmet. The LCSD staff could only act as gatekeepers, keeping the entrance to the park padlocked and only opening the gates to those who had helmets. Once inside the park the LCSD had no power to make those users wear their helmets. The locking of the park was particularly ironic as the TKO skatepark had been designed and landscaped to be open and inviting to public spectators. The very design of the park makes the enforcement of the helmet rule difficult, and the exclusion of non-skateboarders has detracted from the integration of the skatepark as a community resource. Very quickly the helmet rule had become a farce and one skateboarder complained that the helmet he purchased for HK\$500 (US\$64) was basically a cumbersome key to the skatepark. In a very real sense the helmet rule was a punitive measure to working class skateboarders unable to afford a helmet that was simply a key to open a gate. Part of the appeal of skateboarding to many young people is the fact that you do not require expensive equipment or a club membership to participate. The TKO skatepark like many skateparks worldwide (see Wheaton 2013) is a place where people of different ages and different classes can share space and develop friendships. The helmet rule can be critiqued here as an obstacle to the neo-liberal values skateboarding is celebrated for nurturing.

While the cost of helmets was a concern, many of Hong Kong's skateboard shops did not even stock skateboard helmets for sale at the time the mandatory helmet rule was introduced. Rather creatively, within the first few weeks of the rule, local skaters had found various ways to circumvent the helmet rule. Although signs at the skatepark clarify the type of helmet that must be worn, users found that they could gain access with a bicycle helmet, or a construction hard hat. Conveniently such hard hats were

available at a nearby hardware store for just HK\$20 (US\$2.57) an inexpensive alternative. One evening I saw three skateboarders riding the park with hard hats that do not provide the protection that the LCSD sought. The hard hats have no chinstraps and can easily slip off the head. Such circumvention of the rules served to further undermine them. As another act of defiance these same skateboarders blatantly smoked cigarettes, which are also banned in the skatepark. At one level of analysis the rebellion towards the helmet rule is part of the edgework paradigm, taking a risk of being removed from the park, or of challenging the rules.

If the cost of helmets signals a class issue, there was also one incident I encountered in which the helmet rule became an ethnic and religious issue also. One Saturday afternoon in September of 2014 a Sikh teenager had arrived at TKO because he was unable to access his local skatepark in Mei Foo. As an observant Sikh he wore a Patka turban while skateboarding but could not fit a helmet on top. The staff at Mei Foo, and at TKO refused to let him in without a helmet, it was only through the intervention of an older skateboarder who was able to mediate in more proficient Cantonese, that the security guards came to understand that due to his Sikh faith he could not wear a helmet. He was eventually allowed to skateboard in the park by the security staff.

Between August and December I witnessed numerous families with young children being turned away at the gates because they were without helmets. The blocking of access was a frustration to many parents who had made a special journey to the skatepark with their children. Such visitors were often further frustrated by the fact that they were denied entry while the majority of skateboarders already in the park were not wearing helmets. Similarly teenage and adult skateboarders would be denied access to the skatepark if they arrived without helmets. Many of those who were

being turned away were novices new to skateboarding and interested to participate precisely because of the attraction of the new park. More frequent visitors would often climb the fence to gain entry. In some instances skateboarders who were denied entry would be lent a helmet by other skateboarders as a means of access to the park. This activity ridiculed the helmet rule and the way in which it was enforced. A helmet provided access to the skatepark, but staff were unable to enforce helmet use.

Of further frustration to the skateboarders was the continued refusal of the LCSD to open up the bowl for use at the TKO skatepark. The bowl is essentially a large empty transitioned swimming pool with a maximum depth of 3.3 metres. The design is transplanted from the backyard pools of Californian suburbia. This bowl has remained cordoned off and only accessible if booked by an official organisation with insurance liability (See image 2). The LCSD deemed this feature too dangerous without training, yet provides no access to training. Skateboarders tolerated the closure of the bowl when TKO first opened as they were led to believe that the apparatus would eventually be a fully accessible part of the skatepark. However frustrations grew with the introduction of the helmet rule and the continued closure of the bowl. Why indeed did the LCSD build such a bowl if it was not for public use? Skateboarders wearing safety pads and helmets are still unable to access this feature of the skatepark making the helmet rule deeply frustrating and irrelevant to many park users. Bemused skateboarders could not grasp how they would be able to learn to use the bowl if it remained inaccessible.

