The Social Mediatization of Lifestyle Sport: Continuity and Novelty in the Online Skate Subculture

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Abstract
Based on mediatization theory, this article tracks how skateboarders experience and negotiate the entry of social media into their subculture. Building on existing scholarship, I show how social media and digital devices retain existing values within the culture while simultaneously introducing new challenges. To illustrate the phenomena of continuity and novelty in the online skate subculture, I analyze two case studies pertaining to YouTube. The first is a textual analysis of a typical skate video. Released on YouTube in 2020, the BE FREE video exhibits neoliberal, apolitical, masculine, and individualist values that go back decades in skate culture. The second case involves one of the most popular hubs of online skateboarding today: The Berrics YouTube channel, which claims 1.3 million subscribers and over 4,500 individual videos. I show how The Berrics maintains a one-dimensional positivity through its posts and interactions with fans, and I argue that it is still experimenting with the handling of negative feedback that participatory media allow. I also provide a brief history of skateboarding media to properly contextualize these case studies.

Keywords
mediatization, skateboarding, social mediatization, subculture, YouTube

Introduction
In July 2021, men’s and women’s skateboarding debuted at the Summer Olympics in Tokyo, Japan. News and commentary of the novel event circulated on Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Vimeo, and YouTube, as well as on other websites and forums dedicated to the activity. For example, the hosts of a popular podcast/vlog show questioned the scores handed down by Olympian judges (The Nine Club Clips, 2021). Jokey tweets went viral by asking how skateboarders—historically notorious for smoking marijuana—would pass a mandatory drug test before the Games. Countless YouTube clips continue to preserve and showcase the performances from that summer. However, live TV viewership of the mega-event on NBC had dropped precipitously in comparison with previous years (Bauder, 2021). It was like Olympic skateboarding existed instead in a fast and fragmented world of “social mediatization” (Olsson & Eriksson, 2016).

This article focuses on a specific area in the mediatization of everyday life, namely, the skateboard subculture, often referred to by scholars as a “lifestyle sport” (Wheaton, 2010). Skateboarding is increasingly popular, practiced by tens of millions of enthusiasts around the globe, and is representative of a multibillion-dollar industry (Giannoulakis & Pursglove, 2017; Tighe, 2020). In addition to its recent induction into the Olympics, skateboarding has inspired mainstream video games (e.g., Tony Hawk Pro Skater [1999]), Hollywood films (e.g., Grind [2003]), and prestige TV shows (e.g., Betty [2020]). The activity is an important subject to examine for the sake of media studies because one can show how the affordances of new-media technologies enter and impact a subculture, as well as how networked members of the culture negotiate these technologies. I argue that social media and networked devices preserve existing social relations within skateboarding just as they introduce new ones. I am not alone in this argument (Camoletto & Marcelli, 2018; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013), but in this article I introduce new data and place skating more in a media studies context, as opposed to a sociological or kinesiological one. To illustrate continuity...
and novelty within the online skate culture, I examine two case studies: the persistence of older themes within digital presentations of skateboarding and the new ways skaters navigate hostile commentary online.

A tension between old and new, between break and continuity, informs the following article about the entry of social media into skateboarding. On this point, consider the following examples. As skateboarding becomes suffused with social media, existing hierarchies persist, such as those between subcultural gatekeepers and outsiders (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Nelson, 2010). At the same time, the democratized, dialectical potential of social media platforms allows for the demassified empowerment of laypersons to voice their opinions against big brands and media giants (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). This fact concurs with communication scholarship on how social media represent a dialectical co-creation between contending forces, one of which is the user (boyd, 2015; Schmidt, 2007; Srauy, 2015; van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Sometimes the democratic potential of social media is used for progressive and legitimate ends; other times it opens the door for reactionary “cyberhate” (Jane, 2015, p. 65) and “trolling” (Murthy & Sharma, 2019, p. 206). These discursive strains pollute online public spaces. For the purposes of this article, we can look to a significant venue where a contention between forces occurs, namely, the professional skateboarding website called The Berrics (Nichols, 2011). More specifically, I will examine its YouTube page, which it maintains to support its digital brand empire. Although, I argue that the criticism The Berrics received, in my case study, was valid.

I separate the following text into four main sections. First, I define the two concepts at hand: skateboarding and social mediatization. Second, I describe the article’s method, which borrows from textual and rhetorical analysis. Third, I provide a brief history of skateboarding media from VHS tapes to Instagram; in addition to familiarizing the outsider with the lifestyle sport, this history illustrates the conditions that persist within digital media. I identify the consequences of the social mediatization of skateboarding in this section, including the ubiquity of content and the shortening of this content into more conveniently consumable bits. Fourth, I analyze two cases in depth to support my argument about continuity and novelty. The first involves the digital continuation of existing themes in skateboarding—present for decades—such as “homosocial bonding” (Battema & Sewell, 2005, p. 262), the borrowing of Black “cultural signifiers” (Brayton, 2005, p. 365), and the celebration of neoliberal coolness (McGuigan, 2016). The second case illustrates a newer phenomenon within skate culture, namely, instant, public, and negative feedback that can visit a content creator.

