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Skate Parks as a Context for Adolescent Development

Abstract

All people influence, and are influenced by, the contexts they inhabit. Leisure contexts are no exception. The current research comprised three studies investigating the links between one leisure context, skate parks, and adolescent development. Using interview, observation and questionnaire methods, the research shed light on several of the demographic, psychosocial, and sub-cultural correlates of skate park use. Despite polarized attitudes to skate parks, parks users reported levels of personal adjustment and social integration similar to those of other adolescents. The research illustrates the need to distinguish between different types of unstructured youth leisure activities, with those activities that occur within the unstructured context of a skate park shown to offer considerable potential for positive youth development.

Adolescence is a pivotal period of psychosocial development, with multiple life experiences and social contexts shaping the balance of positive-to-negative outcomes during these years (Arnett, 1999; Larson, 2000). Past studies have investigated the effects on adolescent development of experiences within parental, family, peer, school, neighborhood, work, and other contexts (Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2002; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). Fewer studies have examined the influence of leisure and recreational contexts and activities. Yet leisure occupies approximately 50% of adolescents' waking hours, a proportion higher than that of school and work combined (Larson).

The current research focused on one particular leisure context, skate parks, and the activities (including skateboarding, roller skating/blading, riding of scooters and BMX bikes) that take place there. This focus was chosen for three reasons. First, as elaborated below, skate parks are popular venues, and skateboard riding is a popular pastime, among young people. Second, no prior study appears to have examined the relationship between this leisure context and adolescent psychosocial adjustment. Third, because skate park-based activities provide a clear example of what has been termed "unstructured" leisure, propositions regarding the correlates of this kind of leisure pastime can be tested through the study of skate parks.

Skaters, Skateboards, and Skate Parks

Although (anti-)skateboarding laws date back to 1913, skateboards, skaters and skate parks are thought to be relatively recent phenomena (Hill & Hill, 1986). Most authorities (e.g., Chiu, 2009; Woolley & Johns, 2001) agree that skateboarding first came to prominence in the 1950s in California as an alternative to surfing when the sea was flat. Over the past five decades, purpose-built skate parks, comprising concrete and steel configurations of ramps, bowls, steps, rails, and the like, have been constructed as public or commercial facilities in many cities around the world. Stated purposes for their construction include satisfying the leisure needs of youth, reducing loitering and delinquency, and protecting the property and personal safety of other community members (Rice & Dolgin, 2008).

Estimates of the number of skateboarders in the US range from 12 to 20 million (Fetto, 2002). Most are able-bodied males aged 8 to 22 years (Fetto, 2002; Snow, 1999; Woolley & Johns, 2001). According to surveys cited by Fetto, approximately 23% of US teens ride skateboards, including 8% who skateboard every chance they get and 15% who skate once in a while or sometimes. These figures are consistent with Australian research by Boag, Hibbins, Harrington, and Lloyd (2003) who found that 26.5% of the 854 adolescents they sampled spent at least some of their leisure time in skate parks. When Boag et al. asked their respondents to indicate the place in which *most* leisure time was spent, skate parks ranked fifth of 25 possible leisure contexts (behind home, the beach, friends' house and shopping centre, but in front of sporting field, cinema, pool, gym, library, and others).

Over the past 50 years, a distinctive subculture has evolved around skate parks. Skate parks are predominantly “male spaces”, but, as Beal (1996) observed, the masculinity apparent at skate parks is an “alternative masculinity” reflected in values of personal freedom, self-expression and cooperation, rather than the more traditional masculine values of aggression, power and competitiveness. Central to the skater subculture is a language that relates to skate boards, moves and venues (Woolley & Johns, 2001). Skateboarder attitudes are reported to reflect anti-authority and rebellious themes (Chiu, 2009; Davis, 2004). Clothing has evolved from hippy and punk styles in the 1970s and 1980s, to a uniform comprising baseball caps, baggy shorts/jeans, and over-sized and ripped shirts in the 1990s and beyond (Chiu; Rice & Dolgin, 2008). More recently, a style involving tighter fitting clothes has become popular. Musical tastes have also evolved over time, but mainstays include hip-hop and rock (Denholm, Horniblow, & Smalley, 1992). Distinctive skate art forms appear on boards and in parks. Magazines, video footage placed on skateboard Web sites, and commercial photos/videos/DVDs, reflect and enhance this skate sub-culture (Chiu; Snow, 1999). These leisure values, dress codes, musical styles and modes of artistic expression provide the building blocks for the crowd and individual identities adopted by many skaters (Woolley & Johns).

There exist widely diverging views about skate parks, skateboarding and the skate sub-culture (see, e.g., Jones & Graves, 2000; Stratford, 2002; Woolley & Johns, 2001). Skate parks are sometimes stereotyped as unsavoury if not outright dangerous places populated by graffiti artists, bullies and drug takers. Some see skateboarding as at odds with conventional attitudes and behaviors, as a symbol of the gulf between generations and social classes (Davis, 2004). Others extol the virtues of skate parks, arguing that they stop young people skating in public places, help reduce youth problems, enhance community life, and more generally enliven our cities. For example, a report commissioned by the Local Government of Queensland (2004, p. 15) claims (without supporting evidence) that:

Skate facilities are not just recreational facilities in the same way that tennis courts are. Well designed and managed skate facilities will become a hub for community life ... A skate facility can be a catalyst for healthy community life in which young and old socialise, have fun, develop new skills, make new friends, hang out and much more.

The current research aimed to update and extend knowledge of skateboarders and skate parks, to test some of the (predominantly negative) stereotypes related to skaters and skate parks, and to link knowledge about skate parks/boarders/subcultures to the scientific literature on adolescent development.

Adolescent Psychosocial Development and the Role of Leisure

Leisure contexts and activities may influence participants in many ways. For example, Shaw, Kleiber, and Caldwell (1995) identified effects of leisure on adolescent identity and self-esteem, whilst McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, and Kawachi reported links to such outcomes as family attachment, school attachment, peer relations, and social support. Other studies (e.g., Barnes, Hoffman, Welkte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2007; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Palen & Coatsworth, 2007) have shown that leisure time activities predict delinquent and rule-breaking

behaviors. These various outcomes of leisure activity were grouped by Larson (1994) into two categories: “personal integration” and “social bonding”. Both types of outcomes are of interest in the current study.

The effects of skate park participation on psychosocial outcomes – on personal integration and social bonding - are not known with certainty, nor are the factors that moderate and/or mediate these effects. However, theories such as differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947), social control theory (Hirschi, 1961), and routine activity theory (Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996) can be used as bases for predicting that skate park-based activities may have predominantly negative effects on adolescent development. According to these theories, antisocial behavior is most likely to occur when bonds between individuals and conventional contexts (e.g., school, church) and activities (e.g., family outings, homework) are weak, and when discretionary time is instead spent in unsupervised association with peers. Lifestyles dominated by patterns of skate park activities deprive adolescents of time for conventional family and school pursuits, with a potential negative impact on family cohesion and academic achievement, and an eventual substitution of these activities and goals with less conventional ones favored by the peer group.

In support of the argument that skate park use and skateboarding activities lead to adverse developmental outcomes is the body of research demonstrating different development consequences of youth involvement in structured, as opposed to unstructured, leisure activities (Barnes et al., 2007; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004; Morris, Sallybanks, & Willis, 2003; Osgood & Anderson, 2004). *Structured* activities are those that entail high levels of adult organisation and supervision, with rules imposed to regulate the behavior of the young participants. Examples include school sponsored extra-curricular activities and team-based sports. Such activities are generally associated with positive developmental outcomes. In contrast, participation in *unstructured* activities - particularly those involving free time spent in the company of peers – is related to

antisocial behaviors such as violence, public nuisance, property damage, and substance use. Most skate parks are unsupervised, and most skateboarding activities are unstructured. As such, this context and its associated activities present adolescents with peer models of, ample opportunities for, and few adult constraints over, rule breaking behaviors.