**{Insert Image: 2 Closed Bowl: Author's photograph}**

## **The LCSD**



I met with LCSD staff on various occasions and urged them to gain dialogue with the skateboarders. One LCSD staff member highlighted that it is a long process but the skateboarders have to be educated about the importance of wearing helmets. Despite this rhetoric no efforts have been made to educate skateboarders about helmet use and risk. The only members of staff regularly present at the TKO skatepark are security guards who have a very limited knowledge of skateboarding. In December of 2015 some skateboarders moved a rubbish bin to the top of one of the flat banks in the TKO skatepark. As one skateboarder attempted to jump over the bin a park security guard threw himself in front of the obstacle and angrily removed it. For skateboarders this type of intervention mirrored their interactions with security guards and police in the city. What senior figures in the LCSD might imagine as education translates poorly as policing. Security staffs are mediators between skateboarders and managerial rules and have a challenging and difficult job. The whole process appears hierarchical as rules have been decided upon with little to no dialogue with skateboarders. One example of the absence of understanding was the painting of a skateboard obstacle in the Mei Foo skatepark in November of 2015. Management felt the object needed to look less tatty and organised the painting of ledges that skateboarders use to grind (slide along on their axles) with sticky yellow paint. This rendered the obstacle unusable for skateboarders. One user was told that if they grinded the paint they would have to pay for the damage. The issue was quickly escalated to LCSD management who on this occasion promptly remedied the situation.

In February of 2016 some of these issues were raised in a roundtable debate between academics, the LCSD, NGOs and skateboarders at Lingnan University. The issue of

risk was a continued complaint with some skateboarders arguing that the public read the rules at the TKO park and would sometimes challenge skateboarders and security staff when they see park users not wearing helmets. The question posed to the LCSD was why are these people, who do not skateboard, being listened to above and beyond skateboarders who do skateboard and actually know what they are doing? This is an argument of edgework, which asserts expertise as key skill in navigating risk. The specific issue of the TKO bowl, which has never been opened to the public, was also discussed. It was argued by some of the older skateboarders that big transitions are actually safer to use than smaller ones and that the perception of risk is misplaced. Representatives from the LCSD reported that they were primarily concerned with the public perception of risk and recognised that there were some cultural constraints about safe play that extended beyond skateparks and to children's playgrounds also. The LCSD are thus in a difficult position being responsible in one way for providing engaging facilities for healthy play and appeasing the public's very broad concerns about safety.

### **Attitudes to Helmets**

There were some very simple patterns observable at the TKO skatepark that highlighted attitudes to helmet use. Users between the ages of 12-30 were the least likely to wear helmets and although there were a few weeks where some conceded to the LCSD rules, by January of 2015 nearly all the skateboarders I encountered in this age group were not wearing helmets.

The justifications given by some skateboarders for not wearing helmets were, like 13 year old Hiro, that their skill level was not advanced enough for them to be trying risky manoeuvres that required a helmet.

*Hiro: I don't like helmets. I only use one if I am trying something new, or skating something big*

*Paul: Would you use a helmet in the combi-bowl?*

*Hiro: I won't even skate that thing.*

Wai-yip, a 12 year old regular who began skateboarding after the opening of the TKO skatepark stated that although he had a helmet he wouldn't use it unless he was skating 'something big' and that it was too hot to wear a helmet. The issue of overheating was indeed a reality at TKO where Hong Kong summer heat averages 32°C with relative humidity of 80%.

As a simple matter of observation helmet use was more common among pre-teen white children, and over-30 white male skateboarders. Class and wealth may well be significant in this instance. In speaking to some of the older skateboarders they offered some pragmatic reasons behind their decision to wear a helmet, including being available for work the next day, avoiding a scolding from their wives, or simply setting an example to their children. These were some of the explanations I received from three skaters in their mid-thirties, and one who had recently turned 50. However, in three of these cases the skateboarders had returned to skateboarding after a hiatus of more than a decade, and one had just recently began to skate. In all cases they were skateboarding because of the draw of the new TKO skatepark. This group of skateboarders were distinctly different from their peers of a similar age who had

never stopped skateboarding since their teen years. In the case of veteran skateboarders, attitudes to helmets were typically the same as the 12-30 age group. One 43 year old skateboarder complained that the LCSD simply didn't understand that it 'is our culture', he argued that there was greater risk of broken limbs than cracked heads and that choice is of central importance to skateboarders.