**Skateboarding and Social Mediatization**

Skateboarding belongs to the broader orbit of lifestyle sports, which includes BASE jumping, BMX, free running, kite-surfing, parkour, rock climbing, snowboarding, surfing, wakeboarding, and the like (Dumont, 2017). Its history goes back decades, with skaters clattering around California shopping centers by the early 1960s (Yochim, 2009). Over the past 40 years, lifestyle sports have experienced increases in both participants and mainstream legitimacy (Encheva et al., 2013; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2012). In particular, Zirin (2008) identifies the 1990s as a special turning point marked by a “restlessness . . . against the big three sports” (p. 249). Traditionally, the sociological makeup of skateboard enthusiasts has been mostly young, White, male, and middle class (Atencio et al., 2013; Thorpe, 2011; Willing & Shearer, 2016; Zirin, 2008). This homogeneity began to change around 2006, however, which Atencio et al. (2013) mark off as the year when POC skaters started challenging the old perspective of skating as a primarily White activity. Lifestyle sport researchers are also acknowledging that participants are getting older and sticking with the activity (Willing et al., 2018).

Regarding the lifestyle sport’s subcultural ethos, researchers have long understood that skateboarders engage in resistant, subversive practices (Beal, 1995, 1996). These can include flouting the rules within a skateboarding contest or occupying space in a downtown business district, potentially damaging property with their boards. In addition, many researchers point out and fixate on a contradiction at the core of skateboard culture, namely, the rift between transgression and commercialism, between free expression and professionalization (Cantin-Braault, 2015; Kilberth, 2019; Schafer, 2019; Schwier, 2019). Put another way, this is a debate about selling out or remaining “core” and authentic (Dupont, 2020). Most important for this article, though, is another mainstay of skateboarding culture: This is the capturing of skateboarding tricks and the skater lifestyle on video (D’Orazio, 2020; Snyder, 2017).

Mediatizing the activity takes place for both personal and commercial reasons. For example, groups of friends will film each other’s skateboard tricks to upload to their social media profiles. With high-quality cameras available on smartphones, and user-friendly editing software equipped on laptops, doing so has become exceedingly easy and relatively cheap. Filming and presenting tricks can be done for fun, for analyzing one’s progress (Thorpe, 2017), and for claiming authenticity within the subculture (Camoletto & Marcelli, 2018; Dupont, 2020; Jones, 2011). At the same time, large brands that manufacture and sell skateboarding items will upload professionally produced videos to the Web as a form of marketing (Borden, 2001; O’Connor, 2020). These productions feature a brand’s sponsored riders, such as Red Bull’s Flathot Frenzy, featuring pro skater Torey Pudwill. Uploaded to YouTube in 2017, it has since garnered over 1.5 million views.

Thanks to everyone from neighborhood friends to transnational corporations, skateboarding footage routinely appears in “mass, niche, and micro media” (Thorpe, 2011, p. 17). This is to say that the mediatization of the sport runs the gamut from a paper flyer announcing a local video premiere, to niche magazines like Thrasher, to televised Olympic Games...
viewed by millions of people. It is important to note that the advent of new media has blurred the distinctions between these categories (Camoletto & Marcelli, 2018), and between consumers and producers (MacKay & Dallaire, 2012).

As this article is interested in mediatization, the term requires context. This is not so easy a task, however, as Hepp (2012) and Couldry and Hepp (2013) explain that multiple definitions exist, and within them many nuances. Encheva et al. (2013) further remind us that other words vie for usage, such as medialization and mediation. Mediatization theory rose to prominence around 2003 (Couldry & Hepp, 2013), and it “carries the legacy of both medium theory and effects research” (Encheva, 2011, p. 5). It can be understood as a dialectical “interrelation” (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197) between media and society, which takes place as they evolve together. The media are understood to pervade “institutions, social fields and social systems” (Hepp, 2012, p. 3) in myriad ways over time, though beyond any singular media logic. Therefore, mediatization can be considered a “meta-process” (Encheva, 2011, p. 5) that influences society to a degree comparable to globalization.

Furthermore, mediatization is an “ongoing process of dispersing media communication” (p. 13) that can take place temporally, spatially, and socially. In the temporal case, for example, Hepp (2012) explains that “the increasing number of technologically mediated communication is becoming more and more accessible all the time” (p. 13). An example he gives is TV, which never stops its flow of programming. Similarly, content available online is constantly and endlessly updating at all hours and by any given user or enterprise—what Ruggiero describes, respectively, as the “asynchronicity” (as quoted in Alhabash & Ma, 2017, p. 3) and “demassification” (p. 3) of the Web. These developments in media have social consequences that are incumbent on the researcher to identify.