As appealing as these arguments may seem, it is possible to make a case for more positive outcomes to be associated with the skate park context. For example, because skate parks provide opportunities for unstructured, peer-centred activities, they may help satisfy adolescents' needs for autonomy and relatedness, and may enable young people to develop social skills. The acquisition of skating competencies may help build self-confidence and status within peer groups. Opportunities to present oneself in a positive light and to take on aspects of a favored youth sub-culture may enable adolescents to build and clarify their sense of self (Danish, Taylor, & Fazio, 2003). Consistent with this reasoning, recent evidence (e.g., Abbott & Barber, 2007) suggests the need to distinguish between different types of unstructured activities, with some (e.g., hobbies, unstructured sports) linked to more positive experiences than are others such as media use and communication activities. The former group of unstructured activities include skateboarding and other skate park-based pursuits. Whilst lacking adult-imposed mechanisms for behavioral control, these activities and leisure contexts provide forms of control that are internal either to individual participants and/or their group (Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Snow, 1999), and thereby help develop capacities for self-regulation, cooperation and negotiation with peers.

The effects of skate parks and skateboarding on adolescent development, whether positive or negative, are likely to be mediated by a range of internal processes and subjective experiences (Sibereisen & Todt, 1994). Past research (e.g., Palen & Coatsworth, 2007, Sharp, Coatsworth, Darling, Cumsille, & Ranieri, 2007) has identified several cognitive and affective processes that are activated by leisure participation. "Developmentally superior" leisure contexts (Cook et al., 2002) are ones that activate healthy and positive processes such as (a) learning to focus and sustain concentration on a task, (b) recognising, using and developing competencies, (c)

exploring, achieving and expressing identity, (d) setting goals and striving to achieve them, and (e) interacting socially and feeling accepted and supported by others. Perhaps the impact of skateboarding, like that of other leisure activities, is mediated by these processes.

In sum, the literature suggests a number of possible correlates of skate park use, and a number of possible antecedents and consequences of involvement in this leisure context. Figure 1 provides a conceptual overview of the factors likely to be involved. The current research investigated a subset of these factors.

Figure 1 about here

The Current Research

This research was conducted in a coastal city of Australia (population of 500,000) in which approximately thirty outdoor skate parks have been built and are maintained by the local city council and are freely available for use by all. Research by Boag et al. (2003) indicated that about one-quarter of adolescent residents of this city spend at least some of their leisure time in skate parks, with many others reporting being constrained (by a lack of money, transport, etc) from so doing. Despite evidence of this kind demonstrating the popularity of skate-parks both in the current location and elsewhere (e.g., Fetto, 2002; L'Aousted & Griffet, 2001), no prior research appears to have examined the developmental implications of time spent in this leisure context (and its associated activities).

The research addressed the following questions:

1. What is the extent and nature of skate park usage? Who uses and who does not use these facilities? How and when are they used? What happens in these parks?
2. What reasons are given for using skate parks? What factors encourage and constrain park usage?

3. What psychosocial outcomes are associated with skateboarding, skate park usage, and identification with the skating subculture?
4. What changes can be made to improve and broaden park usage, and to increase prosocial, and decrease antisocial, outcomes from park usage?

The research aimed to inform youth policy regarding leisure spaces and services, especially the location, design, management and impact of skate parks and other multi-facility youth precincts.

The current paper presents findings relevant to all four research questions, although space constraints require some selectivity of reporting. Thus, the major focus here is on the third of the above questions, namely, the interface between skate boarding/skate park usage and developmental outcomes.

The research comprised three studies, each of which used a different data collection method. Study 1 comprised 20 individual and two group interviews with skate park users and other stakeholders. In Study 2, participation and activities at two skate parks were observed by pairs of trained observers. Finally, in Study 3, adolescent students from two secondary schools completed a questionnaire relating to leisure activities, skate park use, perceptions of benefits and drawbacks of park usage, and likely correlates of skate park-based behaviors. This mixed-method approach permitted verification and clarification of findings across studies.

The Interview Study

Aims

The aim of the interview study was to identify issues relating to use and non-use of skate parks, the characteristics of users, the culture associated with the parks, perceptions of pro- and anti-social outcomes of park usage, and factors likely to improve and detract from park usage. Given the exploratory nature of these aims, a heterogeneous mix of interviewees was sought, and both individual and group interview were conducted.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 adults and eight adolescents. Two group interviews were also conducted. Interviews were audio-taped (with the interviewees' permission) and transcribed for later analyses. Copies of the interview schedules are available upon request.

Selection of the 12 adult interviewees was based on their expertise and interest in skate parks, skateboarding and/or adolescent leisure behavior. They comprised two elected local government representatives, three local government officials with responsibilities for recreation, youth or community affairs, two parents of skate park users, five industry representatives (e.g., a skate park designer, an on-line retailer of skate products), and a former professional skateboarder who resides in and who learnt to skateboard in the city. Two of these adults were current users of skate parks. Interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes.

Individual interviews were conducted with eight adolescents selected on a purposive basis to include four users and four non-users of skate parks. There were five males (aged 13-17 years) and three females (aged 16-18 years). Interviews included both same- and mixed-sex dyads. They lasted between 10 and 25 minutes. Each of the two focus groups included six adolescents (four females and two males, ages 13-16 years), and a mix of skateboarders and non-skateboarders. These group interviews were used, in part, to reduce unnecessary interviewee inhibitions and to enable additional insights to emerge out of debates between interviewees over the pros and cons of skate parks. Group interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes.

Interviewers were two females (aged 33 and 37 years) and one male (aged 54 years). None was, or had previously been, a skateboarder. Two of the interviewers, plus a third person with no prior involvement in the project, coded the interview data. A three-phase process was employed. In the first phase, coders, acting independently, applied a descriptive coding approach (Saldana, 2009) in which they recorded the major categories of responses to each of the interview questions in turn. Between three and eight categories were identified by the coders in the

responses to each question. In phase two, the coders re-read and reflected upon each interview transcript as a whole, and recorded details of any broader, more pervasive themes that emerged. In the final phase, the coders met and discussed their observations and reflections. Discussion and cross-referencing continued until consensus was reached as to the major question-specific and broader themes evident in the interviews.

Results and Discussion of the Interview Study Findings

First thoughts. Interviewees were asked for their first thoughts about skate parks. Answers varied widely in content, direction (positive or negative) and strength of feeling. Current and past park users typically reported positive thoughts. Illustrative responses are:

Awesomeness – They’re just awesome places to go. All the fun times with my friends are associated around skate parks.

(Adolescent Focus Group Member)

I love them... I just get to go down there in my spare time and get better at whatever I like doing at the time, like biking or skating.

(15-Year Old Male Skater)

One adult stakeholder stated that skate parks are “friendly places, busy places.” Others noted that skate parks provide a legal avenue for expression and activity.

In contrast, most interviewees who did not use the parks reported negative attitudes relating particularly to park unattractiveness, the negative qualities of some park users, and the frequency of anti-social behavior associated with the parks. For example, one parent commented: “From a mother’s perspective, I have found skate parks to be quite threatening places, they’re usually very isolated... they are lonely places, they are covered in graffiti which irks me and I find them really ugly”, whilst another adult interviewee stated that “skate parks are sort of a

concrete facility with little attraction for anybody besides skateboarders”. Reflecting on a decade of association with one local skate park, an elected member of the city council stated that skate parks produced “nothing but problems”. This interviewee described instances of conflicts between skateboarders and bike riders, graffiti, paint being poured over the footpath, fires, beer bottles and spirit bottles left lying around, “vandalising our furniture, seats, rubbish bins, and all other things in there”, and other antisocial acts. The interviewee did, however, acknowledge that most such incidents occurred late at night, and were probably not committed by dedicated skateboarders.

Park users. Interviewees generally confirmed impressions gained from the literature that teenage males are the major demographic group using skate parks. For example one parent described skate park users as “mostly boys, having fun.” Interviewees tended to characterize park users and non-users in sharply different ways. For example, a 17-year old male skater, claimed:

In general you’re probably popular if go to the skate park because skating is cool... School? I would have to say that [skateboarders] have less concentration because their mind is set on skateboarding or what their afternoon is going to be like after school when they go to the parks...

whilst a 17-year old female non-skater reported:

[Skaters are] popular kids who are not good at school work... they just spend time skating. [Non-users are] people like myself who just enjoy other things, more non-athletic things.