One well-respected and skilled twenty four year old skateboarder, Phil, who doesn't wear a helmet said:

*I think helmets are great, especially for building confidence in new users, however for already competent and more mature skaters I think they should have a choice whether or not to wear a helmet and skate at their own risk...Abolishing the helmet rule will also increase usage in these, currently, unused skateparks.*

A point Phil highlights is that the helmet rule had an adverse effect on the usage of certain skateparks. This presented the LCSD with a problematic scenario, more and more skateboarders were using unstaffed parks with no helmet rules, and were also congregating en masse in the street to skateboard late into the night. Skateparks specifically designed for skateboarders funded with public money were being shunned. Unlike much skatepark construction that happens in the United States and UK, the Hong Kong skateparks were constructed and designed with little input or co-operation with local skateboarders. As a result skateboarders do not identify a sense of ownership with the parks that has been integral to the success of skateparks elsewhere (Jenson et al 2012). This pattern presents as another feature of audit culture

where power and control is centralised in governance and not shared with stakeholders.

By April of 2015 there were reports in the local press that skateboarders were performing high speed runs on underused parts of the highway and that they ran the risk of collisions with cars (The Sun 2015). The paradox of this scenario is that those skateboarders wore helmets, whilst the majority of those that used the controlled environment of the TKO skatepark chose not to.

The element of choice is a clear feature of the argument of those who choose not to wear helmets. One 18 year old respondent spoke to me via Facebook and stated:

*It's the fact that there is a park that we can't use because somebody who doesn't know skateboarding, doesn't do it with us, tells us what to wear for OUR protection. It is important to be sensible and try things within your abilities, but that's common sense for most people. I think what I'm trying to say is: we know when we actually need a helmet.*

Gary, an American skateboarder in his early twenties highlighted the issue of choice and control in an argument with LCSD staff on a Saturday afternoon in December 2014. Arriving in the park with two friends he made his way directly to the bowl that was cordoned off in the corner of the park. He moved some paraphernalia in order to skate the bowl and managed to ride undisturbed for no more than two minutes before an LCSD guard came over and asked him to stop. Gary responded angrily to the guard shouting 'this is what I do. I do this every day.' Moving to the open and accessible combi-bowl part of the skatepark Gary continued to skate as the LCSD guard returned to complain that Gary was not wearing a helmet. At this point Gary

once again got angry and shouted at the guard 'I'm not going to fall off. This is what I do. You will fall off, you skate the board' and he threw his board to the ground and asked the LCSD guard to skate it. The guard flatly refused to try the board to which Gary shouted 'exactly – then leave us alone.' Gary's behaviour appeared aggressive and an overreaction to the circumstances, yet it replicates Lyng's (1990) argument that edgework practitioners believe in their own competence and think little of the opinions of those who are not edgeworkers. The issue of control is central here and manifests as a disconnection between both parties.

## **Conclusion**

The comments from skateboarders echo the importance of control. As edgeworkers they believe they know their own abilities and have little respect for rules generated by non-skaters. In contrast the LCSD also seek control through the management of rules to which they ask their subordinates to enforce, and also through the appeasement of public perceptions of risk. These are culturally biased and it appears that the Hong Kong public sees skateboarding as much more dangerous than the popular weekend activity of ice skating that takes place in shopping malls throughout the territory. The fact that ice skaters are strapped into their skates and wear no helmets is somehow accepted as normal while skateboarding continues to be treated as abnormal.

However, the focus of this paper is to highlight that helmet use remains one of the key contested issues in the remarkable rise in the popularity of skateboarding. Skateboarders are clearly edgeworkers but the issue of risk is arguably less important to skateboarders than the issue of control. As existing research has shown (Borden

2001, Beal and Weidman 2003, Yochim 2010) skateboarders seek physical control over their boards, bodies, and urban space while also pursuing some level of creative and commercial control over the broader culture of skateboarding. Helmet use is thus not simply another issue in skateboarding but a symbol of control and authenticity.

What must be clarified in conclusion is that skateboarding, despite its popularity, is a site of various conflicts surrounding control. Skateboarding has become ideologically celebrated for its work ethic, individuality, and creativity. Yet inherent in the freedom of such neo-liberal ideals is risk. Audit culture is thus the resistance to creative freedom. As skateboarders require increasing partnerships with governments and big businesses as a method to secure more facilities to gain greater security in earning a living through skateboarding, they must additionally share how skateboarding is controlled. Skateboarders themselves audit facilities, brands, and other skateboarders as authentic and cast a critical eye over how skateboarding is represented. I argue that the future of skateboarding will be representative of these various forms of audit and control, of which the issue of helmet use will remain a contested feature representative of who really has control of skateboarding.

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