There is an additional degree of precision provided by Olsson and Eriksson (2016). They advance the term “social mediatization” as a further extension of the concept. In their study of media as they relate to government bureaucracy, the authors discuss whether social media impose a particular logic to be acceded to by users. They understand social mediatization as forcing “other actors to adapt to [media’s] content, format, and language” (p. 188), and they find that bureaucrats in fact do this. For instance, bureaucrats communicate more personally, transparently, and informally when they interact with clients online. In other words, new avenues of contact open up over Twitter, for example, where users can witness once faceless and imposing entities take on a new and more approachable character. This occurs in ways not possible before the advent of Web 2.0.

As it happens, new formats and interactions also occur in the mediatized world of professional skateboarding. I explore this below with respect to “online hostility” (Jane, 2015, p. 66). One case I analyze involves a popular skate website on the internet (theberrics.com) navigating negative feedback from its large base of followers.

### Objective and Method

To depict the history of skateboard mediatization, I borrow from scholarly and popular resources to construct a narrative. The narrative is necessary to understand what conditions of this lifestyle sport have been reproduced in digital media and which conditions are newly facilitated by social media. This narrative is therefore crucial to my argument on continuity and novelty. It also helps establish the general relation between skateboarding and media to make more fulsome arguments below. While histories of skateboard media exist elsewhere in scholarly literature (Camoletto & Marcelli, 2018; Dinces, 2011; Willing et al., 2020), I try to introduce new considerations below.

In the final section of this article, I draw on two methods to show (1) how existing logics within skate culture persist in the digital age, and (2) how a new development within social mediatization has emerged; this is the anxiety that gatekeepers (e.g., The Berries) have regarding social media users expressing negativity and criticism toward gatekeepers. The two methods used are textual analysis and rhetorical analysis, respectively. I will next describe my approach to both.

First, I argue that digital skateboarding videos express the same values now as they did in the late 1980s. To illustrate this, I perform a textual analysis of a recent skateboarding video released on YouTube titled BE FREE (Thrasher Magazine, 2020). It is largely representative of all standard skateboarding media in that it depicts riders doing skateboarding tricks in segments that are set to music. Tricks involve flipping one’s board, grinding down handrails on sets of stairs, sliding on concrete ledges, and so on. Released in January 2020 through Thrasher Magazine’s YouTube account, it is roughly 16 min in length and has garnered around 600,000 views.

In terms of method, I take cues from Fiske (1990), Hall (2002), McKee (2003), and Phillipov (2013) during my textual analysis of the primary source. Hall (2002) states that in terms of representation and reading signs, “The reader is as important as the writer in the production of meaning” (p. 33). Fiske (1990) concurs, stating that “semiotics prefers the term ‘reader’... to ‘receiver’ because it implies both a greater degree of activity and also that reading is something we learn to do” (p. 40). This means however that interpretations are contingent on one’s “cultural experience” (p. 40). In extrapolating meaning from the BE FREE video, I acknowledge that I have an idiosyncratic understanding due to being a skateboarder. Nevertheless, I would argue that the interpretations meet McKee’s (2003) criterion for textual analysis. He writes, “when we perform a textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (p. 1). This is my objective below.

Textual analysis has come under scrutiny for its lack of empiricism and for being too contingent on the hunches of the investigator (Phillipov, 2013). This argument holds that the researcher’s interpretation may be too subjective and therefore removed from the participants of, say, the subculture one
is studying. The researcher’s distance from her or his object of analysis was in fact “[one of the most widespread critiques” (Wheaton & Beal, 2003, p. 155) of the CCCS, a school known for advocating “textualism” (Phillipov, 2013, p. 211) as a method. Complicating matters further, texts themselves are polysemic, which suggests that readers can draw more than one interpretation from them (Storey, 2006).

Nevertheless, there is much to appreciate about the ability of the textual analysis method to “find a vocabulary to describe the elusive” (Phillipov, 2013, p. 221), particularly when a subculture’s own members fail to articulate why they have joined it, why they like a certain aspect of it, or what they get out of participation in it. In my case, it would mean skaters unable to explain why a video speaks to them, what they like about a video part, or the lessons intimated. A textualist study circumvents this potential problem altogether. As a skateboarder myself, I would further argue that I have some authority in commenting on the video in question; I face less of a challenge compared with researchers who analyze a subculture from the outside.