Interviewees identified other commonalities among skate park users. These included distinctive clothing styles (e.g., “more black”, “jeans or denim shorts”, “t-shirts”, “ripped clothes”, “skinny/tight jeans”, and “skate shoes”), distinctive language (e.g., terms used to describe skating manoeuvres, swearing), and distinctive youth groups (“gangsters”, “punks” “wannabes/wiggers”). Interviewees also identified a set of values - pertaining to risk, bravado and skilled performance – that characterize the skate park culture. Other descriptors of park users included “delinquents”, “bad boy image”, “screamo” [heavy metal music], “lots of scars”, and “drop-outs”.

Several interviewees suggested that park usage among females is increasing. Many also commented that, whilst most park users are adolescents, the age of users ranges from five years (usually accompanied by a parent) to 50 years, and possibly older. A wide range of socio-economic statuses, preferred activities, and ability levels are also represented.

Park activities. Interviewees were asked about the activities that took place at skate parks. Not surprisingly, most responses related to skateboarding, bike riding, scooters and roller skating/blading. Evident in many of the responses were themes pertaining to performance, risk-taking and rebellion. Skate parks were characterized as involving “risky tricks”, “physical sorts of behaviors”, and “dangerous, stupid things”. An adult interviewee put it like this:

A lot of young people have nothing to do. They don't engage in regular sports activities [like] football, golf, tennis, or other things. They seem to be drifting away from those into these more dangerous sports that perhaps give them a better thrill and, you know, excite them a bit more. And they're not regulated and regimented when they skateboard whereas they are in the other sports ...

The former professional skateboarder claimed that skateboarding is a “rebellious sport – not so mainstream as its sister sports of surfing and snowboarding”. Several interviewees pointed to the

frequency of antisocial behaviors (e.g., swearing, inappropriate use of public property) displayed by skaters. Others observed that some amount of rule-breaking occurs wherever young people congregate and thus comparisons are fair only if made with levels of misbehavior that exist in other youth contexts.

Affiliation and bonding. Skate parks were described as more than places to skate and ride (and, indeed, more than places to take risks and bend rules). Responses reflected the theme that, for many youths, skate parks are central to social networking and social integration. They are places to meet and mix, to “chill” and “hang out”, where skateboarders share knowledge, encourage others, and generally “look after their own”. A 15-year old male skater indicated that he does not go skating by himself, but needed social interaction for the activity to be stimulating, “Otherwise it is boring”. Others said:

It’s a good way to socialise ’cause it’s cheap, for fun, and we get to see all our friends who are interested in the same stuff.

(Adolescent Focus Group Member)

For kids it’s an opportunity for people to get together in groups... Kids will get together and not necessarily skate. They might get on the board three or four times but they might sit there for two hours just talking...

(Adult Interviewee)

A further theme emerging from the interviews was the existence of a strong bond between the “fraternity” of skate park users. For example:

Once you’re at the park you’re all mates. It’s rare that you find people who aren’t. They’re usually ok to help out with a trick or something.

(17-Year Old Male Skater)

There's actually quite a camaraderie in a skate park. The older kids help the younger kids, I've seen that quite a lot. They encourage them, they applaud sort of thing, when someone does a good trick....

(Adult Interviewee)

In the words of one focus group member, skaters “are all sort of there for each other. They've got that connection ‘oh you skate, I don't really know you, but if you fall over I'll help you up’ type of thing”. The ex-professional skateboarder commented “[w]hen you are a skateboarder, you're in a family”, with even the average skater “feeling part of something bigger”. Most interviewees regarded this camaraderie and affiliation with the sport as a positive influence in helping young people achieve a sense of identity and self-confidence.

Social order in an unsupervised environment. Several interviewees commented that skate parks are orderly settings. For example:

They all watch each other, and there's almost an unwritten code allowing one person to use the bowl. And standing and not getting in the way of them and things like that, there's sort of unwritten manners ... That's definitely something I've seen.

(Adult Interviewee)

I think if anybody take[s] the time to go and sit and watch a group of young people using a park, any park, there's a certain protocol that happens, a certain understanding of who goes next, and how long they're allowed on the park or for that run. There never seems to be an argument. It's an amazing thing to watch.

(Adult Interviewee)

Psychosocial impact. Interviewees were asked to consider the developmental impact of (young) people spending their leisure hours at skate parks, and in particular the benefits and risks of park use. In response, several spoke of the opportunities parks provide for developing social skills, self-esteem, co-operation, and respect for self, for other park users, and for the park itself. One 17-year old skater commented that skate parks are important in “building character, building your attitude, and definitely making friendships”. Others noted that skate boarders learn when to share a contested space and when to take turns in its use. For example, one focus group member claimed that “you learn co-operation. You don’t go when somebody else is going down... you learn to work with each other”. Another saw skate parks as contributing to a sense of belonging and “social acceptance...Knowing your place in society.” An adult remarked that it is through skate park-based interactions that young people (often inarticulate young males) develop their social skills:

Being able to socialise, develop their own communication skills, because most of the time skaters will turn up, skate, sit down, have a rest and a talk... [this is] where kids learn to communicate with each other on many different levels.

When providing an example of prosocial behaviors acquired at skate parks, one parent cited a case she observed in which a skater was injured and many other skaters rallied around, helped out and phoned for assistance.

Many respondents commented about the role played by the parks in developing young people’ skating skills and the effect this has on the development self-confidence and peer acceptance. Some suggested that these traits transfer to other areas of the individual’s life. For example:

I think the difference between skate parks and other leisure areas is [that] young people in skate parks have the ability to show their skill, and to build on their self-esteem ...

Skateboarding isn't about comps, and teams, and it's not just that the tricks are difficult...

You look at a skate park - people aren't trying to outdo each other, they're trying to outdo themselves. They just want to get better at their own skill.

(Adult Interviewee)

Respondents suggested that one mechanism by which positive development occurs is through the opportunity the parks provide for young people to experience a sense of ownership, and with that, a sense of shared responsibility. An adult interviewee told of a case in which youth involvement in the development of one particular skate park had coincided with a decline in anti-social behavior. According to this interviewee, youth in the area even took responsibility for policing the park:

There's one or two that have actually reported the culprits to the police. They've actually offered their names up, because they're annoyed that the youth centre's been tagged and targeted, because they're trying to take a little bit of ownership of it...

As the above example illustrates, many respondents emphasized the importance of involving young people in the design and management of skate parks. This theme of ownership, responsibility and civic participation is reflected in the response from one adult interviewee:

The most positive effects I've had or seen with skate parks comes from communities that directly involve the youth in the design process... If you get the kids involved it gives them a sense of civic duty... They end up showing stewardship for the park; they learn

that their voice and their opinion matter. It's absolutely a positive win-win situation for everybody.

Possible moderators of perceived skate park impact. In sum, our interviewees recognized that skate parks provide opportunities for skill acquisition, personal development and social acceptance, and for preparing young people for future community participation. But many interviewees also voiced concerns regarding the opportunities provided for learning problem behaviors such as swearing, substance use and property damage. Compared to those who use skate parks, non-users were much more likely to articulate these negative views, with users describing the parks as friendly, safe and supportive places, non-users reporting them to be intimidating and dangerous.

The reality perhaps becomes clearer by invoking a distinction based on time of day, with several interviewees commenting that antisocial behaviors are increasingly likely as the day progresses.

That's the problem with skate parks - they're usually fine during the day but it's at night when there's graffiti or something happens or smashing beer bottles and stuff.

(15 Year-old Male Skater)

Equally important is the distinction between skate parks as a physical place – which seem to be a common site for antisocial acts – and the skaters themselves who, consensus had it, are not the perpetrators of most of the mischief. Interviewees generally agreed that skate parks attract some delinquent and otherwise problematic people, and that the actions of this minority probably contribute disproportionately to negative attitudes towards the parks. Most skaters interviewed would prefer these “lurkers” not to use the parks, not the least because their antisocial acts undermine the quality of the skating experience.

I try to make sure they are always clean and they don't have stuff through the bowls and stuff, 'cause I've broken a lot of bones hitting rock and stuff.