Finally, I draw on rhetorical analysis while exploring new challenges that emerge under the social mediatization of the skate subculture. I use the popular web enterprise known as The Berrics as a case study, initially analyzing the typical statements that it pins below its YouTube videos. In line with advice on successful online communication, these statements express an invariably positive connotation asking for engagement and interaction (McCallister, n.d.; Smith, 2019). I also discuss how this content creator marshaled rhetorical strategies following an incident that had drawn negative feedback from fans, followers, and YouTubers. I argue that while The Berrics may associate its brand with a one-dimensional positivity, it is still learning how to negotiate the user backlash that participatory media make possible.

Rhetorical analysis entails the interpretation of the words of an author or speaker, particularly the discursive strategies used in the service of an appeal (Short, 2007). The method falls under the larger discipline of rhetoric, which dates back to ancient Greece. Rhetoric is the “study of producing discourses and interpreting how, when, and why discourses are persuasive” (Keith & Lundberg, 2008, p. 4). Importantly, the study of rhetoric is more concerned with how something is said, as opposed to what is said (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Aristotle, whom many scholars identify as the first philosopher on rhetoric, categorized forms of speech based on their intent, such as forensic, epideictic, and deliberative. These types of speech relate to justice, honor, and debate, respectively (Keith & Lundberg, 2008, p. 7). He further theorized three “rhetorical proofs” (p. 7) that, when used in harmony with one another, could best convey a persuasive message. These are logos (logic), ethos (credibility), and pathos (emotion). In addition to the author or speaker exists a larger social context referred to as the rhetorical situation, which prefigures and frames the text or speech.

Researchers using rhetorical analysis can interpret not only the words used by a speaker but additional qualities that include affect, body language, intonation, pauses, and voice volume, among others. Landau and Keeley-Jonker (2018), for example, analyzed the 2011 speech that President Barack Obama gave following a mass shooting that killed bystanders and injured US Representative Gabby Giffords. Studying multiple facets of the speech, such as Obama’s avoidance of “negative” (p. 177) words that would incur anger, the authors find that the former president was able to channel the audience’s uneven energy in a way that expressed love and civic responsibility. Using a different case study altogether, Gibson (2013) analyzed the “rhetorical strategies” (p. 296) people used to navigate difficult situations. Paying attention to the pauses, volume, intonation, and word tenses used on original recordings of the infamous Milgram experiments, Gibson (2013) makes an argument that undermines 50 years of psychologists’ interpretations of Milgram’s data on obedience. In a study that more closely relates to this one, Ge and Gretzel (2018) show which emojis are used, and to what effect, by popular influencers on the Chinese social network, Weibo.

The primary sources I examine in the fourth section of this article are text-based posts left by The Berrics below videos. I also focus on an incident that elicited anger from viewers, as well as on how The Berrics affiliates reacted. All of these sources are found on YouTube, which according to Murthy and Sharma (2019) is a platform “replete with antagonisms” (p. 208). As I argue in this article, the same challenges that social mediatization poses for other sectors, individuals, businesses, and bureaucracies have visited the skate culture, which is likewise learning how to negotiate them.

**Skateboarding Media: From VHS to Instagram**

Skateboarding is a robust subculture, and like any other subculture, it entails a “social [group] organized around shared interests and practices” (Gelder & Thornton, 1997, p. 1). To that, we can tack on the practice of certain “rituals” (Hebdige, 1983, p. 2). The chief practices of the skate culture involve the physical participation in the activity: that is, going to the skatepark, skating the streets, challenging oneself, learning new tricks, cultivating camaraderie with one’s friends, and engaging in identity performance (Dupont, 2014). In fact, the physical, bodily participation in lifestyle sports is what underpins a subcultural member’s authenticity (Woermann et al., 2012). Another crucial ritual, however, is watching action-sports stars in videos distributed by brands. Making one’s own amateur videos and watching them is prevalent as well.

Dinces (2011) explains that skateboarding films first appeared in the 1960s and “became widely popular” (p. 1515) by the 1980s. Skating found life on VHS tapes throughout the 1980s, as in the case of Powell-Peralta’s videos that
featured international celebrity Tony Hawk and the “Bones Brigade.” Such films included Future Primitive (1985), The Search for Animal Chin (1987), and Public Domain (1988). These and other videos’ subcultural function was multifaceted. According to O’Connor (2016), “Skateboard videos. . . communicate to skateboarders a sense of authenticity, community, aesthetics, and cultural values” (p. 481). The skate video also pushes forward ideas of what is possible to do on a board, both documenting progression and charting a course for the innovation of tricks (Porter, 2003).