(15 Year-old Male Skater)

Most of the skaters look after the [park]... They want to ride a good surface, ... they don't generally mess up their own nests.

(Adult Interviewee)

Many interviewees admitted that their knowledge of skate parks was acquired other than through first-hand experience, with several commenting on the influence of hearsay and media portrayals of skate parks and their users. For example, one adult interviewee stated:

I think probably the negative media, the Chinese whispers, the gossip from older people [is deterring people from visiting skate parks]. I've heard some amazing, horrible things said that have come back to [me], about bashings, and car thefts, and one was a murder – but as it turned out, none of it ever happened. But people used it to try and stop the skate parks from being built.... I think the elderly population think that skaters are bad news; they wear long shorts and sometimes they wear their hats back to front, so they can't be good.

Similarly, one adolescent interviewee immediately associated skate parks with drugs and violence, but, when questioned, admitted having no first-hand experience of skate parks or knowledge of park activities. One adult remarked:

It's more about the perception of the things rather than anything physical... Anybody who goes to a skate park [if they] can sit and watch and see what happens, I think, can accept the fact that they are safe places.

Locating and managing skate parks for maximum usage and benefit. Reflecting on the interviews as a whole, coders agreed that two inter-related dilemmas pervaded many of the responses. Resolution of these was seen as crucial to realising the potential of skate parks to contribute to their users and their communities. The first relates to skate park location. Parks situated in out-of-way places, especially when lacking gates or other physical security barriers, provide conditions conducive to antisocial behavior. But noisy parks located in close proximity to houses create disturbances and have potential for negative community impact. In general, interviewees greeted with enthusiasm the idea of broadly-based youth precincts that include but are not limited to skate bowls, especially when they are located in areas that are visible to passers-by, accessible to members of the general community, and integrated into the surrounding natural and built environment. When implemented elsewhere, this approach has facilitated the inclusion of skateboarders into the general community (Jones & Graves, 2000; L'Aousted & Griffet, 2001).

The second dilemma relates to management of skate parks. This may be equally critical in determining park usage and impact. The clear view emerging from the interviews was that skateboarders are attracted to the sport in part because of its unstructured and unregulated character. Many skaters indicated that they did not want to be organised or supervised by adults. However, without on-site supervision or surveillance of some kind antisocial behavior may thrive, and without mechanisms to minimise antisocial behaviors, unknown numbers of current and potential park users may be deterred from attending. Two of our interviewees commented on the lack of resources devoted to the management and maintenance of skate parks relative to other sporting and community facilities. They argued that skate parks, despite being a valuable community asset, are built and then left to "look after themselves." If neglected in this way, antisocial individuals are attracted, antisocial behavior flourishes, and negative stereotypes regarding the adverse developmental impact of skate parks thus appear confirmed.

The Observation Study

Aims

The interview study revealed sharply divergent views regarding skate parks. Many non-users, without first-hand experience of the parks, were highly critical; most users, with vested interest in maintenance and expansion of the parks, described them in favorable terms. Through direct observation, the second study aimed to shed light on the nature and extent of skate park usage, the kinds of activities that occur there, and the likely consequences of these activities.

Method

Usage of, and activities within, each of two skate parks were observed on twenty occasions. Each observation period lasted 20-minutes, yielding 800 minutes of observation time in total.

For each park, the 20 observation sessions comprised five sessions during each of four distinct periods: (a) during school time, (b) after-school time, (c) on weekends, and (d) during school holidays. Within these constraints, observations were spread across days of the week, and times of the day. No two observations occurred on the same day at the same park. For each session, pairs of trained non-participating observers recorded details of events whilst seated in an unobtrusive position.

For every person who entered the selected parks during the 20 observational periods, observers recorded details of the person's gender, estimated age, build, dress, protective clothing worn (helmets, caps, shoes, knee-pads, gloves, elbow-pads), main activity (on skateboard, bike, scooter, and/or roller-skates/blades, whether spectating, socializing, parenting, or some other main activity), other activities (including those that are prosocial [teaching/coaching, helping, 'making out', sharing, and/or caring] and/or those that are anti-social [smoking, drinking alcohol, physical fighting/bullying, verbal conflict/bullying, littering, graffiti, damage to co-user property, other vandalism]), and social affiliations (if any).

Results and Discussion of the Observation Study

The skate parks were well used. Across the 40 sessions, a total of 613 people were observed using the parks. Thus, on average, 15.3 people (SD = 11.2) were present in each observation period. Predictably, this number was lower in inclement weather and when schools were in class, but it increased to 40 people per park at any one time when conditions were favorable. Excluding the eight sessions in which it was raining, the mean number of park occupants was 23.3 (SD = 10.5). The estimated mean age of the park users was 15.6 years (SD = 6.1).

Table 1 gives further details of these skate park users and the activities in which they were engaged. As can be seen, users were predominantly male, aged 11-17 years. The relatively few females present included 12 women over the age of 25 years, and three children under the age of seven years (all with their mothers). None of the females was riding a skateboard; most were spectators; ten were parenting. These findings are in contrast to claims made in the interview study regarding increasing female patronage of parks. We saw almost no boyfriend-girlfriend relationships or activities during our observations. Skate parks appear not to be places where young males bring their girlfriends or do their dating.

Table 1 About Here

Most park occupants were riding a skateboard, a bicycle, or a scooter. Very small numbers of participants were observed smoking, drinking alcohol, or littering. Of those drinking alcohol, three were estimated to be aged 17 years, six aged 18-25 years, and one older than 25 years. All were males. Of those smoking, two were estimated to be aged 15 years, five aged 16-17 years, seven aged 18-25 years, and three older than 25 years. All but one were male. Of those littering, one was estimated to be aged 12 years, five aged 16-17 years, five aged 18-25 years, and one older than 25 years. All were male.

There was a complete absence of physical or verbal fighting. We saw no evidence of bullying, intimidation, or the like. We saw no-one damaging property. Consistent with claims made by several of our interviewees, skate parks were observed to have rules that are followed by most users, and few conflicts arose. Indeed, during the times of our observations, the parks appeared to be *peaceful* and *harmonious* places. These findings run counter to popular, negative stereotypes of skate parks. The findings are all the more remarkable because (a) there was often over-crowding and considerable competition for space in skate parks, (b) this competition was between people of diverse ages, activities (skateboarders vs. those riding scooters, for example) and skill levels, and (c) there was no formal supervision of the park users or activities.

Most occupants were a part of a friendship pair or group, and most interacted in good-humoured ways with others. In this sense, the skate parks appeared to be *friendly* places. This said, it was also the case that (a) almost one-third of occupants seemed to be alone and interacted little, if at all, with other users, and (b) there was very little *pro-social* behavior (helping, sharing, comforting) evident at the skate parks at the times we observed. The latter finding runs counter to the claims of some of our interviewees. Whilst this does not deny the *potential* for such behaviors to occur in skate parks, our observations suggest that they are not common occurrences. Park users clearly abide by norms regarding looking after their park – on two occasions, for example, teenagers were observed sweeping out the bowl – and they abide by norms regarding turn-taking and use of space - they know how to keep out of each others' way - but there did not appear to be strong norms requiring users to initiate acts of kindness to others. Loners were left alone; victims of minor accidents were not comforted. As Beal (1996), Power (2003) and several of our interviewees noted, the stoicism and other male values that dominate in skate parks are not consistent with fussing over scrapes and bruises.

Almost all participants wore shoes, but only approximately 48% wore protective head gear (either a helmet or a cap). Wearing of protective clothing varied with age and with activity. For example, (a) the proportion of people wearing helmets decreased with age, (b) few

skateboarders wore helmets, and (c) those riding bikes were more likely than those involved in other activities to be wearing helmets and gloves (although, even among bike riders, the majority wore neither). Many park users were thus taking few precautions against the risk of injury. The low rates of use of headwear is noteworthy given that the parks provide little shade, and that nearly all observations took place during the summer months, when ultra-violet rays are most dangerous. Whilst systematic counts were not taken, few occupants were observed applying sunscreen. For many of the young people observed, therefore, skate park use may represent a health risk. Remarkably, no signage was present at the parks we observed to remind users to engage in appropriate risk reduction practices.

Comparisons between the two parks revealed that the mean number of users per session were similar: 14.9 in Park A and 15.8 in Park B. Both parks were occupied mainly by teenage males, who rode a skateboard, bike or scooter, without protective gear, and who seldom engaged in overtly antisocial or prosocial behaviors. However, compared to users of Park A, those attending Park B were (a) more highly concentrated in the teenage years, (b) more likely to be riding a bike or scooter (rather than a skateboard), and (c) more likely to be socialising with peers in small groups. Park A attracted people of widely differing ages and ability levels, whose main interest was in riding their skateboards. In contrast, Park B functioned more as a meeting place for a relatively homogenous group of young male adolescents interested in a wider range of activities. For example, 79% of Park B users were aged 11-17 years (versus 53% of Park A users), and 60% of Park B users were in groups of three or more peers (versus 32% at Park A). The existence of between-park differences such as these points to the need to be cautious when generalising across skate parks.

The Questionnaire Study

Aims

The interview study focused on the attitudes and behaviors of a relatively small sample of people, most of whom had high levels of engagement in skate parks. Similarly, participation in the observation study was limited to people who use skate parks. The questionnaire study examined the views and activities of a wider cross-section of young people. Drawing on past research, and findings from the current interview and observation studies, the following hypotheses were tested:

- H1. Approximately one-quarter of this sample of Australian adolescents use skate parks.
- H2. Most skate park users and most skateboarders are male.
- H3. Skate park users have lower levels of academic success and educational aspirations than those of other adolescents.
- H4. The activity most commonly performed at skate parks is riding a skateboard (followed by riding a BMX/other bike).
- H5. Adolescents' attitudes to skate parks vary widely, from very positive to very negative, in line with their own skate park use.
- H6. Skateboarders and skate park users display high levels of (a) "personal integration" (i.e., high self-esteem and identity achievement), and (b) "social integration" (i.e., good relations with peers, family and at school).

Method

Participants. Students from two public secondary schools were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire. A total of 196 students took part, but after deletion of questionnaires that were either substantially incomplete or contained a predominance of irrelevant or highly patterned responses, 177 usable questionnaires remained. This sample contained a mix of genders (56% female), ages (12-17 years, mean = 14.7 years, SD = 1.52), and school years levels (Years 8-12). Almost half of the participants (46%) did not live with both their biological parents. One-

quarter were born outside of Australia, and 11% spoke a language other than English as their principal language at home.

Materials. Development of the survey instrument was informed by past research investigating the contribution of leisure to adolescent development, and by findings from the first two studies in this project. Following pilot testing and refinement, the final version of the questionnaire was eight pages in length and comprised 27 (multi-part) questions. It was divided into four sections. Section 1 (titled *About You*) comprised nine questions developed for the purpose of this study related to the students' demographic and school characteristics.

Section 2 (*About Your Leisure-Time Activities*) comprised six questions adapted from Barnes et al. (2007) and Caldwell and Darling (1999). These questions related to time typically spent per week engaged in 15 leisure activities (including skateboarding), and the nature and extent of respondents' skate park use. Participants also nominated the leisure activities that best define them as a person.

Section 2 also contained items relating participants' thoughts and feelings when engaging in their favorite leisure activity. Four-item scales were constructed to assess each of three internal processes. The processes (and a sample item measuring each) were: (a) focus and flow (e.g., "My mind is really focused on what I am doing [when I participate in this activity]"); (b) exploring and expressing oneself (e.g., "My self-confidence really grows"); and (c) gaining a sense of belonging and support (e.g., "I feel accepted by others when doing [this activity]"). Items were based on measures used by Danish et al. (2003), Kahne, Nagoake, Brown, O'Brien, Quinn, and Thiede (2001), Palen and Coatsworth (2007), Sharp et al. (2007), Shaw et al. (1995), and Waterman (1993). Exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring with oblique rotation) of the 12 items confirmed the three-factor structure: all loadings exceeded .45, with no cross loadings greater than .30. Correlations between factors ranged from .38 to .50. Alpha reliabilities were .80, .77 and .85, respectively.

Finally in Section 2, participants responded to a set of original items by selecting one of five response options (*never to more than monthly*) to indicate the extent to which they had engaged in six rule-breaking/delinquent behaviors in the preceding six months.

Section 3 (*Skate Parks and You*) comprised open-ended questions pertaining to ownership of a skate board, perceptions of skate parks and skate park users, opinions as to the attractive and unattractive aspects of skate parks, perceptions of benefits and drawbacks of park usage, and views as to ways in which skate parks can be made more broadly appealing. These questions were written for, and pilot-tested prior to use in, this study

Section 4 (*About You, Your Friends, Family and School*) comprised scales that assess five variables that are indicative of healthy psychosocial development, namely, self-esteem (Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Inventory; alpha reliability coefficient in the current study = .88), identity achievement (the Identity sub-scale of Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore's (1982) Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory; $\alpha = .78$), attachment to parents (3-item scale from Aseltine, 1995; $\alpha = .86$), peer relations (mean of two items, $r = .59$), and school engagement (five items from Goodenow, 1983, $\alpha = .79$). Also included was a scale assessing social desirability response bias (a short form of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Reynolds, 1982); $\alpha = .66$).

Based on the work of Eccles and Barber (1999) and others, and following pilot testing of a range of possible groups, additional questions tapped participants' affiliations with youth sub-cultural groups. Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they saw themselves as fitting each of five youth groups: (a) *nerd* (or "geek"), (b) *sporty* (or "jock"), (c) *cool*, (d) *skater*, and (e) *emo*. (In Australia, the term *emo* refers to a youth sub-cultural crowd characterized by distinctive preferences in clothing (mostly black), hairstyle (also black, with a long fringe to one side), musical tastes (lyrically strong and sorrowful), and "attitude" (equally mournful)). Responses were on a 4-point scale: *not at all*, *a little*, *somewhat*, and *very well*. Participants were

assigned to a group if they reported that they fitted the category either *somewhat* or *very well* (thus, several of the participants were included in more than one group).

A copy of the full questionnaire, and coding schedules used, is available upon request.

Procedure. The school principals, parents of potential participants and the students themselves were provided with information sheets and were asked to read and retain these prior to agreeing to participate in the study. Students for whom parental consent had been obtained completed the questionnaires anonymously, under the supervision of teachers and/or members of the research team. As an incentive to participate, students were invited to enter a lottery draw to win one of four music store vouchers. Completion of the questionnaire occurred during school time, and took between 20 and 40 minutes.

Results and Discussion of the Questionnaire Study

The questionnaire data enabled participants to be grouped using several (overlapping) criteria, especially, whether they (a) owned a skateboard, (b) spent time riding a skateboard, (c) spent time using a skate park, and (d) identified with a skater sub-cultural crowd.

Prevalence of skate park use, skateboarders and skateboarding. Questionnaire responses revealed that skateboarding is a popular pastime and skate parks are a popular leisure context in this sample of adolescents. A total of 72 respondents (43% of those who answered the question) reported owning a skateboard, 42 (24%) spent one or more hours each week skateboarding, and 38 (22%) spent some time in the average week at a skate park. Hypothesis 1 – that about one-quarter of the youth in this region spend time at skate parks – was broadly supported.

Respondents who participated in skateboarding did so for an average of 5.2 hours per week (SD = 6.6), whilst those who attended skate parks also did so for an average of 5.2 hours per week (SD = 5.8). Twenty percent of respondents (N = 35) wished they could spend longer (on average, almost seven hours longer) each week at skate parks. These findings regarding participation rates are consistent with the results from past research (e.g., Boag et al., 2003).

In terms of self-nominated sub-cultural group affiliation, 20 of the 177 participants (11%) were categorised as fitting the *skater* group type, 28 (16%) were categorised as *nerds*, 72 (41%) as *sporty*, 17 (10%) as *emos*, and 80 (45%) as members of the *cool* group.