Perhaps surprisingly, skateboarding had migrated to cyberspace as early as the mid-1980s (Borden, 2001). Based out of San Francisco, California, Thrasher Magazine began hosting an online “bulletin board” (p. 118) during this era. This means that the outlet was active at the same time as Howard Rheingold’s “virtual communities” (Turner, 2006, p. 6) and Stewart Brand’s Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link. Before the term “Web 2.0” was coined, “skaters [were] increasingly using the internet to receive and post images and movie clips” (Borden, 2001, p. 118). The momentum has continued through today, as skate content has fully capitalized on the Internet’s affordances. Videos by established brands, and solo pros of famous teams, rack up hundreds of thousands (even millions) of views on YouTube, released asynchronously and without letup. Lakai Footwear’s Fully Flared has over 1.6 million views; Andrew Reynolds’s “B-Side” part for Emerica’s Stay Gold has 2.7 million views; Richie Jackson’s Death Skateboards part has almost 10 million. Individual pros’ Instagram accounts, meanwhile, boast legions of followers and regularly feature short clips of tricks. Chaz Ortiz has 559,000 followers; Tony Hawk has 7.1 million.

That you can find all manner of skate content online, from the obscure to the renowned, speaks to a key dimension of the social mediatization of lifestyle sport: ubiquity. Instagram launched in late 2010, and before long a series of comments on skate culture began surfacing about the ubiquitous nature of content. We can understand these misgivings as skateboarders’ negotiation of the temporal nature of mediatization, whereby online content appears as an asynchronous and ceaseless onslaught (Hepp, 2012). The general attitude was that the avalanche of content represented a growing threat of some kind—a cheapening of what skateboard media used to be. In an interview posted to YouTube in 2012, professional skater Marc Johnson said the following about the profusion of skate content online:

There’s a lot of access; the access is instant. . . Whereas before you had to wait a whole year—two years or whatever—to see anything that kind of came out of the skateboard industry. . . [With respect to new tricks], now, your mind is blown all day long on the Internet. . . [Now] nobody cares about anything. You could see the craziest part on the Internet. . . [and then say] NEXT!” [It’s always] Give me the new, the new, the new. (Crailtap, 2012)

Similar sentiments are found on the skateboard website, Jenkem, which features cerebral and critical pieces about its beloved subculture. One of the many themes discussed on Jenkem’s forum is the effect of the Internet on skate videos. Like Johnson’s perspective above, some see access to endless content as a bad thing. For example, Kaminski (2013) analyzes and disputes the statement that “the Internet is killing skate videos, not only as a medium, but as an artform” (para. 1). Elsewhere on the site, Castro (2019) notes that this “media cycle. . . encourages us to forget new videos too frequently, almost regardless of their quality” (para. 14) as new clips “are released rather unceremoniously, pushed out as quick blog posts” (para. 17).

Scholarship on media and lifestyle sports also reports on the effects of Instagram and YouTube on skateboarding consumption. D’Orazio (2020) writes that social media seem to have “increase[d] the total share of available content. . . and somewhat blunt[ed] the novelty of marquee skate videos” (p. 67). In his ethnographic study of skateboarders’ use of Instagram, Dupont (2020) described the Web as engendering an “endless content blast” (p. 658). Encheva et al. (2013) acknowledge that “skating and filming are now caught in an endless spiral of mediation” (p. 20; emphasis added). In quoting a journalist, Thorpe (2017) adds that “we are being fed so much amazing skateboarding on a daily basis that. . . we are getting desensitized” (p. 561). Mirroring recurrent popular commentary about networked devices, Jones (2011) describes the anxiety that the Web is turning its users into zombies.

While it is a subjective determination whether the Internet is cheapening the quality of skateboarding content, we can safely state that the quantity is now more than ever. On the one hand, this is self-evident given that roughly 6.4 billion people around the world possess a smartphone (Oberlo, n.d.), and some 3.78 billion people use social media (Mohsin, 2021). What requires more research is how pervasive the negative attitude toward excessive skate content is, although this is beyond the scope of this article.

Continuity and Novelty: Reproducing Old Themes, Negotiating New Problems

Distributed on Thrasher’s YouTube channel in conjunction with the Real Skateboards company, BE FREE premiered in January 2020. It features the talents of pro skaters Kyle Walker and Ishod Wair, two winners of the coveted Skater of the Year title that Thrasher awards annually (Wair in 2013; Walker in 2016). Walker is a young white man, and Wair is a young Black man. According to the video’s blurb, they produced this 16-min video project after “having done a lot of miles together” while touring with the Real Skateboards team (their sponsor).7 By January 2022, the video had accumulated nearly 600,000 views.
BE FREE copies the format of nearly all skate-video parts: it is a series of tricks in urban environments strung together for a few minutes and overlaid with music. Concrete, handrails, benches, street architecture, sidewalks, and the like appear throughout. The video also represents a familiar formula Dinces (2011) identifies that became standard in skate videos by the late 1980s; this is the change from team-centric, collective presentations to “competitive individualism” (p. 1525) presentations, where each rider has their own section. In keeping with the trend, Kyle Walker skates first, and Ishod Wair second; both of their parts are roughly 5 min in length. Although it is slightly longer than the solo video parts today (given that Walker and Wair are both featured), BE FREE also falls far shorter than the standard 30- to 60-min videos that preceded Web 2.0.

Kyle Walker is a White professional skater, and accompanying his section is a song by rapper Chief Keef from the Back From the Dead 3 mixtape. The song is titled “Booty Call.” This is significant because digital media have reproduced an old trope within skateboarding, hinted at above with respect to race. For many years, White skaters have been poaching Black “cultural signifiers” (Brayton, 2005, p. 365) when they present their identities and distinguish their favored activity from traditional sports. In this and many other cases, a White skater performs a montage of tricks set to a hip-hop soundtrack. The impulse to draw from Black culture is broad and long-standing, of course, and this extends beyond skate culture. Brayton (2005) likens the poaching done by skaters to the 1950s form of “white rebellion” (p. 361) waged by the Beat Generation’s Jack Kerouac and Norman Mailer. Indeed, white men have long sought to embody the role of “outsider and ‘rebel’” (hooks, 1992, p. 96) through the adoption of Black masculinity. Social media and networked devices, through the presentation of Walker’s part in BE FREE, have kept this problematic tradition going.

The BE FREE video also exhibits masculine camaraderie, which we can refer to as “homosocial escape” (Brayton, 2005, p. 361) or “homosocial bonding” (Battema & Sewell, 2005, p. 262). This too represents a long-standing value in skate culture that becomes replicated through new media. Indeed, the two skaters share the stage—an arrangement that tracks with Yochim’s (2009) observations on “alternative masculinities” (p. 13) in skateboarding. By this, she means that skateboarders’ performance of masculinity involves “self-expression and cooperation rather than competition and physical dominance” (p. 24). The textual blurb accompanying the video further notes that “Traveling, skating and filming with your friends—that’s the way it’s supposed to be.” Your friends, the crew, the homies—however they are defined, the point is that skaters should not be loners. The blurb combined with the footage expresses a clear message to viewers: a crucial element of being a skateboarder is hanging out with your pals, and there are plenty of good times to be had.

A final point to examine in BE FREE illustrates why, out of any number of other videos, it is an appropriate media artifact to include in this study; this has to do with the concept of “freedom.” The video in fact suggests that “Traveling, skating and filming with your friends” equals “freedom,” as expressed in the video’s own title. But this concept can be problematized by asking: What antecedents and current realities condition their freedom, or our freedom? Freedom is a loose concept that incidentally nourishes American common sense and neoliberal ideology; exploring these factors will better contextualize the lessons imparted to viewers of this video.

Harvey (2005) explains that neoliberal values succeed because they capitalize on existing common-sense beliefs in capitalist cultures. He goes on to say that “for any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts” (p. 5); therefore, “the founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental” (p. 5; emphasis added). This is because the ideals are “powerful and appealing in their own right” (p. 5). Manders (2005) agrees with the ideological power of freedom, categorizing it along with the concepts of democracy and equality as the number one tenet of “dominant capitalist ideology” (p. 36) in the United States.

This fixation on freedom readily translates to skate media, an observation that has been documented for years. As Yochim (2009) argues, subcultural virtues within the skate culture overlap with those of the pilgrims, Puritans, and frontiersmen of early America. Speaking of lifestyle sports more generally, Gilchrist and Wheaton (2013) state that they “reinforce the hegemonic position of the heroic Western White male adventurer subjectivity” (p. 182). Brayton (2005) likewise argues that skaters perform an “outlaw fantasy” (p. 363) while on the road, not unlike the pilgrimages of 1950s Beatniks—themselves motivated by the abandonment of “middle-class whiteness” (p. 361) and “stagnant . . . suburbia” (p. 362). This outlaw nature is reinforced in the BE FREE video when we hear the exclamation: “Hey, security’s on the way; we gotta go,” along with clips of an approaching security guard.

The “be free” mantra of this video project, when aligned with the common-sense beliefs of a neoliberal society, suggests that young and dynamic individuals should use the streets as they see fit in a practice referred to as “urban appropriation” (O’Connor, 2016, p. 478). Hellman and Odenbring (2020) connect skate camaraderie to the attitude of the “global businessman” (p. 49), who enjoys “the taken-for-granted privileges of self-confidence and a sense of the right to enter and colonize public spaces” (p. 49). The authors further argue that skaters in the social world use space without fear of reprisal or being accosted by police and that the mediated representation of skating depicts the “quest of individual identity” (p. 49) and expression of a “global entrepreneurial mindset” (p. 49). Similar conclusions can be drawn from BE FREE.