Demographic characteristics of skate park users/skateboarders. The second hypothesis (H2) - that most skateboarders and skate park users are males – also received majority support. As shown in Table 2, significantly more males than females owned a skateboard, rode a skateboard for at least an hour per week, and spent at least one hour weekly at a skate park. Affiliation with the skater sub-culture did not vary by gender. Further, among those who participated, there were no significant gender differences in the number of hours reportedly spent per week skateboarding or using skate parks. Overall, reported participation rates by females were higher than those recorded in our observation study.

Table 2 About Here

The third hypothesis - that skate park users have levels of academic success and educational aspirations lower than those of other adolescents – received limited support. There were no differences in the self-reported GPAs of participants who owned (vs. did not own) a skateboard ($\chi^2 (2) = 1.07, p = .587$), spent (vs. did not spend) at least one hour each week skateboarding ($\chi^2 (2) = 1.75, p = .417$), spent (vs. did not spend) at least one hour weekly at a skate park ($\chi^2 (2) = 2.69, p = .261$), or affiliated (vs. did not affiliate) with the skater sub-culture ($\chi^2 (2) = 1.96, p = .376$). Similarly, there were no differences in the educational aspirations of participants who owned (vs. did not own) a skateboard ($\chi^2 (3) = 4.53, p = .210$), or of those who spent (vs. did not spend) time in the average week at a skate park ($\chi^2 (3) = 6.76, p = .080$). However, differences in educational aspirations were apparent in those who spent at least one hour each week skateboarding (vs. those who did not skate) ($\chi^2 (3) = 13.65, p = .003$), and in those who affiliated (vs. did not affiliate) with the skater sub-culture ($\chi^2 (2) = 8.12, p = .042$).

Specifically, compared to other adolescents, the group of skate park users, and the group who affiliated with the skater sub-culture, contained disproportionately large numbers of students who intended to leave school before Year 12 graduation. Given the study's design, the direction of causation (if any) remains uncertain: it is equally possible that people with low educational aspirations are attracted to skate boarding/parks as it is that involvement in skating causes a reduction in these aspirations.

Activities at the parks. Skate park users were asked to describe what they did when at the parks. Up to three responses were coded per person. The third hypothesis – that the activity most commonly performed at skate parks is riding a skateboard (followed by BMX/ bike riding) – did not receive clear support. Contrary to expectations, and to the results of the observation study, four skate park-based activities were reported as occurring with approximately equal frequency:

- watching others (cited by 26 respondents; 14 males and 12 females)
- skateboarding (24 respondents; 17 males and 7 females)
- socialising with friends (23 respondents; 12 males and 11 females)
- riding bike (23 respondents, 16 males and 7 females).

Attitudes to the parks. The fourth hypothesis – participants' views of skate parks vary widely and in ways predictable from their own park usage – was not strongly supported in the sense that there were as many neutral or *non-evaluative* comments about skate parks, as positive or negative remarks. Leaving aside these neutral comments, however, responses were bifurcated along lines consistent with H4. Skateboarders and park users generally described the parks as a source of fun, challenge and excitement, a place for meeting and making friends (“Having a great time with friends, making new friends”, “Fun, laughter, excitement”), and a place where skills are learned and displayed for others' enjoyment. They commented positively about park-based opportunities for self-expression in skate manoeuvres, clothing styles and/or in graffiti art. Several wrote of the laidback/friendly atmosphere, the attractive people (e.g., “hot guys”, “cool people”), and the “dare-deviling” [sic] fun that that was on offer. Attractive features of skate park

use were said to include “stuff to grind on, big ramps”, “challenging myself”, “the freedom of showing off what I can do”, and “the speed I can get & the combos or run I make up”. When asked about what people might learn from spending their leisure time at skate parks, responses related to skating skills, peer group acceptance, communication skills, and personal qualities such as self-confidence and respect (e.g., “Confidence might go up because people are watching them skate”, “Respect: considering that other people are there to use the park as well”).

These generally positive comments about skate parks were outnumbered by almost two to one by negative comments. Aspects of skate parks that were most disliked included (a) the people (including the skaters) who use the park, (b) the dirty and dangerous condition of the parks, and (c) the presence of drugs and graffiti. Descriptors of skate parks included: “blood, injury, broken limbs”, “boring, useless, senseless”, “scary people with cigarettes and alcohol”, “bad kids”, “rough and tough who doesn’t care and gets into trouble”, “the amount of litter and dangerous objects”, “some of the graffiti is rude and horrible”, and “drugs, vandalism”. When asked what might be learned from time spent at the parks, respondents pointed to the parks’ potential to teach swearing, fighting, drug use, vandalism and general bad behavior (e.g., “how to do drugs”, “how to do graffiti”, “bad attitudes”).

Many of the negative comments were, therefore, consistent with the stereotypes of skate parks as unsafe places where drug taking, property damage and physical aggression are rife. In some cases, the respondents’ words conveyed considerable strength of feeling. The issue of skate parks is clearly one that polarizes young people, at least in this sample of Australian adolescents. A possible implication from these diverse, but predominantly negative, views is that there may be a disappointing return on public and private resources invested in skate parks so long as large numbers of people avoid skate parks because of the stereotypically-negative (and possibly inaccurate) views they hold.

Processes ‘activated’ by leisure participation. Participants were asked to choose one of their favorite leisure activities and have this in mind when answering a series of questions

relating to three subjective processes (focus and flow; exploring and expressing oneself; and gaining a sense of belonging and support) that may occur whilst participating in this activity. Four activities (basketball/netball, dancing, bike riding, and skateboarding) were nominated by at least ten participants. Analyses examined the extent to which these leisure activities were perceived to activate each of the three internal processes. Table 3 shows mean scores for the three processes, for each of the frequently-cited leisure activities. All four leisure activities were reported to elicit all three processes: possible exceptions were the association of basketball/netball with exploring and expressing oneself, and the association of skateboarding with gaining a sense of belonging and support. In these cases only, the mean score was not significantly (one sample *t*-test, $p > .05$) above the scale midpoint of 3.0. Significant between-activity differences were found in relation to gaining a sense of belonging and support, where dancing was rated as promoting this process more than did skateboarding or bike-riding ($p < .05$). In general, skateboarding activated the three processes at a level similar to basketball/netball and bike riding. Whilst acknowledging the small group sizes and consequent lack of power, the finding that skateboarding is as strongly associated with these positive processes as is the more highly “structured” activity of basketball/netball runs counter to the view that team sports elicit developmentally superior processes than do “unstructured” leisure pursuits such as skateboarding.

Table 3 About Here

Psychosocial correlates of being a skateboarder/park user. Analyses were conducted to compare the profile of leisure time use of those involved and not involved in skateboarding. Findings revealed that, compared to those who did not use skate parks (N = 139), park users (N = 38) spent more time involved in non-school, non-team sports (a category that no doubt includes skate boarding itself): here, the mean numbers of hours per week were, for park users, 6.17 hours

(SD = 6.01), and for non-users, 3.69 hours (SD = 4.32), $t(171) = 2.85, p = .005$. The difference between the two groups approached significance in relation to time spent in only one other leisure time activity, namely, time spent with family (park users' mean = 8.8 hours per week (SD = 10.46) vs. non-users' mean = 13.1 hours (SD = 8.84), $t(171) = 1.87, p = .063$). Importantly, park users did not differ from other members of the sample with respect to time spent in school-based leisure activities, playing team sports, doing homework, doing housework, or doing voluntary work.

Groups were compared in terms of self-esteem, identity achievement, and quality of relations with peers, with family and at school. No differences were found on any of these variables between participants who do and do not own a skateboard (all $ps > .20$), between those who do and do not skateboard at least one hour weekly (all $ps > .05$), between those who do and do not use skate parks at least one hour weekly (all $ps > .20$), or between those who do and do not identify with the skater sub-culture (all $ps > .30$). See Table 4 for illustrative findings. The trend that most closely approximated significance was for participants who skateboard for at one hour weekly to report *better* school relations than did those who did not skateboard this much, $t(148), = 1.88, p = .062$. With one exception, the groups also did not differ in terms of their tendencies to respond to the questionnaire along socially desirable lines. The exception related to the comparison between those who did and those who did not identify with the skater sub-culture: in this case, the former group displayed higher scores on the social desirability scale, $t(171), = 2.17, p = .032$.

Table 4 About Here

Analyses revealed no differences in rates of rule-breaking between skateboard owners and non-owners, between those who do and do not skateboard for at least one hour weekly or between those who do and do not identify with the skater sub-cultural group (all $ps > .10$). As

shown in Table 5, a significant association was evident in respect of one of the six categories of rule-breaking behaviors when skate park users' behaviors were compared with those of non-users, with the former reporting more often violating school rules. It is, of course, possible that this difference between skate park users and non-users were partly due to (a) a higher proportion of skate park users than non-users being male, and (b) males tending to commit more rule-breaking acts than do females. To test this proposition, a subset of 38 non-park users was selected to match the 38 users in terms of gender, age, school, school year, living arrangements and first language. Comparison of these matched groups revealed no significant differences in the frequency of any of the six rule-breaking behaviors.

Table 5 About Here

Finally, analyses were restricted to just that subset of people who spent at least one hour per week using skate parks. A dichotomous variable was formed, comprising those skate park users who attend the parks for an average of less than three hours per week ($N = 21$) and those who attend for longer ($N = 14$), and these two groups' responses to the psychosocial wellbeing scales and rule-breaking items were compared. These analyses revealed no significant differences between the heavy and lighter users of skate parks. Only one difference approached significance: participants who attended skate parks for *less* than three hours weekly reported *less positive* family relations than did those who attended for longer periods (means = 3.54 ($SD = 1.02$) and 4.21 ($SD = 0.79$), respectively, $t(32) = 2.00$, $p = .057$).

These findings offer mixed support for the final two hypotheses - that skate park use is associated with high levels of personal integration (H6), and high levels of social integration (H7). A reasonable conclusion is that skaters and skate park users display levels of personal and social integration similar to those of other adolescents, with the exception of park users being more frequently involved in school-based rule-breaking.

General Discussion

Young people spend up to half of their waking hours in leisure activities, yet little is known about the links between specific leisure contexts and adolescent psychosocial development. The current research examined the extent, nature and correlates of skate park use, skateboarding and related activities.

Findings indicated that the parks are occupied by an average of 15 people at any given time (23 in fine weather). Park users tend to be males in their mid-teenage years. Several positive learning opportunities and experiences were linked to skate parks use, with skaters potentially gaining a sense of achievement, identity and camaraderie from their park experiences. Contrary to the notion that only structured and adult-supervised leisure yields favorable developmental outcomes, this research found links between the “unstructured” activities that occur within skate parks, on the one hand, and opportunities for task focus and challenge, meaningful identity development and wider social integration, on the other. Skate park participation may thus meet many of the criteria thought to lead to positive youth development. Whilst these findings do not refute the substantial body of evidence linking unstructured leisure activities to problematic outcomes, they add to the more limited evidence (e.g., Abbott & Barber, 2007) suggesting that not all unstructured leisure activities affect participants in equally negative ways.

Previous studies (e.g., Jones & Graves, 2000; Woolley & Johns, 2001) have shown that many adults (including parents of skateboarders) hold negative attitudes towards skate parks and park users. The current research extended these findings by documenting the existence of attitudes among adolescents that are equally as negative. Apparent in this data set was the polarity of views held by skateboarding “ingroupers” and “outgroupers”, a phenomenon that may undermine strategies aimed at broadening the appeal and enhancing the impact of skate parks. Whilst negative stereotypes regarding skate parks and skateboarders were frequently expressed in the current study, other findings challenge the veracity of these views. For example, there was

little evidence to suggest that skateboarders are in conflict with their families, that they lack self-esteem, or that they routinely damage public property. Indeed, most skaters seemed respectful of each other, of their skate parks, and of skateboarding customs and rules.

The data do not paint an entirely rosy picture of skate parks and those who inhabit them. Many interviewees noted that antisocial behavior occurs in the parks, albeit mostly late at night and probably not committed by dedicated skaters. Many non-users, and even some users, reported feeling intimidated by aspects of the parks and the people they attract. Some evidence suggested that skateboarders, on average, have lower educational aspirations than do other adolescents. Other data indicated that those who use skate parks are particularly likely to break school rules. Such associations do not demonstrate that skate boarding or skate park use has caused these outcomes. However findings from related research (e.g., (Mahoney et al., 2004) suggest that, to the extent that the parks attract antisocial people and deter those with more conventional tastes, the mix of users may shift over time in ways that render the parks increasingly conducive to the development of antisocial tendencies in all.

Several findings emerged with consistency across studies. For example, more than one study confirmed that young males were the most common group of parks users, that the parks play an important role in social networking among users, and that informal norms regulate the behavior of park users. Also emerging in all studies was evidence of particular male values - for activity, physicality, danger, bravado and stoicism - within the skate park culture. As Beal (1996) observed in her study of skateboarders in northeastern Colorado, these values are distinct from the values of aggression, regimentation and competition seen in many organised sports and other structured leisure activities.

Other trends show less consistency between studies. For example, both the interview and questionnaire studies suggested that a sizeable minority of park users are female, yet observational evidence in Study 2 failed to confirm this. The experience of camaraderie and sense of belongingness emphasized in several interviews was not clearly confirmed in quantitative

analyses of the survey data. Similarly, direct observations indicated that prosocial behaviors occur only rarely at skate parks, yet interviewee and survey data suggested that these behaviors are more frequent occurrences. In all these cases, the positive reports disproportionately came from users of skate parks, suggesting the possibility that these reports are statements of ideals, and are motivated partly out of a desire to bolster the social acceptability and apparent inclusiveness of the parks. Whatever the explanation, the inconsistent findings across studies serve as a reminder of the need to draw conclusions cautiously when using data derived from a single study, source or method.

The research was not without limitations. Only two skate parks were observed in Study 2, and a limited range of school students was surveyed in Study 3. Approximately half the questionnaire data were collected using original or adapted questions, rather than established measures. Generalizations from the survey respondents to the broader population of skate park stakeholders, especially those residing in countries other than Australia, should be made with caution. Findings pertaining to park users may also not apply to street skaters (Chiu, 2009; White, 1999). All data were collected at only one point in time, meaning that associations could be demonstrated, but temporal sequencing remains undetermined. Like all survey-based studies, the Study 1 and 3 data were subject to response biases, memory lapses and other sources of error.

The research did, however, have several strengths, not the least of which was its use of mixed methods. The interview schedule, observation record, and self-administered questionnaire developed for and refined in this research will be of use in future projects. The samples of interviewees and questionnaire respondents included a mix of genders, ages, leisure interests, and other demographic categories. The questionnaire was shaped by theory and past research, it included well-validated scales, and it permitted comparison of groups of adolescents categorized by multiple skateboard-related criteria. The findings provide a baseline against which future trends in skateboarding, skate park usage, skate park satisfaction, and related phenomena can be compared. More broadly, the research provides insights into the leisure needs of contemporary

youth. Given the strongly opposing views about skateboarding and skate parks evident in this and other research, the information obtained will be valuable in managing the future development of the sector.

The current work can be extended in many ways. Future research should use longitudinal designs so that the effects of self-selection into skate park use can be disentangled from the socialization processes that occur within the parks. Research should also use larger and more representative samples of regions, types of skate parks, and skate park stakeholders. Comparisons of usage and outcomes can then be made across a range of youth leisure facilities. Specific features of the parks/precincts can be used to predict usage and adolescent developmental outcomes. In addition, future research should monitor gender-related trends in skateboarding and skate park participation: perhaps participation rates among females have been underestimated in past research, but perhaps also the gender gap has been closing over recent years. Also worthy of investigation is the extent to which positive psychosocial qualities (e.g., self-efficacy, social competence, civic engagement) acquired in skate parks generalize to other contexts.

Do skate parks contribute positively to youth development? Clearly, the current findings provide an insufficient basis upon which to draw final conclusions. Nonetheless, the overall picture of skate park users that emerges from this research is of a group of young people who are neither maladjusted nor malevolent. They are attached to their place (skate parks) and they identify with the sub-culture that pervades skateboarding. However, no matter which way the Study 3 sample was divided – skateboard owners versus non-owners, skaters versus non-skaters, park users versus non-users, heavy versus light park users, identification with the sub-cultural group or not -, the evidence indicated that the “skaters” as a whole were not alienated from mainstream institutions, like family and school. Moreover, skate parks and the activities that take place therein were shown to have the potential to enhance participants’ personal integration and social bonding in diverse ways. To the extent that these benefits are accrued by young males who

are in other ways hard to reach, the contribution of skate parks to positive youth development may be particularly valuable.