Moreover, skaters as neoliberal subjects (Howell, 2008; Wheaton, as quoted in O’Connor, 2016) are encouraged to
see existing public (and private) space as a dated fetter governed by rules and mores no longer desirable or comprehensible to the young generation. This concept can be tied to McGuigan’s (2016) point about “neoliberal selfhood” (p. 27), which is performed by young folks who are “socialized into a cool-capitalist presentation of self” (p. 27). We can easily see how Walker and Wair embody this “freedom-seeking” (p. 27) selfhood in BE FREE. Bound up in the video is this host of values left over from an earlier time in skateboarding, which digital media now recycle, package, and distribute for the new generation.

One place to look for new developments in the social mediatization of skate culture is elsewhere on YouTube, specifically The Berrics channel. As one of the most popular and regularly visited skateboarding channels on the site, The Berrics has uploaded nearly 4,500 videos and claims over 1.3 million subscribers. Some of its videos garner a few thousand views, while others amass over 2 million. Many videos represent recurring themes or segments. “Recruited” videos feature a well-known rider performing tricks in the private park; injury videos feature a rider who tells stories about their worst accidents on the board; and “Dream Trick” follows a single rider’s attempts to land a difficult maneuver.

Like any other substantial content creator, The Berrics generates thousands and thousands of comments from amateur users, many of them supportive. If Olsson and Eriksson (2016) found that bureaucracies became more informal and personable under social mediatization, so too has this process dictated that content creators engage more with fans. One simple way to do this is for the creator to “like” the positive comments left by viewers below a video. The Berrics web team does this regularly; liking comments contributes to the positive environment that the creator hopes to cultivate and sustain. In fact, a YouTuber named Gifted Hater (2021d) has astutely pointed out that the world of The Berrics’ co-founder (Steve Berra) must be full of “sunshine and daisies,” because Berra has abandoned any impulse toward criticism. Berra’s attitude no doubt contributes to the one-dimensional positivity associated with the channel, which Hater rightly identifies as a contrivance that does not help the subculture progress or reflect on itself.

A question asked by rhetorical analysis is whether the author addresses other perspectives (KSU Writing Center, n.d.). It is clear by the statements above that The Berrics is not interested in doing so, preferring unobjectionable statements that, as noted, discourage a dialogue about problematic or weighty issues that emerge in the culture. The breezy, frictionless requests (coupled with a lack of critical perspectives) mirror larger discursive trends in the skateboarding industry (Gifted Hater, 2021c; Nichols, 2020), whereby remaining cordial is thought best for a skater’s career (Board Crazy, 2006; Michna, 2012). Widening the scope even further, the inoffensiveness of The Berrics’ rhetoric fits in with the neoliberal economy, where precarious creatives and freelancers learn that “It’s not cool to be difficult” (McRobbie, as quoted in McGuigan, 2016, p. 41), as obstinance can lead to lost contracts. If we accept the premise that “Almost every text makes an argument” (KSU Writing Center, n.d., para. 1), The Berrics purports that positivity is the correct conduct in skateboarding, despite the fact that problems in the culture remain unacknowledged.

Perhaps the main draw to The Berrics is its annual competition referred to as “Battle at the Berrics,” or BATB. This event places professionals, amateurs, and unknowns into a March Madness-style bracket, where two competitors per match try to land more tricks than their opponent. The winner advances rounds until there is a champion on “Finals Night.” The Berrics launched this competition in 2008 and has since overseen 12 BATBs. BATB 12 began in the summer of 2021 and is set to conclude in late June 2022. It has been an uneven and messy rollout, which contrasts with its smoother predecessors. For example, for the few months at a time that a previous BATB “season” was underway, Berrics workers would generally upload competition videos every weekend. BATB 12, however, has witnessed long, drawn-out weeks in which the site posted little or no competition activity. Followers complained; a typical example is a commenter who joked that this BATB would not finish until 2027 (The Berrics, 2021c). The consternation surrounding BATB 12 represents the “rhetorical situation” (Keith & Lundberg, 2008, p. 24) in the following analysis.

In a BATB 12 match between skaters Sean Davis and Shaun Hover, posted to YouTube on August 21, 2021, the former executed questionable tricks, won the match, and acted in a way many observers thought was unsportsmanlike. This resulted in a torrent of “dislikes” and negative comments that quickly wrecked the upload. Gifted Hater also produced a video that humorously criticized the match (2021a). Before long, The Berrics web team even turned off user comments for the Davis video—a rare reaction from the content creator (though the function has since returned).
Among the negative comments accruing over 1,000 likes were: “first time a game of skate left me with a bad feeling,” and “Sean lost all respect this game” (The Berrics, 2021c).