Given the prevalence of strongly-held prejudices about skate parks and skateboarders, authorities responsible for leisure policy and youth development face continuing challenges to limit both the perception and the reality of negative outcomes from skate parks. Further research is required to identify specific benefits and risks associated with skate parks. Dissemination of research findings is required to ensure that youth policy is guided more by evidence rather than by prejudice and polemics.

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Table 1

Profile of the Skate Park Users, and the Activities in which They Were Engaged

| Characteristic of User | No. | % | Characteristic of User | No. | % |
|------------------------------------|-----|------|-------------------------------------|-----|------|
| <i>Gender</i> | | | <i>Main Activities</i> | | |
| Male | 588 | 95 | Riding skateboard | 236 | 38.5 |
| Female | 25 | 5 | Riding (BMX) bike | 147 | 24.0 |
| | | | Riding scooter | 140 | 22.8 |
| | | | Roller skating/blading | 7 | 1.1 |
| <i>Age</i> | | | Spectating | 80 | 13.1 |
| Less than 8 years | 20 | 3.3 | Socialising | 149 | 24.3 |
| 8-10 years | 62 | 10.1 | Parenting | 25 | 4.1 |
| 11-13 years | 117 | 19.1 | Other | 14 | 2.3 |
| 14-15 years | 179 | 29.2 | | | |
| 16-17 years | 101 | 16.5 | | | |
| 18-25 years | 84 | 13.7 | <i>Other Activities^a</i> | | |
| More than 25 years | 40 | 6.5 | Smoking | 17 | 2.8 |
| (Missing age) | 10 | 1.6 | Drinking alcohol | 10 | 1.6 |
| | | | Physical fighting | 0 | 0.0 |
| <i>Protection Worn^a</i> | | | Verbal fighting/arguing | 0 | 0.0 |
| Helmet | 122 | 19.9 | Littering | 12 | 2.0 |
| Cap (eg., baseball style) | 182 | 29.7 | Graffiti | 0 | 0.0 |
| Shoes | 609 | 99.3 | Damaging co-user property | 0 | 0.0 |
| Knee-pads | 5 | 0.8 | Other vandalising | 0 | 0.0 |
| Gloves | 25 | 4.1 | Teaching/Coaching | 0 | 0.0 |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|------|---------------------------|---|-----|
| Other protection | 11 | 1.8 | Helping others | 1 | 0.2 |
| | | | Sharing (eg., skateboard) | 4 | 0.7 |
| <i>Social Groupings</i> | | | Comforting | 0 | 0.0 |
| Child(ren) and father | 17 | 2.8 | “Making out” | 0 | 0.0 |
| Child(ren) and mother | 9 | 1.5 | Other acts ^b | 8 | 1.3 |
| Child(ren) and both parents | 4 | 0.7 | | | |
| With siblings | 17 | 2.8 | | | |
| Pair of friends | 84 | 13.7 | | | |
| Group of > 2 friends | 284 | 46.3 | | | |
| Boy- and girl-friend | 2 | 0.3 | | | |
| Alone | 180 | 30.0 | | | |

Note. %s are percentages of all people who used a park in any of the 40 observation sessions.

^a More than one entry was permitted within this category, where appropriate

^b “Other acts” included eating, texting on a cell phone, listening to an i-pod, building a ramp, and taking photos of friends performing manoeuvres.

Table 2

Gender Differences in Skateboarding, Park Use and Group Affiliation

| Characteristic of the Full Sample | Males | Females | χ^2 ($df = 1$) |
|--|-------|---------|-----------------------|
| % who own a skateboard | 57% | 31% | 11.97*** |
| % who ride a skateboard at least one hour weekly | 33% | 17% | 5.48* |
| % who spend at least one hour weekly at a skate park | 34% | 13% | 10.09*** |
| % who affiliate with skater sub-culture | 15% | 8% | 2.70 |
| Characteristic of Members of the Sample Who Skate | | | t ($df = 36$) |
| Mean hours per week skateboarding | 6.00 | 5.07 | 0.41 |
| Mean hours per week using a skate park | 5.52 | 4.73 | 0.39 |

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Mean (SD) Scores on Three Processes Activated During a Favorite Leisure Activity

| Leisure Activity (& number of participants nominating each) | Focus and Flow | Exploring & Expressing Oneself | Gaining a Sense of Belonging |
|---|----------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Basketball or netball (N = 10) | 3.75 (0.94) | 3.56 (1.03) | 3.88 (1.00) |
| Bike/BMX riding (N = 16) | 3.69 (0.69) | 3.75 (0.63) | 3.50 (0.67) |
| Dancing (N = 13) | 4.36 (0.66) | 4.29 (0.66) | 4.29 (0.51) |
| Skateboarding (N = 10) | 3.78 (0.62) | 3.53 (0.73) | 3.38 (0.95) |
| <i>F</i> (3, 45) | 2.17 | 2.76 | 3.51* |

* $p < .05$.

Table 4

Mean (SD) Level of Psychosocial Variables in Five Youth Sub-Cultural Groups

| Psychosocial Outcome Variable | Mean (Standard Deviation) for Each Group ^a | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Nerd (or Geek) Group (N = 28) | Sporty (or Jock) Group (N = 72) | Emo Group (N = 17) | Cool Group (N = 80) | Skater Group (N = 20) |
| Self-Esteem | 3.53 (0.84) | 3.78 (0.61) | 3.13 (0.66) | 3.66 (0.66) | 3.61 (0.88) |
| Identity | 3.51 (0.62) | 3.59 (0.54) | 3.31 (0.41) | 3.47 (0.54) | 3.59 (0.53) |
| Peer Relations | 3.63 (1.07) | 4.13 (0.51) | 3.59 (1.00) | 4.10 (0.62) | 3.73 (1.07) |
| Family Relations | 3.77 (1.10) | 3.76 (0.90) | 3.18 (1.23) | 3.63 (1.04) | 3.95 (0.90) |
| School Relations | 3.14 (0.51) | 3.37 (0.47) | 2.94 (0.54) | 3.33 (0.52) | 3.21 (0.79) |

^a Inferential statistics comparing groups means could not be computed because of violation of the independence of observations assumption.

Table 5

Rule-Breaking Activities Self-Reported by Skate Park Users and Non-Users

| Rule-Breaking Activity | X^2 ($df = 4$) | Group | Percentage of Group Members Participating in Activity in the Past Six Months | | | | |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|---|--------------|--------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| | | | Never | Once only | 2-3 times | About once a month | More than monthly |
| Broken school rules | 10.69 ($p = .03$) | Skate Park User | 16 | 30 | 8 | 5 | 41 |
| | | Non-user | 22 | 18 | 31 | 5 | 25 |
| Stealing, shoplifting | 2.73 ($p = .60$) | Skate Park User | 81 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 5 |
| | | Non-user | 74 | 15 | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| Bought or used drugs alcohol, or cigarettes | 4.10 ($p = .39$) | Skate Park User | 57 | 8 | 16 | 0 | 19 |
| | | Non-user | 66 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 16 |
| Damaged property, incl. graffiti | 0.77 ($p = .94$) | Skate Park User | 62 | 11 | 16 | 3 | 8 |
| | | Non-user | 69 | 10 | 13 | 3 | 5 |
| Violent behavior, incl. bullying | 5.95 ($p = .20$) | Skate Park User | 49 | 24 | 8 | 3 | 16 |
| | | Non-user | 64 | 13 | 13 | 2 | 9 |
| Broken other (minor) rules | 3.33 ($p = .50$) | Skate Park User | 68 | 11 | 5 | 3 | 14 |
| | | Non-user | 79 | 9 | 5 | 3 | 5 |

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Conceptual overview of variables antecedent and consequent to participation in leisure contexts and activities.