As Gilchrist and Wheaton (2013) explain, YouTube “has the potential to allow a broader range of voices and expressions” (p. 178) to surface, with the “two-way interactive elements [of the platform] allow[ing] for dialogue and criticism” (p. 178). With regard to the Davis controversy, the affordances of YouTube chagrinned The Berrics, whose reaction was to temporarily shut off user comments, thereby eliminating negative feedback associated with the brand. Like a successful content creator, however, The Berrics team reinstated the comments and listened to its followers and subscribers. Users wanted a rematch, and The Berrics obliged. Organizing a rematch was unprecedented in the 14-year history of BATB (The Berrics, 2021d). The fact that followers got this event is evidence of the dialectical co-creation that animates social media; the interaction between users and creators leads to new outcomes.

In keeping with The Berrics’ (2021d) standard inoffensiveness, its text below the rematch video reminded fans that its “listening to all of you” and thankful for everyone’s patience. It did not rebuke anyone for criticizing the first match, nor, interestingly, did it apologize for turning off comments. To shore up its ethos, it deployed another strategy. Gibson (2013) writes that the body language of leaving and returning (say, in a room) is a rhetorical tactic, as the physical act may convince others that the entrant has verified something pertinent and has therefore built ethos. A similar strategy appears in The Berrics rematch text, where users read that the co-founder Steve Berra personally flew from Chicago to Los Angeles to act as the referee (whereas friends of the competitors filled that role the first time). This tactic signifies responsibility and commitment to fans. What may be good for inclusive communication as a content creator, however, may not be good for critical reflection within a subculture (Gifted Hater, 2021d).

I think it is important to record these developments to understand trends in social mediatization. The Berrics’ response to the Davis controversy shows that even elite gatekeepers are still negotiating this phenomenon, as are other sectors that have adopted social media. Indeed, The Berrics’ concern about negativity reflects a similar one that has emerged elsewhere in mediated life, especially in op-ed journalism and Twitter (Ott, 2017; Stephens, 2017). Says conservative New York Times columnist Bret Stephens regarding his disaffection with Twitter: “I’ll intercede only to say nice things about the writing I admire, the people I like and the music I love” (2017, para. 1). This further involves the distaste those in privileged positions have about being criticized, or talked back to, by amateur users on the Web (Feinberg, 2019).

Conclusion

In this article, I have given an account of the social mediatization of the skateboarding subculture. I tracked how the subculture evolved from the 1980s to today, focusing first on its relationship with analog and digital media. Finally, I illustrated how social media replicate old values within skateboarding while at the same time introducing new challenges. Online skate enthusiasts, skateboard brands, and amateurs are in the process of negotiating these thorny issues. In sum, I feel these findings are important to document, as we can catalog and study the ways in which new media technologies influence aspects of our social lives.

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Notes

1. As Thorpe (2017) writes, “As with many traditional sports, . . . action sport-related events are increasingly being designed and choreographed for online audiences” (p. 557).
2. I use the terms “subculture,” “lifestyle sport,” and “skateboarding” interchangeably. Many scholars in this area of sports studies and kinesiology use the term “lifestyle sport” over action, alternative, or extreme sport (Dumont, 2017; Wheaton, 2010); this is because an activity like skateboarding represents the physical act itself, as well as a subcultural style that overlaps elsewhere in a skater’s daily life.
3. Though Nelson (2010) is referring to the world of BMX, the principle relates to skateboarding.
4. This is incidentally the same year that the Internet transformed from “static” (Jane, 2015, p. 81) medium to the interactive public sphere of the Web 2.0 age.
5. As the authors explain, this was due to the major three methods in communication (textualism, political economy, and audience studies) failing to address why media was so important to study in the first place. Mediatization accounted for the gap in understanding.
6. Fuchs (2014) notes that the effect of Tim O’Reilly’s 2005 coinage of the term “Web 2.0” was meant to woo investors to put money “into new Internet start-up companies, which was difficult after the 2000 [dotcom] crisis” (p. 32).
7. That the video description references the miles traveled with the Real team accords with O’Connor’s (2018) observation that skateboarders are prone to take “secular pilgrimage[s]” (p. 1652) to famous spots, as well as to take journeys in general.
8. Although the one-to-one relationship between the traveling Real team and Jack Kerouac’s On the Road-form of “white . . . rebellion” (Brayton, 2005, p. 361) is problematized by teammates such as Ishod Wair.
9. The Berrics posted 29 videos throughout March 2022; I only noted one instance of the web team responding to a critical remark. Some of these videos yielded between ~100 to ~1,000 user comments in total.
10. Interestingly, Ge and Gretzel (2018) found that the gesture was the most used emoji type in their sample of influencers on Weibo.

11. One such problem Gifted Hater (2021b, 2021c) identifies is the increase in commercialization seen at The Berrics since its founding.

12. Gifted Hater (2021d) refers to other instances of The Berrics turning off comments, such as on the latter’s Instagram posts that feature Sean Davis (Gifted Hater, 2021a). In another video, Gifted Hater (2022) additionally shows that The Berrics Instagram page blocked him.

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